

The Church of God in Prophecy

What does the abomination of desolation mean? The Church of God in Prophecy

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Jesus Christ said that the Church of God would endure to the very end of this present age. “I am with you always,” Christ says to His true followers, “*even to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20). What does the future hold for Christ’s church?

Jesus Christ promised that He would build His church, and that “the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). And indeed, Jesus *did* build His church. He began building it in the first century, A.D., when He called and trained His first disciples, and sent them to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God to all nations.

But what is the “church” Jesus said He would build? What does “church” mean?

Most people think of buildings with steeples and stained-glass windows when they hear the word “church.” Or, they think of some “religious” activity, such as Sunday school or Sunday morning worship services consisting of prayers, liturgy, and a sermon or homily.

The Greek term translated “church” in the New Testament was not restricted to religious gatherings, but could refer to *any* kind of assembly. It could refer to a “town meeting,” a violent mob, a gathering of worshipers at a local synagogue, or any kind of gathering. The word is *ecclesia* (related to “ecclesiastical” and “ecclesial,” which refer to church-related matters), and literally means “assembly.”

So Jesus said that He would *call an assembly* of believers who would proclaim His true gospel to the world as a witness to all nations. The New Testament shows, however, that Christ’s true assembly—the true Church of God—is not restricted to geographical or organizational boundaries, but consists of all in whom the Spirit of God dwells.

To the members of the Church of God at Rome, the apostle Paul writes, “But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, *he is not His*” (Romans 8:9). Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ dwelling within him is not one of Christ’s own, and if he is not Christ’s he is *not a member of Christ’s assembly*, which is the “church of the living God” (1 Timothy 3:15).

Foundation of Christ’s Church

Christ began laying the foundation for His church when He called His first disciples. “Follow me,” He said to the fishermen Simon and Andrew, “and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). In other words, Simon and Andrew, along with the other apostles and disciples Jesus would call, would be the instruments whereby Christ would build His church (or gather His assembly). Just as the fishermen cast their nets into the sea and drew in hundreds of fish, the disciples of Jesus would proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom throughout the world, and through the Kingdom message would draw thousands of human beings into Christ’s assembly of believers.

Christ first called twelve apostles, and then added many other disciples to form a foundational core group for a much larger influx of believers in the days to follow. After His resurrection, but before drawing thousands into His assembly of believers, Christ appeared to several of those He had chosen as foundational leaders and “breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 19:22).

The disciples received the Holy Spirit then and there. Just a few days earlier Christ had told them that the Holy Spirit “dwells *with* you and will be [in days to come] *in* you” (John 14:17). At that time, the Spirit was “with” the disciples as long as Jesus (who had the Spirit without measure—John 3:34) was with them, but would soon be *in* them, and would impart special *gifts* to them, enabling them to fulfill the commission to “Go...and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19,20).

Thus the “ground breaking” for the New Testament church was complete. The first disciples had been selected and prepared for a life of ministry. Soon God would add *thousands* to Christ’s newly formed assembly.

Phase 2: Downpour of the Spirit

The first wave of massive growth took place on the Day of Pentecost, just seven weeks after the death and resurrection of Christ.

“When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they [the disciples, totaling about 120 at this point—Acts 1:15] were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all *filled with the Holy Spirit* and began to speak with other tongues [real languages], as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1–4).

Soon, the miraculous work of the Spirit attracted the attention of others who were at Jerusalem for the festival.

“And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them [the disciples] speak in his own language. Then they were

all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, ‘Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?’ . . . So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘Whatever could this mean?’” (Acts 2:5–12).

When someone suggested that the disciples must have had too much wine, Peter spoke out:

“For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is that spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘*And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams, and on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy. . . . And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*’” (verses 15–21).

Peter’s words were not spoken in vain. The Spirit used the inspired apostle’s words in leading many to see the error of their ways and to turn to God in wholehearted repentance and embrace Jesus as both Master and Messiah. “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day *about three thousand souls were added to them*” (verse 41).

In the days that followed, thousands more were added to the rapidly growing assembly of believers (Acts 2:47; 4:4). Jesus was keeping His promise. He was building His church!

Was Joel’s Prophecy Fulfilled ‘Once and For All Time’?

Many prophecies of Scripture can have only one fulfillment. Once they are fulfilled, there is no “second fulfillment.” Examples can be found in both the Old Testament and the New: Isaiah’s prophecy about the Messiah’s suffering and death (Isaiah 53) was fulfilled once and for all time in the suffering and death of Jesus, and will have no further fulfillments in other instances of suffering and death. Christ’s prophecy about a time of tribulation “such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:21) cannot have more than one fulfillment.

