

Who Really Is the **REMNANT CHURCH?**

By Harry Allen



I was recently reading an article in *Adventist World* titled “Foundations for Ellen White’s Prophetic Call” by Dr. Gerhard Pfandl, associate director of the General Conference’s Biblical Research Institute. The article richly detailed that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the remnant church of Bible prophecy. In making his case, Dr. Pfandl listed a somewhat lengthy sequence of scriptures and dates, one familiar to Seventh-day Adventists, though also of a kind that we tend to politely ridicule when others similarly explain their doctrines.

Suddenly, I had an unusual thought. I found myself wishing that Adventism had an axiom analogous to *Occam’s razor*, which (quoting *Wikipedia*) says that “the explanation of any phenomenon should make as few assumptions as possible, eliminating those that make no difference in the observable predictions of the explanatory hypothesis or theory.”

But while considering this, it occurred to me that there already is such a prescript for studying the Bible. Pfandl’s article had even mentioned it at one point, affirming “the principle of interpreting Scripture with Scripture.” It’s the rule of *sola scriptura*. By applying the rule of “the Bible, and the Bible only” to the formulation of our doctrines, we Adventists believe that God has led, and continues to lead, us into the marvelous light of his holy truth.

Adventist Exceptionalism

In my opinion, however, we typically circumvent this rule whenever we attempt to invoke a theology of what I call “Adventist exceptionalism” (i.e., Seventh-day Adventist centrality in human religious history).

So, for example, consider this formulation of the remnant church, from the previously cited “Foundations for Ellen White’s Prophetic Call.”

“One of the identifying signs of the remnant church, which according to prophecy exists after the 1,260-day period, i.e., after 1798, is the testimony of Jesus, which is the spirit of prophecy, or the prophetic gift. The Seventh-day Adventist Church, from its very beginning, has believed that in fulfillment of Revelation 12:17 the spirit of prophecy was

manifested in the life and work of Ellen G. White.”¹

A consistent application of *sola scriptura* would lead us first to note that, contrary to what this synopsis and, as well, the 13th Seventh-day Adventist baptismal question/vow (“Do you accept and believe that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the remnant church of Bible prophecy...?”) affirm, there is no “remnant church” of Bible prophecy, because the term “remnant church” does not appear in scripture. As such, any attempt to negotiate a meaning for this term must evade the Bible, thus denying *sola scriptura*.

But though it does not speak of a “remnant church,” the Bible certainly does speak of a *remnant*, perhaps most prominently doing so in Rev. 12:17, where it says: “And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

Here’s the way many Adventists handle this verse. They say, “I know what ‘the commandments of God’ are. But what’s ‘the testimony of Jesus Christ?’” So they turn to Rev. 19:10, where it says, “The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” Suddenly the light goes on. “Wow! ‘The testimony of Jesus’ is ‘the spirit of prophecy,’” they utter, amazed at the plainness of scripture. “The Spirit of Prophecy, of course, is Ellen G. White.” (We know this because “The Spirit of Prophecy” is commonly used as a synonym for “Ellen G. White and/or her writings” in Adventist churches every week, and twice on Wednesdays.)

So the remnant are those “which...have” Ellen G. White. Seventh-day Adventists have Ellen G. White. So Seventh-day Adventists must be the remnant church! Indeed, challenge any die-hard Adventist on this formulation, and the first quiz they’ll pop you with is: “OK: Name another church that keeps the commandments of God—all of them,” even though, as I say again, the verse doesn’t say anything about churches.

Embarrassing Application

This methodology flies as “searching the scriptures” in many Adventist circles. But it’s actually pretty embarrassing. Applied this way, it’s almost as if the Bible is merely some kind of “secret decoder ring,” of the sort one might find as a prize in a box of children’s breakfast cereal. If this is the best we can do, then we haven’t really read the Word or grappled with its most pressing ideas. To the contrary, Rev. 12:17, I’d argue, is elegantly stating something far more critical, beautiful, and eternal than some static formula on the 13th Adventist baptismal question/vow. And what is that?

First, as should be obvious given its greater context within



the Holy Scriptures, the verse is about *obedience*. Most would no doubt agree, as, again, this is the meta-topic of the entire biblical text.

So here's where Occam's razor (or, in this case, *sola scriptura*) comes into play: When Rev. 12:17 speaks of "the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ," *it simply means just that*. Period.

In other words, if I, through Christ, keep the commandments of God and live as he lived—i.e., his actions, as well as the fact that his testimony was not solely what he spoke, but the life he lived—I am part of the remnant. If I don't, I'm not.

So if I'm part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church but *lie*, I'm not part of the remnant. If I'm part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church but, from the window of my tiny apartment, *burn* at the sight of my neighbor's enormous, luxurious car or home, I'm not part of the remnant. If I'm part of the Seventh-day

foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his" and "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

The Real Remnant

In other words, the remnant is *the church invisible*, to use a well-known term in our theology; it is a population known only to God, just like 2 Timothy 2 says. As follows, questions of whether we, Seventh-day Adventists, form the whole remnant or whether a remnant of a remnant will come out of us, etc., are highly misplaced. To approach it another way, when one truly examines the matter, the remnant is essentially the people Christ spoke about in Matt. 22:36-40: Those who love the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their mind, and who love their neighbors as themselves. We actually corrupt Rev. 12:17's meaning by imagining that it's about stuff as limited or local as our

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Adventist Church but have *a thing for the ladies*, I'm not part of the remnant. Why?

