

PROPHECY

What You Should Know about It!

Church of God, The Eternal

P.O. Box 775

Eugene, Oregon 97440

www.cogeternal.org

© 1977 Church of God, The Eternal
Reprinted: 1984, 2001

TABLE OF CONTENTS

What Is Prophecy?	1
What Is the Nature of Prophecy?	2
God Inspires Prophecy	3
Prophesying Is Directly to the People Involved	4
What Are the Duties of Prophets?	5
Prophets Must Be Chosen and Sent	6
Prophecies Directed Toward Israel	7
Prophecy in the Last Days	8
Reaction to Prophecy	10
Who Are the False Prophets?	11
What Causes Prophets to Go Astray?	12
Why Prophets Persist in Error	13
What Source Inspires False Prophets?	14
Why God Allows False Prophets	14
Try the Prophets	15
True Prophets Must Be Respected	17
Day of Revealing Coming	18
Who Will Understand Prophecy?	19
When Will Prophecy Be Understood?	20
Prophets Did Not Understand What They Recorded	22
Christ's Appearance—Proof of When Prophecy Understood	22
Bible Prophecies—What Value Today?	23
Prophecy Irrevocable	25
Conclusion	26

Prophecy—What You Should Know about It!

No subject has been more misunderstood than that of Bible prophecy. What are the reasons behind the prophetic failures of the Worldwide Church of God? Does God intend Christians to know the future? This article will reveal, for the first time, many facts never before understood about prophecy!

It was after the prophetic failure of 1972 that many members of the Worldwide Church of God began to question the ministry. What started as a ripple soon became a tidal wave, so that eventually the term "'72 Syndrome" came to be applied to the entire gamut of doubts, questions and waverings of the Church membership. While it was only a small minority of members who left as a result of the prophetic failures of 1972, the seeds of doubt had been sown. It was to be only a matter of time before doctrine too would be challenged, then repudiated.

For years members of the Worldwide Church of God sneered at religious groups which dared to proclaim future events contrary to what the Worldwide Church of God believed. Prophetic failures of those organizations did not signal a warning that the Worldwide Church of God could be wrong and might possibly suffer the same embarrassment. With almost God-like confidence, prophetic pronouncements emanated from the pulpits and presses of the Worldwide Church of God. Members did not question the validity of these prophecies—because the Worldwide Church of God was God's Church and God's Church could not be wrong! But the confidence of many was left in shambles by these prophetic failures which would require a catalog to enumerate.

What happened? What went wrong?

What Is Prophecy?

Before we analyze the reasons behind the prophetic failures of the Worldwide Church of God, let us first ask ourselves—"What is prophecy?"

In the general sense, a prophecy is a forecast. It is a message from God signifying His revealed intent and purpose. God makes His will known in advance so man cannot claim knowledge superior to God's. God does not allow man or man's idols to take credit for revealing the future (Isaiah 48:3–8).

A prophecy is also a burden. It is a charge or responsibility placed upon the one who proclaims it, as well as upon those who receive it (Ezekiel 12:8–11). The pronouncement made by a prophet is called "prophecy" (2 Chronicles 9:29). Some of these pronouncements were canonized; others were not. Many of the prophecies looked forward to terrible events yet to

come. Long-range prophecies foretold Christ's coming (Acts 3:24), the general resurrection (Ezekiel 37:7–10), future deliverance and salvation for God's people, Israel (Ezekiel 38:14–19)—as well as many other prophecies for the last days (Daniel 12:6–9).

In the New Testament sense, prophecy goes beyond the matter of foretelling the future and includes any inspired speaking, regardless of the content (1 Corinthians 14). All the mysterious things of God's Word are included in prophecy (Revelation 10:7). Many long-range prophecies form a part of God's Word (Revelation 22:18–19), and it is His intent that we eventually understand them.

Prophecy is, then, the foretelling of those coming events which signify the intent and purpose of God. Prophecy is the advance knowledge of that which is to take place at some future time, and it is generally not understood until the time of fulfillment.

What Is the Nature of Prophecy?

Generally speaking, prophetic pronouncements are against those to whom they are directed (Jeremiah 28:8–9). Many texts illustrate the reprehensible nature of prophecy. Note, for example, Jeremiah 23:33 and 19:14–15, 1 Kings 22:7–8 and Jeremiah 35:15. Many more could be included.

Since the prophet was the purveyor of God's Truth, it was his duty to make that Truth known. Whenever a prophet was sent, he was sent for a purpose (Jeremiah 1:5, 10, 17). It was his duty to speak that which God had directed him to speak. Thus, the prophet was under obligation to obey. First Kings, chapter thirteen, records an example of what happened to a prophet who refused to carry out instructions.

Many of the recorded prophecies were direct, timely and intended for the specific periods during which they were given. There was little, if any, doubt as to the meaning. The prophecies were fulfilled immediately or shortly thereafter (2 Kings 4:1–7; 20:1–7 and Jeremiah 34:1–6, compared with Jeremiah 39:2, 6–7).

While short-range prophecies could be easily and quickly "checked out" and the credentials of the prophet immediately substantiated, long-range prophecies were another matter—their fulfillment was intended for a future time. The long-range prophecies will be covered in more detail later in this article. Suffice it to say that the substantiation of a prophet during his lifetime rested in the fulfillment of short-range prophecies—not in the interpretation of long-range ones which were for the distant future. Inability to understand this principle has led to much of the prophetic failure of the Worldwide Church of God.

From a pragmatic viewpoint, short-range prophecies were intended to "drive the point home" at the immediate time they were given. Most of these prophecies were powerful warnings for the people of Israel to stop what they were doing wrong. Such warnings (which the prophets by nature of their offices were authorized to make) were either based on general spiritual truths or were specific messages from God (given to specific prophets and directed to specific individuals or peoples).

Since the nation of Israel was God's kingdom during the Old Testament period, short-range prophecies comprised that correction given because of Israel's obstinacy and rebellion. Long-range prophecies, while based on conditions which prevailed at the time, were nevertheless intended for the distant future. The emphasis in long-range prophecies was God's government to come—not God's government which existed at that time. Long-range prophecies often spoke of Jesus Christ, the establishment of the Millennium, and the deliverance of God's people from captivity after the return of Christ. They spoke of the fulfillment of God's plan and the restitution of all things (Acts 3:21). Much of what the prophets said was recorded to become foundational for the establishment of the New Testament church (Ephesians 2:19–20).

Both the short and the long-range prophecies were directed primarily to Israel. Some were directed to Gentile countries as they came in contact with Israel. The bulk of the short-range, as well as many of the long-range prophecies, were intended as indictments for disobedience to the revealed will of God!

God Inspires Prophecy

In speaking God's words, the true prophets were not motivated by their own innate abilities or insight. It was the false prophets who presumed to speak because of their own assumed capabilities.

The Apostle Peter said, "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). The book of Nehemiah tells us, "Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them by thy spirit in thy prophets . . ." (Nehemiah 9:30). It was the prophets who spoke to the fathers in times past (Hebrews 1:1). But they spoke only as they received direct revelation from God and as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (1 Samuel 10:6). Numerous Old Testament examples attest to this fact. See 1 Samuel 10:10–11; 19:20–23; Numbers 11:25–26 and Acts 7:29–34.

So, messages came directly from God (Jeremiah 19:1, 14; 37:6–10) and as the prophet was moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Kings 3:15–20; 2 Chronicles 15:1; Ezekiel 2:2). They could be in the form of either visions, literal words (spoken by God or an angel), or dreams (Isaiah 1:1–2; Amos 1:1; Micah 1:1; Numbers 12:6–8). The prophet was then obliged to speak what had been

revealed to him (Deuteronomy 18:18)—and could have absolute confidence in this revelation (1 Kings 22:28). There is not one example in the entire Bible of a prophet's reading any portion of God's word and being able to foretell the specific future based on what he had read. In every case where prophetic insight was based on reading the recorded Word of God, there was an inspired interpretation of what had already happened or was happening at that given moment! Never were the Scriptures read, then prophetic pronouncements made relative to specific events of the future. Always, when the Scriptures were read the specific event which they described was correctly interpreted. And this interpretation was based on a historical event which had already occurred or was occurring at the time of the interpretation!

