

God's Church in the End-Time

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Our inquiry will concentrate on the question, Does the Bible speak of a "remnant" as the people of God in the end-time, and if so, how does it characterize and identify this remnant?

In order to place this specific end-time focus in the proper perspective, we need to consider the remnant concept in the totality of Holy Scripture. This requires a brief survey of the remnant idea in the OT and how Christ and His apostles applied the remnant concept to their own time.

A Remnant People in the Old and New Testaments

Historical Experiences

The prophets of Israel spoke frequently of a "remnant" people of Israel or Judah that would survive the devastating military conquests of the kings of Assyria and Babylon. Isaiah promised divine deliverance for Jerusalem from Assyria in 701 B.C. in these words:

And the surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward; for out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the Lord will do this.¹

This use of "remnant" in its context shows that it designated those praying and repentant Israelites (see 2 Kgs 19:1-4) who were delivered by an act of divine mercy from imminent judgment. This remnant did not indicate a morally sinless people, but those worshipers who were chosen by the gracious God to

¹ 2 Kgs 19:30-31; also Isa 37:31-32. Scripture quotations are taken from the RSV unless indicated otherwise.

continue to be the bearers of His covenant promises.

This style of divine election was apparently already in the book of Genesis, when Noah "found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (Gen 6:8, NKJV). He and his immediate family survived the divine judgment on a corrupt generation (Gen 6:5), because Noah "walked with God," and therefore, lived a blameless life in his generation (Gen 6:9). God's covenant of grace continued in Noah's family (Gen 6:18).

Also instructive is Joseph's explanation to his terrified brothers, how God had turned their wicked deed into a gracious act of providence: "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors" (Gen 45:7).

Another significant example is found in the prophet Elijah, who exemplified the faithful remnant people of God in the midst of an apostate Israel (of the northern tribes). While he could see himself as the only faithful Israelite in the ultimate confrontation with Baalism on Mount Carmel, God assured him that He would provide a faithful remnant *within* Israel: "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" (1 Kgs 19:18).

Israel as a political or ethnic nation as such could never equate herself with the faithful remnant. Only those who worshiped God according to His covenant law and grace were the remnant. It is apparent that the remnant people in each historical situation remained in constant need of walking with God in the spirit of true humility and repentance. King Hezekiah sent the following appeal to the 12 tribes inviting them to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem: "O people of Israel, return to the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and he may turn again to the remnant of you who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria" (2 Chr 30:6). When Jerusalem returned to idolatry under King Manasseh, God's judgment was,

And I will cast off the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came out of Egypt, even to this day. (2 Kgs 21:14-15)

This indicates that the redeemed remnant people actually fell into renewed apostasy and came under the punishing judgment of God. The same situation reoccurred after the Babylonian exile, as a faithful remnant of Judah and Israel returned to their homeland in 537/536 B.C. and 457 B.C.

When the Persian king, Cyrus, issued his historic decree to release all Israelites from the Babylonian captivity, all those "whose spirit God had

stirred" (Ezra 1:5) returned to Jerusalem. This postexilic community of faith identified themselves as the "remnant" of the people.² Yet Ezra saw this historic remnant people as standing in need of reformation repentance, and the mercy of God: "O Lord, God of Israel, you are righteous! *We are left this day as a remnant.* Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it *not one of us can stand in your presence*" (Ezra 9:15, NIV).

Zechariah's warning to the remnant people of his time was, therefore, "Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts" (Zech 1:3).

Deeply significant is God's act of grace for this redeemed yet sinful remnant of His covenant people, represented in Zechariah's vision of Joshua the high priest. "Remove the filthy garments from him," commanded the angel of the Lord. "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will cloth you with rich apparel" (Zech 3:4).

This act of divine justification of the sinful but repentant remnant received a remarkable apocalyptic perspective in the subsequent commission and promise, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here" (Zech 3:7). Mrs. Ellen G. White applies Zechariah's vision to the last dramatic experience of the remnant church.³

Summary. We may conclude from this brief historical survey of the OT that the remnant idea was attached to the survivors of a divinely caused disaster or judgment. Those remnant people were theoretically characterized as those chosen by divine grace, not because of their sinlessness but because they worshiped God in the spirit of true repentance and walked with God in joyful obedience to His revealed will. At the same time we observed the abiding need for repentance and for reformation from idolatry and immorality in all the remnant peoples of Israel's salvation history. Nevertheless, each succeeding remnant constituted the ongoing bearers of the divine covenant promises and responsibilities.

Old Testament Prophetic Insights

The prophets Amos and Isaiah reveal new dimensions of the remnant people of God in their prophetic outlook to the future. Isaiah's dramatic personal encounter with the Holy One even provides a prophetic type of the

² Hag 1:12, 14; 2:2; Zech 8:6, 11-12; Neh 1:2-3, NIV; Ezra 9:13-15.

³ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 5 (Mountain View, CA, 1889): 475

end-time remnant people. The new aspects of Amos' revelations are, (1) God will restore a faithful remnant of the house of David in the "day of the Lord" (Amos 5:15; 9:11), and (2) non-Israelite peoples like Edom will have faithful remnants also who will join the eschatological remnant of Israel (Amos 9:12). Apparently Amos defines the future remnant people as *a community of faith*, of true worshipers of Israel's God (Amos 9:11-12) rather than an ethnic entity.

The remnant motif becomes the core element of Isaiah's message of judgment and salvation. Isaiah's dramatic personal experience of lostness and transformation (Isa 6:1-8) receives specific theological significance for the remnant promise. Gerhard F. Hasel's perception is revealing: "The prophet himself may be considered the proleptic of the future remnant because he was confronted by Yahweh's holiness and emerged as a cleansed and purified individual."⁴

Isaiah is the first prophet who speaks of the future remnant of Israel as a *holy* remnant or "seed" (Isa 6:13). It shall emerge, however, only after God's judgments have cleansed Zion from all filth and idolatry:

And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, every one who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. (Isa 4:3-4)

Isaiah distinguishes between a *present* remnant of Israel (he calls his oldest son Shear-jashub ["a remnant shall return" to the Lord], Isa 7:3; cf. 8:18) and a *future* eschatological remnant that will emerge from a future action of God:

A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. For though your people Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return. Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness. For the Lord, the Lord of hosts, will make a full end, as decreed, in the midst of all the earth. (Isa 10:21-23)

Isaiah's remnant concept identifies the *true believers*: "If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established" (Isa 7:9; cf. 28:16). Isaiah adds an essential feature to the eschatological remnant concept: God will gather the eschatological remnant from the nations *through the Messiah* from the house of David: "In that day *the root of Jesse* shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious. In that day the

⁴ Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea From Genesis to Isaiah*, Andrews University Monographs, Studies in Religion, vol. 5, 3rd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI, 1980), 243.

Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover *the remnant*" (Isa 11:10-11).

Isaiah thus unites the future holy people of God directly with the coming Messiah. They are individually "recorded for life in Jerusalem" (Isa 4:3).

The other vital aspect of Isaiah's remnant promise is the prediction that they will finally fulfill Israel's mission to be *a light to all nations and tongues*: "They shall declare my glory among the nations" (Isa 66:19; cf. 49:6). Thus, the eschatological remnant will be a messianic people who will engage in a worldwide missionary outreach to gather all believers into one last community of faith and worship. This universal aspect of the eschatological remnant is emphasized especially in Isaiah 56, where God is presented as the great *gatherer* of a scattered Israel: "Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered" (Isa 56:8; cf. Mic 5:2, 4; 2:12).

Isaiah even announced the essentials of the last reformation and revival of worship among God's eschatological remnant people in chapter 58.

Summary. We may conclude that while the OT prophets addressed ethnic and political Israel, they stressed that only a spiritual Israel would experience the covenant blessings. An idolatrous and rebellious Israel would experience rather the covenant curses, until they would repent and walk with God and His Messiah in true covenant fellowship.

Israel's prophets anticipated a true Israel, the eschatological remnant, the followers of God's Messiah. Their prophetic focus is not primarily on a Jewish state, as such, or on Israel's return to her homeland, but on Israel's return to the covenant God, on a community which serves Him in true worship and praise in His temple.⁵ This remnant of Israel will incorporate the faithful remnants of all Gentile nations. Thus the universal purpose of Israel's election, to provide a blessing for *all* peoples, will be fulfilled.⁶

Jesus and the Remnant

How do Jesus and His apostles use the remnant motif of the OT? The remnant idea is of supreme importance for validating Christ's church as the true Israel. It is clear that Jesus saw Himself as the Messiah of Israel and, consequently, His church as the people of God (Matt 16:16-19). Furthermore, Jesus made the promised *new covenant* with His chosen 12 apostles (Matt 26:26-29; cf. Heb 8:6-13).

⁵ See also Ezek 36:24-27; Jer 31:31-34.

⁶ Gen 12:3; Isa 49:6; Zech 9:7.

The question remains, Did Jesus regard His disciples as the prophetic remnant of God, even when He did not use the term "remnant"?

The answer must be positive. Jesus brought the eschatological *judgment* of God on Israel in His coming as Messiah.⁷ Jesus' first advent is the initiation of judgment on Israel and the beginning of the messianic age, of "the last days."⁸ John the Baptist tried to prepare the way of the Messiah by gathering a cleansed or repentant remnant of Israel (Matt 3:8), over against the Pharisees and the Qumran covenanters who each claimed to be the exclusive holy remnant by their intensified lawkeeping.⁹

Contrary to their restricted views John's concept was that of an open remnant: a remnant of repentant ones, open to *all* who would bear fruit befitting repentance (Matt 3:8). Jesus' acceptance of John's baptism meant that He decided to enter into the Baptist's remnant. Jesus acknowledged that John was the divinely appointed forerunner and herald of the Messiah's advent (Matt 11:10-14). He recognized him as the predicted "Elijah," who would "restore all things" between Israel and God (Matt 17:10-13). Jesus indeed claimed to be the promised Shepherd-Messiah who would gather the scattered, but believing, Israel into one flock, those who recognized the voice of the Good Shepherd.¹⁰

Jesus specifically called His disciples the "little flock" who would receive the kingdom of God (Luke 12:32). He even claimed to fulfill the eschatological gathering of Israel and of the nations of Isaiah 56: "And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice" (John 10:16; cf. Isa 56:8). Jesus offers salvation and the divine "rest" of grace to those who follow Him now (Matt 11:28-30). It is evident that Christ brought at once judgment and salvation to Israel. Those in Israel who followed Him became the people of the Messiah, the remnant of prophecy, the remnant people of God. They remained an open or inclusive remnant, not an exclusive sect like the Qumran community. In this manner Jesus began to fulfill the prophetic promises of divine judgment on Israel and of the gathering of a messianic remnant people, the church of Christ.

Jesus will complete His work of salvation and judgment, however, only at the executive judgment when He will ultimately separate "the sheep from the goats" (Matt 25:31-46). Those in Israel who have rejected Jesus as Messiah,

⁷ Matt 3:7-12; 10:14-15; 23:32-33.

⁸ See Acts 2:17; Heb 1:1-2.

⁹ See Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* 2 (München, 1922-1928):170, 469, 617; 4:1075.

¹⁰ Matt 12:30; 18:20; 23:37; 16:31; John 10:11, 14-16.

will receive a final judgment that is worse than that of the wicked heathen (Matt 12:41-42).

The apostolic church considered herself to be the eschatological remnant of Israel, the messianic flock.¹¹ For the first time the remnant people are no longer hidden within unfaithful Israel but have come *separate* from Judaism (Matt 18:15-20; 21:43).

Apostolic Application of Remnant Motif

The apostles declared that Israel's remnant prophecies had found their initial fulfillment in the apostolic church, according to God's definite plan and foreknowledge. Peter's interpretation of the outpouring of the Spirit as the direct fulfillment of Joel's prophecy for the last days (Acts 2:16-21) confirms the truth that the church was not an unforeseen, unpredicted entity in the OT. Rather, it was the surprising fulfillment of Joel's remnant prophecy. The church is not an afterthought or interruption of God's plan with Israel for the world, but rather the divine realization of the eschatological remnant of Israel.

Shortly after the outpouring of God's Spirit on the church, Peter stated categorically, "Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days" (Acts 3:24, NIV). In other words, since Pentecost all the OT prophecies concerning the remnant of Israel have received their actual fulfillment in the formation of the apostolic church. This church is plainly prophesied in the remnant promises of the OT as the fulfillment of the new-covenant prediction (see Heb 8:6-13; 2 Cor 3:7-18). Peter stressed that "anyone who does not listen to him [Christ Jesus] will be completely cut off from among his people" (Acts 3:23, NIV).

