

**THE REMNANT CONCEPT IN EARLY ADVENTISM:
FROM APOCALYPTIC ANTISECTARIANISM
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 antisectarianism. 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 millenium [*sic*] may come in this country in three years”¹—but in the ensuing years, American millenarian optimism was slowly waning.

¹Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co.,

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 antisectarianism, 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 experientialist 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 ecclesiology² 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

1835), Lecture 15, "Hindrances to Revivals," 282.

²From 1842, the Millerite view of "the churches" grew decidedly more negative. Cf. Charles Fitch'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).

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 antisectionarian 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 antisectionarianism 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 biblicist hermeneutic has been labeled “historicist” because of its tendency to search for fulfilled prophecy throughout the history of Christianity.³ 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,”⁴ as an earlier analysis has done, this article suggests that it was a series of creative reapplications of the very Millerite interpretive paradigm, i.e., their strongly bounded historicist-experientialist thinking in a changed setting.⁵

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,

³The 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).

⁴Jonathan 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).

⁵For 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.⁶ Monographs and debates in the last decades⁷ have demonstrated that the issues connected with this biblical term⁸ 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 development⁹ of Seventh-day Adventist concepts regarding the “remnant.”¹⁰ This article seeks to fill this

⁶The denomination’s Fundamental Belief no. 13 is titled “The Remnant and Its Mission”; for an introductory exposition of the theme, see Hans K. LaRondelle, “The Remnant and the Three Angels’ Messages,” in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 857-892.

⁷See, e.g., Ángel M. Rodríguez, ed., *Toward a Theology of the Remnant* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2009); and a dissertation that discusses recent voices (Carmelo L. Martines, “El concepto de remanente in la Iglesia Adventista del Séptimo Día: Razones subyacentes en el debate contemporáneo [The Remnant Concept in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church: Reasons in the Background of the Contemporary Debate]” [Ph.D. dissertation, River Plate Adventist University, 2002]).

⁸For an OT study by a prominent Adventist theologian, see Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1972).

⁹The following three Master’s theses discuss remnant concepts in Adventist history; however, they do not analyze the earliest stages with a focus on the development of the Adventist remnant understanding: Stephan Paul Mitchell, “We Are the Remnant: A Historical, Biblical, and Theological Analysis of Seventh-Day Adventist Ecclesiological Self-Understanding” (M.A. thesis, Loma Linda University, 1988); Passmore Hachalinga, “Seventh-Day Adventism and the Remnant Idea: A Critical and Analytical Study of the Seventh-Day Adventist Ecclesiological Self-Understanding” (M.Th. thesis, University of South Africa, 1998); and Gideon Duran Ondap, “Diversity in the Remnant Concept in the History of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (1841-1931)” (M.A. thesis, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, 2003). Ondap’s study has a systematic-theological perspective and essentially begins with the 1850s, referring to sources from the 1840s only in few instances.

¹⁰Martines, 65-91, discusses some aspects of Adventist remnant theology as understood by “the pioneers” of Seventh-day Adventism, but does not analyze the origin of the motif, its content in the Millerite movement, or the *development* of

research gap with the hope that it also sheds light on other aspects of early Adventism¹¹ and similar movements that have not yet been investigated in detail, notably the denomination's ecclesiology in general¹² and mechanisms in the emergence of ecclesial identities in revival movements.¹³

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

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.

¹¹The best historical study of the earliest Sabbatarian Adventists is Merlin D. Burt, "The Historical Background, Interconnected Development, and Integration of the Doctrines of the Sanctuary, the Sabbath, and Ellen G. White's Role in Sabbatarian Adventism from 1844 to 1849" (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 2002). It focuses on dimensions other than ecclesiology, as does the systematic-theological dissertation by Alberto Timm, *The Sanctuary and the Three Angels' Messages, 1844-1863: Integrating Factors in the Development of Seventh-Day Adventist Doctrines*, Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series 5 (Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society, 1995).

¹²A comprehensive historical analysis of early Adventist ecclesiology does not yet exist. The extant studies focus on organizational issues and church leadership; see Andrew G. Mustard, *James White and SDA Organization: Historical Development, 1844-1881*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 12 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1988); Barry D. Oliver, *SDA Organizational Structure: Past, Present, and Future*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 15 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1989); and Ricardo A. González, "The Making of a Church: Ellen G. White's Views on Church Government, 1844-1888" (Ph.D. dissertation, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, 2008).

¹³For an overview of the dynamics leading to a denominationalization of the Pentecostal movement, see Wolfgang Vondey, "The Denomination in Classical and Global Pentecostal Ecclesiology: A Historical and Theological Contribution," in *Denomination: Assessing an Ecclesiological Category*, ed. Paul M. Collins and Barry Ensign-George (London: T. & T. Clark, 2011), 100-116.

