THE REMNANT CONCEPT IN EARLY ADVENTISM: FROM APOCALYPIC ANTI-SECTARIANISM TO AN ESCHATOLOGICAL DENOMINATIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

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Introduction

When a new denomination is formed, a viable ecclesiology is vital for its survival. The case of the Millerite movement and its Adventist heirs is particularly interesting because of the initial ecclesiological dimness associated with their apocalyptic expectation and revivalist anti-sectarianism. After the “Great Disappointment” of October 1844, Sabbatarian Adventists constructed a “remnant” self-understanding from the residue of Millerite convictions and reinterpreted their experience by means of an eschatological scheme that assigned them a crucial role in what they believed to be the short last phase of history. This article provides a detailed account and analysis of their developing view on this remnant motif, with its several distinct steps toward the ultimate establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Sabbath-keeping Adventists eventually came to apply the term to their ecclesiastical organization (“remnant church”), which reversed the initial transdenominational tenet of the motif, but codified a thoroughly eschatological ecclesiology.

Part I

The morning of 23 October 1844 marked the end of a movement. Its adherents, the Millerite Adventists, had invested all of their hope, thinking, and energy in the proclamation that the kingdom of God was at hand. Jesus Christ was to come back to earth in order to end history, so they believed, “in or around 1843,” later to be corrected to 22 October 1844, the Day of Atonement date deemed to fulfill the prophecies of Dan 8:14. While this prediction failed visibly, the Millerite defeat was not the only thwarted eschatological expectation of the period. Other American eschatological models were not much more successful: the Latter-Day Saints, for instance, had lost their prophet Joseph Smith earlier the same year. Charles Finney had famously asserted in 1835 that “if the church will do all her duty, the millennium may come in this country in three years”—but in the ensuing years, American millenarian optimism was slowly waning.

Of course, in comparison with the postmillennial and Mormon versions of God's eschatological kingdom, the Millerite premillennial interpretation was a much more precarious theory, for all depended on whether the event foretold would actually occur. It was not the Adventist eschatological mood that was foreign to the era; not even definiteness as such—it was their view on a definite time to be believed, to be proclaimed, and to be taken as a point of reference for the short period remaining until Jesus' parousia. One would think, therefore, that the utter failure of this time conviction should have dissolved the Adventist movement. And it almost did, had there not been another conviction, one that remained more hidden, but which was apparently as important to many Advent believers: that God himself was "in" the movement, that apocalyptic prophecy was fulfilled through it, that he was preparing an eschatological "remnant" by means of the Adventist proclamation.

Revival movements such as Millerism often radically question established religion, the churches, the lack of dedication among average believers, and the hardening of denominational boundaries. By announcing Jesus' imminent Second Coming, the followers of Miller did the same, but added an important component to the revivalist mix of antisecularism, call to commitment, and critiquing of extant religious bodies, an antiecclesial impulse that rested on the premise that the churches, like the world at large, would soon no longer exist. At the same time, the logic that their message and activity was a fulfillment of Revelation 14 and other biblical "end-time" passages entailed an empirical and social dimension that created a nonexclusive but highly experiential alternative to prevailing church concepts: a body of believers constituted wholly through participation in an apocalyptic-oriented movement.

Such a nonchurch identity shared the instability of a movement fixated on a particular year and, finally, a specific day. Thus, the tendency of Millerites to not reflect much on ecclesiology implied that Adventists of the period after the "Great Disappointment" of October 1844 could not build on agreed-upon church concepts. The event (or rather nonevent) marking the expected end of church history, together with the end of general history, necessitated a reinvention of the church, and it was the "remnant" motif that

provided most continuity with Millerite thinking and created space for the development of a new ecclesiology.

Beyond the insight—not noticed so far in Adventist historiography—that this continuity is significant, the main argument of this article is that this remnant thinking went through a thorough reinterpretation in several steps. Starting as a broad and essentially antisecular concept derived from the interpretation of apocalyptic texts, the meaning of the term was increasingly narrowed down to Millerites only. It was then linked to Sabbatarian Adventists and, finally, to the new Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

While the significant shift of this remnant interpretation and the irony of its change from antisecularism to a denominationalist stance appear to have escaped early Adventists as well, it is also important to realize that the plausibility of these transformed understandings fully rested on the peculiar Millerite hermeneutic. This biblicalist hermeneutic has been labeled "historicist" because of its tendency to search for fulfilled prophecy throughout the history of Christianity. However, in view of the frequent and rather immediate application of biblical passages to the nineteenth-century world, it may be called more appropriately "historicist-experientialist." In the context of such a hermeneutical framework, many of the small but crucial steps away from the original Millerite vision to a more integrated but still fully eschatologically driven theology and ecclesiology were logical. Rather than viewing this process as a move from "boundlessness to consolidation," as an earlier analysis has done, this article suggests that it was a series of creative reapplications of the very Millerite interpretative paradigm, i.e., their strongly bounded historicist-experientialist thinking in a changed setting.

It is this hermeneutical thinking that gave the initial impetus and rising importance to the use of the remnant motif and a particular focus on one biblical text in which it appears—Rev 12:17. Therefore, the following microanalysis of the early career of the remnant concept among Adventists is also a case study on how ecclesiologies of particular denominational traditions are born and developed. Like soteriologies, Christologies, pneumatologies,


1From 1842, the Millerite view of "the churches" grew decidedly more negative. Cf. Charles Finch's influential call to leave all churches: Come Out of Her, My People: A Sermon [Brochure] (Rochester: J.V. Himes, 1843). It should be noted, however, that there was a broad spectrum of attitudes to the existing denominations. Miller took a moderate stand and remained a member of his Baptist denomination until the end of 1844 (when he was excommunicated), while many others were increasingly radicalized in 1843 and 1844 (David T. Arthur, "'Come out of Babylon': A Study of Millerite Separatism and Denominationalism, 1840-1865" [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1970], 12-83).

2The most thorough discussion of the Millerite approach to the interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy is provided by Kai J. Arasola, "The End of Historicism: Millerite Hermeneutic of Time Prophecies in the Old Testament" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Uppsala, 1989).

3Jonathan Butler, "From Millerism to Seventh-Day Adventism: 'Boundlessness to Consolidation,'" CH 55/1 (1986): 50-64. Butler does not discuss ecclesiology and the remnant concept, but focuses on the period as a whole and the change from Millerism to Seventh-day Adventism as a "cultural transformation" (ibid., 51).

4For the connection between Millerite and Adventist approaches to the Bible, see Jeff Crocombe, "A Feast of Reason": The Roots of William Miller's Biblical Interpretation and Its Influence on the Seventh-Day Adventist Church" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Queensland, 2011).
and other parts of doctrine, they commonly rely on a specific set of scriptural texts, biblical metaphors, motifs, or themes. It is the configuration of such elements, coupled with distinct interpretive approaches and an emphasis of some specific motifs—often at the expense of others—that make theological views of the church, and particularly of what constitutes the true church, so diverse.

Among Seventh-day Adventists, the remnant motif has been of central importance for ecclesiology in general and their self-understanding in particular. Monographs and debates in the last decades have demonstrated that the issues connected with this biblical term and with the theology linked to it continue to stir interest and discussion. However, so far there has been no analysis of the historical origin and initial development of Seventh-day Adventist concepts regarding the "remnant." This article seeks to fill this research gap with the hope that it also sheds light on other aspects of early Adventism and similar movements that have not yet been investigated in detail, notably the denomination’s ecclesiology in general and mechanisms in the emergence of ecclesial identities in revival movements.