This is not to say that general prophetic knowledge or understanding cannot be, or never has been, made known through Bible interpretation. Much of what is recorded as prophecy can be understood in the general sense. But in every case of specific dates associated with prophetic events, it was only after the event happened that the real understanding of the Scriptures came to light! There is not one single Bible example where a future event's specific prophetic date was made known through Bible interpretation! The reason for this will be given later.

Prophesying Is Directly to the People Involved

There are many Bible texts which illustrate that prophesying is directly to the people involved. Jeremiah, chapter nineteen, is an outstanding example. It is clear from the reaction of Pashur, that he understood the words of Jeremiah were intended for him (Jeremiah 19:1–15; 20:1–2). Other examples include Ezekiel 4:7–8; 11:4–13; 21:2–3 and Jeremiah 26:12–13. Ezekiel 11:4–13 is especially noteworthy because of the shocking death of Pelatiah. Jeremiah, chapter twenty-six, should be called to our attention because the prophecy is directed against the princes as well as the people. Several of the middle chapters of Jeremiah prophesied directly against various Gentile lands (Jeremiah 44:1; 46:1–2; 47:1; 48:1; 49:1; and 50:1). The shepherds of Israel are severely rebuked in several chapters (Ezekiel 13, 34; Jeremiah 23), and some of the prophecies indict "all the inhabitants of the earth" (Jeremiah 25:29–30).

Some prophecies are directed toward specific individuals. David often received answers as a result of divine intervention (1 Samuel 22:3–5; 2 Samuel 24:9–14), and prophetic pronouncements were even made against him (2 Samuel 12:10). Many kings received through prophets, direct pronouncements (1 Kings 14:7; 1 Kings 16; 2 Kings 20:5). These direct messages more than substantiated the authority of the prophets. They were given for specific periods of time and were made directly to the individuals involved.

The exception to this rule concerns those prophecies which are intended to have dual fulfillments. Many prophecies are dual—that is, the original (historic) events were to be repeated in the latter days. Because men fail to learn from their predecessors, history repeats itself.

As has been shown, both short and long-range prophecies are included in the Bible. The short-range prophecies teach us how God deals with men and what He expects of them and these prophecies substantiate God. The long-range prophecies teach us how, when men refuse to learn from experience, they bring upon themselves much suffering. Long-range prophecies will substantiate God when they occur but many of them have not yet been fulfilled. The major prophecies yet to be fulfilled are found in that grouping which are historical in nature but were intended to be dual in fulfillment.

There could be no substantiation of a long-range prophecy during the prophet's lifetime. Thus, long-range prophecies were always included as a part of the inspired record. And since that record is now complete, any future prophecies spoken by inspired men of God will be short-range in nature!

Whether short or long-range, prophecies can be substantiated only by their fulfillment. But the clear inference from Scripture is that we can have confidence in the fulfillment of long-range prophecies—since short-range prophecies, spoken by the same prophets, are readily proven. However, one must never assume—because of his own ability to read the Scriptures—that he also has the ability to place dates on specific prophetic events yet to come. The Bible does not substantiate this approach to prophetic insight!

What Are the Duties of Prophets?

Because Israel did not want direct contact with God, Moses was selected to be God's spokesman (Exodus 20:18–19; 25:21–22; Deuteronomy 5:23–27). While the Levites were chosen to be God's ministers at the sanctuary, other men from various tribes were also selected by God—from time to time—to be prophets (Amos 2:11).

Actually, prophets preceded Israel (as a nation) by a considerable period of time. Abraham was a prophet (Genesis 20:7). Enoch, the seventh from Adam, was a prophet (Jude 14). Balaam was a prophet (Numbers 22). Moses himself was a prophet (Numbers 12:6–8). During the period of the judges, prophets were sent from time to time (Judges 6:7–8). Samuel was later established as a prophet (1 Samuel 3:19–20). Many of these prophets spoke short-range prophecies which quickly established them as true servants sent from God.

Without exception, these true servants were to, "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins" (Isaiah 58:1). The primary duty of God's prophets was to warn the people of their sins. It was the true prophets who were unpopular with the people and with the heads of government (2 Kings 17:13–18).

Prophets were chosen for specific missions as the need arose. And whatever capabilities were needful at given times were granted those prophets (1 Kings 13:1–5). While the general duty of prophets was to uphold God's Truth and advise the people of their responsibility to obey, they were also a source of vital information from God (1 Samuel 28:6). In addition, they were God's hewers (Hosea 6:5). They gave advance warnings of what would happen to those who refused to obey God.

Not so with the false prophets. Their aim was to please the people, saying what they wanted to hear (Isaiah 30:9–10). The instruction of a prophet of God to kings required immediate compliance in most cases (2 Chronicles 29:25; Ezra 9:11). Thus, short-range prophecies served to substantiate their credentials as well as accomplish the immediate purpose of God in His dealings with the people of Israel.

Seldom, if ever, did the false prophets order kings to comply with anything God required. Rather, their intention was to ingratiate themselves to the kings for the sake of advantage. Their prophecies were generally vague in nature—or predicated on the distant future—so it would be difficult to "check them out."

Prophets Must Be Chosen and Sent

There is nothing more certain than the fact true prophets had to be chosen and sent. God specifically says ". . . [He] raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazarites . . ." (Amos 2:11). In all likelihood, the majority of God's prophets were not seeking a prophetic office (Amos 7:14–15). No man dare seek this responsibility as far as God is concerned (Zechariah 13:2–5; Hebrews 5:4). While the text in Hebrews 5:4 refers specifically to the office of the high priest, the principle is just as true as far as any prophetic office is concerned.

God says, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet . . ." (Malachi 4:5). It is God who sends His prophets. No man should assume prophetic responsibility—because of an ability to conjure-up a prophetic framework which attempts to fix specific dates and events. God's true prophets do not assume prophetic capability and then say in the face of failure, "Well, I did the best I could." God's true prophets know who backs them.

Jeremiah was chosen before his birth and was given an awesome commission (Jeremiah 1:5). He did not assume. Although Elisha asked for a double portion of God's Spirit to continue Elijah's work (2 Kings 2:9), this could not have been granted without God's approval.

Jesus Christ, referred to as "that prophet" (John 6:14), was chosen and sent by God (Deuteronomy 18:18; Luke 9:35). The Bible commands us to hear Him. Jesus said those who

hear Him will hear His servants (Luke 10:16). It is His words which will judge us in the last day (John 12:48).

Those who have arrogated to themselves "the office of a prophet" would do well to read Jeremiah 23:20–21. This latter-day prophecy is a stern warning against those who have assumed prophetic capability. Since their prophecies did not come to pass, their claims have not been substantiated. The reason their prophecies did not come to pass is that they believed their interpretations of specific prophetic dates and events would be backed-up by God. The reason they thought their interpretations would be backed-up is because they knew true doctrine.

When their prophecies failed, they—like the people who listened to them—became bewildered. And their loss of confidence in God was so complete they discarded revealed doctrine. They failed to distinguish the difference between prophecy and doctrine. Likewise, they failed to distinguish the difference between general prophetic understanding and specific prophetic dates. Had they heeded the words of Jesus they never would have attempted to set dates on prophetic events!

Prophecies Directed Toward Israel

Since the Bible is an Israelitish book, it is natural that the prophecies should be directed toward Israel. Gentiles are addressed secondarily.

However, prophets did not always forecast specific events. Often, their main duty was to warn. Their warnings against the Gentile nations involved the Gentiles as they affected Israel. While prophecies against the entire world will eventually have their fulfillment, the application of Old Testament prophecy is more or less limited to Israel.

The prophecies regarding physical Israel apply also to spiritual Israel—the Church. The Gentile counterpart, spiritually speaking, would be the unconverted.

