Adventist Identity and Remnant Heritage

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.” Then the sermon went on to mention the Sabbath and salvation, and the spirit of prophecy. The fact that Adventists are a remnant, Wilson insisted, means that we are not “just another denomination.”

Our 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 unique 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 their denominational forbears in two rather different ways.

One group of Adventists includes those for whom the time and the signs of the remnant mentioned in Revelation 12 find fulfillment in one, and only one, religious movement, namely, their own, and that settles the issue. Extensive analysis of biblical material supports the conviction that Adventists constitute the last remnant of biblical prophecy. As Angel Rodriguez puts it on the final page of a recent publication of the Biblical Research Institute, *Toward a Theology of the Remnant*, “The Adventist self-designation as God’s remnant people is based on a historicist read-
ing of Revelation, on the characteristics of that remnant recorded in Revelation, and on the mission of that remnant.”

Those who affirm this traditional concept of the remnant do not maintain that Adventists are the only ones who will be saved. But in view of the unique mission of Seventh-day Adventists—to deliver God’s last warning message to the world—they believe, the time will come when all the living who are faithful to God will join with Adventists to form the final remnant of those who are faithful to God.

Over the past few decades a number of Adventist thinkers have revisited the remnant concept and they extend its meaning beyond the familiar “time and signs” touchstones of Revelation 12. Just as the various “remnants” referred to in the Bible responded to God within their specific historical contexts, they believe, the remnant mission of Seventh-day Adventists calls us to respond to the distinctive challenges and opportunities facing us today.

Those proposing a more expansive view of the remnant include Fritz Guy, Roy Branson, Charles Scriven, John Brunt, and Charles Teel, as well as the late Jack Provonsha. Provonsha sought to preserve a sense of Adventist uniqueness without making exclusivist claims. Accordingly, he suggested that we think of Adventism as “a prophetic minority,” as a visible institution that performs a specific task, but is not necessarily co-equal with the body of true believers. In time, this prophetic minority will trigger the formation of God’s true remnant, and it will remain faithful to the end.

Fritz Guy argues that uncertainty is one of the essential dynamics of Christian hope and warns against any attempt to forecast future events. Waiting requires patience, he notes, and predictions tend only to further disappointment. Roy Branson argues against “expansionist” and “moral” responses to the delay of Christ’s return. Not only has the impressive increase in the size and extent of Adventism not triggered the Advent, but the attempt to link the two would make Christ’s return man’s work rather than God’s. Instead, Branson suggests, we should view the end as a “cosmic mystery,” which our actions will neither hasten nor delay.

Besides reconsidering the traditional notion that the work of the remnant precipitates the end of human history, 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

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2 Stephan P. Mitchell, MA Thesis, Loma Linda University, 1988, 55. Mitchell not only reviews and critiques the elements of the traditional remnant claim, he proposes a reformulation of the concept for Adventists today.
3 Ibid., 56.
4 Ibid., 57.
to ethical concern.\footnote{Ibid., 58.} 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.\footnote{Ibid., 59.}

Charles Teel finds an interesting transition in the ethical activism of early Adventists. While many Millerite Adventists were involved in social causes, their social sensitivity ceased with the call to come out of Babylon in 1844. With the passage of time after the Great Disappointment, they became active in political issues that directly affected them, such as noncombatancy and Sunday laws.\footnote{Ibid., 61.} Teel calls Adventists today to return to the ethical activism of the early Millerites. “Remnant-ness,” he insists, is not a designation we should claim or proclaim for ourselves, but “a gracious calling to be humbly lived.”\footnote{Ibid., 62.}

In a 1988 MA Thesis, Stephan P. Mitchell argues that SDAs can make important, but not extravagant claims for themselves. We can make a valid claim to be a historical remnant, he believes, but not the eschatological remnant, i.e., the last remnant, the group whose activity precipitates the very end of time. Viewed this way, Adventism “plays a cumulative, not culminative, role in salvation-history.”\footnote{Ibid., 67.} 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.”\footnote{Ibid., 69.}

