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The Remnant Church

Gerhard Pfandl
Biblical Research Institute
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

On October 22, 1844, thousands of eager Christians in the United States waited for the second Advent of Christ. They were disappointed, because they had misunderstood what Daniel 8:14 teaches about the judgment. But out of this disappointment came the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In the first few years, the group-identity of our spiritual forefathers centred around five doctrinal pillars, all of them beginning with an “S”: the Sabbath, the second coming, the sanctuary, the Spirit of Prophecy and the state of the dead.

The Sabbath, the second coming, and the state of the dead are generally not questioned within the church. However, 150 years after the beginnings of our church, the sanctuary and the Spirit of prophecy are very much under scrutiny; and there are Seventh-day Adventists today who deny these two pillars, or who modify them to such an extent that they are hardly recognizable. The result is an identity crisis in our church. Who are we? Why are we here? Some of our people are no longer sure that we are, in fact, God’s remnant church.

The Witness of Scripture

As far back as Martin Luther, Christians have recognized that God has an invisible church which consists of members from all Christian churches, because there are faithful members in all communions, including that of Rome. They have accepted Christ as their personal Savior, and they are counted as His people. Therefore, in Revelation 18:4, in the time of the end, the call is made, “Come out of her [Babylon] my people.” Many of God’s people are still in Babylon; they belong to God’s invisible church. At the time of the “loud cry” of Revelation 18:4, they will come out and join God’s visible remnant church.

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That God has a visible remnant church in the time of the end is clearly taught in Revelation 12. “Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. Then being with child, she cried out in labour and in pain to give birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and to His throne. Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand and sixty days” (vss. 1-6, NKJV).

Adventist historicists believe that the woman is a symbol of the church (see Isa 54:5,6; 2 Cor 11:2); the dragon is Satan (vs. 9); the man child is Christ (cf. Rev 19:15); and the 1,260 prophetic days refer to the period of papal supremacy from the sixth to the end of the eighteenth century (538-1798).

In verses 7-12 we have an interlude explaining where Satan came from. The story continues in verse 13: “Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring [the remnant of her seed, KJV], who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

Verses 13-15 describe in symbolic terms the persecution of the Christian church, first by the Roman empire and later by the apostate Roman church. In verse 16, the earth (personified) helps the church by providing a safe haven on the newly discovered continent of America, thereby symbolically swallowing up the persecuting armies (see Rev 17:15).

In verse 17, we are now in the time after the 1,260 day period, that is, in the nineteenth century. Satan, seeing that he has been unable to wipe out God’s faithful people, is angry with a particular group of people called “the rest of her offspring.” The symbolism in verse 17 is

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changed; no longer is the focus on the woman—symbol of God’s people, the invisible church, throughout the ages—but on a particular group, “the rest of her offspring,” the visible remnant church. The invisible church (the woman) does not cease to exist at the end of the 1,260 years. There are still many of God’s people in all Christian churches, but the focus is now on the visible remnant church of God.

Only twice in this chapter is an offspring of the woman mentioned. The first one is the male child in verse 5, the Messiah; the second, “the rest of her offspring,” the remnant church. Both times the offspring of the woman is clearly identified, supporting the view that “the rest of her offspring” is the visible, not the invisible, remnant church.

Identifying Marks. Two identifying marks, or signs, are given of this remnant church: (1) They keep the commandments of God, and (2) they have the testimony of Jesus.

Whatever commandments we may want to include in the first mark, we must certainly include the Ten Commandments. Thus, the first identifying sign of the remnant church is their loyalty to God’s commandments, all His commandments, including the fourth, the Sabbath commandment. God, in Revelation 12:17, says, “At the end of time I will have a visible church—the remnant church—which will be recognized by the fact that they keep the commandments as I have given them in the beginning, including the Sabbath commandment.”

In the time of the apostles and the early church this would not have been a special sign, because they all kept the Sabbath; but today, when most Christians keep Sunday, the Sabbath has indeed become a distinguishing mark.