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*,¹⁴ which 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 controversie [*sic*] between the Saints and the Man of sin.”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶

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 sabbatarians in Rhode Island as “that little remnant of the woman’s seed that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.”¹⁷ He explained, “It greatly concerns us to show ourselves the remnant of the woman’s seed.”¹⁸ 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.

¹⁴Bryan W. Ball, *The Seventh-Day Men: Sabbatarians and Sabbatarianism in England and Wales, 1600-1800*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Clarke, 2009).

¹⁵Thomas Tillam, *The Seventh-Day Sabbath Sought Out and Celebrated* (London: printed for the author, 1657), 2. Tillam, a prominent preacher, adopted a sabbatarian position in the 1650s and wrote this book after being imprisoned for his views.

¹⁶Ball, 272–273, quoting Thomas Tillam, *The Temple of Lively Stones* (London: printed for the author), 1660, 2-5.

¹⁷Ibid., 170, quoting a letter of Edward Stennett to Newport [congregation], 6 April 1670, Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society, Janesville, MS 194x.6, 56.

¹⁸Ibid., 15, quoting Edward Stennett, *The Insnares Taken in the Work of His Hands* (London: printed for the author, 1677), 159.

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 apostasy [*sic*], 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.”¹⁹

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*.²⁰ 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 [*sic*].”²¹ Christians, “Church,” 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.²² Although here the

¹⁹Alexander Campbell, *The Millennial Harbinger*, September 1835, 418-420. The year 1809 probably refers to the *Declaration and Address* mentioned in the following footnote. The Richmond Letter rejected rebaptism of those who had already been baptized as adults.

²⁰Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (Washington, PA: Brown & Sample, 1809), 18.

²¹*Ibid.*, 19.

²²The term generally occurs in formulations such as “remnant of the house of Israel,” “remnant of Jacob,” or “remnant of the seed/house of Joseph/Jacob.” In two more cases, the plural “remnants” is used; cf. the respective entries in George Reynolds, *Complete Concordance to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: [by the author], 1900), 587.

term is naturally linked to Mormon theology, this Latter-Day usage shows that not only general apocalyptic thinking, but also this particular motif and eschatological notions connected with it were common in the environment that gave birth to Adventism shortly after, even if such notions did not grow into a more definite ecclesiological thinking.²³

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,²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ In later publications, he applied the term to believers surviving to see Jesus’ Second Coming,²⁷ to

²³Even today, remnant language is vibrant among some Mormon groups: one denomination renamed itself “Remnant Church” in 2000 (cf. William D. Russell, “The Remnant Church: An RLDS Schismatic Group Finds a Prophet of Joseph’s Seed,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38/3 (2005): 75-106.

²⁴In his dissertation, Arthur handles some relevant ecclesiological material, but with a focus on the relationship with the churches and on post-1844 developments among the nonsabbatarian groups.

²⁵W[illia]m Miller, *Evidences from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ about the Year A.D. 1843, and of His Personal Reign of 1000 Years* (Brandon, VT: Vermont Telegraph Office, 1833, 53).

²⁶Connecting events of the French revolution and Rev 11:13, Miller argued, “Well might the remnant, (or church of God) be affrighted, and give glory to the God of heaven” (*ibid.*, 49).

²⁷“The son of man is now discovered sitting on the throne of his glory, crowned with a pure crown of righteousness and truth; having all power to gather the remnant of his people, to reap the last harvest of the wheat, and tread the wine press of the wrath of God” (William Miller, “Miller’s Lectures. No. 1: The Harvest of the World,” *Signs of the Times*, 1 July 1840, 50). The *Signs of the Times* was the first and most important Millerite paper.

those brought to faith in the last years before that event,²⁸ to the persecuted early Christians,²⁹ and even to believers of all ages, including the OT epoch.³⁰

Miller's application of remnant terminology to various figures of thought—the *ecclesia invisibilis*,³¹ 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 exegete-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”³²—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 every where [*sic*] a minority, and we know that the truth on this subject will be despised by the multitude till Christ comes

²⁸Miller speaks about the 45 years between 1798 and 1843 and efforts of “bringing the last remnant into Christ's fold.” See a later version of his book, *Evidences from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ about the Year A.D. 1843: Exhibited in a Course Of Lectures* (Boston: Moses A. Dow, 1841), 111-112.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 136. Here Miller refers to Rev 12:17 and comments: “How exactly was this prophecy fulfilled in the days of Nero, Domitian, and other Roman emperors. . . !”