**Antecedents**

While the immediate origins of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are to be found in the Millerite Advent movement of the 1830s and 1840s, the remnant motif and ecclesiological thinking connected with it was by no means unique to Millerites. Both in earlier sabbatarian reasoning and in the apocalyptic interpretations of Millerite contemporaries, remnant ecclesiology played a role that needs to be examined in order to understand the Adventist use of the theme in a larger context.

Seventh-day advocates in seventeenth-century Britain influenced Adventists in an indirect way through a historical line leading to nineteenth-century Seventh-Day Baptists, whose sabbatarianism prompted some Millerites to adopt the concept in the 1840s and 1850s. His method of describing various Adventist individuals’ positions regarding remnant ecclesiology from the 1850s onward—which are almost identical—leads to a picture in which nineteenth-century remnant thinking appears static rather than as forming part of a larger theological and organizational development.


to begin Sabbath keeping. The ecclesiology of those sabbatarian antecedents, however, does not seem to have made an impact on their Adventist heirs, in spite of the fact that some notable parallels existed even in their understanding of the “remnant.” The comprehensive study, *The Seventh-Day Men*, draws a detailed picture of British sabbatarianism, demonstrates that a combination of sabbatarian convictions and an eschatological interest produced a logic in which the remnant motif played an important role already two centuries before Adventism. One important leader, Thomas Tillam, was convinced in 1657 that the seventh day was “the last great controversy between the Saints and the Man of sin.” He believed that prophecies in the book of Revelation were being fulfilled at his time and that “the voice of the seventh angel (now sounding) had produced a small remnant of the woman’s seed in these Islands, waiting for the advance of the Law of God.” This remnant was to have “wholly abandoned Babylon’s customs and traditions” and to “keep the commandments of God . . . recovering the sanctified Sabbath,!”

This kind of thinking was evidently shared by other Sabbath keepers of the period. For example, his contemporary Edward Stennett, one of the most respected seventh-day advocates in seventeenth-century England, addressed sabbatarianism in Rhode Island as “that little remnant of the woman’s seed that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.” He explained, “It greatly concerns us to show ourselves the remnant of the woman’s seed.” Evidently, the “Seventh-day Men,” as they were called in the period, clearly linked the biblical remnant motif and particularly Rev 12:17 with their sabbatarian practice, believing themselves and their practices to be a fulfillment of prophecy. This interpretation apparently did not survive far beyond the seventeenth century; nevertheless, it demonstrates that such a connection was plausible when the Sabbath and the expectation of an imminent advent came together. At the same time, this self-understanding raises the question of how much the apocalyptic “remnant” was to be seen as being linked to particular periods of history—an issue arising again in the Adventist context.

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17Ibid., 170, quoting a letter of Edward Stennett to Newport [congregation], 6 April 1670, Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society, Janesville, WI 53946, 56.


When discussing the remnant theme in the context of the nineteenth-century environment of Millerite Adventism, one must remember that this was a society in which interest in biblical apocalyptic writings existed to a considerable extent. Among the movements grappling with eschatology, two are outstanding in helping to understand the Millerite alternative: the Mormons and the postmillennialist Stone-Campbell (Restoration) movement. Even though the Stone-Campbell tradition did not develop the remnant theme into a doctrine, one can find some remnant language in its discourse. Most significant is the fact that both Thomas Campbell and Alexander Campbell, two of the main leaders, use the motif. The younger Alexander Campbell discusses the topic inherent in the term in what has been called his “Richmond Letter” (1835). He asserts: “For my part, although I have been reluctantly constrained to think that the remnant, according to the election of grace, in this age of apostacy, is, indeed, small, yet I thank God that his promise has not failed—that even at this present time there is an election—a remnant—and that this remnant did not commence either in 1827, 1823, or in 1809.”

It is significant that this view of the true church—for this is what “remnant” meant to Campbell—includes earlier movements. In spite of his eschatological ideas, he, therefore, did not apply the motif to his own period at the expense of earlier epochs.

Even more important is a reference to the “faithful remnant” by Thomas Campbell, found in his famous *Declaration and Address.* It immediately follows the last of his thirteen “propositions.” The aim of the *Declaration and Address* was to “prepare the way for a permanent scriptural unity amongst Christians” and “remnant” were thus seen as being one and the same.

As is well known, the eschatological interest of the epoch was shared by the nascent Latter-Day Saints, whose millennial views led them to build their own Zion in the United States. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Book of Mormon, published initially in 1830, also uses remnant terminology: it has sixty instances where the term “remnant” is mentioned. Although here the
The Millerite Antisectarian Use of the Remnant Motif

The Millerites spoke of the "remnant" in many instances. Although the term and the concepts behind it did not develop into a clear-cut ecclesiological teaching—after all, Advent believers did not aim at creating anything like a new organization—the frequency with which the word was used and the assumption of its self-evident meaning reveals how many Millerites connected remnant thinking with themselves as a movement. While the general development of Millerite ecclesiological terminology and the use of the term "remnant" in particular calls for an investigation, the following few examples will suffice for the purpose of this study.

Significantly, Miller already included the term in his earliest booklet. On one hand, he viewed the "remnant" as "the last part of the church" or "the true children of God," who according to his interpretation of Rev 12:17, would experience anti-Christian persecution and divine deliverance at the very end of history. On the other hand, he also used the motif in a more general way—as a synonym for the true church even in the earlier years. In later publications, he applied the term to believers surviving to see Jesus' Second Coming, to those brought to faith in the last years before that event, to the persecuted early Christians, and even to believers of all ages, including the OT epoch.

Miller's application of remnant terminology to various figures of thought—the *eclesia nobilissima*, the true church, the persecuted end-time church, the final generation of converts, early Christians, faithful believers of all ages, and the "bride" meeting Jesus during his *parousia*—indicates that he did not use the term in a very technical manner. Depending on the context, he could stress one aspect or another without developing a definition beyond the "true church" with a strong eschatological slant. As a self-made exegesis-turned-preacher, Miller's focus was neither general theology nor ecclesiology, but on warning the world.

Other writers of the Advent movement had a similar orientation. At times, the term was applied to "the true church"—an interpretation which raised the question of Adventist relations to the denominations in an increasingly forceful way as 1843, the envisioned time of the *parousia* came nearer. In 1844, when chronological adjustments had to be made and many Millerites were perceptibly isolated from other Christians, the term also gained a stronger numerical meaning. The *Midnight Cry*, one of the major Millerite papers, proposed: "Still, we are everywhere in a minority, and we know that the truth on this subject will be despised by the multitude till Christ comes among the nonsabbatarian groups.

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to their sudden consternation; but we gladly labor in the joyful hope that a remnant will be saved. May you, reader, be of that number.”

In the summer of 1844, the “Seventh Month Movement” produced a powerful but final stir in the ranks of the Millerites by advocating October 22 as the date for the parousia. In this context, the term also helped explain why the majority of Christians and society had rejected the Advent message: it was a divinely predicted sifting process. “How forcible then is the Savior’s testimony, that straight is the gate, and narrow is the way that leadeth to life, and few there be that find it,” argued Emily Clemons, a writer in another Millerite paper, the Advent Herald. She continued: “Those on the Lord’s side are called a ‘remnant’—as ‘gleaning grapes’ are they ‘left,’ ‘as the shaking of an olive tree, two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof, saith the Lord God of Israel’—Isa. xvii. 6.”