The second identifying mark is “the testimony of Jesus.” But what does this phrase mean? The expression “testimony of Jesus” (*marturia Iesou*) occurs six times in the book of Revelation (1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10 [twice]; 20:4). Two grammatically possible explanations concerning its meaning have been put forward. The first view takes *marturia Iēsou* as an objective genitive and interprets it as man’s witness to Christ.¹ Thus, the war mentioned in 12:17 refers to the “persecutions against all individuals of the church who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.”² The second view takes *marturia Iesou* as a subjective genitive and understands the testimony of Jesus as the self-revelation of Jesus—His own testimony.³

A study of the word *marturia* in the Johannine literature, where it occurs twenty-one times, indicates that it is used fourteen times in a genitive construction that is clearly subjective: for example, John 1:19; 3:11, 32, 33; 5:31; etc. The objective idea of “witness about” or “witness to” in John’s writings is consistently expressed by the preposition *peri* (about, concerning) with the verb *martureō* “to witness, testify.” He

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never uses the noun *marturia* (testimony, witness) with an objective genitive construction by itself. For example, John 1:7, “To bear witness to the light” [*martureō + peri*]; 5:31, “If I bear witness to myself” [*martureō + peri*]; 1 John 5:9, “He has borne witness to his Son” [*martureō + peri*].⁴

Revelation 1:1, 2. The introduction to the book of Revelation sets forth the source and general content of the book (the revelation of Jesus Christ). Verse 2 states that John bore witness to “the Word of God” and “the testimony of Jesus.”

“The Word of God” is commonly understood to refer to what God says; therefore, the expression “the testimony of Jesus” (in parallel to “the Word of God”) must mean the testimony which Jesus Himself gives. How did Jesus testify of Himself? While here on earth, He testified in person to the people in Palestine. After His ascension, He spoke through His prophets.

Revelation 1:9, 10. Before speaking in detail about his first vision, John introduces himself. He identifies who he is: John, “your brother”; where he is: on Patmos; why he is there: on account of “the Word of God” and “the testimony of Jesus”; and when he received the vision: “on the Lord’s day.”

The parallelism between “the Word of God” and “the testimony of Jesus” is again clearly discernible. “The Word of God” in John’s time referred to the Old Testament, and “the testimony of Jesus” to what Jesus had said in the gospels and through His prophets, like Peter and Paul. Thus, both genitives can be taken as subjective genitives. They describe the content of John’s preaching, for which he was banished. Therefore, in Revelation 19:10 we read the explanation, “For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

However, what is “the spirit of prophecy?” This phrase occurs only once in the Bible, only in this text. The closest parallel to it in the Bible is found in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. There Paul refers to the Holy Spirit, who, among other charismata, gives the gift of prophecy; and the person who receives this gift is called a prophet (cf. 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11).

Now, just as in 1 Corinthians 12:28, those who have the gift of prophecy (vs. 10) are called prophets, so in Revelation 22:8,9, those who have the spirit of prophecy (in Rev 19:10) are called prophets.

Please note the parallelism between Revelation 19:10 and 22:8, 9:

19:10

And I fell at his feet
to worship him.

22:8,9

I fell down to worship before the feet
of the angel who showed me these things.

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But he said to me,
“See that you do not do that!
I am your fellow servant, and
of your brethren who have
the testimony of Jesus.
Worship God! For the testi-
mony of Jesus is the spirit
of prophecy.”

Then he said to me,
“See that you do not do that
For I am your fellow servant,
and of your brethren the prophets,
and of those who keep the words
of this book. Worship God.”

The situation in both passages is the same. John falls at the feet of the angel to worship. The words of the angel’s response are almost identical, yet the difference is significant. In 19:10, the brethren are identified by the phrase, “Who have [hold] the testimony of Jesus.” In 22:9, the brethren are simply called “prophets.”

If the Protestant principle of interpreting scripture by scripture means anything, this comparison must lead to the conclusion that “the spirit of prophecy” in 19:10 is not the possession of all church members in general, but only of those who have been called by God to be prophets.

