

***Remnant Identity Past and Present***  
***A Central Issue for Adventists Today***

In his first sermon as newly elected president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Dr. Ted N C Wilson used the word *remnant* no fewer than twelve times. As he employed it, the expression is basic to “our unique prophetic identity and mission.” “We are to be a peculiar people,” stated Wilson, “God’s *remnant* people, to lift up Christ, His righteousness, His three angels’ messages of Revelation 14, and His soon coming.” We are “Bible believing Christians living in the last days of earth’s history.... As God’s *remnant* people identified in Revelation 12:17 as those ‘who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ,’ we have a unique message of hope and a mandate to proclaim God’s grace to the world.” The fact that Adventists are a remnant, Wilson insisted, means that we are not “just another denomination.”

The new president could not have employed a more strategic term, for no biblical expression produces a stronger resonance among Adventists than the word *remnant*. It assures us that we have the identifying marks of the remnant listed in Revelation 12: we stand at the end of history, we keep God’s commandments, all of them, including the fourth; and we have the testimony of Jesus, that is, the gift of prophecy, in the form of Ellen White’s unique ministry.

The invocation of the remnant thus gathers into one utterance a number of themes that figure prominently in Adventist identity—the imminence of the Advent, a special role in salvation-history, prophetic gift and prophetic responsibility. It reinforces the sense that we are a unique group, endowed with special gifts, presenting a distinctive message at a particular time in response to a specific divine mandate.

**Current interpretations of remnant.**

While the biblical term remnant occupies a prominent place in Adventist consciousness, there are interesting variations among Adventists as to just what remnant identity involves. Adventists today affirm their connection with the remnant theology of our denominational forbears in two rather different ways. One asserts that the Seventh-day Adventist church is the end-time remnant of Revelation, because it arises at the end of prophetic time and exhibits the distinctive characteristics identified in Rev 12:17. For this group, the time and the signs of the remnant mentioned in Revelation 12 find fulfillment in one, and only one, religious movement. As Angel Rodriguez puts it in the book, *Toward a Theology of the Remnant*, “The Adventist self-designation as God’s remnant people is based on a historicist reading of Revelation, on the characteristics of that remnant recorded in Revelation, and on the mission of that remnant.”<sup>1</sup>

The other perspective goes beyond the “time and signs” approach and applies additional characteristics to the category of the remnant, such as, religious sincerity, ethical concern, religious inclusiveness, even political activism.<sup>2</sup> Since the Bible mentions several “remnants” who responded to God within their specific historical contexts, those who take this tack believe the remnant mission of Seventh-day Adventists calls us to respond to the distinctive challenges and opportunities facing us today.

This leads some to question the traditional notion that the work of the remnant precipitates the end of human history. For Fritz Guy, uncertainty is an essential dynamic of Christian hope, and we should be wary of any attempt to forecast future events. Waiting requires patience, and predictions tend only to further

disappointment.<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, Roy Branson maintains that we should view the end as a “cosmic mystery,” which our actions will neither hasten nor delay.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary Adventists have also found in the remnant idea a call to serious ethical commitment. John Brunt argues that ethics and eschatology belong together, not because ethical action triggers the eschaton, but because an encounter with divine grace inevitably leads to ethical concern.<sup>5</sup> For Charles Scriven, the vision of Jesus confronting the powers of his day calls Christians today to radical political engagement—engagement that takes the form of non-violent resistance to oppressive social and political powers and concern for the victims of injustice.<sup>6</sup>

In a 1988 MA Thesis, Stephan P. Mitchell summarizes these revisionary approaches in the following way. Adventists can make a valid claim to be a historical remnant, he says, but not the eschatological remnant, i.e., the last remnant, the group whose activity precipitates the very end of time. Viewed in this light, Adventism “plays a cumulative,[but] not culminative, role in salvation-history.”<sup>7</sup> Such a position, Mitchell believes, maintains a unique heritage for Adventists as part of a larger whole, yet avoids “the exclusive and narrow sectarian definition of remnant so offensive to non-Adventists.”<sup>8</sup>

This shift in remnant rationale is far from welcome to some in the Adventist community. Frank M. Hasel, for example, insists that the remnant theology formulated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is central to Adventist identity, and Adventists today should hold fast to it. He quotes the *SDA Encyclopedia*: “Seventh-day Adventists are convinced that ‘they alone among the bodies of Christendom are giving this message [the three angels’ message of Revelation 14].’ Thus,” says Hasel, Adventists believe “‘the term “remnant” to be an appropriate designation of themselves in their role as God’s appointed witness to earth’s last generation.’ Hence, the remnant is an identifiable and visible Christian movement.”<sup>9</sup>