All Bible prophecy is applicable, in a general sense, to the individual. Many of the prophetic warnings to various groups or nations apply to the individual. Therefore the lessons derived by reading the history of Israel should be heeded by every Christian. The failures of Israel as a nation are today being repeated by the Church. Spiritual Israel (the Church) refuses to heed the warnings of the prophets!

Jeroboam changed God's way of life and the people blindly followed. Today doctrinal committees change God's way of life and the people blindly follow. Prophets warned the people of Israel that God would "spoil" them for their sins. Spiritual Israel is experiencing the same thing today! God has always warned through His prophets and many prophetic warnings for

God's people apply today to the Church. Those with ears to hear had better listen, for the lessons in the Old Testament are for God's people today! It is the revelation of God which should be proclaimed—not ideas from doctrinal committees or prophetic guesses which attempt to set dates on the fulfillment of Bible prophecy! We are going to be judged on the basis of how well we live according to God's law—not how well we solve timetables which seem to prove prophetic insight.

Spiritual Israel is repeating history. Like Israel of old, they are turning from God. And like Israel of old, those who leave God's revealed way of life seldom return. But remember, our entering into salvation (as Israel of old entered into the promised land) will not be determined by our understanding of the specifics about prophecy. The Bible prophecies and their fulfillments are recorded as examples for us today (1Corinthians 10:6, 11; Romans 15:4).

God's people today—the Church, spiritual Israel—have drifted so far from God that even the idea of divine revelation is ridiculed. Most of God's people have forgotten how they were called to a knowledge of the Truth and how they were converted. They are lost in a spiritual wilderness of confusion and doubt. Yes, God says, "My people hath been lost sheep: their shepherds have caused them to go astray . . ." (Jeremiah 50:6). Physical Israel is depicted as being in a state of confusion and bewilderment at the time of Christ's return—and so is spiritual Israel, the Church of God!

Prophecy in the Last Days

Jeremiah 23:20–21 tells us false prophets will be rampant in the last days. The same thing is stated in 2 Peter 2, Revelation 16 and Revelation 19. Because of the times in which we live, these prophets will be able to appeal to what people want to hear (2 Timothy 3:1–5; 4:2–4). Their messages may include statements about the return of Christ. But little or nothing will be said to make people aware of how they are displeasing God—how sin will bring His wrath upon a disobedient world. The truth they bring will be so "watered down" there will be little resemblance to the message Jesus preached: A message about the need to repent and turn from sin—the transgression of God's Law!

The proof of God's true prophets, on the other hand, is as follows: 1) Their "good news" is substantiated by the fulfillment of what they preach. 2) What they say does not contradict the Bible!

Those prophets who contradicted Jeremiah's message (compare Jeremiah 28:1–4 with Jeremiah 29:1–9) wanted prestige, popularity, and the security which comes with having many followers. Why should it be any different today?

False prophets wanted the approbation and approval of "the powers that be." This is made abundantly clear in First Kings, chapter twenty-two. Only Micaiah remained faithful to the Truth. The message of the false prophets was contradictory to that which was preached by Micaiah (1 Kings 22:6, 19). Micaiah was not popular since he refused to yield to "popular opinion."

Jesus warned about workers of "iniquity" (lawlessness) who would prophesy in His name (Matthew 7:21–23). That is, originally they would come as His true prophets, but they would apostatize. Because they began to assume responsibilities and messages not given to them, they would depart from obedience. They would preach from their own self-deception (Jeremiah 14:14), refusing to wait for God to give them divine revelation. And the people—not knowing how to substantiate the messages of the prophets—would be carried away by the esoteric, the unproven, the "inside knowledge."

What many fail to realize is that the long-range Bible prophecies are complete, and God is not interested in substantiating any "prophet" today! Future, short-range prophecies will substantiate the prophets who are God's true representatives, but their prophecies will have to be fulfilled before this can be accomplished.

No "prophet" today understands, except in a general sense, "the times or the seasons" (Acts 1:7). Jesus warned against setting dates (Matthew 24:36). He said only the Father knew the specific times. The Bible says the just shall live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4)—not by understanding the beginnings and terminations of nineteen-year time cycles, as was attempted by many in our parent body.

It is the prophets in God's House who turned to a vain thing (Jeremiah 23:11, 16–17, 32). The spiritual counterpart is obvious from 1 Timothy 3:15. Prophetic revelation comes to those prophets who are patient enough to wait for God to reveal His Truth to them. Those who are impatient conjure-up ideas of their own—ideas which God says are manmade dreams (Jeremiah 29:8–9).

It has been entirely too easy to accept the concepts of those who view themselves as prophets because the substantiation of their prophecies is "for many days." But the real test for those who claim to be true prophets will be their preaching-of and adherence-to the true doctrine (Isaiah 8:20). Those who depart from doctrinal truth cannot be the true prophets of the Eternal God! Not even the performing of miracles by those who claim to be the prophets of God is sufficient proof (Deuteronomy 13:1–3). Only if they adhere to the true doctrine are they the true prophets of God.

Until God directly (in the Bible manner) reveals prophetic truth, it is the prophets duty to preach true doctrine—not to assign prophetic dates, determine time periods or prepare prophetic charts. But false prophets in whatever age they live are allowed by God in order to test His people (Jeremiah 27:15; Deuteronomy 13:3; 1 John 4:1).

At some future date God's true prophets will deliver timely, inspired prophecies (Luke 11:49; Matthew 23:34; Revelation 10:11; 11:3)—and these prophecies will quickly come to pass. Then there will be no doubt who the true servants of God are. Meanwhile, the responsibility which rests heavily on each Christian is to "try the spirits."

Reaction to Prophecy

There are some who are interested in the "unknown," the esoteric. Prophecy has tremendous appeal to these religious hobbyists. But in reality, this is a form of vanity (Jeremiah 23:16). It is because they are not really convinced of any singular truth regarding prophecy that such people do not find prophecy offensive.

There are those, on the other hand, who are immediately incensed at any prophecy—especially if the prophet speaks with authority. We are told in the New Testament, "Despise not prophesyings" (1 Thessalonians 5:20). While prophesying takes on a broader meaning in the New Testament sense—and generally refers to the entire range of inspired preaching—the admonition not to disregard or despise prophesying certainly includes the Old Testament prophecies.

Generally people listen to what they want to hear—to that which is not offensive. Therefore, it was quite common for false prophets to tailor their messages accordingly (Jeremiah 23:36). True prophets, however, faithfully preached what God revealed to them. Consequently, their messages rang with authoritative truth. It is in this respect we begin to see the common reaction—as found in the Old Testament—to prophecies spoken by God's true servants.

The true prophets were a persecuted lot. People—including the authorities—wanted to kill Jeremiah (Jeremiah 26:8–9, 11). Amos was told to get out of the land (Amos 7:12). Urijah was pursued into Egypt, apprehended, then brought back to Judah and executed (Jeremiah 26:20–23)! Many of the true prophets of God were threatened (Jeremiah 11:21). They were told not to prophesy (Amos 2:12). Other examples of their treatment may be noted in Amos 7:10, 1 Kings 22:27 and Jeremiah 32:3.

Jesus said, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! . . . Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets" (Matthew 23:29, 31). The people to whom the prophecies were directed are the ones who turned against the prophets sent to deliver God's warnings. They even accused some of the true prophets of setting-up themselves as prophets (Jeremiah 29:26–27).

The New Testament is full of examples of how God's true servants would be treated (Matthew 5:11–12; 13:57; 23:29, 30–37; Mark 6:4; Luke 6:22; 11:47; 13:34). This is because

man hates truth. Jesus said men love darkness more than light because their deeds are evil (John 3:19). True prophets were never accepted by the people to whom they were sent (John 4:44), and myriad excuses were used to repudiate them (Luke 7:39).

Individual prophets stood alone at times, against the evil and sin so rampant in their day (1 Kings 19:10). Never were the true prophets and their messages accepted by the people of Israel as a whole (2 Chronicles 24:18–19; 36:15–16). Why should it be any different today?