Paul addressed himself directly to the remnant promises as the climax of his Epistle to the Romans. In chapters 9-11 he explains the spiritual continuity of God's covenant with Israel and with the church of Christ. Paul continues the old prophetic distinction of a spiritual Israel *within* the nation of Israel. The prophets called this spiritual Israel "the remnant." It was to be the bearer of God's covenant promises. In the faithful remnant, Israel continued as the people of God in salvation history.

God provided a faithful remnant by His sovereign grace and showed that in every judgment on Israel He did not reject those of His people who trusted and obeyed Him. God's covenant promises can never be used as claims on Him outside a living faith-obedience relation to the Lord. God's promise and Christian faith belong inseparably together, as Paul states: "The promise

¹¹ Acts 20:28-29; 1 Pet 5:2-4; Heb 13:20; Rom 11:5.

comes by faith, so that it may be by grace" (Rom 4:16, NIV).

Paul's message is that God is faithful to His word, because He has again graciously provided a believing remnant of Israel, the apostolic church, through the creative power of His promise: "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace" (Rom 11:5). The legitimate heirs of the Mosaic and Abrahamic covenants are not the unbelieving natural descendants of Abraham ("Israel after the flesh," 1 Cor 10:18, KJV), but exclusively the spiritual children of Abraham, those who belong to Christ (Rom 9:8; Gal 3:29). Paul, therefore, applies Hosea's and Isaiah's promises to Israel's remnant to the formation of the church of Christ.¹² Above all question, the remnant theme is a key motif in the Pauline eschatology and in the Christian hope of the NT.

The Remnant in Apocalyptic Prophecy

Our focus now shifts to the church of God in the end-time. We concentrate on those prophecies that deal specifically with the final generation of God's people in the church age, as found in Joel, Ezekiel, Daniel, and other prophetic sections that deal with the day of judgment, and how they all meet and end in the book of Revelation.

Joel's End-Time Fulfillment in Revelation

Joel 2:28-32 predicts that the coming age shall be characterized by the outpouring of the Spirit of God on all people "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (vs. 31, NIV).

The true remnant people are described as those who call on the name of the Lord, "for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance" (vs. 32, NIV). Both Peter and Paul quote Joel 2:32 and proclaim its initial fulfillment in the universal church of Christ (Acts 2:21; Rom 10:13). This gospel fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32, however, does not rule out a special end-time fulfillment at the conclusion of the church age. Such is the specific contribution of the book of Revelation. Its specific focus is on the ultimate consummation of Joel's remnant promise.

The central part of the book of Revelation, chapters 12-14, concerns itself with the worldwide completion of the gospel mission of the church of Jesus Christ. Employing the traditional imagery of the bride of Yahweh,¹³ John paints the future of Christ's church as a persecuted woman who flees "into the

¹² Rom 9:25-29; cf. Hos 2:23; 1:10; Isa 10:22-23; 1:9.

¹³ Isaiah 54; Jeremiah 6; Hosea 2; Ezekiel 16.

wilderness,” where God nourishes her for “one thousand two hundred and sixty days” (Rev 12:6) or three and a half “times” (12:14). These prophetic periods point to the fulfillment of Daniel’s predicted persecution of the faithful saints (Dan 7:25)—to those Christian saints who were outlawed and executed during the reign of the medieval state-church (A.D. 536-1798). John then continues to describe the final conflict of the remnant church after the Middle Ages: “Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 12:17, NIV).

John furthermore portrays the ultimate triumph of the faithful remnant on Mount Zion: “Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads” (Rev 14:1).

Revelation 12:17 and 14:1 together portray the fulfillment of Joel’s remnant promise (2:28-32) *for the end of the church age*. This implies that the gospel proclamation in its end-time setting is portrayed as the threefold warning message of Revelation 14:6-12. Joel’s remnant people who “call upon the name of the Lord” on Mount Zion (Joel 2:32) are then described in their end-time fulfillment as, “Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Rev 14:12; cf. 12:17).

The threefold message of Revelation 14 itself creates the 144,000 spiritual Israelites (14:1). They have been called out of Babylon in order to be gathered on Mount Zion, where the Lamb offers them eternal safety (14:1, 20).

The ultimate call from heaven to all who still linger in Babylon, as Lot and his family did in Sodom (Gen 19:16-17), can be noticed in Revelation 18. Here God promises to illuminate the whole earth one more time with His divine splendor (vs. 1). Such a last revival of the glorious gospel, ignited by the pentecostal outpouring of God’s Spirit, includes the urgent appeal to all the scattered children of God in Babylon: “*Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes*” (Rev 18:4-5, NIV).

The idiomatic phrase that Babylon’s “sins are piled up to heaven” alludes to the OT verdict on Sodom (Gen 18:20-21) and on ancient Babylon (Jer 51:9). Also modern Babylon’s apostasy and criminality will finally reach the limit of divine forbearance. Then God will “remember” Babylon (Rev 16:19). In the scales of heaven it will be found wanting. That heavenly verdict will create the urgency of the last call to all God’s scattered children to cut every tie with

Babylon. This appeal will be made by Spirit-filled ambassadors of Christ's remnant church in a "mighty voice [the loud cry]" (Rev 18:2). That global repetition of the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 will cause both the wheat and the tares in the whole world to ripen, ready to be harvested by the sickle of the Son of man (Rev 14:14-20).

Thus, we conclude that Revelation strongly suggests that Joel's prophecies that were fulfilled as "the early rain" at the beginning of the church age, will be fulfilled once more at its close, *on a global scale*. In the words of Ellen G. White, "The great work of the gospel is not to close with less manifestation of the power of God than marked its opening."¹⁴

The apostolic church saw thousands of new believers added to her numbers (Acts 2:47; 4:4). So shall the remnant church witness the predicted influx of "believing remnants" of many peoples, who want to be instructed and saved on "Mount Zion."¹⁵

After the final witness, all the followers of Christ will be part of the "144,000" faithful "Israelites." Not one of them will be part of Babylon any longer (Rev 14:4; 17:5). These companions of the Lamb are described as "his called, chosen and faithful followers" (17:14, NIV).