In a clear and forceful essay, “The Remnant in Contemporary Adventist Theology,” Frank M. Hasel provides a recent survey of contemporary Adventist treatments of the remnant and comes to a strikingly different assessment of their value. For Hasel, the remnant theology formulated by Adventists in the 19th century is central to Adventist identity, and Adventists today should hold fast to it, objections from other Christian bodies notwithstanding. Quoting the SDA Encyclopedia, he asserts, “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 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.”\footnote{TRR 163.}

For Hasel, it is more important for Adventists to remain faithful to this very particular view of the remnant than to avoid antagonizing their fellow Christians. Accordingly, he regards perspec-
tives on the remnant that various Adventists have taken in recent years as regrettable departures from the authentic Adventist self-understanding. He takes exception, in order, with interpretations of the remnant as including other Christians, as including non-Christians, as an invisible entity, as a future reality, and as a movement for social justice.

Hasel detects a “subtle shift” away from the historic Adventist concept in the controversial book, *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*. Here, for the first time, he notes, Adventists applied the term “remnant” to non-Adventists. “God has a precious remnant, a multitude of earnest, sincere believers, in every church, not excepting the Roman Catholic communion, who are living up to all the light God has given them.” This is an acknowledgment of an invisible church and the remnant as an invisible group. “If other Christians are already part of God’s end-time remnant,” Hasel 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?

Hasel finds a similar, and more extensive, weakening of the remnant concept of Revelation in recent Adventist proposals that a remnant may exist in Islam. Thanks to Adventist missionary activity, a significant number of Muslims have accepted Jesus and submitted to baptism, yet they maintain their cultural connection with Islam and remain organizationally independent from the Seventh-day Adventist church. According to some Adventists, such persons form part of the remnant of Bible prophecy. But not according to Hasel. This use of the term “remnant” “weakens the nature of the end-time remnant as described in the book of Revelation.”

The same can be said of suggestions that the remnant is a group characterized by charismatic renewal (Steve Daily), a profound commitment to spiritual growth (Jon Dybdahl), or a movement dedicated to the pursuit of social justice (Charles Scriven and Charles Teel). For Hasel, any construal of the remnant that fails to embrace the notion that the institutional, organized Adventist church is the end-time remnant foretold in the book of Revelation represents an unacceptable departure from the biblical view.

On this particularistic view of the remnant, what shall we say of Christians in other religious communities? Hasel rejects the notion of an invisible church in favor of that of a universal church. On the visible-invisible distinction, the true church is the invisible church, and visible entities and organizations fade into insignificance. For Hasel, however, “Adventists talk about a universal church composed of all who truly believe in Christ but do not consider the church to be essentially invisible.” To the contrary, Adventists have identified various visible entities as “in a

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13 TRR, 165.
14 TRR 170.
sense remnant groups,” such as “the Waldenses, the Anabaptists, the Puritans, the German Pietists, the Methodists, and the Millerite Revivalists.”

It is not Hasel’s view that only members of the Adventist church will be saved, or constitute the universal church. Instead, he is reaching for a position that does not extend the notion of remnant to other Christians in a way that would dissolve or dissipate the distinctive claim of Adventists to constitute God’s end-time remnant people. So, the church universal includes all who have responded to God’s offer of salvation in Jesus Christ, but this universal church has different manifestations at different times in history, and at the present time, its particular and visible manifestation is found in the Adventist church. 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.

In the concluding essay of the same publication, “Toward a Theology of the Remnant,” Angel Rodriguez reviews the traditional Adventist arguments supporting the conclusion that the end-time remnant of Revelation is the Seventh-day Adventist church. Then he returns to the most perplexing question this position raises: just what does this self-identification imply for our relation to other Christians? How can we avoid giving offense in making such claims for ourselves? He appeals to the notion of the universal church as containing all who truly believe in Christ. Since the “universal church” transcends denominationalism, it is invisible … for the time being. 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).