Who Are the False Prophets?

What is very clear in the Old Testament is this: Many false prophets were once true prophets (note Deuteronomy 13:1–3). This text does not refer to Gentile "prophets" who would come into the land of Israel. On the contrary, the warning is against those from among the people of Israel who, after gaining reputations as prophets, would tend to deviate. It is a command to disregard anyone—regardless of his office—who turns from God or His Way.

We should not assume all false prophets within the land of Israel were first established as true prophets. When Israel departed from Judah, wholesale apostasy was set-up in Israel—Baal worship became the national religion! No doubt many "prophets" who were never established with a reputation of any kind were appointed to the ranks of these religions. The Levites left Israel when Jeroboam appointed priests from the lowest classes of the people. So, the priests of Baal and the prophets of the groves had little competition except for brief encounters with the true prophets.

When Israel began as a nation under Moses, national apostasy was not the established religion. Apostasy begins a step at a time. The beginning of the apostasy within the nation of Israel (long before the split between Israel and Judah) came from the ranks of the established servants of God.

Few people acknowledge or accept a spiritual leader who is unknown. Even in the case of Balaam, the leaders of Moab sought for a man who was a renowned prophet—one who could accomplish what they wanted. When the Danites began their apostasy, they chose a Levite who was already established and recognized as a priest (Judges 18:19). There is evidence that Simon of Acts, chapter eight, was the one later known in secular history, as Simon Magus. His reputation was already well established before he encountered the apostles (Acts 8:9–11). There are a number of texts in the book of Jeremiah which show the relationship between false prophets and their established reputations. Some of these false leaders were even priests (note Jeremiah 2:8). It was those who handle the law who influenced and established false doctrine.

When the priesthood began to apostatize it was no problem for the prophets to "join the bandwagon" (Jeremiah 5:31). Those who turned from the Truth originally given continued to use their established authority (Jeremiah 14:14; notice Jeremiah 23, in particular). The apostasy started in God's House (Jeremiah 23:11; see 1 Timothy 3:15 for the spiritual counterpart). It was the prophets of Jerusalem who were responsible for profaneness (v. 15)—Jerusalem was the headquarters of the national religion.

To back-up their authority (Jeremiah 23:30), the false prophets relied upon the established word of others, claiming it was the word of God (v. 31). They paid no deference to original truth, but rather made light of it (v. 32). They perverted the words of the living God (v. 36)—one cannot pervert what one did not receive as original truth.

So it was the priests and prophets—who had access to God's House—who were the ones culpable before God (Jeremiah 26:7; 28:5). The struggle recorded in Jeremiah chapters twenty-eight and twenty-nine was between Jeremiah—a true prophet who was not accepted as God's representative—and Hananiah, the "prophet" who was. It was because God placed His stamp of approval on Jeremiah and killed Hananiah that Jeremiah was sustained in his cause. These texts are not talking about Gentile prophets who came into Israel. They are talking about influential and established religious leaders within Israel who turned from the Truth and from the responsibility given them! They were the prophets and priests of Israel (Jeremiah 32:32)! It was these religious leaders within Israel who were willing to compromise standards and truth for the sake of popularity (Ezekiel 13:2, 6, 22). They conjured-up their own concepts of right and wrong, ridiculed divine revelation and made it easy for the people to accept watered-down versions of God's requirements. They were "liberators" who delivered God's people from "bondage" (Jeremiah 23:33–34). They led the people away from the Truth, not away from the nation of Israel.

The spiritual parallel is found in Second Thessalonians, chapter two. The "falling away" here, is not from a church but from the Truth.

Ezekiel 22:25–26 shows a conspiracy, for the sake of financial security, to turn from God's way of life. It was the prophets and priests who rejected knowledge and polluted all God had established (Zephaniah 3:4; Hosea 4:6). The spiritual counterpart in modern times should be obvious for all to see!

What Causes Prophets to Go Astray?

What is the motivation behind this spiritual perversion and deviation from God's Truth?

The false prophets of the Bible had no real dedication—no love for the Truth. Their frivolous approach and conduct, especially in relationship to changing doctrine, was appalling

(Jeremiah 23:13–15). They were flippant in attitude and conviction (v. 32). They parroted one another for the sake of advantage within their own ranks (v. 30). Popularity, security and financial gain came about by "jumping on the bandwagon." They lacked self-control and discipline in their personal lives (Isaiah 28:7–8). They knew what the people wanted to hear and made every effort to please them (Ezekiel 13:2–8; Isaiah 30:9). They conjured-up their own ideas of what was right and wrong (Lamentations 2:14). Their primary concern was financial security (Micah 3:11). Many of them were "sold" on their own abilities and accomplishments. They somehow felt they had a special relationship with God which gave them the right to interpret situations as they saw fit (Ezekiel 13:8–9). They practiced "situation ethics." They created images for themselves and felt they were the exception to the rule, that they were above the law (Jeremiah 23:14). They had little real concern for the people (Ezekiel 34:1–5). Therefore, they went off into spiritual blindness from which there was little chance of recovery (Isaiah 29:9–11).

Since their primary desire was to sustain their position and popularity, they were not willing to wait for spiritual direction from God. They conjured-up their own prophecies and opposed the true servants of God who disagreed with them. Since the New Testament warns of an end-time apostasy and since human nature has not changed in the last 3,000 years, we should expect the same factors to be the cause of apostasy in the latter days!

Why Prophets Persist in Error

The New Testament tells us false prophets will be rampant in the latter days (Matthew 24:5, 11, 24). Paul tells us, ". . . evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:13).

One of the most difficult things for human beings to do is to admit error. Prophets who are presumptuous are no exception to this rule. Deuteronomy, chapter eighteen, tells us it is a natural proclivity for some prophets to presume (v. 20). When their prophecies fail to materialize, it is clear they have assumed prophetic insight not given by God (v. 22). Those who presume are often intent upon maintaining their image. They are determined to uphold "their own way" (Ezekiel 22:31).

In addition, once an individual takes the wrong position on a matter, it is almost impossible for him to change. This is demonstrated in the account of Nehemiah (chapter six). The enemies of God found it impossible to alter their position once they made a commitment. Even the hired false-prophet could not recognize the error of which he was guilty.

Human nature is made-up of a good degree of vanity. It is not easy for an individual with an established reputation to give it up. Once a recognized prophet goes astray, he will continue to maintain control over those within his sphere of influence (Ezekiel 13:23). He will never

willingly free anyone from his grasp. He will seek constantly to substantiate himself and to maintain credibility. He will make every effort to influence people to look up to him, in spite of the fact that God warns against such a practice (Jeremiah 29:8–9). Preaching the Truth—faithfully speaking only that which God has given him—is of little importance to him. What is important is his need to maintain a following in order to substantiate the self (Jeremiah 23:25–32). If the false prophet can get people to trust him, there will be little need to emphasize trust in God (Jeremiah 28:15).

The popularity of prophets will be maintained by their preaching what the people want to hear (Ezekiel 11:2–3; Isaiah 30:10). Their personal advantage will be guaranteed as long as they keep the people happy. So, these false prophets will be "liberators"—allowing people to do essentially what they want to do while still thinking of themselves as God's people (Ezekiel 22:23–26).

What Source Inspires False Prophets?

The prophet Ezekiel says, referring to false prophets, "They have seen vanity and lying divination, saying, The Lord saith: and the Lord hath not sent them . . ." (Ezekiel 13:6). The source of their inspiration is largely what they have conjured-up out of their own minds—often as a result of demonic influence (Ezekiel 13:7–8). Whether all their dreams were inspired by the spirit world, the Bible does not say. However, it does make plain that a large part of their inspiration was their own imagination (Ezekiel 21:29; 13:23; Zechariah 10:2). Many prophets who came under the influence of Baal-worship derived much of their "insight" directly from this false religion (Jeremiah 2:8; 23:27). They walked after the imagination of their own hearts (Jeremiah 23:17). So, in many cases their inspiration was their own—it was not of God! And all too frequently the source of their inspiration was the evil spirit world (1 Samuel 18:10)!