To sum it up, the Apocalypse projects only two opposing parties in the final conflict before God: *Babylon* and the *Israel of God and Christ*. Both are represented universally as worshiping communities and are, therefore, identified first of all religiously before God, that is, in terms of worship (Rev 14:9-11). The true remnant people "obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 12:17, NIV). The importance of this recurring expression, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, in the Apocalypse¹⁶ establishes it as a central theological theme in the book, even as the line of demarcation between Babylon and the messianic Israel. As Kenneth A. Strand concludes,¹⁷ "In the book of Revelation, faithfulness to the 'word of God' and to the 'testimony of Jesus Christ' separates the faithful from the faithless, and it brings about persecution that includes John's own exile and the martyrdom of other believers (see again Rev 1:9; 6:9; 12:17; 20:4; etc.)."

Ezekiel's Remnant in Revelation

John's theology of the remnant is rooted also in Ezekiel's vision of the

¹⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA, 1888, rev. ed. 1911), 611.

¹⁵ Cf. Rev 18:1; Isa 2:1-3; Mic 4:1-2; Amos 9:12.

¹⁶ Rev 1:1, 9; 6:9; 12:17; 20:4.

¹⁷ Kenneth A. Strand, "The Two Witnesses of Rev 11:3-12," *AUSS* 19/2 (1981): 133.

deliverance of a repentant remnant among an idolatrous Israel in Jerusalem (see Ezekiel 8–9). John *hears* in a vision that 144,000 Israelites (12,000 from each of 12 tribes specified) will be sealed on their foreheads with the “seal of the living God” by the angels of God, as the sign of divine approval and as a protection against the seven last plagues (Rev 7:1-8). This revelation was the immediate reply to the anxious cry of those who shall experience the terrors of the wrath of God and of the Lamb under the sixth seal: “The great day of their wrath has come, and *who can stand before it?*” (Rev 6:17).

In his vision Ezekiel saw six angels, as the appointed executioners of God's wrath, approach the apostate city of Jerusalem. Starting at the sanctuary of God, they were ordered to slaughter “without showing pity or compassion” (Ezek 9:5, NIV) all men and women and children who did not have a specified mark on their forehead, previously placed there by a special angel who went *in advance* of the executioners with his writing kit at his side. Fearing the destruction of all Israelites in God's retributive judgment, Ezekiel cried out, “Ah, Sovereign Lord! Are you going to destroy the entire remnant of Israel in this outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?” (Ezek 9:8, NIV; cf. 11:13).

The law of Moses already had stated what God's judgment on the willful idolater and deceiver in Israel would be, “Show him no pity. Do not spare him or shield him. You must certainly put him to death” (Deut 13:8-9, NIV). God's mercy is revealed, however, in His provision that through the discriminating judgment of a priestly man, “clothed in linen” (Ezek 9:2; cf. Rev 1:13), *the truly repentant ones would be exempted from divine wrath*: “Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it” (Ezek 9:4, NIV; cf. 5:6).

Revelation 7 applies Ezekiel's sealing vision to its end-time fulfillment. The symbolism of the 144,000 sealed ones in 12,000 from each tribe of Israel (Rev 7:4) is meaningful. Some scholars have observed that the unique list of the tribes mentioned in Revelation 7:5-8 derives basically from Ezekiel 48:31-34.¹⁸

Significantly in Revelation 7 John moves the tribe of *Judah* purposely to the head of the list, apparently to stress that Christ Jesus, the King of kings, is the head of the new-covenant Israel (cf. Rev 5:5). This messianic motif is confirmed by the fact that the tribe of Judah was located in the *North*, another *regal symbolism*.¹⁹ In line with this Christological emphasis is the omission of the tribe of *Dan*.

¹⁸ See Ross E. Winkle, “Another Look at the List of Tribes in Revelation 7,” *AUSS* 27/1 (1989): 53-67.

¹⁹ Cf. Ezek 48:30; Ps 48:2; Isa 14:13; Ezek 1:4.

In Revelation 7, possibly due to the tradition that Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ and therefore lost his share or lot among the apostles (Acts 1:17, 25), was from the tribe of Dan.²⁰ Most refer to Jacob's prediction that Dan would "be a serpent . . . that bites the horse's heels so that his rider falls backward" (Gen 49:17), which bears some resemblance to the serpent's act against the woman in Genesis 3:15. The dropping of Dan from John's apocalyptic list of faithful Israelites suggests also messianic significance.

The 144,000 true Israelites *all* follow the Lamb perfectly, as sheep follow the Good Shepherd: "In their mouth no lie was found, for they are spotless" (Rev 14:5). They are all as sincere to God as Nathanael was, of whom Jesus declared, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" (John 1:47; cf. Ps 32:1-2). The 144,000 seem to be also the fulfillment of Zephaniah's promise of a future faithful remnant:

For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord, those *who are left in Israel*; they shall do no wrong and *utter no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue*. For they shall pasture and lie down, and none shall make them afraid. (Zeph 3:12-13)

The compelling question now before us is, How are the 144,000 Israelites related to the next vision of a countless multitude of redeemed ones (Rev 7:9-10)? A careful examination of the style of John's images and their interpretation strongly suggests the conclusion that the 144,000 true Israelites of the end-time are presented as *the last generation* of the numberless multitude of Christian believers who come from all tribes and peoples. John had referred from the start to Christian believers from all nations as the true Israel of God: "and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God."²¹

Significant is John's description that he only "*heard the number*" of the sealed Israelites (Rev 7:4), while as soon as he looked, he *saw* "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands" (vs. 9, NIV). What John sees is intended to be a further clarification of what he has heard.²²

Abraham's descendants would be "as the sand of the sea, which *cannot be numbered for multitude*."²³ The distinction between the vision of the sealing

²⁰ See Winkle, 60-66.

²¹ Rev 5:9-10; cf. Rev 1:5; Exod 19:6.

²² See the extensive treatise in LaRondelle, *Chariots of Salvation* (Hagerstown, MD, 1987), chap. 10; cf. also B. S. Neall, "Good News About the 144,000," *Adventist Review*, April 2, 1987, 14-15.

²³ Gen 32:12, NKJV; see also Gen 15:5; Gal 3:7, 29).

of Israel's faithful remnant and that of the great multitude is one of *historical progress*. The *sealing* of the 144,000 places the remnant still on earth, prior to the final crisis of faith, while the vision of the victorious saints with palm branches in their hands has them in heavenly glory, before the throne of God. They have already "come out of the great tribulation" (Rev 7:14). One may thus observe progress in salvation history in Revelation 7.

