

AASS 4 (2001):69-75

Devotional presented during the

AIIAS Theological Forum 2001: The Church: Unity Amidst Change

August 8-11, 2001

REFLECTIONS ON THE SDA CHURCH AS THE ESCHATOLOGICAL REMNANT CHURCH

RONALD D. BISSELL, Ph.D.

Acting Dean & Professor of Systematic Theology

AIIAS Theological Seminary

Introduction

During recent years there has been a tendency among some Seventh-day Adventists, including some leaders and scholars, to question the traditional claim that, in a special sense, the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church constitutes the eschatological Remnant Church depicted in the book of Revelation. On the one hand, some feel that such a claim is arrogant, that there are dedicated Christians in other churches, and that other churches beside ours are preaching the gospel of Christ and have much truth. On the other hand are those who are involved in independent ministries and who believe and teach that the SDA Church is in deep apostasy, and though it once was the Remnant Church, it is no longer so.

One factor that may help individuals who are troubled about this issue to feel more comfortable with the traditional claim, is a clear understanding of how early believers during the formative years of the SDA Church came to understand themselves as the "Remnant Church." A second factor is a clear understanding of the distinction between the "visible" church and the "invisible" church. A third factor is reflection upon how and why a visible church may lose its standing as the visible church of God.

The Idea of a Separateness before the "Great Disappointment"

During the Millerite years, before the "Great Disappointment" of 22 October 1844, William Miller had not wanted to create a new church, and had expressed

concern when those who accepted his teachings began to refer to themselves as "Adventists." Although Miller was very hesitant to agree, when other churches began threatening and disfellowshipping pastors and laypersons for advocating Millerite beliefs, some Millerite leaders reacted by declaring that these churches had fallen and were part of "Babylon." They believed that Miller's message constituted the message of the first angel of Rev 14, and that they should proclaim the second angel's message when these churches rejected the first message.

The Idea of a Separateness after the "Great Disappointment"

The Shut Door

The first weeks and months after the "Great Disappointment" of 22 October 1844 were a time of uncertainty and confusion for Millerites. Many came to believe that the whole movement had been a mistake, and either returned shamefacedly to their former churches, or, disillusioned, abandoned religion altogether. Others believed that the date had been mistaken, but that the coming of Christ was still very near. A third group concluded that the date had been correct but that there had been a misunderstanding concerning the event that was to take place on that day.

For several months, William Miller was among those who believed that the date had been correct. Though Christ had not come then, the parable of the Ten Virgins had been fulfilled. Christ had gone into the "wedding," and the door of salvation was closed to the "foolish virgins," namely, "sinners" and those who had rejected and scoffed at the belief that Jesus would come. The wicked had been warned, their probation had passed, and the work of judgment had begun. He who was holy would remain holy, and he who was filthy would remain filthy. Believers should now focus only on encouraging one another to remain faithful until Christ would come. Miller firmly believed this would occur before the close of the Jewish year that ended in March or April 1845. However, by late March, Miller had changed his views, largely as a result of the influence of the reports from Millerite preachers who were apparently reporting conversions of sinners through their ministry. Of course, such conversions would not have been possible if the "door" of the parable was truly "shut."

The Albany Conference

On 29 April 1845 a conference of Millerite leaders and believers was convened at Albany, New York. One reason was to lay plans and coordinate efforts for future work. A second was to bring order out of confusion that had come in part as a result of practices which had arisen and/or "new tests" of believers that were being promoted by some Millerites which mainstream leaders considered to be fanatical. Among practices that had arisen were footwashing, the

holy kiss, multiple-repeated rebaptisms, the idea that the Jubilee had begun and no secular work should be done, and belief that believers must fulfill the words of Christ and become as little children by creeping and crawling on the floor like babies who could not yet walk. Some Millerites believed that the number of Millerites before the “Disappointment” had been too large, swelled by many who joined the movement through fear of the coming of Christ but had not been sincere. Some new “test” or “tests” were needed to weed out the false believers and identify the true.

At the Albany Conference, a strong stand was taken against the so-called “new tests,” and the rejection of the “shut door” idea was clear. Millerite preachers were to preach the gospel of salvation to anyone and everyone who would hear. Miller, who was present, agreed with these views. A few months later, in August 1845, he wrote that he no longer had any confidence in any of the new theories that had arisen in connection with what had happened on 22 October 1844, and implied that he no longer believed that date had been correct.

The Remnant in Ellen White’s Early Visions

During the first few weeks after the “Great Disappointment,” Ellen White and her family appear to have at first concluded that the date had been wrong. This conclusion was changed, however, by two of Ellen White’s earliest visions. The first vision came in December 1844, the second in February 1845. These two visions, plus another that she received in March 1847, provided much of the basis for the belief of the group (which later developed into the SDA Church) that they clearly constituted the eschatological “remnant” of Rev 14.