One thing is certain: The prophecies of false prophets do not come to pass. Though many of their prophecies will be vague and "subject to alteration and revision" as the events fail to materialize, do not be led into believing they are of God. The true prophets will speak clear-cut, decisive messages, which will be substantiated in short order by their fulfillment. One will not have to wait "many days" to see them come to pass.

Why God Allows False Prophets

False prophets have been responsible for untold human suffering and misery. Certainly God could stop their evil works should He choose to do so. But it is obvious from the Bible that God does not will this at the present time. Not until the millennium will false prophesying utterly cease (Zechariah 13:5).

Why does God allow false prophets today?

One reason is to abet the evil desires of men. Note an example in First Kings, chapter twenty-two. God said, ". . . Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead? . . ." (1 Kings 22:20). The account shows how God used false prophets, inspired by a lying spirit (demon), to deceive Ahab's prophets—who in turn convinced him to go to war with Syria. God had determined to slay Ahab and used demons, along with false prophets, to accomplish His purpose.

Another reason God permits false prophets is to test His people. This is specifically stated in Deuteronomy 13:3. The process of character-building calls for repeated tests and false prophets are often used to try God's people. This is corroborated in the New Testament by statements in 1 Corinthians 11:19 and 1 John 4:1. As stated earlier, many people are influenced by the esoteric, by the unproven or by signs, wonders and miracles. They do not possess a sense of dedication to truth. They are influenced by what they see—not by what they believe. But God warns, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20).

What is important to God is adherence to His Truth. False prophets mislead those not dedicated to God's Truth and thereby serve to separate the wheat from the tares.

Those who follow human beings rather than God will pay a terrible price. First Kings, chapter twelve, shows that the beginning of the end for Israel was in following Jeroboam's sin. No one is blessed for disobedience to God or in any desire to please and honor men above Him. What God decrees, man must do—regardless of what seems right (Jeremiah 27:16–22). We must never listen to the disguised logic of anyone—regardless of who that person may be—who attempts to turn us from the way of God (Galatians 1:8–9)!

Try the Prophets

God's people are admonished not to hearken to the prophets who speak visions out of their own hearts—visions which the Bible says are nothing short of deceit (Jeremiah 23:16, 30). Christians are told to ". . . try the spirits whether they are of God . . ." (1 John 4:1).

So, how can one know who is speaking the truth and who is not?

Enough is said in the Old Testament to make it plain who God's true prophets are and who is speaking the truth. Remember, the prophet who speaks by God's authority and performs miracles is capable of deviating from the commission given him. So these credentials of themselves are not sufficient proof (Deuteronomy 13:3; 18:20).

The first thing to be analyzed is whether the prophecies of the prophet come to pass (Deuteronomy 18:22). If what the prophet says does not come to pass when he says it will, then he has been presumptuous and has not been inspired by God! He has been inspired by the imagination of his own heart (Jeremiah 23:16) and is not to be feared (Deuteronomy 18:22).

Next, the true prophet of God generally prophesies evil (Jeremiah 28:8). Therefore, the prophet who prophesies peace must especially be watched. It is only when his prophecy comes to pass that he can be trusted as a true prophet of God (Jeremiah 28:9). If he speaks only of good, drawing no correlation between faulty living and its consequences, he is not speaking for God (Galatians 1:10).

Also, the true prophet must stand on God's merits, not his own. Consequently, he will be careful of what he says where prophecy is concerned (Jeremiah 23:28). What he says will be substantiated by God because the prophet will not speak his own ideas. God will let none of His words fall to the ground (1 Samuel 3:19–20). The true prophet will not officially speculate, guess, surmise or in any way leave the impression that his personal ideas are from God. There will be no doubt in his own mind—or in the minds of those who listen to him—that the words he speaks are from God. This is because the Bible shows how God reveals Himself to His prophets. And it is not by any prophet's conjuring-up what he thinks the Bible says (as a result of his own personal Bible study). God says He speaks to His prophets either directly or through dreams and visions (Numbers 12:6–8). On other occasions He speaks to His prophets by angels (Daniel 9:21). But there is not one instance in the entire Bible where God reveals the future to any prophet by that individual prophet's own Bible study!

True prophets do not presume. They wait for God to reveal specific answers regarding the future (Jeremiah 42:1–4). And their prophecies are specific—to a specific people or person and for a specific period of time. The only exception to this involves long-range Biblical prophecies where specific answers are reserved for the last days. And even these prophecies are for specific peoples and specific times. The only difference between short and long-range prophecies is that short-range prophecies can be quickly substantiated, while long-range ones are not understood until the time of their fulfillment.

While true prophets are human and willingly admit their incapacities (Daniel 9:4), they nevertheless are sent to warn the people about sin (Lamentations 2:14). A basic function of true prophets is to turn the people back to God (1 Kings 18:37). It is the false prophets who fail to point out the sins of the people.

True prophets will never attempt to gain their own following in order to substantiate their own ideas about prophecy (Zechariah 1:1–6). While they desire to see good outcomes and are not against good reports, they are realistic enough to know that most people will not return but will have to suffer the penalty for sin (Jeremiah 28:5–9). Therefore, true prophets do not cater

to whims and desires of the people (v. 8). They do not turn from revealed truth (Hosea 4:6) as do false prophets, for the sake of popularity. True prophets do not yield to pressure or give up their convictions because the majority disagrees with what they say (1 Kings 22:28). They know they must stand for truth and the revelation given them regardless of what the cost may be to them personally (1 Kings 22:27). Therefore, true prophets will be persecuted (1 Kings 18:4; Matthew 23:31; 1 Thessalonians 2:15).

True Prophets Must Be Respected

It is these true prophets who must be respected. The Bible tells us there will be true prophets of God extant in the latter days (Joel 2:28). Since they will receive direct revelations, any prophecies given by them will be specific, to-the-point and fulfilled without delay. These prophets will not revise, reinterpret or alter prophecies which do not come to pass. There will be no need to alter anything.

False prophets are easily recognized by the failure of their prophecies and by their constant revisions, alterations, reinterpretations and changes. They constantly alter the dates of their prophecies as one prophetic failure follows another. Those who follow false prophets go from one state of confusion to another and never seem to learn. They fail to grasp the simple truth that when a prophecy fails to come to pass, the prophet has presumed—he is a false prophet and must not be followed.

It is those who recognize this truth—and believe the true prophets—who shall prosper and be established (2 Chronicles 20:20). These have their feet on solid ground. They realize it is a terrible mistake to reject all of God's servants because of the sins of some—or to assume that because certain prophetic statements failed there will be no true prophets of God today.

What must be understood is that God's prophets carried out many functions and duties apart from prophesying future events. The long-range prophecies have already been recorded in the Bible. The only future prophecies will be those short-range prophecies which will substantiate God and His true servants to a world which has all but departed from every concept of spiritual truth. Those who assumed prophetic capability and attempted to set times, seasons and dates on those long-range prophetic events which form a part of God's word should have known better. Jesus said this should not be done!

Jesus Christ is a Prophet whom we are to hear (Deuteronomy 18:18; Matthew 17:5). He said, "He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me" (Matthew 10:40). Further, Jesus said His true servants would be here on this earth at the time of His return (Matthew 24:45–46). These true servants must not be rejected because of the recent sins of some in the ministry or because of erroneous doctrinal changes. It is these two factors,

along with the prophetic failure of 1972, which have destroyed much confidence in the ministry of Jesus Christ today.