Because that's what the Bible says. Not only should that be enough, but, when one thinks about it, *it doesn't get any better than that*. In other words, there's not a form of thought, speech, or action anyone can name or describe that goes higher than (1) keeping the commandments of God, and (2) living as Christ lived.

Now here's the interesting part about this: I can behave in the ways I've briefly described above and remain part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I can even be "a member in good standing" and do so.

Immediately, that should make at least one fact clear: Remnancy, as expressed in Rev. 12:17, is not based upon church membership, as the 13th Seventh-day Adventist baptismal question/vow affirms. Or, let me express this more strongly: Being part of the remnant has nothing to do with being a Seventh-day Adventist, *nor can it*, because it is based upon people acting in ways that are beyond human review.

It's easy to verify whether or not someone is an Adventist: Just look at the books. But whether or not one is keeping the commandments of God and/or has the testimony of Jesus Christ isn't something one person can determine about another person. Even people who "outwardly" appear to be faithful may not be so, as 2 Tim. 2:19 (NIV) eloquently states: "Nevertheless, God's solid

datum and/or Ellen G. White. God has far higher thoughts than we do. "But," I can hear people say, "what about Rev. 19:10: 'The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy'? It promised that the gift of prophecy would be a sign of the remnant church!"

So we've been told. But does it *actually* say that? To really understand Rev. 19:10's meaning, I say, it's important to do something that Adventists seldom do when quoting it: Read it in context, as opposed to stripping it out and tossing the rest of the chapter away like so much gristle.

In Revelation 19, we find John undergoing what, at best, might be described as a sensory assault. Up to that point, he has been taken, in vision, into the very presence of God's throne. Each new and astounding experience has overpowered his eyes, ears, and even his nostrils, whirling him disorientingly within an overwhelming vortex of incomprehensible heavenly realities. His ears have been slammed by the magnificent praise of unending choirs. His pupils have been nearly fused shut with the nova-sun brightness of staggering images, "wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke" (Acts 2:19). Repeatedly, John describes the sound level as that of a deafening *roar*, the "roar of a great multitude" (Rev. 19:1, NIV). Meanwhile, his brain is overloading on spectacles that even today, in our age of 3-D, computer-generated special effects, would give anyone years of nightmares. Then, amidst all of this, John's guiding angel speaks directly to him, in verse 9:

“And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.”

By this point, simply put, John is totally blown away by all he has experienced, and possibly, even more so, because he is now being given the charge of conveying to human audiences what he has seen. So in verse 10, he describes his response to the angel, and the angel’s response in kind:

“I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

Now, in context, this statement is completely straightforward. What the angel is saying, in the clearest possible language, is this: “John, everything you’ve just seen is so utterly amazing, so beyond understanding, it will be millennia before anyone human

white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean.

“And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

“And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

Take a moment to absorb the unending power of those words. Read in context, all of the above forms the actual meaning of Rev. 19:10, the one that has seemingly evaded Seventh-day Adventists for decades, even though, when one looks at it, it’s all plainly there, in the shape of a complete and indivisible thought, one that makes perfect sense.

Non Sequitur

But when you think about the traditional Seventh-day Adventist reading of Rev. 19:10, in context *it does not make sense*, because when one inserts our explanation into the verse, all one gets is a non sequitur. Instead we read it this way: I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for **prophecy is one of the identifying signs of the remnant church**.

So how did we get here? We did it, in fact, by making at least two important theological errors: The first error we’ve made is with our translation of the Greek word *pneuma*, which is often translated as “spirit.” *Pneuma* does often mean “spirit.” But this is not the most accurate translation of it wherever it appears. For example, the supplementary notes in my own 1995 Zondervan NIV Study Bible transliterates “spirit” in Rev. 19:10 as “essence.”

Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words lists a septenary meaning for *pneuma* (from 18, total) of “purpose,” or “aim.”

Strong’s Concordance notes “vital principle” as one meaning of this sublime Greek term.

Any one of these new substitutions for *spirit* fits a contextual reading of Rev. 19:10 perfectly and sensibly. That is, the angel is saying this to John: “The vision of the future you’ve just seen is composed of—*made out of*—Jesus. His life is the *essence*, the *purpose*, the *aim*, the *vital principle* of prophecy—its content. That’s why the prophecy is so awe-inspiring and so fearsome to behold!”

This would not only be clear to John, but it would also reassure and comfort him, because the disciple whom Jesus loved *knew* Christ! Telling him that Christ’s testimony was the key to understanding the astounding vision he’d just witnessed put John back on an even keel. He knew Jesus! Jesus was an old friend!

