

The Remnant

Background

There are very few words that have such a serious meaning to Christians as the word “remnant.” If you belong to the remnant, it indicates that you have a right relationship with God and consequently you are saved. The remnant truly consists of the faithful ones; it is an exclusive group of believers who will make it through the pearly gates. But the word is also loaded with comparisons and superiority and stands in sharp contrast to those who won’t “make it.” It is also exclusive in the perspective that the remnant is a minority and those outside are the majority. It certainly is something we ought to belong to.

It might have been under struggles or hardships that you were faithful and decided to become part of the remnant. Maybe it was in times of persecution and tribulations that you remained faithful. It might have been in times of “cold” and unspiritual conditions that you survived spiritually. To belong to the “remnant” is the same as to say that you “made it,” or were faithful.

Let’s first visit a dictionary to look at what this word “remnant” means. According to Webster’s it is “something left over,” “remainder,” “surviving trace” or “small remaining group of people.” The definition seems to be very clear. Initially there is a big group and some time later only a smaller group remains. To understand this concept we need to have a starting and an ending point, a big initial group and a small group at the end. How can you and I become a part of the remnant and how is it defined in the Bible?

Old Covenant

In this Bible study we are not interested in people’s opinions about the remnant, but what the Bible says. I am convinced that you can go to many denominations and churches and most of them, if not all, will consider themselves to be *the* remnant or at least a part of the remnant church. And why not, since we all want to belong to the triumphant ones? But what the Bible says is of highest value to us as Christians. Let’s first see how Paul uses it in Romans 9:27:

*Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only a remnant will be saved.
(NIV)*

And combine this text with Romans 11:1 and verse 5:

...asked then: Did God reject his people? By no means!

...at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. (NIV)

In Romans chapters 9 and 11 the remnant issue seems clear. The whole nation Israel was chosen and though the number was like the sand by the sea, only a small group of them would eventually be saved, by grace. The beginning is the election of the Israelites and the end point occurred at the cross when the Israelites as a nation separated themselves from God. The final reward for the remnant from the Old Covenant is their resurrection at the second coming of Jesus.

New Covenant

Up to this point I believe it has been easy to understand the concept of the remnant because it fits our general thinking. But now we will step forward in history and approach our own situation. Are there any New Testament indications of a remnant? Yes, there are! Let’s first look at some texts that give general support to a New Testament remnant concept. Jesus talks about a small group that in the end will be saved, Luke 13:24:

Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. (NIV)

Matthew 22:14:

For many are invited, but few are chosen. (NIV)

And Matthew 7:21-23:

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' (NKJV)

All these three texts have examples of a remnant concept in general terms. The big group consists of all those who claim to be His followers but only a few of that big group will eventually be saved. Many are invited to join God's kingdom but few will "make it." Many think they belong to the "remnant" but at the end of this world God will plainly tell the "many," that they were not the triumphant ones; "*depart from me you who practice lawlessness!*" This is a very tragic fact! Even if the word "remnant" is not used, the remnant concept can be seen.

Can the concept of this remnant group be narrowed down or be defined more specifically? In the first text we read the importance of "*making every effort,*" which indicates the seriousness of being a Christian. God is generous and has invited "*many*" which probably means that God wants all people to be saved. In Matthew 7:21 we get some more information about the group who "made it." "*but he who does the will of My Father*" will be saved. This seems to be a description of the remnant.

Book of Revelation

In the book of Revelation the remnant is one of the important players. Revelation tells us who the faithful are and at first John the Revelator tells us about his destiny. He was on the island of Patmos because of his faithfulness to "*the word of God and the testimony of Jesus,*" Revelation 1:9. In the fifth seal we find a group of people who were slain "*because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained,*" Revelation 6:9. A very similar expression is found in Revelation chapter 12. In this passage we find a group of believers who are heavily attacked by the dragon, which is Satan, Revelation 12:17:

And the dragon was wrath with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. (KJV)

The "*remnant*" described in Revelation 12:17 are the faithful New Testament believers up until His second coming. It defines a small group out of a big group who call themselves Christians. The first criterion of the remnant is that they "*keep the commandments of God.*" The Commandments truly were written by God's own finger, Exodus 31:18.

If you are faithful to God's Commandments, you are also faithful to the Word of God. Faithfulness to His Word is so important that it is repeated seven times in the Book of Revelation. The keeping of the Commandments of God, is not a legalistic concept, since the book of Revelation over and over again lifts up grace as the only way to salvation. No, these seven passages encourage the believers to faithfulness *after* they have been saved.

The Testimony of Jesus

The second criterion of the New Testament remnant believer is that he has the “*testimony of Jesus Christ*.” “Testimony” could also mean to have the “evidence of” or being a “witness” of Jesus Christ. This phrase has caused quite a bit of turmoil since this expression possibly defines the remnant explicitly. The first criterion, faithfulness to the Word of God, is hard to assess since so many claim it and, of course, with good arguments. But the second criterion might help us. How does the Bible define the phrase the “*testimony of Jesus*?” We do not need to speculate, because the Bible is its own interpreter. Revelation 19:10 explains:

For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. (KJV)

Thus, the second criterion of the remnant is that it has the “*spirit of prophecy*.” That expression sounds familiar and appears to come close to home. But the reality is that there have been many Christians over the last 2000 years. Would the saved ones only come out of a certain denomination which surfaced in the middle of the 19th century, led by ONE specific prophet?