³⁰William Miller, “A New Year's Address to Second Advent Believers for 1843,” *Signs of the Times*, 25 January 1843, 150. He states: “This year, a glorious year!! The trump of Jubilee will be blown, the exiled children will return, the Pilgrims reach their home, from earth and heaven the scattered remnant come, and meet in middle air, the fathers before the flood, Noah and his sons, Abraham and his, the Jew and Gentile, all who have died in faith, of every nation, kindred tongue and people, will meet to part no more.”

³¹Miller explained: “God has a people, a remnant, in the world, children of the kingdom, invisible perhaps to us, but known unto God from the creation, as all his works were” (quoted in Joshua V. Himes, *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology, Selected from Manuscripts of William Miller with a Memoir of His Life* [Boston: Moses A. Dow, 1841], 64).

³²Joel Spaulding comments: “And there shall be a highway for the remnant of his people, (the true church,) which shall be left from Assyria. . . .” These two last verses very clearly teach us the experience of faithful Christians, even from the time they . . . commence seeking salvation, deliverance from their spiritual Egyptian bondage” (“Exposition of Isaiah xi,” *Signs of the Times*, 1 June 1842, 66).

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.”³³

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.”³⁴

Miller did not accept the reasoning of the Seventh Month movement until October 1844, but his remnant concept resembled the lines of the more radical preachers. Lamenting 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.”³⁵

Miller’s distaste of the “sect” spirit was typical of the Millerites.³⁶ 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

³³Quoted in “History and State of the Cause,” *Signs of the Times*, 24 January 1844, 187.

³⁴E[mily] C. C[lemons], “Who Is on the Lord’s Side?” *Advent Herald*, 11 September 1844, 44.

³⁵“Letter from Wm. Miller,” *Advent Herald*, 25 September 1844, 58.

³⁶Cf. Stefan Hörschle, “On the Ecumenical and Separating Potential of Revivals: A Case Study of the Millerite Movement,” in *Mission und Einheit: Gemeinsames Zeugnis getrennter Kirchen? (Mission and Unity: Common Witness of Separated Churches?)*, ed. Peter de Mey, Andrew Pierce, and Oliver Schuegraf (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), 337-355.

continue the tower building, and each is sanguine that his will be the only one that will reach to heaven.³⁷

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 nonchurch ecclesiology, in which existing Christianities 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.³⁸

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 1845.³⁹ At the same time, references

³⁷E[mily] C. C[lemons], "The Lord, He is God," *Advent Herald*, 25 September 1844, 63.

³⁸William Miller, "Elijah the Prophet," *Advent Herald*, 5 February 1845, 203.

³⁹Samuel S. Snow asserted: "The question has arisen among the waiting remnant of God's Israel as to what constitutes the Church of Laodicea. . . . We are fully aware that there are many of the sect of 'Adventists' who have drawn back to the 'original faith,' (i.e. the faith of mystic Babylon). . . . They are those who clamour for an open door after the Bridegroom has shut it. . . . They are fallen, apostate 'Adventists'" ("The Laodicean Church," *Jubilee Standard*, 12 June 1845, 108). This group, initially the largest among the former Millerites, developed into the Evangelical Adventist Church, which

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 [*sic*]. Nearly all Adventists professed to keep all the law at the 10th,⁴⁰ but a mass have since cast away the faith they then had, and God calls them Laodiceans.⁴¹

Its frequent occurrence in some post-1844 Millerite journals, often in combination with expressions such as “little flock” or “the little remnant,”⁴² 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.⁴³

declined until it became defunct in the twentieth century.

⁴⁰H. 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 Millerites considered to be the last year of world history.

⁴¹*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 Millerites’ 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.

⁴²The *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).

⁴³See 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;⁴⁴ however, the text itself does not elaborate it in any way. What is ecclesologically significant in it, though, is the tripartite scheme—“the Advent people, the church, and the world,” indicating the view 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

⁴⁴Ellen 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.

sabbatarian period. Interestingly, they did not mention the “remnant” motif, but they did develop the ecclesiological thinking of the sabbatarian group-to-be one step further. On one hand, Ellen White differentiated between “the true Israel of God,” the Sabbath keepers among the “waiting saints,” and “unbelievers.” On the other hand, “the church” and “nominal Adventists” are contrasted with true believers. Nevertheless, she emphasized, “God had children who do not see and keep the Sabbath.”⁴⁵ Thus, she developed the first aspects of a remnant ecclesiology in which a sabbatarian group identity was paramount. At the same time, she did not make sabbatarianism an entirely exclusive soteriological criterion. Later the same year, she mentioned “the scattered flock of God,” which referred to Adventists in general, including the nonsabbatarians.⁴⁶ The fluid ecclesiological thinking of the period allowed Sabbatarian Adventists to use motifs in somewhat divergent ways even though all positive terms were applied only to those who had a connection with the Millerite movement and who continued to cling to their Advent revival experience of 1843-1844.