According to Rodriguez, then, the Adventist church constitutes the endtime remnant, the last remnant, of biblical prophecy. Members of the Adventist church are not the only ones who constitute the true church, but the time is coming when they will be, because those who are members of the universal church, those who are truly following Christ, will eventually respond to the three angels’ message and join the Advent movement.

To summarize, we find two contrasting interpretations of the remnant among Seventh-day Adventists today. One reasserts the traditional interpretation that the Seventh-day Adventist church is the endtime remnant of Revelation, because it arises at the end of prophetic time and exhibits the distinctive characteristics identified in Rev 12:17. The other goes beyond the “time and

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15 TRR 179.
16 TRR, 226.
17 TRR 220-222.
signs” identification and extends the category of remnant to additional characteristics, such as, religious sincerity, ethical concern, religious inclusiveness, even political activism.\textsuperscript{18}

As these divergent views suggest, it is no small task to determine just what a remnant heritage involves. And while our goal is to find in the notion of the remnant a strong continuity between Adventism past and present, we cannot ignore the enormous differences between them. A number of factors demand our attention.

**The passage of time.** The most obvious is the sheer passage of time. It’s been 166 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 themselves as “the last generation,”—has long passed from the earth, and the Lord has not come.

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 precisely 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. Next month Mother, born to young Adventists who believed the world was soon to end, will celebrate her 92\textsuperscript{nd} birthday. 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.

**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. The “little flock” is now a denomination of over 16 million people with members in over 200 countries. 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 have more members in Africa that anywhere else and nearly as many members in Latin America (34% and 33%, respectively). We may attribute this remarkable increase to divine providence, but that doesn’t lessen the difficulty of describing Adventism in ways that no longer seem to fit. The time is long past when we referred to those who left North American to serve in other parts of the world as going “from home base to front line.”

\textsuperscript{18} 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.
We may still use the expression “remnant,” but we are no longer a beleaguered minority on the outskirts of Christianity, little known and even less understood. In some countries Seventh-day Adventists form a significant proportion of the population. Approximately 10% of Jamaicans identify themselves as Seventh-day Adventists (second only to the Church of God), and the current Governor General of the country, Sir Patrick L. Allen, is a member of the Adventist church. 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. A November 15, 2010, article in “The Christian Science Monitor” reports the findings of the four-year CognitiveGenesis 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 each subject category. Combining the commitment to medical care and education, Loma Linda University’s School of Medicine is one of three privately operated medical schools in the state of California, and regularly graduates one of the largest numbers of students from any medical school west of the Mississippi River.

**Theological developments.** There are other ways in which the Adventist church today is quite different from the one in the 19th century which applied to itself the remnant of Revelation 12. We are not only far removed from the remnant of the mid-19th century in time, size, and demographic distribution. Our theology is significantly different as well. As the decades of the 19th century passed, the doctrinal concerns of Adventists expanded rather dramatically. Alongside a characteristic preoccupation with prophetic interpretation, Adventists developed a concern for the basis of salvation. The legalism that was arguably encouraged by their emphasis on keeping God’s commandments was eventually countered by the realization that salvation depends entirely on God’s grace received by faith. The famous GC of 1888 was a watershed in Adventist theology, and its ramifications are still being felt. 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.”

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19 “Several have written to me, inquiring if the message of justification by faith is the third angel’s message, and I have answered, ‘It is the third angel’s message in verity’” (Ev 190. R&H April 1, 1890). Cf. statements re Christ in Ev 184ff. cf. justification through faith = 3rd angel’s message (TM 92).

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The recognition that salvation is entirely God’s gift, received by faith, eventually led to other important developments, including the emergence of Christological orthodoxy within Adventism and later on the embrace of full-fledged trinitarianism. Indeed, so different is Adventist theology today from that of the earliest generation 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.”

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 many Adventists to find a close connection between the concerns of early Adventists and the issues confronting us in the world today. And there are some who argue that we should stop trying. For them, the changing demography of Adventism calls for a dramatic shift in Adventist preoccupations.