Israel of old suffered serious consequences for refusing to heed God's true prophets (Daniel 9:6). Will we be guilty of the same thing today? Remember, there have been true prophets of God in all periods of time and there are true prophets of God on this earth today. No one knows who they are, but God will make them known at some future time. They may not necessarily "prophecy" future events, but they will be warning against the consequences of sin. They will be faithful to God's Truth and they will be turning God's scattered sheep back to the fold. They will not attempt to gain a following by delving into the unknown or by generating fear and excitement through prophetic prognostications. They will adhere to the Truth originally given and they will not assume prophetic capability not given directly by God. They will wait for God to make His will known regarding future events. They know from the Bible, God does not make future events known through personal Bible study. Furthermore, they realize doctrinal truth must be evaluated on the basis of the past—what was given originally—not on the basis of the emotional present (Zechariah 7:3–7). It is prophetic failure, along with unauthorized doctrinal changes, which has dismayed so many of God's people today. But those whose hearts are right will seek out the true prophets of God because they know Jesus meant what He said when He stated, "Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing [remaining loyal to his commitment]" (Matthew 24:46).

Day of Revealing Coming

God says the day of revealing is coming, when it will be known who His true servants are and who they are not (Malachi 3:18). This prophecy, specifically for the latter days, is yet to be fulfilled. Those who have presumed prophetic responsibility will then be ashamed (Micah 3:5–7; Jeremiah 2:26; 4:9).

God is testing His people now to see who will be faithful to His Truth. He called His true people to a knowledge of the Truth, not to an organization which has lost its sense of direction. God is finding out who will worship Him only (Deuteronomy 6:13).

The majority of God's true servants have turned to vanity—to that which will not profit spiritually. They continue, on the basis of a past image, to substantiate a way of life contrary to God's Law. It was the misuse of long-range prophecies—by interpretations that could not be substantiated—which ensnared many. Until these interpretations failed, most of God's people had nothing by which to judge their veracity. And by that time they could no longer see the significance of prophetic failure. There had been no need, up to that point, to question men or the organization since doctrine had been correct. But prophetic failure, along with unauthorized doctrinal changes, was the last straw for many. They lost confidence in everything—in God, in

Christ, in the Bible and in the Truth. Those in the ministry who could not differentiate between doctrine and prophetic dates were the first ones to agitate for doctrinal changes.

Jesus said God's Word is absolute (Matthew 24:35). Doctrine cannot be changed if it is from God. Prophetic dates are not doctrine, except in those cases where the Bible gives specific times for prophetic fulfillment (an example is Judah's seventy-year captivity). Prophetic dates, as a whole, are not revealed in God's word (the reason for this will be discussed later). Therefore, those who proffer dates are merely guessing. And when these dates fail to materialize one should recognize prophetic presumption for what it is. Bona fide prophets will not make guesses. Any future prophecies by true prophets will be specific and short-range. They will not be long-range prophecies which cannot be substantiated for years to come. And the failure of short-range prophecy will be a warning to those who have eyes to see. The failure of any prophecy means that the prophet was presumptuous!

It is vanity which motivates most false prophets, as well as those who are attracted by what they say. It is the result of misunderstanding what the Bible says about the purpose and use of prophecy. False prophets prosper because there are people willing to listen—people who feel supposed prophetic understanding and insight makes them spiritually superior to others. The plethora of prophets in our day amply attests to this fact. If Ezekiel 13:2 and Jeremiah 27:9–10, 14 do not apply to our day, then neither does 1 Corinthians 10:11 or Romans 15:4!

It is the presumptuous prophets who will answer to God for their presumption (Deuteronomy 13:5; Lamentations 2:20). But the people who listen to them are just as guilty. Deceived prophets are deceived because they choose to be, and the people to whom they preach are deceived also because they choose to be (Isaiah 30:9–12; Jeremiah 5:14). It is largely those who at one time were the true servants of God who have become false servants (Acts 20:28–30; 2 Peter 2:1). These prophets are condemned by the very words they preach—and the day of revealing is coming, when the entire world will know what they have done (Ezekiel 13:9, 14; Jeremiah 5:19)!

Who Will Understand Prophecy?

Jesus said, "But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only" (Matthew 24:36). Jesus was referring to His Second Coming, as well as the consummation of the age (Matthew 24:3). Those who formerly believed that this text limited their prophetic insight with respect to the day and hour—but not the year and month—are now embarrassed. That is, the accepted interpretation was that the day and hour, only, were hidden. They thought they knew the year and month—but did they? It is not for Christians to know the times and the seasons. God has reserved this for Himself alone (Acts 1:7). If man is not permitted to know the "times and seasons" or the "day and hour," then obviously there is little—relative to prophetic times—that he can know or understand.

But Christians can know the general times in which they are living (Matthew 24:32–34). Jesus said that when the prophetic events given in His Olivet prophecy come to pass, Christians can know the end is near. The Bible does not substantiate the idea that one can extrapolate from God's word, dates and times for the fulfillment of prophecy. We are told that ". . . no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20). While this has been generally understood in the light of interpreting doctrine, let us not assume it does not apply to one's interpretation of long-range prophecies!

Bible understanding comes as a direct result of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26). The revelation of the coming and purpose of Jesus Christ, which was foretold by the prophets, has been understood only since His first coming (Ephesians 3:1–6; Romans 16:25–26). General prophetic truth, being a part of God's inspired word, can be understood as a result of obedience to doctrine. Understanding comes to those who are called of God and who are obedient (2 Thessalonians 2:13–14). It was only the true disciples who were given understanding of the prophecies concerning Christ (John 12:16; Colossians 1:25–27).

However, even the disciples did not understand the prophecies surrounding Jesus Christ until those prophecies were revealed to them. There is still much to be revealed (1 Corinthians 13:9–10). If we understood the time and season or the day and hour, why would Jesus tell us to watch (Matthew 24:42)? Those who wish to argue may say this statement (in Matthew 24:42) refers to the day and hour only. But, if the disciples could not even guess the year, why should we assume they would know the day or the hour? Yes, the truth is plain. It was never God's intention for His people to know specific dates or times concerning prophecy, let alone the day or hour of Christ's imminent return.

There have been rare occurrences when God made specific events known in advance. But these were given by direct revelation and the prophecies were generally very short-range (for example, 1 Samuel 9:15–16).

God's children can know the general times in which they live (Job 24:1)—although the world as a whole is oblivious to this fact. Those whose eyes are open (spiritually) know by the trend of world affairs that the time is reasonably short (1 Thessalonians 5:1–2). But how God views shortness relative to the fulfillment of prophecy is a matter only He understands. Christians can understand the overall framework of prophecy and will have a general idea of the times in which they live, but specific dates are another matter entirely!

When Will Prophecy Be Understood?

There are those today who deny the general times in which we live (2 Peter 3:3). They are scoffers who have put God's Truth aside in order to justify ungodly lifestyles. Their confidence in specific prophetic dates was shattered by the prophetic failure of 1972. Now they believe

nothing. What they failed to realize is that prophecy generally is to be understood after the event happens! Note Job 27:11–12; 36:22–25; Psalms 58:10–11 and Ezekiel 33:33. These scriptures show that the significance of the prophetic event was grasped after it happened. It is not God's intention that specific events about prophecy be known in advance. The just shall live by faith, not by prophetic insight (Habakkuk 2:4)! Do not construe Amos 3:7 to mean that God makes His prophets to understand the meaning of prophecy in advance. This text simply states God makes His secrets known to His servants, the prophets. The Bible reveals elsewhere this is generally after the event happens.

The allotted span of man's life is said to be seventy years. What purpose could possibly be served by a man's understanding specific prophetic dates hundreds of years ahead of his time when he would not be there to witness the events? There is a reason why the prophets themselves did not understand what they recorded. Prophetic details are made known to the generation they affect after the prophetic events happen (Matthew 24:33–34; 1 Peter 1:12)!

Times and seasons are in the hands of God (Ezekiel 12:21–28). When He desires to make His prophets known He sets up circumstances to do so (2 Kings 5:8). No true prophet of God has ever made himself known by his individual Bible study and subsequent prophetic prognostications based on that study. In every case involving true prophets, God revealed Himself directly by one of the several means previously mentioned. There is no other way authorized in the Bible! Prophecy comes by direct revelation only!