But not all prophecies of Scripture are restricted to a fulfillment occurring exhaustively in a single time and location. Joel’s prophecy of the downpour of God’s Spirit is such a prophecy. It was fulfilled to some extent in the first-century formation of the New Testament church, but God’s promise to pour out His Spirit “on all flesh” *has not been exhausted!*

The time is coming when God will once again pour out His Spirit; when once again *great miracles* will take place; when once again the lame will walk, the blind will see, and the deaf will hear; when once again *thousands* will turn to God in heart-rending repentance, just as they did on the Day of Pentecost in the first century.

What the End-Time Church Can Expect

As mentioned earlier, Jesus promised His true disciples that He would be with them “always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Since His original disciples died many centuries ago, Jesus (through the Holy Spirit), in keeping His promise, must have been with each successive generation of true disciples over the past 2,000 years. He is still with His disciples today, and, as He promised, will be with them to the very close of this age.

Jesus, speaking of a time when He would no longer be physically present, promises His disciples that He would be with them in Spirit. “I will not leave you orphans,” He promised; “I will come to you” (John 14:18). He further promised, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (verse 23).

Of course, God the Father and Jesus Christ will eventually dwell with the people of God on this earth (Revelation 21–22). But in the passage above Jesus is speaking primarily of the Father and Son dwelling *spiritually* in the church. This is another way of saying, “I will not leave My people orphans; I will come to them and be with them, empowering and motivating them, until the end of the age, at which time I will come again and gather them into My everlasting Kingdom.”

Paul said to the church at Corinth, “For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: *‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people’*” (2 Corinthians 6:16).

The church is the “temple of the living God” because where the church is, there is God. Christ is always with His disciples—just as He promised.

What is the point of all this?

If Jesus Christ promised His first-century disciples that He would never leave or forsake them, that He would guide them through the indwelling Holy Spirit, and that He would be with them until the end of the age, then we can certainly expect that He will be with, inspire, and empower the end-time church just as He did His early followers.

God always provides an adequate witness before pouring out His wrath upon sinful man. He sent prophets to ancient Israel, warning the people to turn from their sins and return to the Lord through heart-rending repentance, lest they face the horrifying wrath of God.

Christ said to the unbelieving Jews of His day, “Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation” (Matthew 23:34–36).

Within forty years of Christ’s warning, Jerusalem was overrun by the armies of General Titus and the temple was destroyed—but not without a powerful witness. From the day the Spirit came pouring from heaven, one wonderful miracle after another occurred under the hands of the apostles. The lame walked, the blind received their sight, the sick were made well, and demons were cast out. “And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people” (Acts 5:12).

The apostles’ central *message* (that “this Jesus, whom you crucified,” is “both Lord and Christ”—Acts 2:36) and accompanying *warning* (“Be saved from this perverse generation”—verse 39) were powerfully confirmed and intensified by the awesome *miracles* that accompanied the downpour of the Spirit.

In the future—perhaps the very *near* future—God will once again intervene in the affairs of this world. He will wage war against the wicked, and will send Jesus Christ to this earth to *judge* the nations, conquer His enemies, and establish His Kingdom.

Do we suppose that such a time will occur without an adequate witness? Do we think that the day of message-confirming miracles has passed?

No! God’s promise to pour out His Spirit *was not exhausted* in the days of the apostles. We have every reason to believe that He will *again* pour out His Spirit and perform mighty works through His servants. Once again, the blind will receive their sight, the deaf will hear, and the lame will walk. Once again, great signs and miracles will be performed under the hands of God’s true servants.

As Joel’s prophecy says, “Your sons and your daughters shall *prophesy*, your young men shall *see visions*, your old men shall *dream dreams*. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days, and *they shall prophesy*” (Acts 2:17,18). Prophetic dreams and visions are a part of the signs and wonders accompanying the outpouring of the Spirit.

The next part of the prophecy further suggests that the downpour of the Spirit (with accompanying signs and miracles) was not fully and finally fulfilled in the days of the apostles. The passage continues:

“I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: Blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, *before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord*. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (verses 19–21).

Notice that the downpour of the Spirit is associated with awesome celestial and terrestrial signs that precede the “great and awesome day of the Lord.” This can only be talking

about the very *time of the end*—the turbulent time that will lead directly to *the Second Coming of Jesus Christ*.

It is clear, then, that God’s promise to pour His Spirit “on all flesh” was *not exhausted* in the time of the apostles. If the first-century fulfillment is a preview of the end-time fulfillment of this prophecy, then here’s what we can expect in days ahead: The Church of God will grow by leaps and bounds. Literally *thousands* will turn to God in repentance, will be baptized for the remission of sins, and will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Great *miracles* will occur, including the healing of many diseases, the expulsion of demons from the possessed, and perhaps even the raising of the dead. All these happened during the time of Christ and the apostles; there’s no reason to think they will not happen again, and *every* reason to think they will.

Church To Accomplish Mission

The resurrected Christ commissioned His disciples to go everywhere proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God.