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.” As Ackah describes it, “This means not going over again and again a 19th century, Anglo, Eurocentric heritage, with its preoccupations with the body, and a doctrinal positioning that looks backward to issues about the nature of Christ, the Trinity, and other anachronistic theological debates that comprise far too many of the so-called fundamentals of our faith.” While we need to appreciate our heritage, he argues, we need not be stuck with its preoccupations, and we need to recognize the potential impact on Adventism of the explosion of the Adventist population within Africa and among people of African descent. Ackah calls for a more diverse theology and history of Adventism, one that invites multi-ethnic and multi-dimensional expression. 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.

I doubt that many Adventists would go as far as Ackah does, but his comments underscore the importance of demonstrating that the central features of Adventist tradition are not merely elements in the past, but facets of a heritage that has enduring significance. Is it possible to do this in the case of the remnant? Can we draw from the notion that played such a prominent role in our past a renewed vision of what Adventism can and should be today? We can, I believe, but only if we go beyond the familiar “time and signs” approach that Adventists have used for more than a century and a half. Just how to do this is the crucial question, of course. And the answer, perhaps paradoxically, lies in early Adventism itself. The history of those Adventists who first saw them-

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21 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).
Adventist perspectives on the remnant. One is the fact that remnant theology itself developed among early Adventists. It took several years for Adventists to reach the position that they were the remnant for the reasons that are so well known to us today. According to Stephan Mitchell’s account, in the Millerite period (1830-1844), Miller, Himes and others regarded themselves as the remnant of Rev 12:17 because they saw themselves as the last generation. Since “the ‘end’ had come; there must be a remnant.” Ellen White’s first visions (Dec 1844 and Feb 1845) formed “the backbone of the Adventist remnant concept.” The essential claim here was that God had been active in the “Midnight Cry” movement and that the door of mercy was shut—probation had closed—for those who rejected that position.

The acceptance of the 7th day Sabbath in 1846 added to the remnant concept because it fulfilled the reference in Rev 12:17 to “the commandments of God.” There was diversity among Adventists during this time over the interpretation of “the faith of Jesus,” with Joseph Bates applying it to Christ’s teachings in the NT and James and Ellen White applying it to the Shut Door. Later Bates came on board and the consensus among Adventists in 1850 was that the Sabbath and the shut door identified them as God’s remnant church.

Mitchell sees a decisive turning point in Adventist understanding of the remnant with the publication of James White’s R&H article in December, 1855, “The Testimony of Jesus.” Here White first makes “the now standard connection between Revelation 12:17 and 19:10, thus identifying the “testimony of Jesus” with the “spirit of prophecy,” and implicitly, though obviously, connecting the latter with Ellen White’s visions.

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. And this, in essence, has been the position of Seventh-day Adventists ever since.

Adventist perspectives on the world. There is another important feature in Adventist history that provides a basis for expanding the remnant concept, namely, the positions early Adventists assumed in relation to the various social, political, and religious issues of their day. Not only did the remnant rationale itself develop, so did the Adventist attitude toward the worldly powers around them. In its literary setting, Revelation 12-14, the remnant of Rev 12:17 is one of a number of dramatic prophetic images, including the dragon of Revelation 12, and the beasts of Revelation 13—one arising from the sea, the other from the land. While their self-identification as the remnant remained constant after 1855, the role to which Adventists believed their remnant status

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22 Mitchell, 8.
summoned them vis-a-vis these various powers changed remarkably during the latter half of the 19th century.  

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.

**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. The believed that the “final crisis” was definitely at hand. At the same time, however, they actively opposed Sunday legislation. In other words, rather than hasten the Lord’s return they sought to prolong the time before it occurred. The Second Coming remained prominent in Adventists consciousness, but as Jonathan Butler puts it, “they wished to delay the end in order to preach that the end was soon.”

One of Ellen White’s testimonies illustrates the paradox that Butler describes. In a section of Testimony 33, published in 1889 as part of *Testimonies for the Church* Volume 5, Ellen White asserts that biblical prophecy foretells the enactment of a national Sunday law in the USA. She solemnly warns that such legislation would place particular pressure on Seventh-day Adventists, bringing them before councils to justify their beliefs, would 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).