From this perspective, the remnant reinterpretations that have emerged in recent years are regrettable departures from authentic Adventist self-understanding.<sup>10</sup> These include the idea that the remnant comprises other Christians or non-Christians, as well as Muslims who have accepted Jesus. The same can be said of suggestions that the remnant is an invisible entity, a future reality, or a group characterized by charismatic renewal (Steve Daily), or a profound commitment to spiritual growth (Jon Dybdahl), or a dedication to social justice (Charles Scriven and Charles Teel). For Hasel, any construal of the remnant that fails to identify it the institutional, organized Adventist church “weakens the nature of the end-time remnant as described in the book of Revelation.”<sup>11</sup> “If other Christians are already part of God’s end-time remnant,” he asks, “on what ground is that determined and in which sense can the term be applied to them?” If they already have the marks of the remnant, what purpose would it serve for them to become part of the visible remnant?<sup>12, 13</sup>

As these contrasting views suggest, it is no small task to determine just what a remnant heritage involves. Our goal is to find in the notion of remnant a continuity between Adventism past and present. But to do so we cannot ignore the enormous differences between them. Several factors demand attention.

**The passage of time.** The most obvious is the sheer passage of time. It’s been 167 years since the Great Disappointment, and nearly 150 years since the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists was first organized (1963). “This generation”—that is, the generation of early Adventists who thought of them-

selves as “the last generation,”—has long passed from the earth, and the Lord has not come. However we account for the delay of the Advent, the fact remains that the passage of time has vastly exceeded anything envisioned by our Adventist forbears.<sup>14</sup>

**Denominational size and distribution.** Not only has the bridegroom tarried, far longer than early Adventists expected, but the Adventist church today is one they would hardly recognize. What began as a small sect in the northeastern corner of the USA has become one of the fastest growing religions in the world. We are no longer a tiny minority on the outskirts of Christianity, little known and even less understood. The “little flock” is now a denomination of over 16 million people with members in over 200 countries. We have more members in Africa than anywhere else and nearly as many members in Latin America (34% and 33%, respectively).

In some countries Seventh-day Adventists form a significant proportion of the population. Approximately 10% of Jamaicans identify themselves as Seventh-day Adventists. In Zimbabwe, a country of 12.5 million, there are 1,122 Adventist churches, with a total membership of nearly 600,000. But according to one church leader, the number of people there who identify themselves as Adventists is closer to 1.5 million, or 12% of the population.

**Adventist institutions.** Then there are the impressive institutions for which Seventh-day Adventists are best known by the general public, notably, healthcare and education. In his recent production entitled “The Adventists,” documentary film maker, Martin Doblmeier, focused on Adventist healthcare facilities in North America. Adventists operate not only hospitals, but networks of hospitals in their healthcare systems. Florida hospital, to mention just one, is one of the largest healthcare providers in that state. Adventists are also known for their educational institutions. In fact, Adventists operate the second largest Christian school system in the world. And the effectiveness of Adventist education has attracted national attention. Last fall “The Christian Science Monitor” reported the findings of a four-year study conducted by La Sierra University. It involved over fifty thousand students and determined that those attending Adventist schools scored higher than the national average in every subject category.

**Theological developments.** SDAs today are not only far removed from the remnant of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in time, size, and demographic distribution. Our theology is significantly different as well. As the decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century passed, the doctrinal concerns of Adventists expanded rather dramatically. Alongside their characteristic preoccupation with prophetic interpretation, Adventists became concerned with the basis of salvation and eventually concluded that salvation is entirely God’s gift, received by faith.<sup>15</sup> This eventually led to other important developments, including the emergence of Christological orthodoxy and later on the embrace of full-fledged trinitarianism. Indeed, so different is Adventist theology today from that of the earliest generation, says George Knight, that “[m]ost of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism would not be able to join the church today if they had to subscribe to the denomination’s Fundamental Beliefs.”<sup>16</sup>

In a number of significant ways, therefore, the Adventist church of today is not the church that identified itself as the remnant of Revelation over 160 years ago. These dramatic changes in size and complexity make it difficult for some Adventists to find any real connection between the concerns of early Adventists and the challenges facing us today.<sup>17</sup> The issue is particularly pressing when applied to the remnant, since

it played such a prominent role in our past. Does the remnant have a future? If so, what is the basis of its continued relevance?