The victorious multitude in heaven seems to represent the saints of all salvation history, including the 144,000 end-time Israel of God. But why do the 144,000 take center stage again in Revelation 14:1-5? They are the ones who will overcome the final threat of Babylon: the universal death-decree against the true remnant church. They will take their stand with the Lamb and surrender up their lives for Him rather than worship the beast and live in Babylon (Rev 13:15-17). The 144,000 Israelites come out of the "great tribulation" of the final religious war in world history. As Christ's last legion of loyal, consecrated ones, they are *symbolically* represented as 12 battle units of 12,000 warriors, similar to Moses' special legion of consecrated warriors in Numbers 31:1-7.

In direct contrast to those who have accepted the mark of the beast, the true Israel will receive the sign of divine approval on their foreheads (Rev 14:1). They have the courage to confess Christ as the Lord of their lives. Their victory over the antichrist comes only because of their union with Christ in His death and resurrection (Rev 12:11). As overcomers of the antichrist, they will be rewarded eternal honors around the throne of God and they shall sing the song of Moses and the Lamb (Rev 14:3; 15:2-3).

Daniel's Time of the End

Finally, the apocalyptic phrase "the time of the end" in the book of Daniel needs careful attention. The expression "the time of the end" is found only in Daniel's visions concerning the "distant future" (five times in Daniel 8-12). This Danielic expression is not completely identical with the familiar phrase "the last days" or "days to come," as used 14 times by the OT prophets. While the classical prophets combine God's judgments in their own time *directly* with the final judgment, Daniel leads his readers from his own time down through the ages of redemption history. He goes past the violent death of the Messiah (9:25-27) to the emergence of the anti-Messiah, or antichrist. He also predicts God's judgment upon that evil power.

Daniel's sacred forecast covers the history of God's people in *both* the old and new dispensations. One unique characteristic is its sovereign determinism with respect to the *time periods* allotted to the antichrist's rulership (7:25; 8:14,

17; 12:7). Daniel uses the term “the time of the end” to designate, not the end of time but rather a certain time span that *precedes* the final judgment and the resurrection of the dead (11:40; 12:1-2, 4). This final apocalyptic “time of the end” begins at a fixed point, however, because “*it will . . . come at the appointed time*” (11:35, NIV; cf. 8:19). This point of time seems to coincide with the completion of the 1260 years of papal dominion in 1798 (7:25; 11:32-35), and with the subsequent restoration (in 1844) of the downtrodden sanctuary truth of Christ’s high-priestly ministry (8:14, 17).

Unsealing of Daniel in “the Time of the End”

Daniel’s symbolic visions were not fully understood by the prophet himself (8:27; 12:8). In fact, they could not be comprehended before the “time of the end” had arrived. The interpreting angel commanded, “But you, Daniel, close up and *seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end*. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge” (12:4, NIV). If the prophetic visions of Daniel point to the era immediately preceding the second advent of Christ, then the divine *unsealing* of Daniel’s prophecies must produce practical results in the end-time.

The increase of the knowledge of Daniel’s book resulted indeed in an interdenominational revival of apocalyptic studies and in a renewed hope of the nearness of the second advent of Christ. This led LeRoy E. Froom to the conclusion, “It [Dan 12:4] obviously is a forecast of the . . . revival in prophetic exposition that came under the simultaneous awakening in the nineteenth century, in both the Old World and the New.”²⁴ James White rightly perceived that the promised “increase of knowledge” in Daniel 12:4, 10 does “not refer to the progress in scientific discoveries, but to the subject of the end.” He explained that “the truly wise, the children of God, understand the subject upon which knowledge increases in the time of the end, while the wicked, however scientific, do not understand. The facts in the case are . . . against the position that the prophetic statement relative to the increase of knowledge in the time of the end has reference to the discoveries of the scientists.”²⁵

Worldwide Awakening

The promise of Daniel 12:4 points to the providential rise of a worldwide awakening regarding apocalyptic prophecy in Holy Scripture. The significance

²⁴ LeRoy E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* 4 (Washington, DC, 1954): 1209.

²⁵ James White, *Signs of the Times*, July 22, 1880, 330; see also his *Bible Adventism* (Battle Creek, MI, n.d.; repr. by Southern Publishing Assoc., Nashville, 1972), 70-76.

of Daniel and Revelation dawned upon the Christian consciousness only fully in the midnineteenth century. Only then did the investigation begin to focus on the meaning of Daniel 8 and the reformation message of Revelation 14.

From the start Seventh-day Adventists considered themselves as reformers, whose unique foundation was Bible prophecy. As the remnant people of God, they feel charged before God, as was ancient Israel, to enlighten the whole world with the gospel in its fullness. In order to fulfill Revelation 14, they endeavor to restore the apostolic faith and to complete the first Reformation under the end-time banner of "the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 12:17, KJV; cf. 14:12). God takes care that history and prophecy agree. Prophecy is for Adventism "the rainbow of promise, painted by the finger of God."²⁶

The Mission of the End-Time Church

In the post-1844 period the conviction grew among a number of Advent believers that *all Bible truth* must be restored among God's people before the Second Advent could take place. Thus, the seventh-day Sabbath was adopted—from the Seventh Day Baptists. The Sabbath reformation was given new relevancy and urgency, however, by the clarified understanding that the Sabbath would be the testing truth of the end-time restoration of the gospel and the law, according to Revelation 14 and Isaiah 58.

The clinching argument for the vital importance of the Sabbath restoration was specifically the third angel's message of Revelation 14. This announcement stressed obedience to God's commandments in contrast to following apostate traditions and enactments. And central to it was the statement, "Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus" (vs. 12, KJV).

Ellen White stressed the inextricable union of the Sabbath and the third angel's message as follows: "Separate the Sabbath from the messages, and it loses its power; but when [the Sabbath is] connected with the message of the third angel, a power attends it which convicts unbelievers and infidels, and brings them out with strength to stand, to live, grow, and flourish in the Lord."²⁷

²⁶ LeRoy E. Froom.

²⁷ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 1 (Mountain View, CA, 1885): 337.

Continuing Relevance of the Three Angels' Messages

The three angels' messages are ever new. With every passing year they become more timely and increasingly urgent. The three angels keep flying *together* in irreversible order, heralding first the everlasting gospel of God's grace, and then presenting the binding claims of God's holy law on all mankind. Thus, together they prepare a people to stand in the time of Jacob's trouble and in the day of God's wrath.