Miller did not accept the reasoning of the Seventh Movement until October 1844, but his remnant concept resembled the lines of the more radical preachers. Lamenter the “selfish pharisaical bigotry among the sects,” he observed, “in every sect we find a few of their numbers whose faithful hearts and honest lives denote they have not bowed the knee to Baal.” Through this reasoning, the remnant motif began to express the contrast to all church establishment. Miller deplored that the churches quite generally represented strife and “darkness.” At the same time, he exclaimed, “thank the Lord, a remnant yet is left; the Bible yet is true, and these men are but the tares which soon will be gathered and burned. I do believe few men will be left.”

Miller’s distaste of the “sect” spirit was typical of the Millerites. This antisectarian aversion, which they shared with other restorationists, added a polemical dimension to their “remnant” understanding. Clemons argued that theirs was the time to be “delivered” from the “sectarian” churches, for the church ... apostatized so much that there was only a remnant of her seed which kept the commandments of God, and had the testimony of Jesus Christ. Why? Because when the whole church was of one language, and of one speech, they said one to another, “Go to, let us build us a city, and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven.” ... Unlike, however, the ancient builders of Babel, after the confusion of tongues—the many sects...


continue the tower building, and each is sanguine that his will be the only one that will reach to heaven.”

Naturally, the near advent made distinctions between the various churches and their traditions largely irrelevant. With a focus on God’s kingdom at hand, the remnant concept became a nonestablishment counter-model, a kind of a onochurch ecclesiology, in which existing Christians were stripped of their ecclesiological and soteriological claims. Like their restorationist contemporaries the Millerites did not realize that their particular emphasis on the remnant motif carried the potential for a “sectarian” tendency as well. Although Adventists abhorred founding a new “sect,” there was no other way after October 1844 and ironically the very antidenominational remnant concept could provide a basis for later ecclesiological reasoning and the establishment of a new church organization.

When the Millerite predictions had not come true and the Great Disappointment shattered both their immediate hope and their unity, the tendency of Adventists to view themselves as “the remnant” increased. Miller wrote in early 1845:

A small remnant have recently left the churches, because they will have no fellowship with satanic kingdoms. And the political powers are angry and making war with this remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Rev. xii. 17. “For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” Rev. xix. 10. All others discard the prophecies, except those who keep the commandments of God, and those alone will receive persecution in the last age of the world. The signs, which our Savior gave his disciples, are now matters of history, and thus we know he is near, even at the door.

It is such statements and reasoning that fuelled later sabbatarian-Adventist thinking on the remnant.

The self-understanding of “remnant” became so common in that period that the more radical Adventists soon began to use it in contradistinction to what they called “Laodicea,” i.e., those Adventists who organized themselves in a quasi-denominational manner in 1845. At the same time, references...
to Rev 12:17 and to the remnant motif continued to occur among those postdisappointment Millerites with whom the later Sabbatarian Adventists shared an affinity. H. H. Gross, for instance, wrote in the Jubilee Standard:

The dragon is indeed angry, and is going forth to make war with the remnant of the church, who keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ, or believe and obey the light from the law; and have the spirit of the prophecies [Isa]. Nearly all Adventists professed to keep all the law at the 10th, but a mass have since cast away the faith they then had, and God calls them Laodiceans.

Its frequent occurrence in some post-1844 Millerite journals, often in combination with expressions such as “little flock” or “the little remnant,” indicates that the term continued to be part of Sabbatarian Adventists’ repertoire of motifs and of what may be called their proto-ecclesiological discourse. Even though some details later sabbatarians applied to the term were obviously not in their minds, an essential framework for Seventh-day Adventist reasoning was already provided by connecting the term with the parousia, emphasizing the connotation of a small number, equating “remnant” with “true Christians” as opposed to the “sects,” hinting at the impending persecution of the group, and referring to “the commandments of God” kept by its members.

From Millerite to Sabbatarian Remnant, 1844-1848

The nucleus of Sabbatarian Adventists and their general theology developed in several phases, which have been described and analyzed in detail elsewhere.

declined until it became defunct in the twentieth century.

H. H. Gross here refers to the “tenth day of the seventh month” in the Jewish Calendar (“Food in Due Season—Concluded,” Jubilee Standard, 10 July 1845, 143), which, according to Millerite calculations, fell on October 22 of the year 1844, and which Millennials considered to be the last year of world history.

Ibid. The Jubilee Standard promoted the “Bridegroom view,” an important step in the development of later sabbatarian Adventism that connected Dan 8:14 with heavenly atonement and implied that salvation was no longer available for those who had rejected the Millenials’ message. The latter was also called the “shut door” theory, which even Miller accepted for a short period. For more details see Burt, esp. 77-91; 114-119, 273-274.

The Western Midnight Cry, which changed its name to Day-Star in March 1845, yields thirteen instances of “remnant” in an automated search in the digitized issues of 1844 and 35 for 1845. This search, as others mentioned below, was done in the Online Document Archives of the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (http://www.adventistarchives.org/DocArchives.asp, accessed 11 March 2012).

See Burt, passim.

The fact that the steps that led to their unique ecclesiology—which centers in the remnant concept—have not been examined so far is not surprising. The earliest Sabbatarian Adventists lived in constant expectation of Jesus’ return and did not care much about ecclesiological matters. So soon was the Second Coming to take place that the faithful few waiting for the Savior were, in their own view, almost the opposite of all they termed “the churches.” Thus for several years, they hardly called their assemblies “church,” but referred to themselves as “saints,” “God’s people,” a “company,” “advent” believers, “true Israel,” “brethren,” “true children of God,” a “band,” a “scattered/little flock,” and, of course, “remnant.”

Evidently, even such a diffused ecclesiology did imply a certain understanding of the group dimension of faith. While the term “remnant” did not feature prominently among these various expressions in the beginning, it gained increasing significance as other doctrines developed among the future Seventh-day Adventists. In fact, one can argue that it rose from a status of one somewhat vague biblical motif among others to a quasi-doctrine within just a few years. This remnant understanding added an ecclesiological roof to the eschatological basis bequeathed to them by the Millerites and the soteriological wall inherited from their radical wing. Paradoxically, it was only with this antisectarian roof that the emerging sabbatarian group could develop into a denomination.

The following discussion of the Sabbath-keeping Adventists’ use of the term begins with Ellen G. White’s writings due to the prominence she developed in this emerging group as a prophetic voice. The title of the earliest publication of the then Ellen Harmon, To the Little Remnant Scattered Abroad (1846), uses the motif in a manner that indicates how common it was; however, the text itself does not elaborate it in any way. What is ecclesiologically significant in it, though, is the tripartite scheme—the Advent people, the church, and the world,” indicating that the “Advent people” (i.e., the “remnant”) were those few who would remain faithful until the end, as opposed to the “church” and the world.” The Millerite Adventists who continued in their faith were thus clearly identified with the term “remnant,” which also indicates the experiential nature of Harmon’s use of the motif. At the time of this 1846 publication, the young prophet and her future husband James White were not yet Sabbath keepers. They began to propagate the Saturday-Sabbath doctrine in the autumn of 1846 after they had married in August. Her two 1847 publications, therefore, already fall into their

Ellen Harmon, To the Little Remnant Scattered Abroad [Broadside] (Portland, ME: n.p., 1846). Containing the text of two letters (dated 20 December 1845, and 15 February 1846) originally published in the Day-Star, 24 January 1846, and 14 March 1846, this broadside bore a title that combined several of the proto-ecclesiological motifs most common in the self-understanding of “Bridegroom Adventists”: the eschatological remnant, numerical smallness, and a scattered state.
Bates's second edition of *The Seventh Day Sabbath* in 1847, however, adds reflections of great significance for the developing remnant concept among Sabbatarian Adventists. Already in the preface, he contrasts God's "honest, confiding children" who keep the Sabbath with the "Christian world" in general. Most importantly, he mentions the "remnant" three times, defining it as "remnant (the last end) of God's children" and connecting it with Sabbath keeping in the context of Rev 12:17. Thus, Bates develops a more focused view of the eschatological remnant, which challenged the assumption common among Millerites that their movement—or what remained of it—was identical with the remnant referred to in the book of Revelation. In effect, the 1847 version of *The Seventh Day Sabbath* narrowed down the "remnant" to a remnant of the remnant by counting only sabbatarian Millerites among this group.