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’” (Matthew 28:18–20).

Notice the facts that are stated here: First, Jesus assures His disciples that He has all authority in heaven and earth. Second, He commissions His disciples to go everywhere preaching the gospel and making disciples. Third, He promises to be with His disciples to the close of the age.

These three facts, when looked at as a whole, mean that Jesus, who has *all authority* in heaven and earth, will *inspire* and *empower* His true followers as they obey His command to go and make disciples of all nations. This means that the work of the true Church of God is not merely the work of men, but is *the work of the living Christ!*

Think about it. If God’s people today fail to obey Christ’s command to preach the gospel and make disciples—if they treat the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19,20) as if it applied only to the first-century disciples, or excuse themselves by saying that the “two witnesses” of Revelation 11 will fulfill it—then Christ will call upon *someone else* to do the job!

Either way, the work of God *will* be accomplished. Christ Himself prophesied that His church would successfully fulfill the Great Commission.

Let’s notice what Jesus said when His disciples asked Him about the “sign” of His coming and of the end of the age:

“And Jesus answered and said to them: ‘Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ [or, “...saying that I, *Jesus*, am the Christ”], and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And *this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations*, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:4–14).

Notice that Jesus informs His disciples of several conditions that will precede the final tribulation and Second Advent. First, the true disciples will be persecuted and even martyred. Second, false prophets will arise—apparently from *within* the church—and will betray and deceive many. But in spite of these conditions, Jesus says, the true church will successfully fulfill the commission of preaching the gospel to all nations.

Matthew 24 speaks of two kinds of tribulation: the “great tribulation” that immediately follows the appearance of the “abomination of desolation” in Jerusalem (verses 15–21); and the tribulation that will befall the saints (verse 9). The latter has occurred repeatedly down through the centuries, and will intensify toward the end of the age. Nevertheless, Jesus prophesies success for the end-time church. The gospel *will* be preached far and wide; the church *will* fulfill her commission.

The final martyrdom of saints is revealed when the “fifth seal” of the prophetic scroll is opened:

“When He [the Lamb—Christ] opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony they held” (Revelation 6:9).

These were the early Christian martyrs, or perhaps all martyrs from the days of the apostles to the present. Like the blood of righteous Abel crying unto God from the ground (Genesis 4:10), the “souls” of these martyrs cry out to the Lord for justice: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Revelation 6:10).

“Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, *who would be killed as they were*, was completed” (verse 11).

Those yet to be killed are called “fellow servants” and “brethren” of the earlier martyrs, who had given their lives “for the word of God and for the testimony [the true gospel] they held.” They are the *last generation* of Christian martyrs. Like their predecessors,

they will lay down their lives for the Word of God and for the message of Christ and His Kingdom.

But no matter how intense the persecution, the church will complete her task of proclaiming the gospel to all nations before the end comes.

Remember, when persecution set in on the early church, the gospel penetrated new areas and the number of disciples *increased*. Can we expect anything less in the time of the end?

No ‘Secret Rapture’

Today, the idea of escaping the end-time tribulation by way of a “secret rapture” is popular among evangelicals, but the Bible teaches no such doctrine. (For a full study on this subject, write for a free copy of our booklet, *Should You Expect A ‘Secret Rapture’?*) Rather, the New Testament shows that truly converted Christians—men and women of deep and abiding faith, who are filled with the Spirit of God, and who hope and yearn for the coming of their Lord—will still be on the earth at the time the “Antichrist” (“man of sin,” or “lawless one”) appears (see 2 Thessalonians 1:1–2:12).

Make no mistake; the church will be “caught up” to meet Christ as He descends from heaven (1 Thessalonians 4:15–17), but this event takes place some few years *after* the Antichrist arrives on the scene.

Notice the events surrounding the Second Coming of Christ:

1. The faithful saints will be given rest from their troubles when Christ appears (1 Thessalonians 1:7).
2. The wicked—“those who obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ”—will be destroyed at the same time the faithful saints are given rest (verses 7–9).
3. The Antichrist, or “lawless one,” will be destroyed “with the brightness of His coming” (1 Thessalonians 2:8)—that is, at the same time the above two events occur.

Plainly, the reward of the saints and punishment of the wicked are associated with the same event—“when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven” (1:7), “when He comes, in that Day” (1:10), “with the brightness of His coming” (2:8). This scenario hardly leaves room for a secret, pretribulational rapture.

An honest investigation also reveals that the passage does not envision “left behind” saints, or men and women who are converted *after* Christ comes secretly for the church. The context is critical here. Paul is speaking to the faithful saints of the Thessalonian church (and, by association, the Church of God in general), *not* to the unconverted or half-converted. Listen to his description, and see if these sound like the spiritually impotent or unregenerate:

“We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because *your faith grows exceedingly*, and *the love of every one of you all abounds* toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for *your patience and faith* in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels” (1 Thessalonians 1:3–7).