I believe that remnant consciousness has an important role to play in Adventism today. But to determine just what it is we must be willing to go beyond the familiar “time and signs” approach that Adventists have traditionally taken. The crucial question is just how to do this, of course. But the answer, perhaps paradoxically, lies in early Adventism itself. The history of those who first saw themselves as the remnant gives us a basis for expanding the concept of the remnant today.

**Adventist perspectives on the remnant.** For one thing, remnant theology itself underwent development, starting with the Millerites who saw their movement as a fulfillment of Revelation 12:17—since “the ‘end’ had come; there *must* be a remnant—and culminating in James White’s connection of the testimony of Jesus with the Spirit of Prophecy in 1855. Because early Adventists found such close parallels between their own experience and the various the elements in the crucial verses of Revelation (12:17 and 19:10)—remnant, commandments of God, testimony of Jesus—they concluded that they were indeed the remnant of biblical prophecy.

**Adventist perspectives on the world.** Another feature in Adventist history also points to an expanded concept of the remnant, and that is the changing attitudes of early Adventists toward various social, political, and religious issues of their day. Their self-identification as the remnant remained constant after 1855, but the role they felt the remnant should play in relation to the worldly powers around them changed remarkably over the next fifty years.<sup>18</sup>

Looking for the imminent Second Coming, Adventists in the early 1840’s shunned any relation to government, since all aspects of life on earth were soon to end. From the mid-1840s to the mid-1870s, post-Millerite Sabbath keeping Adventists moved from the withdrawn, apolitical position of the Millerites to a political apocalyptic. They roundly denounced the American Republic as embodying the two-horned dragon-like beast of Revelation 13. As they saw it, the USA had abandoned its founding principles of religious liberty and become an oppressive power, with its failure to abolish slavery and its various attempts to legislate Sunday observance.

In the 1880s and after, Adventism embraced a political prophetic which brought them into the political process, if only marginally, and led to efforts to sustain the Republic rather than merely forecast its doom. Their changing views of the USA were reflected in the pictures that portrayed the USA in Adventist journals and books. The hideous beast of the 1850’s lost its teeth in the 1860s and 70s and morphed into an “affable American buffalo” by 1905. No longer a beast with lamblike horns, it was now described as a lamblike beast.<sup>19</sup>

### **Paradox 1. Oppose Sunday legislation.**

During this third phase, Adventists took a decidedly paradoxical attitude toward the powers around them. On the one hand, they anticipated a union of Catholicism, Apostate Protestantism, and Spiritualism that would precipitate the end. They believed that the “final crisis” was definitely at hand. At the same time, however, they actively opposed developments that would lead to it. In other words, rather than hasten the Lord’s return they sought to prolong the time before it occurred. As Jonathan Butler puts it, “they wished to delay the end in order to preach that the end was soon.”<sup>20</sup>

One of Ellen White’s testimonies illustrates this paradox. In Testimony 33, published in 1889, Ellen White asserts that biblical prophecy foretells the enactment of a national Sunday law in the USA. She sol-

emly warns that such legislation would place particular pressure on Seventh-day Adventists, bring them before councils to justify their beliefs, and ultimately lead to “imprisonment, exile, and death” (5T 717, 712). And she describes this crisis as “impending,” “right upon us” (716), and “on the point of realization” (712).

In the same testimony, however, she also states that the time when our liberties will be restricted has not fully come (717), and urges her readers to actively oppose this legislation and to pray this it will be deferred so that God’s people will have time to accomplish their work (714), and missionaries may be sent to all parts of the world (718). So, while Ellen White announced the imminence of the end, she encouraged Adventists to engage in activities that would postpone it.

When Ellen White described the remnant and the powers opposing it, she was not referring to events that lay in the distant future, nor to things that only prophetic insight could detect. Instead, she was warning Adventists of things that were happening right before their eyes. In 1888 for example—the year before Testimony 33 was publishing—a bill was introduced into Congress that would have brought a federal Sunday law to the United States.<sup>21</sup>

So, when Ellen White wrote the “Impending Crisis,” there was indeed a crisis impending. Her account of the biblical remnant and the beastly powers opposing it was not the forecast of a distant future, but a vivid account of the present, her present. Yet even though Ellen White announced that the world would soon end, she encouraged Adventists to do things that would keep it from ending right away. The work of God’s people was not yet finished. And this brings us to another important feature of 19<sup>th</sup> century Adventism, viz., its commitment to making the world a better place.