Two Key Errors

So the first error is with our translation of *pneuma*. (I’m aware, by the way, that the translation I’m encouraging more or less renders

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makes sense of what you write about it. It’s so astounding and awe-inspiring that, right now, you want to bow down to the first being you’ve come across, which happens to be me.

“*That’s completely unacceptable*, John. What you’ve just seen is the story of Christ the Lamb, the meaning of his sacrifice, and the unscalable heights of his triumph. I’m just like you and others who believe, John: *In awe of the God I serve*. Bow down to him, and him alone, because that’s what you’ve just seen: **What He Is**. Never take your eyes off of Jesus!”

The Most Profound Revelation

John will have no opportunity to do any such thing, however, because what immediately follows this statement, in verses 11-16, is the most profound, the most glorious, the most astounding, the most majestic, the most breathtaking vision of the Christ to be found in all of scripture:

“And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.

“His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself.

“And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God.

“And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon

the Rev. 19:10 term “spirit of prophecy,” as we’ve tended to use it, both a misquote and a misnomer.) As Seventh-day Adventists, we’ve traditionally read Rev. 19:10 *sideways*, sort of like those people in *The Twilight Zone* who get a book called *To Serve Man* from a seemingly beneficent alien race, only to later realize that it’s a cookbook.

The second error, however, is far more grave, and it’s this: By rushing to fold and bend Rev. 19:10 into our worldview so that it will fit our belief in our own remnancy, we have denied Christ!

As many know, the notion of a biblical remnant is not unique to Rev. 12:17. It is an idea used throughout the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, in diverse contexts. For example, in his essay *The Remnant and the Adventist Church*, Biblical Research Institute director Angel Manuel Rodriguez notes that “The concept of the remnant runs throughout the Bible and comes to expression in a multiplicity of images and specific terms. . . In the Bible this concept is theologically employed as an indispensable element in the history of salvation.”

What makes this remnant in Rev. 12:17 utterly unique, however—and what we seldom (if ever) hear preached in an Adventist church, to our shame, because of our mercenary relationship with the verse—is this: **Rev. 12:17 is the first and the only time that a biblical remnant is specifically identified by Christ’s name and characteristics.**

The New Remnant

Am I clear? Remnants are usually identified by their adherence to the law, as they also are in Rev. 12:17; those “which keep the commandments of God.” But by this time we get to Revelation, a new and final covenant has been established, *and* a new remnant, one that will do to all previous remnants what Christ’s death did to the sacrificial system “of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer” (Heb. 9:13, NIV). His remnant, identified by his holy name, is the one that will supercede all others. Here Jesus, enveloped in the full and glorious corona of His Matthew 28/Revelation 1 power, is declaring a completely new age!

This is, as they say, *a moment*. This should give us holy pause and awe! But it doesn’t. We ignore it. We rush right past it. From an Adventist perspective, the term “the testimony of Jesus Christ” in Rev. 12:17 has a sole use: It’s a chip that we cash in, seven chapters later, so we can wrangle a neat semantic exchange which (a) declares us the remnant, and (b) rewards us with prophetic credentials. In other words, between those two chapters, we take Christ’s name and we *flip* it—the way real estate speculators flip houses, acquiring them not to inhabit them but merely to dump them later—in order to get what we *really* want.

Furthermore, doing this leads us into deeper tautologies, as, for example, “Is there a remnant that comes out of [our] remnant?” We do this, because we think these verses are about Adventists, not Christ. Yet on some level, we know Adventists alone cannot

be the fulfillment of them. But what we forget is that Christ *can* be, and Christ is! These words are about him! The second, major error we commit, then, is the one that all would-be Christians commit, day-in and day-out: Ignoring Jesus so that we can obsess over ourselves. So, to summarize, three points:

Not Adventist-Centric

1. The remnant of Rev. 12:17 is the people who, from God’s perspective, bear the character of Christ. In more direct language, the remnant are those who will be saved at his second coming.

2. There is no “remnant church,” except in the truest sense—that of “two or three . . . gathered together in [Jesus’] name” with Christ “in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20). In other words, the remnant church is an indiscernible network of affiliates whose names are known by God alone.

And, most of all:

3. The angelic pronouncement in Rev. 19:10—that “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy”—in essence, affirms that Jesus is the prophetic impetus in human form—prophecy “in the flesh,” so to speak. This divine messenger redirects worship to Christ, that refocus being an ongoing theme in Revelation. The seraph is not making a statement, indirect or otherwise, about past, present, or future manifestations of the prophetic gift in people on Earth, or implications of the same.

In a church where we’ve been taught—as I’ve been, all my life—that the only way to explain these verses is through a labyrinthine proof-texting algorithm (one which, then, outputs our beliefs), it seems wrong at first to suggest that, actually, they are not primarily about us. But in fact, actually, they are about us. That is, they’re about the people who do God’s will, which is the only “us” about which the scriptures bear eternal concern. There is no other class of people God approvingly recognizes. Adventist exceptionalism is superfluous. We become central—exceptional—by doing God’s will. Those who do so, through Christ, are his remnant. **AT**

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¹ Gerhard Pfandl, “Foundations for Ellen White’s Prophetic Call,” *Adventist World*, September 2008, p. 23.