

God's End-Time Remnant and Charges of Exclusivism and Triumphalism

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Adventists have found in Rev 12:17 and 14:6-12 a description of their identity and mission as God's end-time remnant people. The application of that biblical motif to themselves has led some to conclude that the Adventist understanding of the remnant is offensive, exclusivist, and triumphalist. This opinion is based on a distorted understanding of the biblical data and of the way Adventists apply it to themselves. There are several specific things that we can say in response to those charges.

1. The Remnant as a Particular Group

The application of the remnant concept to a specific group of persons through whom God is fulfilling His design for the human race in a particular way, is found throughout the Scriptures. There is Noah, the only one found to be righteous in his generation (a faithful remnant), proclaiming judgment against humanity (Gen 7:1). Elijah and seven thousand Israelites remained faithful to the Lord during the national apostasy of Israel (1 Kgs 19:10, 18). In fact, Elijah spoke against the apostasy and announced God's judgment against His people. Would it be correct to say that when the prophets and those who join them in the preservation and practice of God's truth saw themselves as God's faithful ones they were being offensive, exclusivist, and triumphalist? The same would apply to Jesus and His message, to the work of the disciples, and to the apostolic Christian community constituted by Him as His faithful remnant. Throughout history, the remnant people of God have simply been fulfilling the task God assigned them. In doing that they revealed their true identity and the depth of their commitment to their Redeemer. Their faithfulness set them apart from those who chose a life of rebellion and covenant violations.

2. Spiritual Crisis and the Remnant

The Scriptures make clear that God's remnant people very often appeared at critical social and spiritual moments in the life of the larger people of God. This usually happened in the context of apostasy and oppression, e.g., the ministry of Elijah (1 Kgs 17-19; see also Zeph 3:11-13). In the Bible, we find significant references to the remnant shortly before the exile, during the exile, and after the exile. In these historical periods, Israel and Judah violated the covenant made with the Lord but He preserved a remnant for Himself of faithful ones. In that setting, one of the roles of the remnant was that of servanthood. They were called by God to serve others by calling them to His undivided service (e.g. Isa 66:18-20). In fact, at times they themselves had to go through a purifying experience, thus suggesting that they were also in constant need of God's grace (e.g. Zeph 3:9, 13; cf. Rev 3:14-22). Therefore, God's remnant people were called to humble service to Him who in His grace called them to His service. There is no room in the biblical concept of the remnant for self-glorification and triumphalism.

3. Inclusivity and the Remnant

The existence of the remnant does not mean that salvation is exclusively theirs. It is true that the history of the concept of the remnant shows that it has been misused along exclusivist lines. This was particularly the case in the Qumran community located near the Dead Sea. But the truth is that God's people are not restricted to a particular social, ethnic, or religious group. They are found everywhere. A biblical remnant ecclesiology presupposes that God is actively involved in the salvation of people outside the remnant. The work of the Holy

Spirit reaches every individual even in the absence of a concrete expression of the people of God. The Spirit, like the wind, “blows wherever it pleases” (John 3:8). We can suggest that the totality of God’s people is larger than the remnant (cf. Rev 12:17; 18:4). This should put to rest once and for all any charges of exclusivism in Adventist ecclesiology and soteriology.

4. Message of the Remnant

The biblical remnant has always had a message that was of relevance and importance to God’s people at a particular historical moment. It often contained elements of judgment against the larger religious community, but its intent was to proclaim salvation (cf. Isa 58:9-14). The real aim of the message of the remnant has always been salvific and may have included restoration of truth and rejection of apostasy (Isa 8:16-20; Rev 14:6-12). This is what we find in the biblical prophets, in Jesus, and in the apostolic church.

5. Common Threats for All Christians

Any religious community claiming to have a particular identity and mission (i.e., claiming to possess a message of universal value and relevance and/or requiring from potential members the acceptance of specific beliefs and practices that are considered non-negotiable for the life of that community) could be open to the charges of arrogance, triumphalism, and exclusivism. However, those claims by themselves do not necessarily make the religious community that way.

We, as Adventists, should do all we can to avoid giving wrong impressions that may, in the opinion of some, provide reason to raise those charges against us. It is, therefore, important for us to express our remnant ecclesiology clearly when interacting with other Christians. There is no need to offend anyone through the proclamation of our message. In case the charges continue to be raised, it is important for us not to be intimidated by them nor to consider them valid. If we know who we are and if we also know that the charges are incorrect, then we should go on fulfilling our mission as God’s end-time remnant people.

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