### **Paradox 2. Embrace social reform.**

Although they continued to believe that the end was imminent, Seventh-day Adventists participated in reform activities to a degree notable for both its scope and intensity. By the 1860’s, “The single-minded otherworldliness of 1844 Millerism [had changed] . . . into a durable, complex, and established Adventist sect with wide-ranging interests that included sabbatarianism, temperance, medicine, education, and religious liberty.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, they embraced an array of personal and social reforms with such devotion that one historian remarks that while Adventists were “expecting a kingdom of God from the heavens, they worked diligently for one on earth.”<sup>23</sup>

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, called “the great century” by some historians, Evangelical Christians formed a large number of voluntary associations, each devoted to a specific cause: missions, antidualing, Sunday schools, temperance, Sabbath-keeping, and the abolition of slavery.<sup>24</sup> And Adventists were very much a part of all this. They developed their own mission program, sending J N Andrews to Europe in 1874. They pursued reform in dress and health. They were actively engaged in improving life in the cities. They were extensively involved in the temperance movement. (By her own account, Ellen White was best known publicly as a speaker on temperance.) And they carried their commitment into the political arena. Ellen White urged Adventists not only to live abstemiously themselves, but to vote and encourage others to vote in favor of measures that would “end the drink traffic” and “close the saloons.”<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps most paradoxically, Ellen White encouraged Adventists to ally themselves with the temperance movement at the very time that many of the movement’s leaders were promoting national Sunday legislation. Ellen White described the WCTU as potentially a “great help to us in our efforts to advance the temperance movement,”<sup>26</sup> “an organization with whose efforts for the spread of temperance principles we can heartily unite.”<sup>27</sup> At the same time, she admonished, “We cannot unite with them in a work of exalting a false Sabbath.”<sup>28</sup> So, even though Ellen White cast prospective Sunday legislation in the worst possible

light, she encouraged Adventists to collaborate with its supporters in areas where they could make common cause.

## Conclusion

How does all this help us to maintain a remnant identity? A look at 19<sup>th</sup> century Adventism obliges us to go beyond the “time and signs” prophetic touchstones so often invoked in connection with the remnant. To maintain continuity with our forbears, it is important to remember not only what they said *about* the remnant, but they did *as* the remnant. While early Adventists identified themselves as the remnant of biblical prophecy, the role of the remnant developed in remarkable ways. The remnant people became active participants in the world of affairs, wary of the oppressive potential of government on the one hand, yet willing to use the power of government when it served their purposes.

Following their lead, we who see ourselves as the remnant today should be actively engaged in the issues of our time. Those among us who find in the notion of remnant a call to justice and to peace-making are not abandoning or weakening the remnant identity of Adventism, they are fulfilling it.

To be faithful to a remnant heritage is therefore to be open to new opportunities and new challenges. Because the remnant church is a pilgrim church, it is always on the way. Consequently, we should not necessarily expect the issues of 150 years ago to be the same issues as the ones facing us now. Indeed, a preoccupation with the issues of their time may blind us to the imperatives of our own.

We should also beware of basing our remnant claims on the wrong foundation. Spiritual authenticity can never be institutionally guaranteed. The claim that we are entitled to a particular place in God’s plan because we can trace an organizational continuity to those who had one is a temptation that must be constantly resisted. One has only to think of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day and the rulers of the medieval church. The continuity that counts is a continuity of experience, a continuity of character, a continuity of community. The message of the third angel must never be divorced from that of the first, the proclamation of the everlasting gospel.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we should therefore think of remnant identity as vocation rather than verification. It refers primarily, not to what we are, but to what we are called to be. In the words of Richard P. Lehman, “The claim of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to be the remnant church described in Bible prophecy is more of a challenge than a report, more a call than an assessment, more a test of faith than the sum total of its deeds.”<sup>29</sup>

I value the sense of identity with which our remnant heritage inspires us. I also appreciate the expansive vision of Christian life, witness, and service that our founding figures bequeathed to us. It is not enough for Adventists today merely to reiterate the remnant rationale that Adventists developed then. A prophetic movement must always be a timely movement. So, while there will always be elements of continuity between Adventism past and present, there will inevitably be elements of discontinuity as well. And it may be just as fatal to a remnant heritage to ignore the latter as to deny the former.

We Seventh-day Adventists have been around awhile. We may very well be around for awhile longer, maybe quite awhile. Those of us who have grown up and are growing old with the expectation of Christ’s return must face the fact that it is not as soon as we first believed. Our task, therefore, is to do what our forbears did in the wake of the Great Disappointment, that is, to be about our Father’s business. For as Jesus said, “The faithful and wise slave . . . is the one whom his master will find at work when he arrives” (Mt 24:44-45).