Only a few months later, Bates published a historical-theological evaluation of the Millerite movement and its aftermath titled *Second Advent Way Marks and High Hopes*. Beyond reflections on the Advent believers' experience, it contains the first systematic attempt at ecclesiological reasoning by a Sabbatarian Adventist. Therefore, this is a document of great importance for comprehending the self-understanding of the nucleus of later Seventh-day Adventists. While a full discussion and evaluation of the booklet's explanation of what constitutes a "church" go beyond the scope of this article, a few observations will help to analyze the way Bates uses the term "remnant" in this context.

The background of Bates's ecclesiological views is clearly his (and James White's) original restorationist and nondenominational Christian Connection position, which considered "sects," i.e., denominational entities, as unscriptural. Unsurprisingly, *Second Advent Way Marks* presents the same

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49Joseph Bates, *The Seventh Day Sabbath: A Perpetual Sign* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1846), 1. Bates, 41, also mentions "honest souls seeking after truth" another term indicating that ecclesiological thinking at that stage was in flux and included terms to describe the changing Millerite scene.

50Thomas M. Preble, *A Tract, Showing that the Seventh Day Should be Observed as the Sabbath, Instead of the First Day* (Nashua, NH: Murry & Kimball, 1845), 3. Preble, 2, also calls the Millerites "the true children of God" and the "true Israel" (ibid., 3). J. B. Cook, an "open-door" Adventist who taught the Sabbath, likewise did not derive the ecclesiological consequences of his position in his magazine *The Advent Testimony*, which was apparently published only in 1846.

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Connectionist sentiments merged with the radical Millerite thinking of Charles Fitch's kind and repeatedly links "the organized churches"—i.e., the existing denominations—with apocalyptic Babylon. While rejecting those "nominal churches," Bates also devotes a whole section to the question, "What is a Church?" Starting from the premise that "[a] Christian Church is an assembly or congregation of faithful men," he concludes that an "anti-Christian" church is such a body that (1) disregards "humanity" (e.g., by tolerating slavery), (2) becomes "carnally minded and covetous," (3) does not do the work of the church, and/or (4) disregards "any of the fundamental truths of the Bible."

With these criteria, Bates arrives at the conclusion that the true church is equal to the "remnant." To identify who qualifies as "remnant," he see Thomas H. Olbricht, "Christian Connection," in The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement, ed. Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Bowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, and D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 190-191. James White had been ordained by the Christian Connection; Joshua Himes, the main organizer and second in importance to Miller among the Millerites, was also a Christian Connection minister.

Cf. Finch. Even though Bates stopped short of the position of another famous Millerite, George Storrs, who propagated that a church "becomes Babylon the moment it is organized" ("Come out of Her My People," Midnight Cry, 15 February 1844, 238), Bates's ecclesiological views were as clearly influenced by the radical Millerite wing as other central aspects of his thinking. On Storrs, see also George Knight, Millennium Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 192-199.

Bates, Second Advent Way Marks, 19, 21-24, 26, 34; cf. the anti-"sect" polemics on pp. 23, 28, and 34. Bates also criticizes the Albany Conference Adventists (i.e., the majority of Millerites who would later form the Evangelical Adventist Church) and assigns to them the "Laodicean state of the church" since they "commenced a new organization" (see ibid., 35).

The formulation "congregation of faithful men" is borrowed from the Anglican "Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion" (1563), article XIX, probably mediated through the Methodist "Articles of Religion" (1784), article XIII. Interestingly Bates does not quote the rest of the article, which also refers to "the Sacraments" to be "duly administered."

Bates, Second Advent Way Marks, 28. According to Bates, the slavery issue or any issue of "humanity" is of greater importance than the following criteria; see also his point on p. 25 that doctrinal problems lead to "the mildest form of an anti-Christian Church." Bates and many other Millerites had been active in anti-slavery organizations and various social-reform movements (see Ronald Grayhill, "The Abolitionist-Millerite Connection," in The Disappointed: Millenism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993], 139-152). Bates actually adds physical separation from other churches as a criterion for understands Rev 14:12 to mean that the "saints" mentioned here are "a remnant (the last end, after all the rest had been cut off from them)," who keep all the commandments, including the observation of the seventh day. He continues: "This is the remnant that is to be saved out of all the great company that published the good news and glad tidings of a coming Savior." In other words, Bates had further developed the distinct view of Sabbath keepers as the only true heirs of the Millerite movement. While this position—based on a view of different stages in salvation history coinciding with "way marks" or phases of the Millerite movement—appears like a dispensational model of relatively quickly changing ecclesiologies in the 1840s, its strength was undoubtedly to give the emerging sabbatarian group a sense of identity beyond mere exegetical or doctrinal overlap of positions held by individuals. Such a sabbatarian proto-ecclesiology was the basis for developments soon to occur among Sabbath-keeping Adventists: the modification and final abandonment of the "shut door" theory, the growth of a missionary vision extending beyond the Millerites, and the ultimate establishment of a denomination.

The other two publications by Bates and the Whites in the years 1847 and 1848 slightly diversified remnant thinking. The fact that they published A Word to the "Little Flock" together in 1847 indicates that they had become the leaders in an emerging group of believers, thus creating provisional ecclesial realities even in the absence of a well-crafted ecclesiology. While the 1847 booklet does not mention the term "remnant," other ecclesiological motifs are utilized in the title and in a few other instances, which implies that remnant motif had not acquired a decisive importance yet. Bates's Vindication of the Seventh-Day Sabbath of 1848 contains another interesting expression in the
subtitle, “God’s peculiar people,” also indicating that “remnant” was still one among other terms. However, the book also adds two new dimensions to the use of the remnant theme: a tendency toward soteriological legalism and a missiological notion attached to the term. While Bates did not bolster this latter notion with scriptural arguments, the general embeddedness of remnant thinking in Revelation 14 presumably strengthened such reasoning in the further development of a missionary component in Adventist ecclesiology.

**Part II**

The Sabbatarian Remnant Becomes the “Remnant Church,” 1849-1854

The year 1849 marks the beginning of a new stage for Sabbatarian Adventists. With the publication of their first periodical, *The Present Truth*, James White stabilized this group which had previously lacked a solid platform and identifiable leadership. Another move hardly noted for its significance in Adventist historiography so far is James White’s first collection of hymns published in the same year. Not only did the title contain an ecclesiological statement indicating that Sabbatarian Adventists considered themselves to be a profiled group, the fact that a hymnal was now in existence demonstrated that the scattered believers began to view themselves as unified or at least cohering enough to form local churches with some degree of similarity in practice. Evidently, the steps toward an ecclesiological self-understanding during the previous two years translated into the movement’s life.