She also states, however, that the time when our liberties will be restricted has not fully come (717), and exhorts her readers to zeal, piety, and devotion (717) in order to prepare for the coming crisis. Moreover, she urges them 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—not because

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24 Ibid., 191.
25 Ibid., 194.
she did not welcome it, presumably, but because the world was not ready for it. The work of God’s people was not yet finished.

When Ellen White described the remnant and the powers opposing it that are mentioned in Revelation, she was not referring to events that lay in the distant future, nor to things that were discernible only by someone gifted with prophetic insight. To the contrary, she was talking about contemporary political developments. In the latter decades of the 19th century, the movement to enforce Sunday observance on a national scale enjoyed a widespread support in the USA. In 1863, representatives of eleven Protestant denominations met together and established an interchurch organization, the National Reform Movement, whose objective was the enactment of a law that would make Sunday observance mandatory for all America. In 1888, at the urging of lobbyists for the organization, a bill was introduced into Congress that would have brought a federal Sunday law to the United States. Its sponsor was Henry William Blair, US Senator from New Hampshire (1879-91), who was also a prominent figure in the temperance movement. When Ellen White wrote the “Impending Crisis,” there was indeed a crisis impending. Measures to enshrine Sunday observance had actually been introduced in the US Congress.

From her comments on Sunday legislation, it is clear Ellen White invested events that were happening right around her with apocalyptic significance. She invoked the image of the biblical remnant and the beastly powers opposing it, not as the forecast of a distant future, but as a vivid account of the present, her present. She found in events of her own day clear indications that the end of history was very near. Her sense of the remnant role of Seventh-day Adventists was thus part and parcel of her understanding of 19th century religious and political developments in the USA.

Yet, while Ellen White announced that the world would soon end, she encouraged Adventists to engage in activities that would make the world a better place. And this brings us to another important feature of 19th century Adventism.

**Paradox 2. Embrace social reform.**

Although they continued to believe that the end was imminent, Seventh-day Adventists nevertheless participated in reform activities to a degree notable both for its scope and intensity. “The single-minded otherworldliness of 1844 Millerism [developed] by the 1860s, into a durable, complex, and established Adventist sect with wide-ranging interests that included sabbatarianism, temperance, medicine, education, and religious liberty.”

Indeed, members of the Adventist movement early on embraced an array of personal and social reforms with such devotion that one historian remarks that while Seventh-day Adventists were “expecting a kingdom of God from the heavens, they worked diligently for one on earth.”

The 19th century as been called “the great century,” because of the proliferation of activities devoted to reforming society and improving human life. As described by church historian Sydney

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Ahlstrom, the Second Great Awakening that “began during the 1790s gathered momentum in the early decades of the new century.” And “revivalism became a steady feature of advancing Protestantism throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth. [The period before the Civil War] was the great time of evangelical triumph. These were the days above all when the ‘Evangelical United Front’ took up the manifold causes of moral renewal, missionary advance, and humanitarian reform…. Its aim was to bring the gospel to all America and to heathen lands abroad, but primarily it hoped to make America the world’s great example of a truly Protestant republic. The institution by which this vast program was carried out was the interdenominational voluntary association, one society for each cause: missions, antidueling, Sunday schools, temperance, Sabbath-keeping, and any number of other worthy objectives…. Most decisive for the nation was the great crusade against slavery….”28

Adventists were very much a part of all this. They developed their own mission program, sending J N Andrews to Europe in 1874. They enthusiastically embraced many aspects of social transformation for which the 19th century is also remembered. They were committed to reform in the areas of dress and health. They were actively involved in improving life in the cities. They were extensively involved in the temperance movement, next to abolition the largest, most unified, and most successful of the Protestant attempts to reform society. By her own account, Ellen White was best known to the general public as a speaker on temperance. And she 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.”29

There is an additional paradox to Adventist support for temperance, for Adventists allied themselves with the temperance movement at the very time that many of the movement’s leaders were promoting national Sunday legislation. To cite the best example, Ellen White described the members of the WCTU as potentially a “great help to us in our efforts to advance the temperance movement,”30 “an organization with whose efforts for the spread of temperance principles we can heartily unite.”31 Indeed, she exclaimed, “None who claim to have a part in the work of God should lose interest in the grand object of this organization in temperance lines.”32 At the same time, she admonished, “We cannot unite with them in a work of exalting a false Sabbath.”33 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.