---

<sup>1</sup> *Toward a Theology of the Remnant: An Adventist Ecclesiological Perspective* [hereafter “TRR”], ed. Angel Manuel Rodriguez (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2009), 226.

<sup>2</sup> This general approach takes a variety of forms. Reinder Bruinsma notes five different conceptions of the remnant, besides the traditional one in *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2009), 200.

<sup>3</sup> Stephan P. Mitchell, MA Thesis, Loma Linda University, 1988, 56. Mitchell reviews and critiques various elements of the traditional remnant claim and proposes a reformulation of the concept for Adventists today.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> “The Remnant in Contemporary Adventist Theology,” in TRR 163.

<sup>10</sup> Hasel detects a “subtle shift” away from the historic Adventist position in *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*. Here, for the first time, he finds, Adventists applied the term “remnant” to non-Adventists. “God has a precious remnant, a multitude of earnest, sincere believers, in every church ... who are living up to all the light God has given them” (*Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1959], 192; quoted in TRR 164-65).

<sup>11</sup> TRR 170.

<sup>12</sup> TRR, 165.

<sup>13</sup> This is not to say, however, that only members of the Adventist church will be saved. For Hasel and Rodriguez, we can avoid this conclusion by thinking of the true church as universal rather than invisible. If the true church is invisible, then visible entities and organizations fade into insignificance. But if the church is universal, composed of all who truly believe in Christ, it can have different visible manifestations at different times in history. So, there may be true believers in other churches as well as in other religions, but they do not form part of the end-time eschatological remnant. Only the Seventh-day Adventist church has that distinction. For Angel Rodriguez the universal church is invisible ... for the time being. But just before the cosmic conflict ends, and Christ returns, the end time remnant will “pull the universal church out of its invisibility in preparation for the coming of the Lord in glory. But in the meantime, the people of God visibly exist in the eschatological remnant of Rev 12:17 and invisibly in the universal people of God who are still in Babylon (18:4)” (TRR 220-222).

<sup>14</sup> My grandparents on both sides were overseas missionaries, propelled to spend years of their lives in challenging circumstances by the conviction that time was short, the return of Christ was imminent, and the need the spread the Advent message was urgent. The destiny of souls was hanging in the balance. In fact, my grandparents on one side got married just so they could go to the mission field (the church would not send single men overseas). When they arrived in Korea in 1918, they were certain that the end of time was so near that they would never finish their seven-year term of service. They did, of course. They returned to America and served the church for another 37 years. My mother was born in Korea in 1919 and died in September at the age of 92.

<sup>15</sup> To the question of whether righteousness by faith really fits with the traditional self-understanding of Seventh-day Adventists, Ellen White offered the assurance that the righteousness by faith is the third angel’s message “in verity” (Ev 190. R&H April 1, 1890).

<sup>16</sup> George R. Knight, “Adventists and Change,” *Ministry* (Oct. 1993): 11.

<sup>17</sup> There are some who argue that we should stop trying. Consider, for example, the views of a British Adventist who identifies himself as “a child of the African diaspora in Europe.” According to William Ackah, Adventism in Great Britain today constitutes a “diasporic formation,” and it is high time for Adventism to “move from its childhood

---

endeavours to maturity.” Although Ackah does not mention the traditional concept of the remnant, the revisioning of Adventism he calls for seems to have little room for it (William Ackah, “Moving on to Maturity: From Culture to Diaspora. The Three Angels’ Message as an Ethical, Multicultural Encounter” [*Spectrum*, vol. 38, no. 4 (Fall 2010), 56-57]).

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan M. Butler, “Adventism and the American Experience,” in *The Rise of Adventism*, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 174-75.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>21</sup> Its sponsor was U.S. Senator Henry William Blair, a prominent figure in the temperance movement.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan M. Butler, “The Making of a New Order: Millerism and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventism,” in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteen Century*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 190.

<sup>23</sup> Butler, “Adventism and the American Experience,” 191.

<sup>24</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 387.

<sup>25</sup> “Disseminating Temperance Principles,” *Review and Herald*, June 18, 1908.

<sup>26</sup> *Review and Herald*, November 8, 1881.

<sup>27</sup> *Review and Herald*, June 18, 1908.

<sup>28</sup> *Temperance*, 224.

<sup>29</sup> “The Remnant in the Book of Revelation,” in TRR, 112.