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62 Bates, *A Vindication*, 7: “[A]re not these individuals who enter the gates of the city the same remnant that are at last saved by keeping the commandments?” That this kind of legalistic reasoning was a general danger of Bates’s thinking has been observed by Knight, who also draws a fine line of distinction between Bates’ fundamentally legalistic approach and the Whites’ “gospel orientation” (Joseph Bates, 83-88, esp. 88).

63 Bates argues, “the great mass of advent believers . . . have . . . also turned into the enemy’s ranks, leaving the remnant to finish up the work” (*A Vindication*, 90).

64 Although P. Gerard Damsteegt does not focus on the remnant motif (and devotes only pp. 147-148 and 243-244 to it, analyzing early Adventist thought on it in a systematic rather than historical manner), his whole work develops the missiological significance of early Adventist thinking much further (*Foundations of the Seventh-Day Adventist Message and Mission* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977]).


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Early in the same year, Ellen White published visions that shed light on the future course of the Sabbatarian Adventist movement and, at the same time, clarified elements of the remnant concept. Her vision of 5 January 1849, “The Sealing,” referred to Revelation 7 and emphasized that “the remnant . . . were not all sealed,” thus applying the term to an entity that was still in development. In the extreme apocalyptic mood of the time, such a view served to curb attempts at declaring the sabbatarian group closed and viewing its mission as accomplished. Furthermore, the 16 December 1848 vision, mentioned in the same publication, is the first in which she mentions the “perfect order and harmony” on the New Earth, a theme which would soon translate into a call for “gospel order” in the developing sabbatarian church. Therefore, the beginning of 1849 had strengthened further elements of the nascent sabbatarian ecclesiology and missiology.

Bates stressed the mission concern in the same period in *A Seal of the Living God.* This booklet emphasized the identification of Sabbath keepers with the “remnant,” but also expressed a modification in the sabbatarian-Adventist reasoning. This modification is easily overlooked because of Bates’s patchwork style, but it is of crucial importance for the group’s developing ecclesiology. On the basis of a peculiar understanding of God’s covenants, Bates continued to assert that “advent believers . . . will love and keep this covenant with God, and especially . . . his [God’s] Holy Sabbath, in this covenant; this is a part of the 144,000 now to be sealed.” Different from earlier thought, however, he fully disentangled remnant theology from its Millerite connection and thus opened the door for a much wider vision of sabbatarian mission. According to Bates, the criterion for belonging to the

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66 Ellen G. White, *To Those Who Are Receiving the Seal of the Living God* [Broadside], 31 January 1849.

67 Later publications of the vision omitted the “all” in this statement and thus reinforced the view of the remnant as developing in an interim phase before the end of history (Ellen White, “Dear Brethren and Sisters,” *The Present Truth*, August 1849, 22-23; and idem, *Early Writings of Ellen G. White* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1882], 38).

68 Bates was also the first to link the Sabbath with the apocalyptic “seal” of Revelation 7 (Joseph Bates, Letter to Leonard and Elvira Hastings, 7 August 1848 [Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate]).


70 Bates believed there were four covenants between God and humanity; he considered the Sabbath to be part of the crucial perpetual covenant, thus to be kept until the end of history (ibid., 59-65). This covenant idea did not make any significant impact on Adventist thinking.

71 Ibid., 61.
remnant, viz. the 144,000, was now no longer the Millerite experience but the Sabbath. He asserted:

The other part are those who do not yet so well understand the advent doctrine, but are endeavoring to serve God with their whole hearts, and are willing, and will receive this covenant and Sabbath as soon as they hear it explained. These will constitute the 144,000, now to be sealed with "a seal of the living God," which sealing will bear them through this time of trouble. . . . All advent believers who despise, and reject this covenant, will just as certainly be burned and destroyed with the ungodly wicked at the desolation of the earth.14

Like the other Sabbatarian Adventists, Bates continued to teach the "shut door" for non-Adventists for some time.15 Yet this shift in thought—that the remnant was constituted by commandment-keeping Christians, not primarily by those who had participated in the Millerite movement—would soon move Sabbatarian Adventists' missionary attention away from other Adventists to the Christian world and, finally, to humanity at large. The joy of welcoming non-Adventist converts6 gradually directed the focus of the "remnant" understanding away from the Millerite connection, and the increasing separation from "first-day" Adventists soon made an incipient organization unavoidable.

This organization grew mainly through paraecclesial activities inherited from the Millerites: a regular periodical the committees that ran publications beginning in 1850 and the conferences announced in it. In terms of ecclesiology, The Present Truth and another short-lived follow-up magazine, The Advent Review, continued the lines visible in earlier publications, but also contained a few new elements of significance. Even if they were only mentioned in passing, James White's call for "gospel order" (i.e., a leadership system derived from the NT), a case of church discipline," and a first connection of ecclesiological thought with visionary experiences, indicated an unavoidable.

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...that sabbatarian Adventism was forming itself into a recognizable body with procedures, boundaries, and an increasingly unambiguous self-understanding.

It is interesting that James White, the main author and editor, continued to invoke the remnant motif in such a context, but used it in a more inclusive way than Bates had done. White addressed the first issue of The Present Truth to the "scattered remnant" and expressed his desire that "God help them to recover the truth, and be established in it." Here and in a few other sections, the "remnant" was still thought of as comprising both the group of sabbatarian believers and those potentially joining the Sabbath keepers from among the former Millerites. A similar use of the motif is found in Ellen White's writings during that time. She described the remnant as a group in full, growing through "efforts to spread the truth." Her explanation of Isa 11:11a—"the Lord showed me that he had stretched out his hand the second time to recover the remnant of his people"—implied a decidedly missionary dimension of what could be called the "emerging remnant."84

80James White, [editorial,] Present Truth, July 1849, 1.

81George W. Holt wrote, "The Lord has set his hand to gather the remnant of his people. . . . Precious jewels that were covered up a few weeks since, now begin to shine. God is doing his last work for the 'remnant'” ("Dear Brethren," Present Truth, March 1850, 64). J. G. Bowles formulated, “O, sound the alarm, and let the message fly! I think it is the last one to the remnant” ("Dear Brother White," Present Truth, September 1849, 32). James White praised those "who have valued the salvation of the remnant much more than their time, strength and property" in Vermont, indicating also that his use of the term was not static and did not imply a clear boundary yet ("Our Tour East," 15).

82In another instance, James White used the term to indicate the small quantity of those to be sealed ("The Third Angel's Message," Present Truth, April 1850, 66): "They, though but a small remnant, finally triumph."

83"Dear Brethren and Sisters," Present Truth, November 1850, 86-87. Even though the date differs (September 23/October 23, 1850) and the wording is not exactly identical, the same vision is referred to in Spalding and Magan's Unpublished Manuscript Testimonies of Ellen G. White, 1915-1916 (Payson, AZ: Leaves-of-Autumn Books, 1985), 1. Similar formulations occur in two earlier visions. One is from 7 September 1850: "Every jewel will be brought out and gathered, for the hand of the Lord is set to recover the remnant of his people" (Ellen G. White, A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White [Saratoga Springs, NY: James White, 1851], 57). The other vision, which also quotes Isa 11:11a, is dated 29 July 1850 (idem, Manuscript Reprints [Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990], 18:10 [No. 1302; MS 5, 1850]). The same phraseology is also used in the article "Conferences," Advent Review, November 1850, 72, presumably written by James White.