That this is not purely an Adventist interpretation can be seen from the writings of other scholars. The Lutheran scholar Hermann Strathmann, for example, says:

According to the parallel 22:9 the brothers referred to are not believers in general, but the prophets. Here, too, they are characterised as such. This is the point of verse 10c. If they have the *marturia Iesou*, they have the spirit of prophecy, i.e., they are prophets, like the angel, who simply stands in the service of *marturia Iesou*.⁵

Similarly, James Moffat explains:

“For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” This prose marginal comment specifically defines the brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus as possessors of prophetic inspiration. The testimony of Jesus is practically equivalent to Jesus testifying.⁶

The Witness of the Targumim

The Jewish readers in John’s day knew what was meant by the expression “Spirit of prophecy.” They would have understood the expression as a reference to the Holy Spirit, who imparts the prophetic gift to man.

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Rabbinic Judaism equated the OT expressions “Holy Spirit,” “Spirit of God,” or “Spirit of Yahweh” with “the Spirit of prophecy,” as can be seen in the frequent occurrence of this term in the Targums (written translations of the OT in Aramaic):

And Pharaoh said to his servants, can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of prophecy from the Lord? (Gen. 41:38).

In what will it be known that I have found mercy before Thee but in the converse of Thy Shekinah with us, that distinguishing signs may be wrought for us, in the withholdment of the Spirit of prophecy from the nations, and by Thy speaking by the Holy Spirit to me and to Thy people, that we may be distinguished from all the peoples upon the face of the earth? (Ex.33:16).

And the Lord said to Mosheh, Take to thee Jehoshua bar Nun, a man upon whom abideth the Spirit of prophecy from before the Lord (Num. 27:18).⁷

Sometimes the term “Spirit of prophecy” refers simply to the Holy Spirit, but in many cases it refers to the gift of prophecy given by the Holy Spirit, as is made clear by the context of the Masoretic text.

Commenting on this expression in the Targums, J.P. Schäfer says:

Thence first of all it proves that the term “Spirit of prophecy” is closer to the MT than the term “Holy Spirit.” Moreover an examination of the verses where TO uses the term “Spirit of prophecy” shows that in almost all cases there is a direct relationship to the prophecy in the biblical context. The translation “Spirit of prophecy,” although not in the strictest sense literal, is almost always stipulated through the MT (Gen. 41:38 - Joseph had the “Spirit of prophecy” because he was able to interpret Pharaoh’s dream; Num. 11:25 - The Spirit that settled on the 70 Elders, according to the MT, brought about “prophesying”; Num. 24:2 - Balaam prophesied concerning Israel). In other words, the term “Spirit of prophecy” describes a clearly delineated situation, namely, the Holy Spirit sent from God who imparts the prophetic gift to man.⁸

F.F. Bruce comes to the same conclusion and says:

The expression “the Spirit of prophecy” is current in post-biblical Judaism: it is used, for example, in a Targumic circumlocution for the Spirit of Yahweh which comes upon this or that prophet. Thus the Targum of Jonathan renders the opening words of Isaiah 61:1 as “The Spirit of prophecy from before the Lord God is upon me.” The thought expressed in Revelation 19:10 is not dissimilar to that already quoted from 1. Peter 1:11 where “the Spirit of Christ” is said to have borne advanced testimony in the Old Testament prophets. There too Jesus

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is the theme of the witness borne by the prophetic Spirit; the prophets did not know who the person or what the time would be, but at last the secret is out: the person is Jesus; the time is now.

In Revelation 19:10, however, it is through Christian prophets that the Spirit of prophecy bears witness. What the prophets of pre-Christian days foretold is proclaimed as an accomplished fact by the prophets of the new age, among whom John occupies a leading place.⁹

Summary Of Revelation 12:17

Turning now to Revelation 12:17, we can say that “the rest of her offspring . . . keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ,” which is the Spirit of prophecy, or the prophetic gift.

This interpretation is strengthened by a study of the Greek word *echo*, meaning “to have.” This word indicates possession. The remnant have a gift from God—the prophetic gift. If the testimony of Jesus were our testimony about Jesus, John would have written something like this: “They keep the commandments of God and testify about Jesus,” or, “they bear testimony to Jesus.” But the Greek word *echo* is never used in the sense “to bear a witness.”¹⁰

In summary we can say that the visible remnant church, which according to prophecy exists after the 1,260 day period (after 1798), has two specific identifying marks:

1. They keep the commandments of God, including the Sabbath command as God has given it.
2. They have the testimony of Jesus, which is the Spirit of prophecy, or the prophetic gift in their midst.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, from its very inception in 1863, has always claimed these identifying signs for itself. As Adventists we proclaim the Ten Commandments, including the Sabbath; and we believe that as a church we have the testimony of Jesus, that is, that God manifested Himself in the life and work of Ellen G. White.