The two earliest sabbatarian publications of Joseph Bates (1846), the third of the three main founders of Seventh-day Adventism, contain no reference to the “remnant,”⁴⁷ only to the related term “little flock,”⁴⁸ which is not clearly defined but apparently denotes those Millerites who were ready to listen to his message. Similarly, Thomas M. Preble’s 1845 Sabbath tract, which led to Bates’s adoption of sabbatarianism, is directed to “the Saints Scattered Abroad,” meaning the Millerites, but does not develop a sabbatarian ecclesiology of any kind.⁴⁹

⁴⁵Ellen G. White, *A Vision* [Broadside] (Topsham, ME: Joseph Bates, 1847). The original contains a comma after “children,” which today would render the meaning incorrect.

⁴⁶“To Bro. Eli Curtis,” in *A Word to the ‘Little Flock,’* ed. James White (Brunswick, ME: [n.p.], 1847), 11.

⁴⁷Joseph Bates, *The Opening Heavens* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1846, 1) only contains references to “the true-believer” and “God’s people” (ibid., 37), as well as criticism of “all the nominal churches” (ibid., 35).

⁴⁸Joseph 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.

⁴⁹Thomas 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.

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.⁵⁰ 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 12:17.⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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 Heaps*.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ Unsurprisingly, *Second Advent Way Marks* presents the same

⁵⁰Joseph Bates, *The Seventh Day Sabbath: A Perpetual Sign*, 2d rev. and enl. ed. (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847), iii-iv.

⁵¹Ibid., 52. On p. 59, he repeats "remnant (which of course means the last end) and stresses, "this remnant are actually *practising* what they believe" (emphasis original). On the same page, Bates explains this practice of commandment keeping as consisting of "selling what they have, giving alms, laying up their treasure in heaven, . . . 'washing one another's feet,'" and explains that remnant believers "'greet all the brethren with an holy kiss" and "practice keeping the Sabbath holy."

⁵²When Bates emphasizes that at the end of history there are "only . . . two companies"—i.e., the true believers and those having "the mark of the beast"—he clearly excludes nonsabbatarian Millerites from the "remnant" (ibid., 59).

⁵³Joseph Bates, *Second Advent Way Marks and High Heaps, or, A Connected View of the Fulfilment of Prophecy, by God's Peculiar People from the Year 1840 to 1847* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847).

⁵⁴On Bates's Connectionist background, see George Knight, *Joseph Bates: The Real Founder of Seventh-Day Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2004), 38-41. On the Christian Connection, a distinct stream of the larger restorationist movement,

Connectionist sentiments merged with the radical Millerite thinking of Charles Fitch's kind⁵⁵ and repeatedly links "the organized churches"—i.e., the existing denominations—with apocalyptic Babylon.⁵⁶ While rejecting those "nominal churches," Bates also devotes a whole section to the question, "What is a Church?"⁵⁷ Starting from the premise that "[a] Christian Church is an assembly or congregation of faithful men,"⁵⁸ he concludes that an "anti-Christian" church is such a body that (1) disregards "humanity" (e.g., by tolerating slavery),⁵⁹ (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."⁶⁰ 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. Blowers, 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.

⁵⁵Cf. Fitch. 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, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 192-199.

⁵⁶Bates, *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).

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁸The 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."

⁵⁹Bates, *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 antislavery organizations and various social-reform movements (see Ronald Graybill, "The Abolitionist-Millerite Connection," in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993], 139-152).

⁶⁰Bates 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,⁶¹ 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.⁶² Bates’s *Vindication of the Seventh-Day Sabbath* of 1848 contains another interesting expression in the

the true church sometime after his four-point list of criteria: “[T]he Daughter of Zion is the true Church, the remnant that have literally gone out of the City (the Church) into the fields and into the woods, and there held their meetings” (ibid., 26).

⁶¹For an explanation of the “shut door,” see n. 41. Much scholarly discussion has been devoted to the ideas surrounding this concept. See, e.g., Ingemar Lindén, *1844 and the Shut Door Problem*, *Studia Historico-Ecclesiastica Upsaliensia* 35 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1982), and the important yet-unpublished comprehensive study to which Lindén’s book responds, Rolf Pöhler, “‘... and the Door was Shut’: Seventh-Day Adventists and the Shut-Door Doctrine in the Decade After the Great Disappointment,” TMs, 1978, Center of Adventist Research, Andrews University.