84This missionary dimension is also evident in the terms "scattering time" and "gathering time," which were used by the sabbatarian leaders from 1849 to distinguish between the period immediately following October 1844 and the present (cf. Knight, Millennial Eve, 319-325).
The connected double meaning of “remnant” in the Whites’ thought—meaning both the already existing and the future remnant—becomes clearer through an analysis of the “Mark of the Beast” vision of 1850. In it, the prophet joins a heavenly choir and an angel tells her: “The little remnant who love God and keep His commandments and are faithful to the end will enjoy this glory and ever be in the presence of Jesus and sing with the holy angels.” After that the vision continues: “Then my eyes were taken from the glory, and I was pointed to the remnant on the earth. The angel said to them, ‘Will ye shun the seven last plagues? . . . Ye must have a greater preparation than ye now have. . . . Sacrifice all to God. Lay all upon His altar—self, property, and all, a living sacrifice.’”

In this vision, Ellen White contrasts two aspects or phases of the eschatological remnant: the future remnant of overcomers, of those who have been “faithful to the end,” and the present “remnant on the earth.” Interestingly, both are connected with an imperative—faithfulness and sacrificial living. Therefore, while Ellen White constructed a clear link between these two phases, her main emphasis was not what we could call the ontological notion of being “the last end of the church” (a common Adventist phrase she never used), but a critical view of remnant believers in danger of not corresponding to their call.

In fact, this self-critical remnant concept appears to have been a major burden of Ellen White in 1849-1850. She constantly called for a more sacrificial spirit. Already in 1849, she noted that the lives of “some who profess the present truth . . . do not correspond with their profession. They have got the standard of piety altogether too low, and come far short of Bible holiness.” In 1850, she warned that some among the “people of God” were “stupid and dormant . . . and were attached to their possessions.” She deplored that “there was too little glorifying God, too little childlike simplicity among the remnant.” Evidently, the prophet felt that a remnant self-understanding did not preclude undue self-assuredness to be rebuked.

During the following years, the magazine of the future Seventh-day Adventists, the Second Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, contained frequent references to the remnant motif. The term became such a regular and prominent self-description of Adventist Sabbath keepers that one can consider the concept behind it to be the driving force of this group’s ecclesiological thinking already in the early 1850s. Very few of these instances still pointed beyond Sabbatarian Adventists and had other Millerites in view as well. The general meaning attributed to the term was those who were kept together by the bond of Sabbath practice. As time passed, a systematic outline of interpretation also appeared and reappeared in the paper, indicating that the explanatory attempts connected with the motif had solidified. The common reasoning was that Rev 12:17 referred to a (1) small (2) last generation (3) Sabbatarian group that (4) experienced persecution because of commandment keeping.

This crystallizing self-designation as “remnant” went hand in hand with two trends. One was to attach further ideas to the remnant concept. Bates, for instance, argued the “remnant” should pray with outstretched arms; this view does not appear to have made much impact, however. Sabbatarian Adventists also generally equated the “remnant” to the 144,000 of Revelation 7 and 14. The most important innovative interpretation was connecting visionary experiences to the remnant concept via Joel’s prophecies. Although Ellen White was not mentioned in these reflections, the reasoning clearly centered upon her prophetic ministry, which was interpreted as fulfilling a biblically predicted dimension of the remnant.

The other trend was the increasing stabilization of the formerly loose-knit “remnant” into a church. Spurred by growth from a few dozen believers...

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86Ellen White, A Sketch of the Christian Experience, 54. The title of this vision, dated 27 June 1850, is added in White, Early Writings, 66.
88Ellen White, “To the ‘Little Flock,’” Present Truth, April 1850, 71 (reporting a vision of 26 January 1850).
89Manuscript Releases, 18/10 (No. 1302, MS 5, 1850; vision of July 29, 1850).
90An automated search in the Review and Herald yields more than 900 hits for “remnant” in the 1850s. By contrast, there are only about 150 hits for the expression “little flock” in the same period.
91See, e.g., H. S. Case, who speaks about the tasks to do “until the scattered remnant are established on the commandments of God” (“From Bro. Case,” Review and Herald, 22 July 1852, 46).
94Cf., e.g., S. T. Crans on, “The Remnant, or 144,000,” Review and Herald, 8 September 1853, 68-69. Only when Seventh-day Adventists had increased to proportions beyond that number in the twentieth century did this view ebb away; cf. a 1901 statement of Ellen White in which she assigned discussions about “Who is to compose the hundred and forty-four thousand?” to the realm of “questions which will not help . . . spiritually” (MS 26, 1901, published in Ellen G. White, Selected Messages [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958], 1:174).
in 1846-1847 and perhaps around 200 in 1850 to probably more than 2,000 in 1852, the early 1850s saw an increasing use of the self-designation "church of God" in Sabbatarian Adventist publications. A growing concern for the "children of the remnant," leading to a second periodical in 1852 and revealing the need for some degree of continuity, also indicated a consolidation of the future Seventh-day Adventists as a body.

By the middle of the 1850s, the use of the remnant motif started to show a corresponding tendency. In the 1840s, Adventists had referred to "the remnant" in a manner that made the motif appear to be in sharp contrast to "the churches," i.e., any organized denomination. In 1854, the language began to change. In addition to the phrase "the remnant of the church," which was more common in this earlier period, James White began to speak about "the churches of God's remnant people." In the same year, he used the expression "remnant church" for the first time. This somewhat tentative manner of designating the sabbatarian movement did not persist, for in the very next Review and Herald issue, White spoke of "remnant church" without quotation marks applied to "remnant." In the following years, others began to use the same expression, and although the simple "remnant" remained the dominating term by far, "remnant church" continued to be used alongside and expressing the growing ecclesial self-understanding of Adventist Sabbath keepers. The antisectarian remnant had transformed into a new church.

Remnant Ecclesiology and the Formation of a New Denomination, 1854-1860

The reality that Sabbatarian Adventists were becoming a church was a surprise to many, for earlier Adventists had not aimed at establishing an ecclesiastical entity of any kind, of creating a denomination resembling the "sects," which they had decried as "Babylon." They only wanted to prepare people for Jesus' soon return and had been convinced that no new organization was necessary for this purpose. But the tremendous numerical growth of Sabbath keepers had produced a situation that could no longer be ignored. Thus, James White began to work for "church order," i.e., the establishment of a leadership system and organizational patterns, from the early 1850s. As time went by, the Sabbath-keeping Adventists clearly became a quasi-denominational body. Only two elements were missing: an official act of organizing the body into a church entity, and a more well-defined ecclesiology that would provide the rationale for such a move.

The gradual change in terminology in the mid-1850s reveals the development of ecclesiological thinking during the period. Whereas Sabbatarian publications during the 1840s and early 1850s had frequent references to the "scattered believers" and the "little flock," the mid-1850s saw a significant increase in the positive use of the term "church" in the Review and Herald. Merritt E. Cornell published his booklet, The Last Work of the True Church, in 1855, and it is not merely coincidental that Ellen White's well-known Testimonies to the Church began to appear in the same year.


[James White], "The Cause," Review and Herald, 24 October 1854, 84.


Merritt E. Cornell, The Last Work of the True Church (Rochester, NY: Advent Review Office, 1855). The Testimonies booklets from the 1850s and part of the 1860s were later republished as the first part of a nine-volume series (Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 1 [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948]). These were the first Sabbatarian Adventist books and the first Ellen White publications using...
considerably enlarged hymnal was also put into the hands of Sabbath keepers in 1855. Its preface read “for the use of the Church of God scattered abroad. . . . To the Church of God, waiting for the coming and kingdom of Christ.”107 The waiting remnant had begun to develop a distinctly eschatological ecclesiology.