The New Testament makes it especially plain that prophecy is understood after the event happens (Matthew 13:11–17). We shall see this demonstrated shortly by the prophecies regarding Jesus Christ. The text in Matthew 13:11–17 refers to the spiritual blindness engulfing Israel with regard to Christ. The meaning of the prophecies concerning Him were not understood until His appearance.

Prophecy is sealed until the time God decides to make it known (Revelation 22:6, 10; Daniel 12:9). It is made known by the fulfillment of the event (Matthew 24:15). Understanding of prophecy, then, is the revelation of an event which has transpired! Only after the events happened did Jesus make plain to His disciples the many prophecies concerning Himself (Luke 24:44–46). He did not emphasize specifics about the future, long-range prophecies which He made. Instead, He gave prophetic understanding by explaining the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning Himself. He revealed no key and gave no insight to interpreting prophecies for the future. Rather, He said the times and seasons are in the hands of God the Father.

The apostles corroborated what Jesus taught. They recognized the fulfillment of specific Old Testament prophecies as applied to the events which were taking place in their time (Acts 2:16; 3:24–25). Philip understood the prophecies concerning Christ because Christ had fulfilled the very prophecies the Ethiopian eunuch was questioning.

While it is not wrong to study Bible prophecies, Christians should not assume capabilities not intended for them. They must not arrogate to themselves the ability to foretell when specific prophecies will take place. This is presumptuous and any person who does so will eventually be embarrassed by the failure of his prophecies. God does not reveal prophecy by any individual's conjuring up, as a result of his own study, various ideas concerning dates. Prophecy comes by direct revelation, not by the imagination of a human heart! We must wait for God to reveal the specific details of prophecy, and it is generally by fulfillment that He makes the details known (Luke 21:20, 29–30).

Those who scoff today at Bible prophecy—because they became disillusioned with "prophets" who assumed to have all the answers—had better take another look. God never intended the specifics of prophecies to be known until after the events transpired. There was indeed something very significant about 1972, but it was not what people had been told to expect. No one could have known until after 1972 what the significance of that year was. But because many saw the failures of specific prophecies—failures which were the result of men's arrogating to themselves capabilities not given—they repudiated all prophecy. They did not comprehend when it is that specific prophecies are to be understood. Specific prophecies are not to be understood until the events happen. No truth is more apparent in the Bible!

Prophets Did Not Understand What They Recorded

Not even the prophets, themselves, understood what they recorded (Daniel 12:8–10; 1 Peter 1:10–12)! There was no reason for them to understand the specific dates and meanings of the long-range prophecies which they had written. There was no problem with short-range prophecies because they were fulfilled in a very short period of time. Many of these short-range prophecies are recorded in God's Word merely as an attestation to the authenticity of the prophets. They were not intended for the future. However, long-range prophecies are another matter—understanding them depends solely on their fulfillment. Had God intended to make known their times of fulfillment, He would have given this knowledge to the prophets. But He did not do so. And not only did God generally not give the prophets specific times for the fulfillment of prophecy—He did not even give them comprehension as to the significance. Understanding of the prophecies concerning Christ did not occur until His first appearance. This is a highly significant point in understanding Bible prophecy.

Christ's Appearance—Proof of When Prophecy Understood

Christ said, ". . . all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me" (Luke 24:44). Christ did not discredit the prophets. His life was a substantiation of what the prophets said about Him. His life was regulated in the sense that He was under the authority of the prophets. He was named "Jesus" in

order to fulfill prophecy (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23). He was born in Bethlehem in order to fulfill prophecy (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:5–6). His parents fled to Egypt with Him in order to fulfill prophecy (Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:15). Herod slew the children in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16–17), which was a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15. Jesus dwelt in Capernaum (Matthew 4:13) so that the words of Isaiah 9:1–2 could be fulfilled. His preaching and approach to persecution (Matthew 12:14–20) were a fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1–3. He spoke in parables (Matthew 13:34–35) in order to fulfill Psalm 78:2. These are a few examples of the many prophecies which substantiate Jesus as the Christ and, conversely, substantiate the prophets as God's servants. But relative to understanding the fulfillment of Bible prophecy, none of these Old Testament texts were understood until they were fulfilled in the life of Christ! Had the people or the authorities understood the significance of the Scriptures, they would have known many detailed facts about the life of Jesus Christ—and they would have known He was the Messiah! However, it was not God's purpose to reveal the meaning of these prophecies until they occurred!

As an adjunct to the life of Christ, those associated with Him did not realize they too were fulfilling prophecy (some examples of this are found in Matthew 21:1–6; 26:25–26; 27:3–10 and Luke 3:2–5). Not one of these individuals assumed he was fulfilling anything. None of them had been a party to the fulfillment of prophecy until after the event happened!

God backed up the prophecies of His true prophets in the fulfillment of the life of Jesus Christ (Luke 18:31; 24:44; Acts 26:22–23). Even the significance of Christ's mission was not understood until after His death (Romans 16:25–26). And what was true concerning Christ's first coming is just as true concerning His Second Coming. The majority of the prophecies leading up to the return of Jesus Christ will not be understood until after they occur. The book of Revelation, which contains many prophecies not yet understood, will be revealed very near the end of this present age—close to or at the return of Jesus Christ (Revelation 22:10).

Bible Prophecies—What Value Today?

Since the Bible makes it plain that the specific times and dates of Biblical prophecy will not be known or understood until their fulfillment, what then is the value of prophecy?

First of all, there is much that can be understood in regard to the overall framework of prophecy. There is no reason to question past understanding of Bible prophecy on the basis of prophetic assumptions which failed to materialize. There is no reason to question God or His Word concerning the general historical truth of prophecy for the last days. What should be questioned is the attempt—by those appearing on the scene, either now or later—to assign dates to specific prophetic events. Unless or until one receives direct revelation from God which can be substantiated by the fulfillment of that revelation, there is no need to be alarmed. Prophecy tells us many false prophets will appear in the last days (Matthew 24:24). Each Christian needs to know how to recognize those who are God's true servants and those who are not.

Next, the Bible foretells an apostasy in the latter days (2 Thessalonians 2:2–4; Ezekiel 22:25–28; 2 Peter 2:1–3; 2 Timothy 3:1, 5). Apostasy cannot occur unless truth is first known. There was no way apostasy could be recognized until it happened. The revealed doctrine of God was repudiated because of prophetic failure and a subsequent loss of confidence. Had the specific events of prophecy occurred as predicted, there would have been no reason to question doctrine. It was prophetic failure which brought about apostasy (unauthorized doctrinal changes of 1973–74) in the Church of God. But, in fact, prophetic failure actually substantiated the doctrine. Apostasy was foretold (2 Thessalonians 2).

Thirdly, prophecy serves as a necessary warning to those who are willing to heed—and the fulfillment of prophecy serves as a necessary chastisement to those who refuse to listen. It is in the coming tribulation that the majority of God's people will finally repent (Jeremiah 36:3; 42:2–4; Ezekiel 2:5). Assumption of prophetic responsibility by some today does not void the overall understanding of prophecy which was believed in the Church of God. Because specific dates did not materialize is insufficient reason to reject Bible prophecies in general. There are ample prophetic warnings concerning the consequences of sin. God always deals in the same way with His people. Those who, today, refuse to heed the warnings given in the prophecies will suffer the same consequences as those who refused to heed them during the Old Testament period.

There will be short-range prophecies spoken by God's true prophets in the future. Their fulfillment will transpire rapidly. Those chosen to serve God in that capacity will know their commission, not by what they have done, but by what God has done (Revelation 11). They will not need to conjure-up title or office for themselves in that day!

The Bible says not to despise (disregard) prophesyings (1 Thessalonians 5:20). While the New Testament sense of prophesying means inspired utterance, this does not exclude the understanding of prophecies found in both Old and New Testaments. The New Testament Church is built upon a foundation which includes the prophets (Ephesians 2:20). Some New Testament prophets uttered short-range prophecies which were recorded merely as examples for us. However, the inspired New Testament also includes long-range prophecies. The same penalties for disobedience apply in the New Testament as applied in the Old (Acts 13:40).