Thus, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a church prophetically foreseen, not just one church among many. God has called this church into existence for a very specific purpose: to proclaim the Three Angels’ Messages (Rev 14:6-13).

Our pioneers were quite certain that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the remnant church of Revelation 12:17. G.I. Butler, General Conference president from 1871 to 1888, wrote in an article entitled “Visions and Dreams”:

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Is there then no people in whom these conditions combine in these last days? We believe they truly do in Seventh-day Adventists. They have everywhere claimed to be the “remnant” church for the last 25 years . . .

Do they keep the commandments of God? Every one knowing anything about this people can answer that this is the most important part of their faith . . .

In regard to the Spirit of prophecy, it is a remarkable fact that from the first of their existence as a people, Seventh-day Adventists have claimed that it has been in active exercise among them.¹¹

Ellen White firmly believed that Seventh-day Adventists were God’s remnant church and that Revelation 12:17 applied to them. Seventh-day Adventists “are God’s representatives upon the earth.”¹² “We have the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, which is the spirit of prophecy.”¹³ And she counselled, “Let all be careful not to make an outcry against the only people who are fulfilling the description given of the remnant people who keep the commandments of God and have faith in Jesus, who are exalting the standard of righteousness in these last days.”¹⁴

And we still believe that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the visible remnant church and that the Spirit of prophecy is one of the identifying marks.

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord’s messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.¹⁵

As Seventh-day Adventists, we are members of God’s remnant church. However, this identification with the remnant church does not accord us an exclusive status with God. Salvation is not guaranteed through church membership in any church. We are saved as individuals, not as a church. But being a part of God’s remnant church means that we participate in proclaiming God’s special end-time message—the three angels’ messages—to the world.

The prophetic origin of the Adventist movement and God’s gracious guidance through the prophetic gift of Ellen White should make us more aware of the responsibility we as the remnant church have, and it should spur us on to finish the work God has given us to do.

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Notes

¹ M. E. Osterhaven, "Testimony," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1975), 5:682; see also John J. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (London, 1966), p. 41; Petros Vassiliades, "The Translation of *Marturia Iesou* in Revelation," *BT* 36 (1985): 129-134.

² Ray F. Robbins, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, (Nashville, 1975), p. 154; see also G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible (London, 1974), p. 206.

³ James Moffat, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine," *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. R. Nicoll (Grand Rapids, 1956), 5:465.

⁴ See G. Pfandl, "The Remnant Church and the Spirit of Prophecy," *Symposium on Revelation*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, 7 vols, ed. F. B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 7:305-6.

⁵ Trite, p. 75. See also Hermann Strathmann, "Martyrs," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart, 1933-1974), 4:506; Mounce, pp. 66, 274.

⁶ Moffat, "Revelation," *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5 vols, 5:465.

⁷ John W. Etheridge, *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch* (London, 1862), 1:131, 556; 2:442 Other occurrences are Gen 45:27; Exod 35:21, 31; Num 11:17, 25, 26, 28, 29; 24:2; Judges 3:10; 1 Sam 10:6; 19:10, 23; 2 Sam 23:2; 1 Kings 22:24; 2 Chr 15:1; 18:22, 23; 20:14; Ps 51:13, Isa 11:2. Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (München, 1965), 2:129.

⁸ J. P. Schäfer, "Die Termini 'Heiliger Geist' und 'Heist der Prophetie' in den Targumim und das Verhältnis der Targumim Zueinander," *VT* 20 (1970): 310.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Time is Fulfilled* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1978), pp. 105-106.

¹⁰ Pfandl, pp. 312-313.

¹¹ G. I. Butler., "Visions and Prophecy," *Review and Herald*, June 2, 1874, pp. 193.

¹² Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2 (Mountain View, CA: 1948), p. 452.

¹³ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers* (Mountain View, CA: 1962), p. 114.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

¹⁵ Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists, No. 17. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1990), p. 28.