Ellen White believed that "the true understanding of these messages is of vital importance. The destiny of souls hangs upon the manner in which they are received."²⁸ The Adventist understanding of divine law and gospel as united in the three angels' messages of Revelation 14 was to our pioneers the truth, as sure as God lives. By adherence to it the remnant church was standing "upon a solid, immovable platform."²⁹

Prophetic Types Clarify Mission

Two major biblical events provided early Adventists the historical types for their message and mission. One was the Exodus. The other, the ministry of Elijah, the prophet.

The Exodus. In the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, bound for the Promised Land, our pioneers saw the prophetic type of the three angels of Revelation 14 and their call to leave the nominal churches, with their creedalism, and to follow solidly the inspired word of God as the end-time Israel. Making use of Exodus language, Hiram Edson in 1850 referred to 1844 as "our pillar of light . . . behind us" (see Exod 13:21; 14:19).³⁰

He saw a parallel between God's restoration of the Sabbath soon after Israel's exodus from Egypt (see Exod 16:23-30) and the adoption of the Sabbath truth by those then awaiting the imminent coming of Christ in the 1840s and 1850s. Said he, "The first important truth brought to our minds after we came into the wilderness of the people, this side of 1844, was the Sabbath truth."³¹ A few years later, Augustin C. Bourdeau drew a connection between God's care for Israel's healthful living (Exod 15:26) and the Adventist health reform message.³²

²⁸ Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts* 1 (Battle Creek, MI, 1858, facsimile repro. Washington, DC, 1945): 168.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁰ Hiram Edson, "An Appeal to the Laodicean Church," *Adventist Review Extra*, September 1850, as quoted in P. G. Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, 1977), 249.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Augustin C. Bourdeau, "Our Present Position, in the Waiting, Tarrying Time," *Review and Herald*, May 28, 1867, as noted in Damsteegt, 249.

In 1867, Ellen G. White endorsed this typological approach when she applied 1 Corinthians 10:11 to the fledgling Seventh-day Adventist movement: "Modern Israel are in greater danger of forgetting God and being led into idolatry than were His ancient people."³³ It is evident that the comparison of the Advent movement to ancient Israel was no ground for a triumphal attitude or any feeling of superiority. Rather, it was to be an incentive to self-criticism and to heighten a sense of responsibility and watchfulness.

Elijah's mission. Elijah's mission was to call Israel out of apostasy, back to God and His commandments. As a judgment on Israel's apostasy, God brought drought upon the land (cf. Deut 11:13-17). For three and one-half years, no rain fell. Yet, Israel remained impenitent, led by a hardened royal couple, Ahab and Jezebel. At the end of the period, God sent Elijah back to Israel's apostate leaders and people with a *final appeal*: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him" (1 Kgs 18:21, NIV).

The true religion of Israel must be restored according to the original pattern. Accordingly, Elijah "repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down" (1 Kgs 18:30). He took 12 stones and restored the altar of Israel's God. And by so doing he revived the way of salvation by grace (see Lev 17:11), emphasizing in the process the unity of the 12 tribes, making no concession to their division into ten northern tribes and two southern tribes. Here is a message of unity for all true Israelites and of the restoration of law and gospel.

The lesson from Elijah's encounter with Baal worship is clear: This pagan religion had distorted the worship of Yahweh, virtually supplanting it. It had *destroyed God's way of salvation*. This point is essential to understanding the Elijah message for today.

Shortly after the disappointment on October 22, 1844, several Adventist writers expressed their conviction that the restoration of the biblical Sabbath was basically similar to the restoration of Israel's worship under Elijah in a time of general apostasy. They noted that the prophet Malachi had predicted that God would send "Elijah" again as the forerunner of the last judgment (Mal 4:4-5). They recalled Jesus' emphasis that Elijah would come to Israel to "restore all things" (Matt 17:11). They remembered Gabriel's description of the urgency of John's prophetic mission: "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17, NIV). John the Baptist was the "Elijah," as far as the first advent of Messiah was concerned (Matt 17:10-13). He was the appointed forerunner of Christ.

33 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 1:609.

Joseph Bates combined the ideas of *restoration* and *preparation*: "I understand that the seventh-day Sabbath is not the *least* one, among ALL things that are to be restored before the second advent of Jesus Christ."³⁴ Bates appealed, in particular, to the divine promise in Isaiah, directed to those who would return from the Babylonian captivity: "You shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to Dwell In" (Isa 58:12, NKJV). Bates interpreted the rejection of the Sabbath truth by the churches, and its obstruction by nominal Adventists, as the "mighty struggle" of the remnant church for the restoration of the covenant law and the true worship of God. For our pioneers, the Sabbath truth became a testing truth in the final war of Satan against the remnant people of God, as described in Revelation 12:17. They saw the Sabbath remembrance not as an isolated test of the correct day of the week, but as a symbol of true worship by a redeemed and sanctified people.

Adventist leaders saw the history of the Exodus people and Elijah's encounter with Israel's apostasy repeated in their time. Through a restoration of the Sabbath and a return to the apostolic forms of worship in terms of simple godliness, our pioneers reminded all other Christians of their accountability to God as Creator and Redeemer. Like Elijah of old, the preachers of the third angel's message summon the world to "Mount Carmel," urging all to choose whom they will worship. "Today, as in the days of Elijah, the line of demarcation between God's commandment-keeping people and the worshipers of false gods is clearly drawn."³⁵

Perceived Delay of the Advent: Laodicean Condition

Soon after the emergence of Sabbathkeeping Adventists, certain disturbing characteristics began to develop among them. They began to reflect more and more the spirit of the Laodicean church of Revelation 3. Love and zeal for the Lord gave way to self-exaltation and self-righteousness.

This state of affairs provided sure evidence that the remnant people as a whole were not yet ready for the final seal of divine approval needed to protect them against the punitive judgment of the last plagues. In 1851 Ellen G. White stated frankly that *most* of the Sabbatarian Adventists were not ready for the final events. "'Sabbathkeepers will have to die to self, die to pride and love of approbation.' . . . 'Those who profess His name are not ready.'"³⁶

James White identified Sabbathkeeping Adventists with the *Laodicean*

³⁴ Joseph Bates, *The Seventh-day Sabbath, a Perpetual Sign* (Bedford, MA, 1846), 2.