⁶²Part of the text was Ellen White’s earliest visions, “republished . . . for the benefit of the little flock” (*A Word to the “Little Flock,”* 13). Bates draws attention to the fact that these visions were given “to comfort and strengthen his ‘scattered,’ ‘torn,’ and ‘pealed people’” (ibid., 21). As the words in the title, these quasi-ecclesiological terms—such as “the true Israel of God,” “the saints,” and “God’s people” (ibid., 3, 10)—were not clearly defined; this somewhat fuzzy use probably referred to all shut-door believers who were at least sympathetic with the sabbatarian cause.

subtitle, “God’s peculiar people,”⁶³ 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 legalism⁶⁴ and a missiological notion attached to the term.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶

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,⁶⁷ 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.

⁶³Joseph Bates, *A Vindication of the Seventh-Day Sabbath, and the Commandments of God: With a Further History of God’s Peculiar People from 1847 to 1848* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1848). “God’s Peculiar People” also appears in the title of the 1849 hymnal; see n. 67.

⁶⁴Bates, *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).

⁶⁵Bates 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*, 98).

⁶⁶Although 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]).

⁶⁷James White, *Hymns for God’s Peculiar People That Keep the Commandments of God and the Faith of Jesus* (Oswego, NY: Richard Oliphant, 1849). The remnant motif appears only once, in a rather inconspicuous manner in hymn 10.

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,”⁶⁸ thus applying the term to an entity that was still in development.⁶⁹ 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*.⁷⁰ This booklet emphasized the identification of Sabbath keepers with the “remnant,”⁷¹ 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,⁷² 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.”⁷³ 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

⁶⁸Ellen G. White, *To Those Who Are Receiving the Seal of the Living God* [Broadside], 31 January 1849.

⁶⁹Later 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).

⁷⁰Bates 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]).

⁷¹Joseph Bates, *A Seal of the Living God: A Hundred Forty-Four Thousand of the Servants of God Being Sealed in 1849* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1849), 19, 56.

⁷²Bates 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.

⁷³Ibid., 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.⁷⁴

Like the other Sabbatarian Adventists, Bates continued to teach the “shut door” for non-Adventists for some time.⁷⁵ 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 converts⁷⁶ 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),⁷⁷ a case of church discipline,⁷⁸ and a first connection of ecclesiological thought with visionary experiences,⁷⁹ indicated

⁷⁴Ibid., 61-62.

⁷⁵Knight, *Joseph Bates*, 132.

⁷⁶James White reported already in the first number of *The Advent Review* (“Our Tour East,” August 1850, 15): “One brother, who had not been in the advent, and had made no public profession of religion until 1845, came out clear and strong on the whole truth. He had never opposed the advent, and it is evident that the Lord had been leading him, though his experience had not been just like ours.”

⁷⁷[James White,] “The State of the Cause,” *Present Truth*, May 1850, 80.

⁷⁸James White, “Our Tour East,” 14.

⁷⁹James White emphasized that “the Bible no where [*sic*] teaches that the time has past [*sic*] for such special revelations; and . . . there is positive testimony that the Church is to be blessed with special revelations ‘IN THE LAST DAYS’” (untitled editorial comment, *Present Truth*, December 1849, 40, emphasis original).

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 receive the truth, and be established in it.”⁸⁰ Here and in a few other sections,⁸¹ 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.⁸² A similar use of the motif is found in Ellen White’s writings during that time. She described the remnant as a group *in fieri*, 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”⁸³—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. C. 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 Releases* [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 Fever*, 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.’”⁸⁵

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.”⁸⁶ In 1850, she warned that some among the “people of God” were “stupid and dormant . . . and were attached to their possessions.”⁸⁷ She deplored that “there was too little glorifying God, too little childlike simplicity among the remnant.”⁸⁸ 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 keepers⁸⁹ that one

⁸⁵White, *A Sketch of the Christian Experience*, 54. The title of this vision, dated 27 June 1850, is added in White, *Early Writings*, 66.

⁸⁶Ellen White, “Dear Brethren and Sisters,” *Present Truth*, September 1849, 31.

⁸⁷Ellen White, “To the ‘Little Flock,’” *Present Truth*, April 1850, 71 (reporting a vision of 26 January 1850).

⁸⁸*Manuscript Releases*, 18/10 (No. 1302; MS 5, 1850; vision of July 29, 1850).