The “Midnight Cry” Vision of December 1844

Ellen White’s first vision is sometimes referred to as the “Midnight Cry” vision. In it she saw God’s people struggling toward the Holy City on a narrow path high above the rest of the world. Behind them was a bright light—the pre-disappointment “Midnight Cry” proclamation that Christ would come on 22 October 1844. This light shone all along the pathway to the Holy City. Those who rejected or abandoned and rashly denied belief in the light fell off the path and down into the wicked world below.¹ The meaning of the vision seems clear. Belief that the date was correct, and that something of great significance for the Plan of Salvation had taken place then, was of great importance.

¹Ellen G. White, *A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White* (Saratoga Springs, NY: James White, 1851), 10.

The "Bridegroom" Vision of February 1845

In the second or "Bridegroom" vision, Ellen White saw "the Advent people, the church, and the world." One group, evidently the "Advent people," was bowed before the throne of Jesus offering their prayers to Him while the rest stood by "disinterested and careless."² This disinterested group appears to be those who heard but did not accept Miller's message that Jesus would come soon, including those in churches which rejected it. Then an "exceeding bright light,"—an obvious reference to the "Midnight Cry" message—"came from the Father to the Son, and from the Son it waved over the praying company."³ Few received this light. Many came out from under it. Some received, but did not cherish it. But others welcomed it, and joined those who were bowed in prayer before the throne of Jesus. This group had received the "Midnight Cry" message, and rejoiced in it.

Ellen White next saw God the Father leave His throne in a flaming chariot and go to the Most Holy Place in heaven. Then Jesus arose from His throne, and those bowed before His throne arose with him. She did not see one single ray of light come to the careless, disinterested multitude after that, and they were left in complete darkness.⁴

Jesus told His followers that He was going to His Father to receive His kingdom, and would soon return from the "wedding," a clear reference to the bridegroom in the Parable of the Ten Virgins. He then was taken to the Most Holy Place in a cloudy chariot with wheels like flaming fire. There He ministered before His Father as a Great High Priest. When those who had risen up with Jesus would send their faith to Him there, and pray for His Holy Spirit, He would breathe upon them the Holy Ghost, filling them with light, power, love, joy, and peace.⁵

Those who had not risen up when Jesus left the throne, and did not know He had left it, would also pray to Jesus for the Holy Spirit. Satan, not Christ, would breathe upon them an unholy influence. In this, there was also much light and power, but there was no sweet love, joy, or peace.⁶

Ellen White's earliest visions were first written out in a letter to Enoch Jacobs in December 1845, and published by him in the *Day Star* in January 1846.⁷ About four months later, the "Midnight Cry" and "Bridegroom" visions, plus a third vision given about October 1845, were printed in a broadside under the name, Ellen

²Ibid., 43.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 43-44.

⁶Ibid., 44.

⁷"Letter from Sister Harmon, Portland, Me., Dec. 20, 1845," *Day-Star*, 24 January 1846.

G. Harmon (Ellen White's maiden name). The title of this broadside was, "To the Little Remnant Scattered Abroad."⁸

It is interesting and important to consider when these visions were first written out. It was after Miller had abandoned belief in the significance of 22 October 1844 because of the conversions of sinners reported by his colleagues in ministry.

It thus appears that the deceptive, unholy influence from Satan, about which Ellen White wrote, was connected with these and subsequent conversions which Ellen White regarded as false conversions. It also appears that in this may lie the roots of her belief that just before the last great "latter rain" outpouring of the Holy Spirit before the return of Christ, there would be a false revival among Christians.

The "Bridegroom" vision raises three interesting questions. First, when Ellen White was shown that no further ray of light came to those who rejected the "Midnight Cry" message, did this refer to any particular new message of truth, and if so, what? Second, why was it important to follow Christ by faith into the Most Holy Place? Third, why were apparent conversions by those who did not send their prayers to Christ *in the Most Holy Place* regarded as false conversions?

The "Halo of Light" Vision of March 1847

The third vision in our study provides an answer to these questions and to why early SDAs came to regard themselves as the eschatological Remnant. The vision came to Ellen White in March 1847, after she and her husband had accepted and had begun to observe the seventh-day Sabbath. In this "Halo of Light" vision, which was published in the booklet *A Word to the "Little Flock"* in 1847,⁹ Ellen White again saw Christ ministering in the Most Holy Place as she had seen Him in the "Bridegroom" vision of February 1845. But there was a very significant difference between these two visions. In the "Bridegroom" vision, no explanation of the meaning or significance of Christ's ministry in the Most Holy Place was given. In this vision the meaning and significance were made plain. Christ was ministering before the Ark of the Covenant. In the Ark were found the tables of stone containing the Ten Commandments. These tables were shining brightly, but around one commandment—the fourth or Sabbath commandment—was a special halo of light. Could the truth about the Sabbath have been the ray of light that those who had earlier believed that Christ had entered the Most Holy Place would receive? Does this answer the question concerning what ray or rays of light the rest would not receive? Does this also give one very important reason for the significance of Christ's entrance into the Most Holy Place? I believe the answer to these questions is Yes.