In a general sense, all prophecy applies to the individual (Luke 16:29). Those who have rejected prophecy rejected Christ, for the recorded prophecies are as much a part of God's word (Christ was the total word, personified) as are the specific words of Jesus (Matthew 4:4). Those who refuse to accept His prophets refuse to accept Christ (Matthew 10:40–41). Prophets of the last days, who speak the words of God, must not be rejected. Those who despise what they say will pay dearly for their attitude of contempt and disrespect toward Christ (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11; Romans 15:4; 2 Peter 1:19)! Prophecies will be revealed in the last days (Revelation 22:10). Will the fulfillment of these prophecies overtake you with the belated realization that you have rejected the words of Christ as spoken by His true servants?

Those who "prophecy" should be listened-to with an open mind. But the listener should be cognizant of how prophecy is revealed. True prophets do not conjure-up ideas from the imaginations of their own hearts based on conclusions derived from Bible study. Bible prophecy is not revealed by arranging Biblical texts and assigning dates. It is revealed by direct revelation only—and is substantiated by fulfillment. Short-range prophecy is substantiated by fulfillment shortly after it is given, while long-range prophecy is substantiated and understood only after it happens. Any prophecy which does not come to pass or which needs "revision" or adjustment, is not from God. Rather, it is directly from the imagination of the speaker who gave it! In that case, God warns, neither the prophecy nor the "prophet" should be given serious consideration (Deuteronomy 18:22; 13:3).

Prophecy can serve as a basis for faith. This is because Bible prophecies demonstrate the infallibility of God's Word. Fulfilled prophecy is a proof of God's existence and the reliability of His Word. But it is largely the short-range prophecies (and some few long-range prophecies) which have served to demonstrate this (Luke 1:70; Acts 24:14; 2 Peter 3:1–2). Many of the long-range prophecies are yet to be fulfilled, but the Christian can have confidence in their fulfillment by what has already transpired in relationship to other prophecies. The Christian need only recognize those limitations with regard to how prophetic revelation is given and how long-range prophecies are understood. With this knowledge, one can have complete confidence in Bible prophecy and its authenticity. It is those who have deviated—and arrogated to themselves prophetic capability—who have confused and shattered the faith of God's people!

Keep in mind that Bible prophecy is not an end in itself. Prophecy shall cease (1 Corinthians 13:8). Prophecy is not the ultimate in divine truth. Paul said the outstanding truth is love. Love is epitomized by obedience to God, as exemplified by the Ten Commandments—love to God and love to fellow man.

Do not confuse doctrine—which is absolute—with prophetic dates. It was this confusion which caused many to stumble. Those who reject true doctrine should not be relied upon for spiritual guidance regardless of the credibility of their prophecies. Prophets must be in agreement with God's word in order to represent God (Isaiah 8:20). Those who have rejected true, revealed doctrine—on the basis of prophetic failures—have committed a double wrong. Date revisions which followed prophetic failures must be utterly rejected! Not once does God justify prophetic utterances which fail to materialize. Neither does He countenance unscriptural doctrinal changes. God, alone, knows the times!

Prophecy Irrevocable

God's word is absolute! Jesus said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

Jesus also said, ". . . Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). The prophecies of the Bible are the word of God. They shall not fail. The "scriptures of the prophets" are the source by which God's Truth will be made known to the world (Romans 16:26). It is the interpretations and guesswork of men, attempting to fix dates on prophetic events, which shall fail! But God's prophecies shall not fail. It is men—assuming what they do not understand—who attempt to alter the prophecies. They are not willing to wait for God to reveal the specific times and seasons.

The Bible does not substantiate setting prophetic dates. It is the general truth of God's Word to which we must adhere—not assumed ideas of men who delve into areas God never intended. We must adhere to the Truth we were taught (Hebrews 3:1–2, 12–13). Like Israel of old, those who turn from God's Truth place their faith in men rather than God (Hebrews 4:2). When they become disillusioned with men they turn from God! But God tells us through the Apostle John that we must walk in what we heard from the beginning (2 John 6). It is then, only, we can be sure of God's word and can have the necessary confidence to leave prophecy in His hands. He will see that it is fulfilled in its own time. Prophecy is irrevocable because it is a part of God's word!

Conclusion

It was the prophetic binge of the past that was so disillusioning to many of God's people. With the prophetic failure of 1972 and consequential doctrinal upheaval, thousands completely lost confidence in God and turned from the way of life delivered them. Had the Church of God understood how prophetic revelation comes about—had it understood that comprehending prophecy comes after the prophecy is fulfilled—the disillusionment never would have occurred. But people were attracted to the esoteric, the unknown. They did not want to live by faith. They wanted something tangible on which to build the future. They did not realize prophecy was never intended to be the premise of one's convictions.

It is God's way of life that is important. Prophecy has limitations but God's way of life does not. There is no limit to the expression of love for God and love for fellow man.

Prophetic pronouncements are of value only when they are given by God and have His certification. Then they will come to pass and nothing can stop them. It was the misuse and misunderstanding of prophecy which led God's people astray. Prophecy was the catalyst used to incite fear and to keep the membership involved in "the work." But it should now be obvious to all that until God directly reveals a matter, prophetic dates are only guesswork. God warns that those who become involved with the intricacies of prophecy are only catering to their own vanity.

He says the prophets "make you vain" (Jeremiah 23:16). They cause you to forget God (v. 27). Could this be due to disillusionment which results when the dates they set fail to materialize?

Those who are "burned out" on prophecy and have turned from God's way of life are not likely to return until the fulfillment of drastic events which are prophesied for the future. Their disillusionment with prophecy (because of the failure of men to substantiate dates) will not circumvent the tribulation. It is then they will remember the Truth!

Those who follow every prophetic turn the Church takes—because they have been led to believe "the Church is responsible"—will have a rude awakening. False prophets in Old Testament times suffered the consequences of their actions, but so did the people who followed them.

Why should it be any different today?

There is no validity to the concept that the leader, only, is accountable for error—that the individual member should follow the leadership regardless of the teaching. Those who know the Truth must stand by that Truth regardless of the cost!

The Bible warns us not to disregard prophesyings. Being based on spiritual truths, prophecies are general examples from which we can learn today. They are warnings—with specific follow-up prophecies which God uses to substantiate Himself and His true prophets.

But, we must wait for God to reveal the time of fulfillment. We must never assume we have the capability to read the mind of God. Prophecyings—like signs and wonders—do not, of themselves, necessarily certify those prophets as God's. The Bible tells us those who prophesy must teach and practice the word and the law of God (Isaiah 8:20; compare Matthew 24:24 and Revelation 13:13–15).

Our responsibility today is to watch and pray (Matthew 24:42–44; Luke 21:36). Be ready—in the proper spiritual condition—at all times. Know Christ (John 17:7) and the way of life He wants you to live (Matthew 5:48). Be aware of the general times in which we live but do not attempt to set prophetic dates (2 Timothy 3:1; Matthew 24:36). It is not for Christians to know the times or the seasons (Acts 1:7). The specifics regarding the fulfillment of prophecy are in the hands of God! Eventually all will be understood—but we must wait for the purpose of God to be worked out in this world (Luke 12:2).

Remember, witnessing an event does not necessarily mean one understands it. Many prophetic events were witnessed in the past by thousands of people who had no realization of the significance of those events (Matthew 13:14–15). Understanding comes by revelation (Matthew 13:17; Luke 5:22–24; 10:24; 1 Corinthians 2:9–14).

Far too many of God's people allowed the misuse of prophecy to destroy their faith. The Bible says the just shall live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4). But they did not want to live by faith—they wanted to live by sight. Thus, their disillusionment with men led to their rejection of God.

It is God's Word—and His way of life—which will judge us in the last day. Do not make the mistake of confusing prophetic dates with the sure word of God. God's Word is absolute. The mistakes and assumptions of men cannot alter it!