³⁵ Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, CA, 1917), 187-88.

church of Revelation 3. He urged that the remnant church be “stripped from self-righteous views and feelings,”³⁷ that it recognize its own need for thorough repentance. “We, as a people, have evidently rested down upon the theory of truth, and have neglected to seek Bible humility, Bible patience, Bible self-denial, and Bible watchfulness and sacrifice, Bible holiness, and the power and gifts of the Holy Ghost. . . . Hence it is said, ‘And knowest now that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked’ [Rev 3:17]. What a condition!”³⁸

Ellen White announced the shocking fact, new in Adventist eschatology, that the modern Sabbathkeeping people were basically *repeating* the history of Israel in the wilderness: “Many idols are worshiped, even by professed Sabbathkeepers.”³⁹ In 1867 she judged that only a remnant (a “small portion”) of the remnant church was sanctified by the truth, “not one in twenty.”⁴⁰ In 1873 she declared that, in spite of the increase of membership, “faith in the soon coming of Christ is waning.”⁴¹ This general decline of spiritual readiness provided a rationale for the perceived delay of the Second Advent. In 1883 Ellen White began to stress the *conditional* aspect of Christ’s promise to return “quickly.”⁴²

The *purified remnant* will become visible only in the final “shaking” of the church by means of the straight preaching of Christ’s message in Revelation 3 to the Laodicean church:

I saw that the testimony of the True Witness has not been half heeded. The solemn testimony upon which the destiny of the church hangs has been lightly esteemed, if not entirely disregarded. This testimony must work deep repentance; all who truly receive it will obey it and be purified.⁴³

This humbled remnant will receive the latter rain of the Holy Spirit, in order to proclaim the truth with unprecedented Pentecostal power. As a result, many souls will be harvested.⁴⁴

Arthur G. Daniells urged that,

all who accept the third angel’s message should enter into the experience of justification by faith. . . . They should know that their guilt has been

36 Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC, 1882), 120.

37 James White, *Review and Herald*, November 13, 1856, 13.

38 Ibid., October 16, 1856, 189.

39 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 1:609 (in 1867).

40 Ibid., 632.

41 See Ralph E. Neall, *How Long, O Lord?* (Hagerstown, MD, 1988), 99-100; Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church* 3 (1885): 255.

42 Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, September 16, 1873, 109.

43 Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, 270.

44 Ibid., 271.

canceled, that they have been delivered from the condemnation of the law, and are thus ready to appear before the judgment seat of Christ. They should know by victorious experience that they have laid hold of, and are being kept by, "the faith of Jesus" and that by this faith they are empowered to keep the commandments of God.⁴⁵

Unjustified Fear: A Time Without a Mediator

One unsettling question deserves serious attention: If the last generation has to live *without a Mediator* in heaven during the seven last plagues (see Rev 15:1, 8), will not God's followers have to reach a state of complete sinlessness prior to that time in order to survive?

Representatives of this sinless perfection position insist that the final generation of God's people "will demonstrate that it is possible to live without sin."⁴⁶ The concurrent doctrine of sin maintains that they "can live sinlessly even as He [Christ] did,"⁴⁷ so that they consequently no longer need to have sins forgiven.⁴⁸

Such a sinless perfectionism has discouraged many and has prevented their looking forward with hope to any final event. Instead it has filled them with fear and a troubling uncertainty. Fortunately, neither Scripture nor the writings of Ellen G. White have left room for any speculation with regard to this subject.

When Jesus ceases His intercession in the heavenly sanctuary, He shall declare, "Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy" (Rev 22:11, RSV).

Then, each living person will have received the final test under the latter rain of God's Spirit. Then, "every case has been decided for life or death"; then, Christ has "blotted out" the sins of His people and "the number of His subjects is made up."⁴⁹ The destiny of each, of both the living and the dead, is forever fixed.⁵⁰

In other words, when Christ ends His mediatorial work, the investigative judgment in heaven is closed and the records can no more be changed.⁵¹ Only then, *after each person's eternal destiny has been sealed*, including that of the living saints, are the seven last plagues poured out on Babylon.⁵² The sealed

45 A. G. Daniells, *Christ Our Righteousness* (Washington, DC, 1926), 84-85.

46 See M. L. Andreasen, *The Sanctuary Service* (Washington, DC, 1937), 302; cf. also 312, 318.

47 H. E. Douglass, Edward Happenstall, et al., *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility* (Nashville, 1975), 49-50.

48 C. M. Maxwell in *ibid.*, 21.

49 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 613-14.

50 See Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC, 1900), 319.

51 Cf. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, 490.

52 See Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA, 1923), 446.

followers of the Lamb of God, the 144,000 faithful remnant (Rev 7:1-8; 14:1-51) have then the divine "pledge of security"⁵³ and do *not* come into judgment again after their sealing, when no one can enter the temple of heaven (Rev 15:1, 8).

The final test of loyalty to Christ takes place *before* probation closes. It requires the dramatic decision of each individual believer to accept or to reject the apocalyptic mark of the beast (see Rev 13:15-17). "Now they are eternally secure from the tempter's devices."⁵⁴ When Christ's intercessions suddenly cease for all, no one will be judged again.

The remnant people of God will still have "personal afflictions," but "the Lord has shut them in They are God's property, His possession."⁵⁵ The indwelling Spirit of Christ within each individual believer⁵⁶ and the protective shield of Christ's own righteousness (Rev 3:18; 16:15) will keep the true believer so that "the evil one does not touch him" (1 John 5:18; cf. Ezek 9:5-6). Consequently, their eternal security and acceptance by Christ is not based on the sinlessness of their nature or their sinless perfection but solely on God's seal of approval, His pledge of security. During the last plagues Christ's power is sufficient to keep His people "from falling" and to present them without blemish before His glorious presence at His second advent (cf. Jude 24; 2 Thess 1:10). There is, therefore, no grounds for any true-hearted believer to look with fear or anxiety to the close of probation when Christ shall end His mediatorial work in heaven.

True Preparation for His Coming

In order to be ready for the final events that culminate in the glorious advent of Christ, the Christian believer must be a true disciple and live a sanctified life by obedience to the truth of Scripture.⁵⁷

Ellen G. White's spiritual contribution in this respect was her emphasis on the perfection of Christian character, the restoration of the moral image of God in man. Progressive sanctification was to her not a feeling of increased holiness, but rather, one of greater self-distrust, of deepening repentance.⁵⁸ Never in this mortal life will God's children attain to holy flesh or sinless perfection, although they may possess holy or cleansed

⁵³ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 6 (1900): 404.

⁵⁴ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 5:475.