⁸Ellen G. Harmon, *To the Little Remnant Scattered Abroad* (broadside), 6 April 1846.

⁹Ellen G. White, *A Word to the "Little Flock"* (n.p., 1847; facsimile reproduction, Washington, DC: Review & Herald, n.d.), 18.

In recounting this vision, Ellen White declared that when Christ entered the Most Holy Place and began ministering before the Ark in the presence of God, the Sabbath had become a special, separating wall between the true Israel of God and unbelievers. At the beginning of the time of trouble before Christ's return, the Sabbath message would be proclaimed more fully. This would enrage other churches, but many would see the truth and come out from them to unite and endure persecution with those proclaiming the Sabbath.¹⁰ It is important to note that the acceptance and proclamation of truth—the truth of the Sabbath—is, in a special sense, the identifying mark of “True Israel”—the eschatological “Remnant” (Rev 12:17). Churches that do not accept that truth are not, and cannot be, a part of the visible eschatological “Remnant Church.”

The Visible and the Invisible Church

What, then, should be said of the many wonderful Christians found in other churches? Are these Christians not clear evidence that the churches to which they belong are at least a part of the eschatological “Remnant?” The answer to that question is No—if one recognizes the clear distinction between the visible church and the invisible church. A study of Rev 12 suggests that the Remnant Church of prophecy is the visible church—a church which had gone into hiding for a long period of time, but had come out of hiding with a message to proclaim to the world—the message encompassed within the Three Angels' Messages of Rev 14.

Then how are these sincere Christians in other churches to be explained? They must be a part of the eschatological remnant of believers in the invisible church, who are revealed and become a part of the visible church when the Second Angel's message—the call out of Babylon—is repeated in the loud cry of Rev 18:1-4.

Rejection of a Visible Church

In dealing with those in independent ministries who claim that the SDA Church is no longer the “Remnant Church,” it is of vital importance to ask when and why a visible church might be rejected. The answer to this question may be found by studying the history of Israel. Does God reject a church because widespread apostasy is found in it—because most of its people, including leaders and even prophets, are in apostasy? Why did God reject the nation of Israel as His visible church?

One does not need to read very much in the OT before it becomes clear that there was often widespread apostasy among the children of Israel. God repeatedly reprovved the people and urged them to repentance. He allowed the consequences of their actions to come upon them. He brought redemptive punishment upon them. But time and again they returned to disobedience and outright idolatry.

¹⁰Ibid., 18-19.

After returning from Babylonian captivity, however, there seems to have been little worship of heathen idols among the Jews. Under the leadership of scribes and Pharisees, the nation abandoned much of the open apostasy of the past. Yet they were eventually rejected as the visible church. Why?

According to the NT as well as the 70-week prophecy of Daniel 9, the Jewish nation was rejected when its leaders and the mob rejected and crucified the Messiah, and sealed that rejection by the persecution of Christians, epitomized in the stoning of Stephen. But something more was involved. The Jews had rejected the great truth of salvation by faith in Christ. Because they had rejected this truth, it was impossible for them to be used to proclaim it to the world. They were not rejected so much for apostasy as for no longer being a group in which truth could be preserved and by which it could be proclaimed.

On this basis, it seems clear that the special identifying mark of God's visible church has been and is its acceptance and proclamation of truth. Only that church which has been given, has accepted, and has been entrusted with proclaiming the fullest revelation of truth is the visible church of God, in spite of the possibility that apostasy may be widespread within its midst. The traditional SDA belief that it is in a special sense God's visible eschatological "Remnant Church" is based firmly upon this belief. And it is based upon the belief that the Three Angels' Messages of Rev 14, which the SDA Church accepts and has been entrusted with proclaiming, constitute the final great revelation of truth before the Second Coming of Christ.

Conclusion

While the SDA church's claim to be the eschatological "Remnant Church" may place a wall of separation between SDAs and other Christians, this is not its intent. On the basis of Christ's prayer in John 17 for unity among His followers, Christians can and must seek unity in every way possible. However, unity is only possible where there are a common source of authority, the Bible, and common principles of interpreting that source. Truth must not be sacrificed to obtain a false unity, but rather be the basis of unity. This belief should underlie our evangelism as we seek to bring people into unity in accepting the Bible as God's Word and guiding them in understanding it.

The fostering of this kind of unity holds the secret of unity within the SDA Church. Even though there are wide cultural, educational, social, and economic differences between members in different countries, and even in the same country; and even though there is constant growth, development, and change; unity is possible and can be achieved through unity in Christ, unity in His Word, and unity in believing, accepting, following, and proclaiming His teaching as found in His Word.