If it is true that one denomination has the monopoly on that expression, what will happen to all those who died during the first 1800 years and had no chance to know about the “Spirit of Prophecy” (=E.G. White) as some understand it? In that case there would be no remnant from the first 1800 years after the crucifixion! That doesn’t sound correct! What about Paul, Peter and John, just to mention a few Bible characters?

The proof that this concept is a wrong is found in Revelation 1:9. John, the beloved apostle, was on the Island of Patmos around 90 A.D. for two reasons. Revelation 1:9:

I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. (NKJV)

Anyone can realize that John had not been faithful to a prophet that would live around 1800 years later! John had certainly been faithful to the Word of God as he understood it. But, what did the expression, the “*testimony of Jesus*” mean to John?

Spirit of Prophecy

The word for “*spirit*” in Revelation 19:10 can refer to God. In Greek, translated word by word, it actually says “the spirit the prophecy,” which makes this expression very specific. In that case it points to the Holy Spirit. What Revelation 19:10 tells us is that there is only *one* Spirit involved in true prophecy; there is only *one* Spirit behind true prophecy. This interpretation can be supported with a very similar expression in Revelation 22:6:

The angel said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.” (NIV)

In Revelation 19:10 we read about “*the spirit of prophecy*” and in Revelation 22:6 about “*the spirits of the prophets*.” The definite article is found both before the word “*spirits*” and “*prophets*.” We also read that the Lord is the God of the spirits of the prophets, indicating that God’s Spirit is involved. God’s Spirit is of course the “Holy Spirit.” Is it true that the Holy Spirit is behind all true prophecy and therefore “moves” all true prophets? 2 Peter 1:21:

For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (NKJV)

When God is behind prophecy, the prophet is “*moved by the Holy Spirit*.” All true prophecies have their origin

in God and His Spirit. Thus, the expression “*the testimony of Jesus,*” which is “*the spirit of the prophecy,*” must refer to the working of the Holy Spirit.

Holy Spirit

If you desire to be a witness for Christ you need to be filled with His Spirit. If you are filled with the Spirit you yearn to witness for Jesus. This concept is so important, that Jesus mentions it several times. In the following text Jesus proclaims what the Spirit, here named the Counselor, will do, John 15:26:

When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. (NIV)

The Spirit Jesus gives to all His faithful believers, comes from the Father, and shall “*testify about me,*” said Jesus. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is also called the Spirit of Jesus in Acts 16:6-7. In the following verses Jesus tells us more about what the Spirit will accomplish. The Spirit will give what belongs to Jesus’ and make it known to His believers, John 16:7 and 13-14:

Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. (NIV)

Therefore, the Holy Spirit is the testimony of Jesus. The Spirit of Truth reveals to us what Christ wants to give to us. The Holy Spirit is involved in every true prophecy. There is no doubt in my mind that E.G. White was moved by the Holy Spirit, but she as a person cannot *be* the “*spirit of prophecy.*” She cannot *be* the Holy Spirit! But just as E.G. White wanted to be filled with and led by the Holy Spirit, so should we. That does not imply that we all will prophesy – but we will all live a life led by His Spirit, Romans 8:14. Let’s read again the definition of the remnant, Revelation 12:17:

And the dragon was wrath with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. (KJV)

With this understanding of Revelation 1:9, it certainly was true that John the Revelator had not only been faithful to the Word of God but also to the Spirit of God. That was the reason for his imprisonment on the island of Patmos.

The Remnant

Now we have studied what the remnant in Revelation 12:17 is. The definition of the remnant in New Testament terminology, are those who keep the Word of God, especially the Commandments of God, and are led by His Spirit. With this biblical understanding, we also realize that it is not easy to determine who “the remnant” is. If it is hard to tell who has the truth and keeps God’s Word, it is not easier to know whether someone is led by His Holy Spirit.

With this concept, only God knows who belongs to the remnant.

Moreover, there is no room for personal boasting – and why should it? To belong to the remnant is not a basis for exclusivity, superiority or pride – but certainly the opposite.

To Ponder

Is it then possible that a denomination as a whole could be “the Remnant?” No! Nowhere in the Bible is a denomination mentioned or said to be a vehicle for salvation. It is unlikely that every single member of a denomination or church will be saved.

Is it possible that a certain fraction of a denomination could be the remnant? No!

To belong to the remnant is a personal issue and not a group issue. Thus, it is possible that the remnant exists in all denominations, all churches, all fractions, and only God knows who they are.

A person who belongs to the remnant does not glorify himself – but God!

The remnant in the New Testament era is certainly saved by grace and wants to do the will of the Father. That is expressed by being faithful to the Word of God and acknowledging the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Every true prophet is moved by God’s Holy Spirit.

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