A people whose faith “grows exceedingly,” whose love “abounds” toward others, and who are known for their outstanding “patience and faith” as they endure “persecutions and tribulations” are hardly “lukewarm” Christians who are not really serious about living their faith. Nor are they Christians “in name only.”

No, these are *real* Christians, true followers of Jesus Christ, and Paul did not dissuade them from believing that they would live right into the time of the Antichrist. Why, then, should anyone today think that all true Christians will be snatched out of this world and taken to heaven at the beginning of the tribulation and reign of Antichrist?

Plainly, the idea of the church being snatched away to escape tribulation under the reign of Antichrist was completely foreign to Paul’s mind.

The Remnant Church

In Revelation 12, the devil is unsuccessful in his attempt to destroy Christ when He is born (verses 4,5). He also fails to destroy the “woman” who gave birth to Christ (verses 13,14). Enraged, the devil goes off “to make war with the rest of her [the woman’s] offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (verse 17).

Who are the rest (or “remnant”—KJV) of the woman’s offspring? Christ was her *first* offspring; the *rest* of her offspring must be Christ’s brothers and sisters—the Spirit-begotten members of the family of God, which is the Church of the Living God.

The “rest of her offspring” is the *last generation* of the true church. Members of this end-time body of believers are not weak-willed, compromising antinomians who cling to a phony Messiah, but are those who *keep God’s Ten Commandments and hold firmly to the true teachings of Jesus Christ*.

Revelation 13 continues the saga of Satan’s pursuit of the end-time saints. In this chapter, the devil summons a “beast” from the sea (verse 1). The beast has “seven heads and ten horns” and represents Antichrist and his kingdom. A second beast rises from the earth, and is allied with the first beast (verses 11,12).

The sea beast “opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven. *It was given to him to make war with the*

saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation” (verses 6,7).

This ruler of this blasphemous system can be none other than the Antichrist, the “man of sin,” the “son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” (1 Thessalonians 2:3,4). This is the “lawless one,” whose coming “is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish” (verses 9,10). His authority is not limited to an isolated area, but reaches every nation on earth.

The land beast is the idolatrous “false prophet” (Revelation 16:13; 19:20; 20:10) who “causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast” (Revelation 13:12). He has power to kill all who will not worship the image of the first beast (verse 15).

Christ warns, “If anyone has an ear, let him hear. He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity; he who kills with the sword must be killed with the sword. *Here is the patience and the faith of the saints*” (verses 9,10).

The devil-inspired Antichrist and his idolatrous cohort, the “false prophet,” will not rest as long as there are faithful Christians on the earth. They will hunt them down like wild animals and kill all who refuse to reject God’s commandments and renounce their loyalty to Jesus Christ.

In the end, Christ will defeat the Antichrist and his armies, and will grant immortality to the saints. But between now and then, it is up to us to prepare ourselves for the exciting yet turbulent times ahead.

The Two Witnesses

No discussion on the end-time church would be complete without mention of the “two witnesses” of Revelation 11. We will not attempt to guess their identities or whether they are someplace on the earth today, for many have foolishly attempted to identify these enigmatic figures but have always been proven wrong. We don’t know where they are from, what their nationality is, what race they are, or how old they are. We only know what Scripture reveals.

Rather than quote the entire passage here, we encourage you to read the entire eleventh chapter of Revelation. As you read, you should note the following:

The ministry of the two witnesses is concentrated in Jerusalem (verses 1,2,8). The text nowhere says that others are not preaching the truth in other places. In fact, the persecution of the end-time “remnant” (Revelation 12,13) would not likely occur if the people of God remained silent throughout the reign of the Antichrist.

The miracles that occur during the ministry of the two prophets are comparable to the miracles God performed through Moses and Elijah (verse 6). One obvious message here is that the two witnesses stand for what the names of Moses and Elijah stand for. “Moses” is associated with the part of Scripture known as “the Law,” and Elijah is associated with the portion of Scripture called “the Prophets.” The two prophets of Revelation 11, then, proclaim the central message of *the Law and the Prophets*.

And what is the central message of the Law and the Prophets?

“And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He [the risen Christ] expounded to them [the disciples] in *all the Scriptures* the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27). He said to them, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” Having said this, “He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (verses 44,45).

The ministry of the two prophets of Revelation 11 is a part of the end-time witness and warning. They will draw the attention of the international community (verses 9,10), but there is no reason to believe that they alone will be doing the work of God throughout the entire period of three and one-half years (verse 3).

What You Can Do

Knowing that there is a real devil who “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8), that “in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1), and “that in the last days perilous times will come” (2 Timothy 3:1), we need to make sure that we are always “watching,” or remaining in a state of preparedness, never letting our guard down.

The apostle Paul puts it this way:

“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:10–18).

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