This development was further enhanced by a more definite interpretation of the remnant in Rev 12:17 (“the remnant . . . which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ”). Earlier Sabbatarian Adventist reflections had emphasized the general continuity of spiritual gifts and the legitimacy and significance of prophetic ministry,108 but, in 1855, James White elaborated a close connection between the gift of prophecy and the “remnant” by referring to Rev 19:10 (“the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy”).109 This would soon become a standard explanation among Sabbath-keeping Adventists.110 It added a powerful dimension to their remnant ecclesiology: they could now claim that both sabbatarianism and the prophetic gift of Ellen White were fulfillments of prophecy and marks of the true end-time church. The mid-1850s were, therefore, the period in which Seventh-day Adventist ecclesiology developed through a growing “church” self-understanding, a more systematic explanation of the eschatological remnant, and an incipient use of the term “remnant church,” which combined these two developments into an ecclesiologically viable concept.


interpreted by Millerites as referring to Christianity in general.110 In the second half of the 1840s and early 1850s, Sabbath keepers applied the motif to the nonsabbatarian Millerites,111 while the exemplary “Philadelphia” church was thought of as being identical to the sabbatarian “remnant.”112 Yet, James White changed his position in 1856 by interpreting “Laodicea” as applying to Sabbath-keeping Adventists.113 His view was soon adopted by others,114 and since has served Seventh-day Adventism as an instrument of self-criticism.115

As surprising as this new and antitriumphalist notion may seem, its ecclesiological relevance should not be underestimated. Just when remnant reasoning, with its central importance for Sabbatarian Adventist ecclesiology, had reached a stage of maturation, the triumphalist potential inherent in the view of the remnant as “the last true church” was curbed by a dissimilar eschatological motif. The very success associated with the remnant theology of the previous years, a wholly unexpected numerical explosion of sabbatarians,

108See Miller, Evidences, 2d ed., 155–156. A letter attributed by the Adventist Pioneer Library collection to James White revealed the same view; see J. S. W., A Letter to Rev. L. F. Downie: A Brief Review of His Doctrines, “The End of The World Nat Yet” (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), 10; however, the letter cannot have originated from White, who had not been a full-fledged Millerite when it was originally written, i.e., in July 1842. The writer is most probably John S. White, who contributed to Millerite papers on various occasions. The Adventist Pioneer Library is part of the CD-ROM Ellen White Writings: Comprehensive Research Edition (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 2008).

109See Joseph Bates’s references in The Opening Heavens [1846], 36–37, Second Advent Way Marks [1847], 77; in his book An Explanation of the Typical and Antitypical Sanctuary by the Scriptures with a Chart (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1850), 13–14; and his articles “The Laodiean Church,” Review and Herald, November 1850, 7–8; and “Our Labor in the Philadelphia and Laodiean Churches,” Review and Herald, 19 August 1851, 13–14. Further see [James White], “The Design of the Chart,” Review and Herald, February 1851, 47; and [James White], “The Immediate Coming of Christ,” Review and Herald, 17 February 1853, 156. Other radical post-disappointment Adventists held similar views about the mainstream Millerites; see nn. 39 and 41.


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117Ellen White had already applied in 1852 the words to Laodiea in Rev 3:14–20 to “many who profess to be looking for the speedy coming of Christ,” implying that some Sabbatarian Adventists were also among those whom she considered to be “like the nominal church” (“To the Brethren and Sisters,” Review and Herald, 10 June 1852, 21. Even James White saw the Laodiean condition in some Sabbath keepers during the same year (“Eastern Tour,” Review and Herald, 14 October 1852, 96).
had created not only a church, but also the need for an ecclesiology that kept the balance originally inherent in the view of a small, nonecclesiastical, and antiorganizational remnant. When the remnant had developed into the “remnant church,” the emerging ecclesiology implied in this term needed a critical corrective, which was readily provided by the world of ideas in which Adventists breathed—the inventory of biblical apocalyptic.

The numerical growth of Adventist Sabbath keepers in the early 1850s had spurred not only a change of attitudes toward “church order,” it also led to a situation in which a considerable number of individuals no longer displayed the original Millerite fervor. Apparently the “waiting remnant” could not remain in a position of high-tension waiting for more than a decade, and while a church became reality, the movement’s leaders observed what they interpreted as a slackening of commitment, a “ lukewarmness” of spirituality. This trend led to a picture in which “remnant church” ecclesiology and frequent severe criticism by the Adventist prophet went hand in hand. Already in the early 1850s, Ellen White had pointed to the need of more dedication among Sabbatarian Adventists. In 1854, she wrote: “I saw that the remnant were not prepared for what is coming upon the earth. Stupidity, like the lethargy, seemed to hang upon the minds of most of those who profess to believe that we are having the last message. . . . A great work must be done for the remnant. They are, many of them, dwelling upon little trials.”

Similar statements frequently appear in her Testimonies from 1855 onward. In the first of these, titled “Thy Brother’s Keeper,” the prophet reports a vision in which “remnant” and “church” are used as synonyms:

I saw that the Spirit of the Lord has been dying away from the church. . . . I saw that the mere argument of the truth will not move souls to take a stand with the remnant; for the truth is unpopular. . . . I saw that the church has nearly lost the spirit of self-denial and sacrifice; they make self and self-interest first, and then they do for the cause what they think they can as well as not. 117

The many other texts and visions of Ellen White containing statements of this kind 118 raise the question as to what ecclesiological consequence


117This 1855 text is republished in Testimonies, 1:113-114.

118For 1855, see “Parental Responsibility” (chap. 18) and “Faith in God” (chap. 19); for 1856, “Conformity to the World” (chap. 23); and for 1856, “Be Zealous and Repent” (chap. 25). The latter text contains a reference to the “message to the Laodicean church” (Testimonies, vol. 1). Numerous other texts from later years could also be cited.

such recurrent reproofs had. When comparing her portrayal of Sabbatarian Adventists’ lives with that of other Christians, one finds parallels in many cases, even if the assessment of “the churches” is still darker. Yet, the generally skeptical attitude regarding the Christian character of all “professed” or “nominal” believers’ discipleship, whether Sabbath keepers or nonsabbatarians, indicates that the principle behind these assertions is what may be called a “critical ecclesiology,” derived from an eschatologically loaded theology combined with a pessimistic anthropology on one side and a strongly Arminian soteriology on the other. At any rate, the prophet’s ministry focused on pastoral concerns and on what had to be changed in the life of the church and of believers, rather than on developing new theological or ecclesiological thought. She adopted her husband’s view of Laodicea and integrated it into her ministry of rebuking and warning the “remnant.”

With an ecclesiology containing the potential for balancing a distinct theological self-understanding and a realistic view of ethical challenges to its members, the young church was able to take more definite steps toward an organizational identity. The self-perception as a denomination first appeared in a guarded manner in the late 1850s.120 In 1860, Sabbatarian Adventists discussed an official name121 in the context of local church-building ownership and voted it to be “Seventh-day Adventist.” Now James White argued that “it is objected that we shall be classed among the denominations. We are classed with them already, and I do not know that we can prevent it, unless we disband and scatter.”125 It took only one more year for the first permanent state conference to be organized and less than two and a half until Seventh-day Adventists became a denomination by establishing its General Conference. The earlier rejection of “sectarian” organization126 had given way

116See the chapter “The Laodicean Church” (1859) in Testimonies, 1:185-195.

117Alvarez Pierce, “From Bro. Pierce,” Review and Herald, 7 May 1857, 6, spoke about “the other denominations.”