⁸⁹An 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

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.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹

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;⁹² 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 14.⁹³ The most important innovative interpretation was connecting visionary experiences to the remnant concept via Joel's prophecies.⁹⁴ 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

“little flock” in the same period.

⁹⁰See, 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).

⁹¹This reasoning appears in an almost identical manner in the note, “To Ira Fancher,” *Review and Herald*, March 1851, 52; and “The Sabbath and Ten Commandments Taught and Enforced in the New Testament,” *Review and Herald*, 2 June 1851, 90; “The Faith of Jesus,” *Review and Herald*, 28 February 1854, 44 (aspects 1-3); “The Position of the Remnant,” *Review and Herald*, 12 September 1854; and [Uriah Smith], “Who are the Remnant?” *Review and Herald*, 28 February 1856.

⁹²Joseph Bates, “Attitude in Prayer,” *Review and Herald*, January 1851, 40.

⁹³Cf., e.g., S. T. Cranson, “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).

⁹⁴Joseph Bates, referring to Joel 2:28-32 (“The Gifts of the Gospel Church,” *Review and Herald*, 21 April 1851, 69-70); v. 28 contains a reference to prophecy and v. 32 contains the word “remnant” in the KJV.

in 1846-1847 and perhaps around 200 in 1850 to probably more than 2,000 in 1852,⁹⁵ 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,”⁹⁶ leading to a second periodical in 1852⁹⁷ and revealing the need for some degree of continuity, also indicated a consolidation of the future Seventh-day Adventists as a body.⁹⁸

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,⁹⁹ James White began to speak about “the churches of God’s remnant people.”¹⁰⁰ In the same year, he used the expression “‘remnant’ church” for the first time.¹⁰¹ 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

⁹⁵James White, “A Brief Sketch of the Past,” *Review and Herald*, 6 May 1852, 5.

⁹⁶The need to serve the spiritual needs of children and youth of Sabbath keepers was first emphasized in a letter of Rebekah G. Whitcomb, “Letter from Sister Whitcomb,” *Present Truth*, April 1850, 72, and in an article by Joseph Bates, “Duty to Our Children,” *Review and Herald*, January 1851, 39-40.

⁹⁷The *Youth’s Instructor* was published from August 1852; besides various articles and letters, it also contained “Sabbath School Lessons,” which later led to the Adventist Sabbath School practice as it is known today.

⁹⁸This consolidation is likewise visible in a second, considerably enlarged hymnal, *Hymns for Second Advent Believers Who Observe the Sabbath of the Lord* (Rochester, NY: James White, 1852). This hymnal contained 139 songs; a supplement added 39 more songs. The transition to a more ecclesial perspective is seen in the fact that the book had four main sections: general songs, Sabbath, baptism, and Lord’s Supper—the 1849 hymnal contained only 53 songs and none on the latter two themes. Most of the general songs still had a strong apocalyptic content, but the new focus on the ordinances and the Sabbath (the latter with 18 compared to 4 songs in the 1849 edition) reveal the growing need for more congregational-focused material.

⁹⁹See, e.g., in O[tis] Nichols, “The Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet,” *Review and Herald*, 2 March 1852, 98; [James White], “Signs of the Times,” *Review and Herald*, 13 September 1853, 73, 75. This formulation drastically loses importance in the following years; an automated count yields less than 60 hits until the end of the 1990s, i.e., less than one instance every two years.

¹⁰⁰[James White], “The Position of the Remnant,” *Review and Herald*, 12 September 1854, 37. Later in the same year, he wrote about “the remnant, the last of the church on earth” (“[Sabbath School Lesson] Number XX,” *Youth’s Instructor*, December 1854, 95).

¹⁰¹[James White], “A Cloud of Witnesses,” *Review and Herald*, 17 October 1854, 78.

quotation marks applied to “remnant.”¹⁰² In the following years, others began to use the same expression,¹⁰³ and although the simple “remnant” remained the dominating term by far, “remnant church” continued to be used alongside and expressed the growing ecclesial self-understanding of Adventist Sabbath keepers. The antisectionarian 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.¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵ A

¹⁰²[James White], “The Cause,” *Review and Herald*, 24 October 1854, 84.

¹⁰³See, e.g., S. B. Warren, “From Bro. Warren,” *Review and Herald*, 12 June 1855; Luther Paine, “From Bro. Paine,” *Review and Herald*, 10 April 1856; J. B. Frisbie, “Communication from Bro. Frisbie,” *Review and Herald*, 12 February 1857, 115. From 1857, “remnant church” appears regularly, more than 80 times in the 1860s and with a similar frequency during the following decades. “Remnant Church” in capitals begins to appear only in the twentieth century.