⁵⁵ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 446.

⁵⁶ Cf. Gal 2:20; Eph 3:16-17; Rom 8:9-11.

⁵⁷ See 1 Pet 1:22; 2 Pet 3:11-12, 14; Titus 2:11-14.

⁵⁸ See Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA, 1911), 561; Id., *Christ's Object Lessons*, 159-60.

hearts now.⁵⁹ Genuine preparation for the final crisis requires a Christian character with the following characteristics: "Those who are distrustful of self, who are humbling themselves before God and purifying their souls by obeying the truth—these are receiving the heavenly mold and preparing for the seal of God in their foreheads."⁶⁰

Ellen White never based salvation on the merits of our moral fitness or character development. Our title to heaven, also for the final generation, *remains* exclusively Christ and His righteousness imputed to the repentant believer.

Jesus does not excuse their sins, but shows their penitence and faith, and, claiming for them forgiveness, . . . will clothe His faithful ones with His own righteousness, that He may present them to His Father "a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such things."⁶¹

They may have imperfections of character; they may have failed in their endeavors; but they have repented, and I have forgiven and accepted them.⁶²

Christ's last act of mediation will, therefore, be to accept our sanctification within the framework of a final pardon and justification as "the complete fulfillment of the new-covenant promise."⁶³ Ellen White never states that the final generation of saints will possess an absolute sinlessness of nature before glorification. She stresses rather the need of daily overcoming every known sin in our conduct, that is, of each sinful habit that defiles the character of a Christian. The ultimate goal of Christian character was, in her opinion, *Christlikeness*.⁶⁴ She urged our imitation of Christ, while recognizing that no one can equal the Pattern.⁶⁵

Ellen White's concept of complete sanctification was not the miraculous absence of sinful promptings in our nature, but our ongoing transforming union with Christ, by faith in our divine Redeemer, so that "sin has no more dominion over us."⁶⁶ Only by actively relying on the *divinity* of Christ "we may attain to perfection of character."⁶⁷ To her, "not sinning" was not identical with sinlessness of human nature, but with practical obedience to the revealed truth of Holy Scripture, as summarized in the threefold message of Revelation 14.

⁵⁹ See Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Book 2 (Washington, DC, 1958), 32.

⁶⁰ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 5:216.

⁶¹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, 484.

⁶² Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, 589.

⁶³ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, 485.

⁶⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA, 1898), 311.

⁶⁵ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 2 (1885): 170, 549, 628.

⁶⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 123.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

So long as Satan reigns, we shall have self to subdue, besetting sins to overcome. . . . None of the apostles and prophets ever claimed to be without sin. Men who have lived the nearest to God, men who would sacrifice life itself rather than knowingly commit a wrong act, . . . have confessed the sinfulness of their nature.⁶⁸

This describes the religious attitude of the sanctified remnant, their genuine preparation for the final test of faith. This is the ultimate aim of Christ's message to His end-time remnant, the Laodicean church (Rev 3:14-22).

Conclusion

Bible prophecy unmistakably promises the emergence of a remnant people of God in the time of the end.⁶⁹ Their mandate is the threefold angels' message of Revelation 14:6-12. Their mission is the same as that of John the Baptist: to turn the hearts of an apostate covenant people back to their God and thus to prepare a people ready to meet Christ in His glorious appearance.⁷⁰

Their prophetic characteristics are, (1) they worship God in willing obedience to His commandments (Rev 12:17; 14:12); (2) they hold on to the "testimony of Jesus," that is, they believe also in Christ's prophetic witness or revelation to His church through His chosen apostles and prophets;⁷¹ (3) they will be endowed with the "latter rain" of the Holy Spirit in order to summon the whole world to worship God in Spirit and truth;⁷² (4) after the final crisis of faith the purified remnant shall receive the seal of the living God as the sign of divine approval and protection against the seven last plagues (Rev 7:1-8; 18:1-5).

Earlier in our historical survey we learned that the surviving remnants of God in biblical history were not sinless people, but repentant and obedient children of God who were constantly in danger of renewed errors and even apostasy from God's covenant of saving grace.⁷³ The very remnant people of God, who carried the covenant promises and responsibilities, need an ongoing revival and reformation, represented by Isaiah's personal experience with the Holy One, as the prototype of a purified, holy remnant people (Isa 6:1-8).

The NT fulfillment revealed that God's holy remnant was the apostolic

⁶⁸ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 560-61.

⁶⁹ Joel 2:32; Rev 12:17; 7:1-8; 14:1-5; 18:1-5.

⁷⁰ Mal 4:4-5; Luke 1:16-17; Rev 14:1-20.

⁷¹ Rev 1:2, 9; 6:9, NIV, NASB; 12:17; 19:10, NASB; 22:16.

⁷² Joel 2:28-29; Rev 14:1-4; 18:1-5.

⁷³ See Zech 3:1-7; Mal 3:6-7.

church, the "little flock," gathered by Jesus Christ as the shepherd-Messiah.⁷⁴ The apostolic community of faith was energized by the power of the "early rain" of the Spirit of Christ (Acts 2). Christ testified from heaven, "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men" (Rev 2:2). But the *postapostolic* church fell in an increasing apostasy from the covenant of God (2 Thess 2:3-4; Acts 20:30). The emergence of the end-time remnant after the Middle Ages soon became institutionalized, in order to fulfill its global missionary outreach.

The renewed tension between the remnant as *institution* and as *community of faith* is expressed in the prophetic warning that God's end-time people are at the same time the remnant and Laodicean (Rev 3:14-22). This tension reflects Jesus' teaching in Matthew 13:24-30, 47-50, that "even within the remnant of faith a sifting and selection process would take place at the end."⁷⁵ John's Apocalypse brings the inspiring hope that God will provide a *purified remnant* that is empowered with the Holy Spirit to fulfill its final outreach of divine mercy to a world united in rebellion against God (Rev 18:1-5). A true Israel of God *will* stand in the day of divine wrath (Rev 7:1-8; 14:1-5). This implies a solemn appeal to all church members: "The seal of the living God will be placed upon those only who bear a likeness to Christ in character."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Matt 12:30; Luke 12:32; Rom 11:5.

⁷⁵ G. F. Hasel, "The Remnant in Scripture and the End Time," *Adventists Affirm* 2/2 (1988): 9.

⁷⁶ Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, May 21, 1895, quoted in *The SDA Bible Commentary* 7 (Washington, DC, 1957): 970.

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