

God's People and the Testimony

by Jud Lake

Professor of Preaching and Adventist Studies
Director of the Institute for the Study of Ellen G. White and Adventist Heritage
Southern Adventist University

INTRODUCTION

Revelation 12:17 is a very important text to Seventh-day Adventists. It occurs in the context of the great controversy between Christ and Satan: “And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him” (Rev. 12:7-9 NKJV). With prophetic imagery the rest of this chapter describes Christ’s first advent, the significance of His death, and His ascension to God’s throne. It carries the reader across the centuries of Satan’s crusade against the church to his final attack on the Remnant, summarized in verse 17: “And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (NKJV). This text gives two characteristics of God’s people living in the last days of Earth’s history: they “keep the commandments of God” and “have the testimony of Jesus Christ.” The second characteristic will be our focus as we ponder the meaning of the prophetic gift in our midst. First, we will look at the biblical context of this phrase and then discover what it means to have the prophetic gift.

I. BIBLICAL CONTEXT OF THE PHRASE “TESTIMONY OF JESUS”

The term “remnant” (the ones left over, the remainder) in Revelation 12:17 refers to the end-time people of God. John makes it a point to specify two distinguishing characteristics of this group.

1. **The first characteristic of the Remnant in Rev. 12:17, that they keep the “commandments of God,” clearly refers to the ten commandments of the Decalogue (Ex. 20:1-17).**

Adventist scholars have observed that chapters 12-14 of Revelation are bordered at each end with a sanctuary scene. Revelation 11:19 (“Then the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the ark of His covenant was seen in His temple. And there were lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail”) and Revelation 15:5 (“After these things I looked, and behold, the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened.”) enclose chapters 12-14 with the intent of turning the reader’s attention to what was inside the inner compartment of the temple—the ark of the covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments.¹ Because of these clear references to the ark of the covenant, the commandments in 12:17 and 14:12 refer to the Decalogue. This shows that God’s people who live in the final phase of Earth’s history are loyal to the Ten Commandments—all of them.

2. The second characteristic of the Remnant in 12:17 is that they “have the testimony of Jesus.”

Seventh-day Adventists have traditionally believed that the prophetic ministry of Ellen G. White was a manifestation of the “testimony of Jesus.” But in recent years some have claimed that the “testimony of Jesus” is the testimony *about* Jesus that every Christian should bear. Certain Bible translations reflect this view. What Bible evidence is there for the claim that Seventh-day Adventists have made that Ellen G. White’s ministry is a fulfillment of this prophecy?

The key issue is how we are to understand the preposition “of” in the text. The grammar of the original Greek allows for interpreting the expression in one of two ways: a testimony “about” Jesus, which would refer to our witness about Christ, or a testimony “from” or “by” Jesus, which would mean that the “testimony” is Jesus’ own self-revelation that moves the Christian prophets.² The context of the phrase must finally determine its meaning.

In our text, Revelation 12:17, and in several others in Revelation (1:2, 9; 20:4), the expression “testimony of Jesus” is balanced each time with the expression “the word of God” or “the commandments of God.” Since the “word of God” and the “commandments of God” are what God has said and come “from” Him, the “testimony of Jesus” should also be interpreted as what Jesus has said and be understood as coming “from” Him. Does this limit the “testimony of Jesus” to what Jesus said in the four Gospels, as some might claim? No. Based on John’s usage of the phrase later in Revelation, it clearly involves more than Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels.³

In Revelation 19:10 John writes, “For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” Here he defines the “testimony of Jesus” as the “spirit of prophecy.” The closest parallel for this unique phrase is found in 1 Cor. 12:8-10, where Paul indicates that the Holy Spirit is the originator of the gift of prophecy as one of the spiritual gifts. The person who receives this gift is called a prophet (1Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11).

Most significantly, in Revelation 22:8, 9, John links the two phrases “testimony of Jesus” and “spirit of prophecy” with the prophets, not with every believer. Read the two passages together, one piece at a time, and notice the parallelism between them:

Rev. 19:10	Rev. 22:8-9
And I fell down at his feet to worship him,	I fell down to worship him at the feet of the angel who showed them to me;
but he said to me, “You must not do that!	But he said to me, “You must not do that!
I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus.	I am your fellow servant with you and your brethren the prophets.
Worship God.” For the testimony of Jesus is	and with those who keep the words of this

the spirit of prophecy.	book. Worship God.”
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The situation is the same in both passages. Overwhelmed, John falls at the feet of the angel to worship. The words of the angel’s response are almost identical, yet the difference is significant. In 19:10, the “brethren” are those who “have the testimony of Jesus.” In 22:9, the “brethren” are called prophets. With Scripture interpreting itself, the parallelism in these two passages tells us that the “testimony of Jesus” is the specific manifestation of the prophetic gift—“prophets.” This parallelism also tells us that the “spirit of prophecy” is a prophetic message issuing from the Spirit and not the gift of the Spirit for all church members in general.⁴

So Seventh-day Adventists are on solid Bible ground in saying that the second characteristic of the remnant in Rev. 12:17, the “testimony of Jesus,” is Jesus’ own testimony to the church by means of the “spirit of prophecy.” This Christ-centered prophetic message comes only through those specifically called by God to the prophetic ministry, and is not a spiritual gift that all believers exercise. In this way, God’s people living in the closing days of earth’s history can have an assurance of God’s special care and guidance by the Holy Spirit’s working through those called to the prophetic office, just as it was with God’s people of old.⁵

From its very beginning in 1863, the Seventh-day Adventist church has claimed this identifying characteristic for itself. As Adventists, we believe the seventy-year prophetic ministry of Ellen G. White was a manifestation of the “testimony of Jesus.”

II. WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS

What does it mean to “have” the “testimony of Jesus,” the prophetic writings of Ellen G. White, in our midst? In Rev. 12:17 the word “have” in “have the testimony of Jesus” is the Greek word *echō*, which means “to have, to hold, to have as one’s possession.”⁶ The context of this word in our text indicates that the Remnant people hold firmly to the prophetic gift that has been manifested in their midst. It is a personal possession of their community, collectively as well as individually. As a Seventh-day Adventist, then, you have the testimony of Jesus! It belongs to you!

Notice three practical implications of this word “have” for every Seventh-day Adventist.

1. To “have” the testimony of Jesus is to be a good steward of the prophetic writings.

To be a good steward of Ellen White’s writings means that we read and interpret them responsibly. All too often we fail to read these writings in their original context. Too many of us give Ellen White a flexible “wax nose,” and bend her statements this way and that way to suit our own ideas. She repeatedly resisted this kind of approach to her writings. For example, she wrote in 1901 that many “take the testimonies the Lord has given, and apply them as they suppose they should be applied, picking out a sentence here and there, taking it from its proper connection [context], and applying it according to their idea. Thus poor souls become bewildered, when could they read in order all that has been given, they would see the true application, and would not become confused. Much that purports to be a message from Sister White, serves the purpose of misrepresenting Sister White, making her testify in favor of things that are not in accordance with her mind or judgment” (*Selected Messages*, book 1, p 44). In his

helpful book, *Reading Ellen White: How to Understand and Apply Her Writings*, George Knight proposed fifteen principles of correct interpretation for Ellen White's writings. It's good to keep these principles in mind every time you read Ellen White's writings. They are:

- Read with a plan.
- Begin with a healthy outlook.
- Focus on the central issues.
- Emphasize the important.
- Account for problems in communication.
- Study all available information on a topic.
- Avoid extreme interpretations.
- Take time and place into consideration.
- Study each statement in its literary context.
- Recognize Ellen White's understanding of the ideal and the real.
- Use common sense.
- Discover the underlying principles.
- Realize that prophets are not verbally inspired, nor are they infallible or inerrant.
- Avoid making the counsels "prove" things they were never intended to prove.
- Make sure Ellen White said it.⁷

You have the testimony of Jesus! Are you a good steward of these writings by honoring the original context in which they were written?

2. To "have" the testimony of Jesus is to obey the prophetic voice.

The word "have" in Rev. 12:17 also carries the idea of "having faith" in the "testimony of Jesus." To have faith in the prophetic voice is to be loyal to it and obey it. Thus, the practical outcome of this word is obedience. Ellen White believed that the prophetic gift was bestowed upon her, and she never compromised the authority that came with this gift. When some had slighted her testimonies in 1882 and declared her testimony of warning and reproof to be nothing more than her opinion, she wrote: "You have thereby insulted the Spirit of God. You know how the Lord has manifested Himself through the spirit of prophecy. Past, present, and future have passed before me. I have been shown faces that I had never seen, and years afterward I knew them when I saw them. I have been aroused from my sleep with a vivid sense of subjects previously presented to my mind; and I have written, at midnight, letters that have gone across the continent and, arriving at a crisis, have saved great disaster to the cause of God. This has been my work for many years. A power has impelled me to reprove and rebuke wrongs that I had not thought of. Is this work of the last thirty-six years from above or from beneath?" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 64, 65).

Currently, Seventh-day Adventists express their understanding of Ellen White's authority in their Fundamental Belief #18: "As the Lord's messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested." So when Ellen White tells us to search the Scriptures, do you obey? When she appeals to our hearts to love Jesus as Lord, Savior, and Friend, do you obey? When

she calls us to pour out our hearts in prayer, do you obey? When she directs us to turn away from self and look to Jesus, do you obey? When she admonishes us to battle with sin and overcome through the grace of Jesus Christ, do you obey? The end result is obvious: when you obey the counsels of Ellen White, you simply move more in the direction of biblical Christianity.

You have the testimony of Jesus! Do you obey this prophetic voice?

3. To “have” the testimony of Jesus is to experience the power of the prophetic message.

It is one thing to appreciate the writings of Ellen White, but it is something else to feed on them and have experiential knowledge of their content. When you “have” these prophetic writings and cherish them as a “personal possession,” that is, when you “own” them in a personal way, you will experience their power. To know these writings personally is to experience their power in your life. What is the impact of Ellen White’s writings on the lives of those who read her regularly?