¹⁰⁴Mustard, 116-192, describes and analyzes these steps in detail.

¹⁰⁵Merritt 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.”¹⁰⁶ 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,¹⁰⁷ 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”).¹⁰⁸ This would soon become a standard explanation among Sabbath-keeping Adventists.¹⁰⁹ 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.

Stabilizing attempts at times produce unforeseen dynamics. In Adventism, these consolidating shifts of thoughts were soon complemented with a seemingly divergent innovation: the application of the Laodicea motif of Revelation 3 to Sabbatarian Adventists. In the early 1840s, the “lukewarm” Laodiceans, the last of the seven churches of Revelation 2–3, had been

“church” in the title.

¹⁰⁶James White, *Hymns for Those Who Keep the Commandments of God and the Faith of Jesus* (Rochester, NY: Advent Review Office, 1855), preface. This 352-page hymnal was the first to contain music and had 474 hymns.

¹⁰⁷[Joseph Bates], “The Gifts of the Gospel Church,” *Review and Herald*, 21 April 1851, 69-70 (connects “remnant” with Joel 2:19-20); David Arnold, “The Oneness of the Church and the Means of God’s Appointment for Its Purification and Unity,” *Review and Herald*, 26 June 1855, 249-251.

¹⁰⁸James White, “The Testimony of Jesus,” *Review and Herald*, 18 December 1855, 92-93.

¹⁰⁹[James] W[white], “Revelation Twelve,” *Review and Herald*, 8 January 1857, 76; [James] W[white], “Unity and Gifts of the Church—No. 3,” *Review and Herald*, 31 December 1857, 60-61; [James] W[white], “Unity and Gifts of the Church—No. 4,” *Review and Herald*, 7 January 1858, 68-69; Roswell F. Cottrell, “Foreword,” in *Spiritual Gifts*, Ellen G. White (Battle Creek: James White, 1858), 1:15-16; D. T. Bourdeau, “Spiritual Gifts,” *Review and Herald*, 2 December 1862, 5-6.

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,

¹¹⁰See 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. Dimmick: A Brief Review of His Discourse, “The End of The World Not 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).

¹¹¹See 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 Laodicean Church,” *Review and Herald*, November 1850, 7-8; and “Our Labor in the Philadelphia and Laodicean Churches,” *Review and Herald*, 19 August 1851, 13-14. Further see [James] W[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.

¹¹²Bates, *An Explanation of the Typical and Antitypical Sanctuary*, 13-14; James White, “The Third Angel’s Message,” *Present Truth*, April 1850, 68.

¹¹³James White, “Watchman, What of the Night?” *Review and Herald*, 9 October 1856; James White, “The Seven Churches,” *Review and Herald*, 16 October 1856.

¹¹⁴See, e.g., R. F. C[ottrell], “Are We in Laodicea?” *Review and Herald*, January 1857, 77; J. B. Frisbie, “Communication from Bro. Frisbie,” *Review and Herald*, 12 February 1857, 115.

¹¹⁵Ellen White had already applied in 1852 the words to Laodicea 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 Laodicean 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.”¹¹⁶

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 kind¹¹⁸ raise the question as to what ecclesiological consequence

¹¹⁶James White, *Supplement to the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White* (Rochester, NY: James White, 1854), 39-40. James White himself held similar sentiments and called Sabbatarian Adventists “an inexperienced and unsanctified church” and deplored “the rash, exclusive and retaliating spirit of some of the brethren” (“The Faith of Jesus,” *Review and Herald*, 7 March 1854, 53-54).

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."¹¹⁹

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."¹²² 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."¹²³ 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" organization¹²⁴ had given way

¹¹⁹See the chapter "The Laodicean Church" (1859) in *Testimonies*, 1:185-195.

¹²⁰Alvarez Pierce, "From Bro. Pierce," *Review and Herald*, 7 May 1857, 6, spoke about "the other denominations."

¹²¹A comprehensive description and evaluation of this episode of Adventist history is Godfrey T. Anderson, "Make Us a Name," *Adventist Heritage* 1 (1974): 28-34.

¹²²The wording of this name appears only rarely before 1860: once in 1853 (here as "seventh-day Adventist": S. T. Cranson, "From Bro. Cranson," *Review and Herald*, 14 April 1853, 191) and twice in 1859 (John N. Andrews, "History of the Sabbath and First Day of the Week," *Review and Herald*, 4 August, 1859, 82; "Extracts from Letters," *Review and Herald*, 18 August 1859).

¹²³"Business Proceedings of B.C. Conference," *Review and Herald*, 23 October 1860, 179.