121Even in 1853, an article on “Church Organization,” copied from an 1844 issue of the (nonsabbatarian) Voice of Truth, argued against “sectarian” organizations (Review and Herald, 6 January 1853, 135).
to a more pragmatic view of being a church on the basis of the ecclesiological advances of almost two decades.

It is interesting that the remnant motif did not find its way into the name of Seventh-day Adventists. While it had been among the phraseology commonly used as a self-designation, the name “Church of God” had been favored by many as an official name, including James White. By way of contrast, “remnant” and “remnant church” had developed a theological significance that was not deemed as significant for a self-designation meant for outsiders. The name “Seventh-day Adventist,” however, was explained as being precisely such a way of communicating to the world the main tenets of faith held by the young denomination. At a deeper level, one can also argue that the reservation of the remnant motif for theological reasoning expressed the tension caused by the fact that the “little flock,” the “waiting remnant,” had become a sizeable church rather than having met the awaited Savior. When the “last end of the church” had turned into another denomination, Adventist ecclesiology had to fit into this new dispensation. While remnant thinking did not remain fully independent of the new organization, it had the potential to serve as a critical corrective vis-à-vis denominational realities. Thus, “remnant church” would remain the term for a provisional body and a description for an interim organization intended to prepare believers for the final events of history.

As late as 1858, Ellen White spoke of the Millerites of the early 1840s as “remnant.” With this perspective of remnants of specific periods, early Seventh-day Adventists believed to have the task of preparing people to be part of the “final remnant” while not being identical to it. Moreover, the “remnant” of contrast, “remnant” and “remnant church” had developed a theological significance that was not deemed as significant for a self-designation meant for outsiders. The name “Seventh-day Adventist,” however, was explained as being precisely such a way of communicating to the world the main tenets of faith held by the young denomination. At a deeper level, one can also argue that the reservation of the remnant motif for theological reasoning expressed the tension caused by the fact that the “little flock,” the “waiting remnant,” had become a sizeable church rather than having met the awaited Savior. When the “last end of the church” had turned into another denomination, Adventist ecclesiology had to fit into this new dispensation. While remnant thinking did not remain fully independent of the new organization, it had the potential to serve as a critical corrective vis-à-vis denominational realities. Thus, “remnant church” would remain the term for a provisional body and a description for an interim organization intended to prepare believers for the final events of history.

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As theology in general, Adventist remnant thinking did not develop in a vacuum. The apocalyptic mood of the epoch and the use of the remnant motif by movements in the environment of Adventism indicate that Sabbatarian Adventists reconfigured a kind of thinking that was widespread around them. Unsurprisingly, Millerite ecclesiological terminology and thought was most important for Sabbatarian Adventists because the latter inherited much of their interpretations and perspectives. The basic structure of their later remnant thinking was, therefore, obtained from the Millenarians.

As much as a historicist reading of Scripture prompted Advent believers to think of themselves as the “remnant,” the identification with this term also contained an empirical dimension. Millenarians had applied many biblical and particularly apocalyptic terms and imagery to their present situation because they assumed that they were the last generation on earth and, therefore, experienced a revival in which the few remaining prophecies were to be fulfilled. If most other Christian interpreters viewed Rev 12:17 as describing the church in general, this experientialist approach to the apocalyptic writings of the Bible added substantial impetus to the Adventist self-understanding.

While the term “remnant” was only one among several descriptions used by the Millenarians to explain their experience and self-understanding, it proved to be the most resilient term after 1844. Evidently, the motif was rich in terms
of eschatologically relevant content and concepts that could be connected. Yet, when comparing Miller's multiple applications of the term with the later sabbatarian's interpretation, it becomes clear that it was the experiences of disappointment, of discovering the Sabbath, and of possessing a prophetic voice in their midst that made it plausible for the future Seventh-day Adventists to narrow down the designation of “remnant” to seventh-day Sabbath keepers.

Although in all likelihood earlier Sabbath advocates—the Seventh Day Baptists—and their remnant ecclesiology of past epochs did not directly influence Adventist thinking, this seventeenth-century parallel is remarkable in that it shows how the combination of sabbatarian and eschatological convictions led to a result that resembled Seventh-day Adventist theology. This means that, on one hand, Adventists did not invent their ecclesiology in a purely idiosyncratic manner. On the other hand, the Seventh Day Baptist analogy also indicates that the rise of the Millerite movement and its aftermath were not a necessary ingredient for an ecclesiology constructed around the remnant motif.

At the same time, it is significant that remnant ecclesiology has not been developed anywhere else as distinctly as it has been among Seventh-day Adventists. Several conditions were necessary for this development of the remnant motif: (1) its application to the experience of those participating in the Advent revival; (2) historical, theological, and terminological continuity with the Millerite movement; (3) a sufficiently open (i.e., vaguely defined) interpretation of the term in the initial period; (4) an early sabbatarianization, which considerably boosted the motif’s importance; (5) further development of the term into a distinct concept through exegetical and theological reflection; (6) the intertwining of remnant thinking with a doctrine of spiritual gifts, which enhanced both the ecclesiological role of Sabbatarian Adventists and the status of Ellen White as a prophet; and (7) a transition from an antisectarian view of the remnant to connecting the motif with a denominational ecclesiology. Only because each of these conditions were met in the phases investigated above could remnant ecclesiology unfold the way it did. The more or less explicit support of this emerging ecclesiology, this seventeenth-century parallel is remarkable because they took central aspects of Millerite thinking to their logical conclusions and were thus able to present a coherent package of ideas to potential adherents. Many aspects of Millerite eschatology could only survive after being fertilized by a strong emphasis on Sabbath keeping. It was the sabbatarianized eschatology zygote that was able to mature into a church, first in the test tube of Millerism and soon in the world around. The ecclesiological justification of existence for this developing organism increasingly centered on the remnant motif.

The term “remnant church” was used only from 1854. However, “remnant” (without the addition of “church”), being the biblical term, clearly remained the dominant expression. When “remnant church” was applied to the emerging denomination later called Seventh-day Adventists, this application was done with the conviction that a church body was needed until the Second Coming for the sake of smoother missionary operations. Since the parousia was believed to be at hand, little need was seen to differentiate between “remnant church” and what was to be called the “final remnant” in the twentieth century. Such a differentiation made sense only much later, when the seeming delay of the parousia led to further discussions on remnant ecclesiology. Thus, one can infer that the “remnant church” was seen as the “final remnant” in statu nascendi; the Adventist denomination was, therefore, conceptualized by its founders as a temporary entity preparing people to be among God's faithful at the time of the imminent Second Coming. In a way, Adventists thus repeated the experiences of first-century Christianity, which Alfred Loisy summarized with his famous comment: “Jesus foretold the kingdom, and it was the Church that came.”

The fact that the denomination was not officially called “remnant church” further indicates that the ecclesiology expressed in this term was built with a considerable potential for friction. Its architects constructed it around an organization thought of as possessing a unique function—preparing persons for a time of widespread apocalyptic turmoil and persecution when believers will have to live their faith in a particularly individual manner—thus substantially reducing the ontological importance of the actual organization

they founded. Yet ultimately, a similar friction is part of the very nature of religion as an individual commitment experienced in a community context, and which, therefore, remains a paradox inherent in all ecclesiological considerations that the history of Christian thought has brought forth. The peculiarity of the Adventist version is that its apocalyptical orientation further intensifies this paradox. At the same time, the Advent believers’ development of a thoroughly eschatological ecclesiology continues serving as a reminder to all Christians that the church and its history are indeed interim realities which express our concepts of God’s kingdom, but which come to an end when it is established in its fullness.