First, her readers **cherish the Bible as God’s voice speaking today**. One of Ellen White’s most remarkable statements about the Bible reads: “The Bible is God’s voice speaking to us, just as surely as though we could hear it with our ears. If we realized this, with what awe would we open God’s word, and with what earnestness would we search its precepts! The reading and contemplation of the Scriptures would be regarded as an audience with the Infinite One” (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 393). Does this statement not create in you a greater appetite for the Word of God?

Second, her readers **experience a personal relationship with Jesus Christ**. No one described this experience better than Ellen White: “If we keep the Lord ever before us, allowing our hearts to go out in thanksgiving and praise to Him, we shall have a continual freshness in our religious life. Our prayers will take the form of a conversation with God as we would talk with a friend. He will speak His mysteries to us personally. Often there will come to us a sweet joyful sense of the presence of Jesus. Often our hearts will burn within us as He draws nigh to commune with us as He did with Enoch. When this is in truth the experience of the Christian, there is seen in his life a simplicity, a humility, meekness, and lowliness of heart, that show to all with whom he associates that he has been with Jesus and learned of Him” (*Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 129, 130). Doesn’t this statement make you want more of Jesus?

Third, her readers **find hope and courage for daily Christian living**. One of Ellen White’s many encouraging statements is found in *The Desire of Ages*, her classic book on the life of Christ: “Through all our trials we have a never-failing Helper. He does not leave us alone to struggle with temptation, to battle with evil, and be finally crushed with burdens and sorrow. Though now He is hidden from mortal sight, the ear of faith can hear His voice saying, Fear not; I am with you. ‘I am He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive forevermore.’ Revelation 1:18. I have endured your sorrows, experienced your struggles, encountered your temptations. I know your tears; I also have wept. The griefs that lie too deep to be breathed into any human ear, I know. Think not that you are desolate and forsaken. Though your pain touch no responsive chord in any heart on earth, look unto Me, and live” (p. 483). What great encouragement this passage brings to the reader!

You have the testimony of Jesus! Are you experiencing its power?

CONCLUSION

On July 25, 1967, James R. Nix conducted an interview with Ella Robinson, the oldest granddaughter of Ellen White. At one point during the interview, Mrs. Robinson recalled an experience of hearing her grandmother preach: “I see grandma standing in the pulpit, dressed in her loose fitting, black sack suit, narrow cuffs of white, narrow white collar secure at the throat by a small broach. She’s been telling of the matchless love of Christ in suffering ignominy and death and even running the risk of eternal separation from His Father in heaven by taking upon Himself the sins of the world. She pauses, look up, and with one hand resting on the desk and the other lifted heavenward she exclaims in a ringing voice, ‘Oh, Jesus, how I love you, how I love you, how I love you.’ There is a deep hush. Heaven is very near.”

You have the testimony of Jesus! It is the self-revelation of Jesus to your soul. If you will take the time to read it, meditate on it, apply it, all of its Christ-centered blessings will be yours.

¹ Johannes Kovar, “The Remnant and God’s Commandments: Revelation 12:17,” in *Toward A Theology of the Remnant*, ed. Angel Manuel Rodriguez (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 2009), pp. 117, 118.

² Gerhard Pfandl, “Identifying Marks of the End-time Remnant in the Book of Revelation,” in *Toward a Theology of the Remnant*, ed. Angel Manuel Rodriguez (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 2009), pp. 141-143.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 143, 144; see also Gerhard Pfandl, “The Remnant Church and the Spirit of Prophecy,” in *Symposium on Revelation: Exegetical and General Studies—Book II*, Frank B. Holbrook, ed. (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), pp. 305-315.

⁴ Pfandl, 2009, pp. 144, 145; Pfandl 1999, pp. 315-320.

⁵ Ranko Stefanovic, “What is the ‘Spirit of Prophecy’? Revelation 19:10,” in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, Gerhard Pfandl, ed., Biblical Research Institute Studies, vol. 2 (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), p. 449.

⁶ Walter Bauer, Wm. F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago, 2000), pp. 420-422.

⁷ Adapted from George R. Knight, *Reading Ellen White: How to Understand and Apply Her Writings* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1997).

RESOURCES

The resources below are provided for those speakers who want to get into more details in their exposition of the texts.

Bauer, Walter, Wm. F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago, 2000).

Knight, George R., *Reading Ellen White: How to Understand and Apply Her Writings* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1997).

Kovar, Johannes, "The Remnant and God's Commandments: Revelation 12:17," in *Toward A Theology of the Remnant*, ed. Angel Manuel Rodriguez (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 2009), 113-126.

Pfandl, Gerhard, "The Remnant Church and the Spirit of Prophecy," in *Symposium on Revelation: Exegetical and General Studies—Book II*, Frank B. Holbrook, ed. (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 295-334.

Pfandl, Gerhard, "Identifying Marks of the End-time Remnant in the Book of Revelation," in *Toward A Theology of the Remnant*, ed. Angel Manuel Rodriguez (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 2009), 139-158.

Stefanovic, Ranko, "What is the 'Spirit of Prophecy'? Revelation 19:10," in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, Gerhard Pfandl, ed., Biblical Research Institute Studies, vol. 2 (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 447-449.