In other areas, too, Adventists were very much a part of 19th century Protestantism. Besides participating in various forms of service to others, Adventists also displayed a deep interest in mat-
ters of personal religious significance. Along with other Evangelicals, they placed great emphasis on spiritual nurture and development, on cultivating a strong relationship with God through personal devotions and small group activities. Their understanding of the Christian life had numerous parallels to Methodism, especially with its concern for holiness, its emphasis on sanctification, and its pursuit of spiritual perfection. There may even be parallels between Ellen White’s numerous spiritual counsels and the preoccupations of Methodist “Band Societies.” Among the rules that John Wesley drew up to guide people in these groups as they met weekly for spiritual improvement was a willingness to “be told of all your faults, and that plain and home.”34 In arguably similar ways, Ellen White’s Testimonies for the Church express an intimate concern for, and familiarity with, the particulars of individuals’ personal spiritual condition.

Numerous developments in their thought and life thus placed early Adventists very much in the mainstream of 19th century American Protestantism. They were deeply engaged in the religious and social issues of their day, both in spite of and because of their apocalyptic convictions. They allied themselves with a number of social causes and encouraged participation in various reform movements, such as temperance, yet they were highly critical of others. They saw in the second beast of Revelation 13 a portrayal of the United States and they anticipated a national Sunday law that would betray of the founding principles of the American republic, viz., civil and religious freedom.

**Conclusion**

How does all this help us to maintain a remnant heritage? If we look at 19th century Adventism in its historical context, we find features that oblige us to go beyond the “time and signs” prophetic touchstones so often invoked in connection with the remnant. 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. To be sure, there will be elements of continuity between Adventism past and present, but there will inevitably be elements of discontinuity as well, and it may be just as fatal to a remnant heritage to deny the latter as to deny the former.

While their identification of themselves as the remnant of biblical prophecy remained, the role of the remnant shifted remarkably. No longer a persecuted minority on the cusp of eternity, Adventists became active participants in the world of affairs, occasionally using the powers of government to pursue their goals, as when they encouraged people to vote for temperance legislation, and engaging in mission work, both at home and abroad, as well as in a wide variety of popular reform movements.

All this arguably means two things. The remnant concept is not necessarily static. It is open to further interpretation, and calls for various applications. Just as the early Adventists who saw themselves as the remnant were deeply involved in the issues of their time, we who see ourselves

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as the remnant today should be actively engaged in the issues of our time. Consequently, those
today 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 see 19th century Adventism in general within its cultural and historical context may awaken
us to the unique opportunities and dangers confronting the Adventist remnant today. To be faith-
ful to a remnant heritage is to be open to new opportunities, new challenges, as well as prepared
for unforeseen dangers and novel threats. Because the remnant church is a pilgrim church, it is
always on the way. It must always be open to the leading of the Spirit at this moment. To do oth-
erwise is to betray our remnant heritage. Just as early Adventists developed their remnant iden-
tity in response to the religious situation of their time, we must develop our remnant identity in
response to the religious situation of our time.

On the negative side, this implies two things. For one, we should not necessarily expect the is-
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. There are Seventh-day
Adventists today who still expect the government of the USA to enact a national Sunday law.
This may or may not take place, but it is certainly not an issue of significance at the moment.
Whether it will be at some future time may be a possibility, but it hardly seems inevitable. While
the book of Revelation describes a horrific conflict at the end of time between God’s enemies
and his faithful followers, “it is not very fruitful,” as Reinder Bruinsma notes, “to try to predict
how precisely the ranks on the two sides in the final battle for the mind of humankind will line
up.”