¹²⁴Even 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,¹²⁵ including James White.¹²⁶ 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.¹²⁷ 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 body¹²⁸ and a description for an interim organization intended to prepare believers for the final events of history.¹²⁹

As late as 1858, Ellen White spoke of the Millerites of the early 1840s as “remnant.”¹³⁰ 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,”¹³¹ while not being identical to it. Moreover,

¹²⁵“Business Proceedings of B.C. Conference,” 179; cf. also Joseph B. Frisbie, who stated: “*The Name*—THE CHURCH OF GOD. . . . This is the name that God has seen fit to give to his church, because it belongs to him” (*Order of the Church of God* [Battle Creek: Steam Press of the Review and Herald Office, 1859], 1, emphasis original).

¹²⁶“[James] W[white], “Organization,” *Review and Herald*, 19 June 1860, 36.

¹²⁷Cf. White, *Testimonies*, chapter 24, “Our Denominational Name,” 1:223-224.

¹²⁸For analogous sentiments among Pentecostals who came to think of their churches as “liminal” entities, see Vondey, 110.

¹²⁹Ellen White did not frequently use the term “remnant church”—35 times in writings published during her lifetime (“remnant” appears about 300 times)—and apparently only beginning in the 1880s, the first occurrence being found in “Our Present Position,” *Review and Herald*, 28 August 1883, 546. The search for the term was done with the CD-ROM *Ellen White Writings: Comprehensive Research Edition*.

¹³⁰White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 1:153; she formulated, “the remnant, who loved the appearing of Jesus.”

¹³¹Although the expression “final ‘remnant’” appears only in the twentieth century—notably in *Questions on Doctrine* (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1957), 196—the distinction between the denomination considering itself the provisional

by virtue of not being the official name of the Seventh-day Adventist Church but a theological concept linked with the historical development of its self-understanding, the remnant motif also continued to hold the potential for functioning as a tool of critical self-reflection. Ellen White's frequent warnings to the "remnant," the antisectarian notions and skepticism regarding all human organizations linked with the term in earlier stages, and the "Laodicea" complement to remnant ecclesiology from the 1850s onward continued to serve Seventh-day Adventists as reminders that they had come from a faith of radical commitment to "the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" that had its focus not on ecclesiology or an ecclesial body, but on the return of Jesus and the final establishment of the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

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 Millerites.¹³²

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. Millerites 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 Millerites to explain their experience and self-understanding, it proved to be the most resilient term after 1844. Evidently, the motif was rich in terms

remnant and the final apocalyptic remnant is already laid out in Ellen White's earlier writings; see the quotation before n. 85 and its subsequent discussion.

¹³²This is visible even in formulations by Miller, Bates, and James White, for they all use almost identical wording in the interpretation of the crucial text (Rev 12:17): "The remnant, is the last part of the church" (Miller, *Evidences*, 2d ed., 53); "the remnant (the last end) of God's children" (Bates, *The Seventh Day Sabbath*, 52; cf. 59); "The 'remnant' of the seed of the woman, or last end of the church just before the second advent" (James White, "The Third Angel's Message," *Present Truth*, April 1850, 66).

of eschatologically relevant content and concepts that could be connected. Yet, when comparing Miller's multiple applications of the term with the later sabbatarians' 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 earlier 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 antisectionarian view of the remnant to connecting the motif with a denominational ecclesiology. Only because each of these conditions were successively met in the phases investigated above could remnant ecclesiology unfold the way it did. The more or less explicit support of this emerging doctrine by the prophet ultimately provided the cement for building it into the elaborate doctrinal scheme of Adventists.

With regard to the dynamics and reasoning leading to the emergence of the Adventist self-understanding as "remnant church," this research yields several insights:

(1) Initially even Sabbatarian Adventists viewed themselves as a nondenominational "remnant"; therefore, the change from a "nonchurch" ecclesiology to a more unambiguous view of themselves as "church" was a gradual but significant shift, even if this was not noticed at the time. Yet, it was a necessary one for the Millerite antiestablishment logic and its

ecclesiological consequences were valid only until 1844. After the October 22 disappointment, a new thinking *had to* be developed, and naturally this thinking grew best on the soil of the Millerite premises that had made the revival successful. As among the restorationist “Christians,” the antisectarian component was ultimately sacrificed because its nonecclesiological impulse constituted a stumbling block to building a Christian community.

At the same time, the Sabbatarian Adventists developed into the only permanently growing body remaining from the Advent revival precisely 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.”¹³³

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

¹³³Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church* (London: Pitman & Sons, 1908, 166); French original: *L’Évangile et l’Église* (Paris: Picard & Sons, 1902), 111.

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 apocalyptic 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.