As we have observed, those times are not our times. The historical distance that separates us
from them is enormous—temporally, socially, technologically, theologically. Adventist self-
understanding underwent a series of dramatic changes during the first half century of its history.
The situation of Seventh-day Adventists worldwide has changed far more dramatically since
then, and these changes call for similar reconsiderations of remnant identity today.

Second, we should beware of basing our remnant claims on the wrong foundation. Spiritual au-
thenticity 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 Je-
sus’ day and the rulers of the medieval church to recognize this.

There are two reasons for this reluctance. The first, to quote Bruinsma once again, is that fact
“The symbolism and vivid imagery of the Revelation hardly allows for the continued existence

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35 Bruinsma, 202.
of any kind of institutional life and organizational arrangements among God’s people as we know them today when the great controversy reaches its crescendo.”

And second, 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. And where the gospel is truly responded to, truly lived, there will be a community characterized by the essential qualities of faith, hope and love. God has always had a people, a remnant, identified by their devotion to one another as well as their loyalty to him. “From the beginning,” Ellen White states, “it has been God’s plan that through His church shall be reflected to the world His fullness and His sufficiency.”

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.”

We Seventh-day Adventists have been around for a while. 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).

If we follow the precedent of our forbears we will not only expand our understanding of the work God has called us to do. We will recognize that we are not the only group through whom God is now at work to accomplish his purposes. When early Adventists realized that the door of mercy was not shut, they realized that God was working in human lives in ways they had not understood, and their notion of who could be part of the remnant expanded. As we have seen, there are a number of contemporary Adventists who look to the expansive nature of early Adventists as a precedent for expanding our notion of the remnant, its work, and therefore its identity today.

Alongside our energetic mission and evangelistic programs, it is encouraging to see the Adventist church following the precedent of Adventists 150 years ago in acknowledging Christian social responsibility and expressing a commitment to improve the quality of human life. To cite two recent examples, we note the church’s support, along with that of 50 other faith and community organizations, for “Let’s Move! Faith and Communities,” Michelle Obama’s initiative to fight the epidemic of childhood obesity, and the Statement Global Poverty that was voted on June 23, 2010 by ADCOM, the Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh Day Adventists.

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36 Bruinsma, 199-200.
39 Adventist Review, December 23, 1020.
ventists Administrative Committee. According to this statement, Seventh-day Adventists join the
global community in “in supporting the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals for re-
ducing poverty by at least 50 percent by 2015,” and will “partner with civil society, governments
and other, working together locally and globally to participate in God’s work of establishing en-
during justice in a broken world.”

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 forbears bequeathed to us. To be
faithful to the full range of their concerns we must expand the range of our concerns and em-
brace a larger vision of the remnant than even they originally had.

Remnant and Advent.

There is another aspect of the remnant that always bears remembering. While early Adventists
were greatly disappointed when Christ did not return, there were not disillusioned. Their Advent
hope still burned brightly and their remnant consciousness helped keep it alive. The same can be
true of Adventists today.

The only individual I’ve ever met who lived in three different centuries was a shirttail relative of
mine, my brother-in-law’s stepfather. Born in 1900, Clarence Kilcher died in 2002. He was a li-
felong Adventist, a graduate of our medical school in Loma Linda. Not long before he passed
away, I interviewed him for one of the classes I teach on Adventist beliefs and life. During our
conversation, I asked him which aspect of Adventist doctrine or practice had meant the most to
him over the years. He answered without hesitation, “Why the second coming of Christ, of
course.” I said, “You’ve been waiting longer than anyone I know for Christ to come. Do you ex-
pect it to happen within your lifetime?” He said, “I hope so. But if it doesn’t, I know that Jesus’
face will be the first thing I see when I wake up.”

To be the remnant is to live with the lively hope that Christ’s return is near. And in the final
analysis, this is the most important element of all in a remnant heritage.

Richard Rice
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