

**Preparing for our Future**  
**Feast of Tabernacles**  
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October 12, 2014

Brethren, this time of the year, we in the Church of God very much tend to focus on looking at the future, what the future holds for us, and preparing for our role in that future because we all know that the fall holy days picture prophetic events in the plan of God. Especially the fall holy days are very much future prophetic events that we look forward to. In doing that this time of year, appropriately so, we tend to look very much forward at what the future holds and preparing for our role in that future. Specifically if we look forward at the Millennium itself, it's a fantastic picture. It's exciting. It's fun just to talk about and just to imagine what it's going to be like and to talk about it. But today in the sermon we're going to talk about the subject of preparing for our future. In fact if you want a title for this sermon, that's the title of this sermon,

Preparing for our Future

However, what we're going to do is take a little bit of a different take on this. Instead of looking specifically at the Millennium, what we're going to look at is our more immediate future. As Jesus Christ tells us to have a role—what we're picturing here in the Millennium, Last Great Day, and other things we look forward to—we have to successfully endure to the end. And we have to look forward to enduring through what we have to face from today until Christ returns to have a role in that Millennium and to be a part of that picture.

As I mentioned, when we look specifically at the prophecies of the Millennium, it's a fantastic picture. It is fun just to talk about because it is such a positive, exciting picture. What we're going to see today though is when we look forward into what the church of God is going to face between today and Christ's return, that's a much different picture. That's a sobering, downright ugly picture of what we need to endure through between now and then so that we can successfully have a role in that beautiful picture of the future in the Millennium. Again, keep in mind as we look through all of this, Jesus Christ assures us that He will be with us to the end and those that endure to the end are going to receive God's Kingdom. They're going to receive an exciting future to go forward. But what we have to endure through between now and then, again, is not as pretty of a picture. To be blunt about it, it's a downright ugly picture. So what we're going to do here is take a look at this and what the Bible tells us about it.

To start off with, let's turn over to Matthew chapter 24. We're going to look at a common scripture we tend to look at when we're looking at the end time and things of that nature. Matthew 24, and we're going to start reading in verse 9, but before we do that, let me just summarize what's led up to this particular section of scripture.

This chapter starts off with the apostles asking Christ, you might say, the age old question “How much longer do we have and when’s the end going to come?” The subject’s been on the minds of not only the apostles then but probably every generation of the Church of God since then. “How long is it going to be? When can we set the date? And, of course, Christ doesn’t answer that question. Quite frankly, He makes it clear throughout His statements throughout the Olivet Prophecy and even in the beginning of the Book of Acts that He didn’t know that information. He couldn’t tell them when that was. That was on such a “need to know basis” that only the Father knew. And He (Christ) couldn’t share that.

But what He tells them is He starts looking at major things that are going to happen between then and the end. He starts off summarizing major events in the world in general. He says there are going to be wars, going to be rumors of wars. There are going to be natural disasters. You’re going to see lots of these things happen.

But then He has a section here specifically addressing the Church of God and that’s an important point as we’re going to see reading through this. The reason I say that is I’ve been in the Church of God my entire life. My parents were baptized before I was born. A number of those years, a couple of the scriptures we’re going to read through here I’ve heard oftentimes applied to “the world in general” you might say. What we’re going to see here is this section of scripture is specifically referring to the Church of God and I’ll demonstrate that as we go through here. Start up in verse 9.

**Matthew 24:9.** *"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake.*

*10) And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another.*

*11) Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many.*

*12) And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.*

*13) But he who endures to the end shall be saved. (NKJV)*

Now why do I say all of this is specifically referring to the Church of God? Well, let’s just analyze it. He starts off with saying, “You will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake.” This is Christ talking. Obviously who are the only people who could be hated for Christ’s name’s sake? That would be His followers, right? It would only be logical that that’s who He’s referring to.

This section of scripture ended with, “He who endures to the end shall be saved.” We’re talking about spiritual salvation, are we not? The only people who could be saved are those how have been offered salvation. That only makes sense.

The scripture before that:

*12) And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. (NKJV)*

The Greek word for “love” here is agape. Agape is a spiritual form of love that, again, you receive through the holy spirit. The only people capable of having their agape love grow cold are those who had agape love in the first place, which you have to receive through the holy spirit. We are specifically talking about the Church of God. That’s very obvious here.

Now notice here in verse 10, it says:

*10) And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. (NKJV)*

Now in recent years I’ve oftentimes heard this particular scripture explained in referring to the environment we see in the Church of God today. And understand why people come to that confusion. As we’re going to see today as we dissect this, the environment we see in the Church of God today does not even begin to speak to what this particular scripture is describing. And we’re going to analyze that and come up with that. But the reason this is oftentimes referred to as the environment today is if you look back at the Church of God in our recent history, about twenty to twenty-five years ago, I think it could be said that the vast majority of people God was working with were primarily in one organization. I’m sure there were more than that but you could probably count the number of Church of God organizations on your fingers and you may not have needed them all. Again, that’s not an exact number, I’m just estimating, but you get the idea. It was a small number of groups. Here we are twenty to twenty-five years later and that number is in the hundreds. It would probably be very difficult to even quantify how many Church of God organizations are out there. It’s a very divided scattered environment.

We also have a lot of infighting. We have groups pointing fingers and condemning one another. We have friendships that busted up, families busted up over these types of things. You see lots of division. So you could understand why people would look at this and say, “That’s what this is describing.”

But the key to understanding this scripture is understanding the Greek words that are being referred to here because specifically if we look at the English words “offended” and “betray,” we tend to use those words in a pretty broad context in our society today. What we’re going to see as we look at the Greek words here is they have very specific meanings that don’t really equate with how we tend to throw these words around in our culture today in English.

Now let’s start off with the word “offended.” In today’s culture, you hear that word a lot. Do we not? Everybody is offended by something and what does that typically mean when we use that word? It oftentimes come down to someone is emotionally upset or emotionally hurt by words or actions of another person. That’s basically what we’re saying. We could say, “I was offended by that” or “I found that offensive.” We’re basically saying, “That hurt my feelings. I felt wounded by what this person said or did.”

That is not what is being said here in Greek. To demonstrate this, the Greek word here is *scandalizo*. It's transliterated as s-k-a-n-d-a-l-i-z-o. It's Strong's # 4624. And I'm going to give you a definition from it out of The Complete Word Study Dictionary of the New Testament by Spiro Zodhiates. Now Spiro Zodhiates has a more extensive write-up on this word than what I'm going to read to you today. I'm just reading to you excerpts of this but you'll get the core of what this word is saying by what I'm going to read here today. To quote Zodhiates, he defines this word as:

*To cause to stumble and fall.... In the NT, figuratively to be a stumbling block to someone, to cause to stumble at or in something to give a cause of offense to someone ... to cause to offend, lead astray, lead into sin, be a stumbling block or the occasion of one's sinning ... to be offended, be led astray or into sin, fall away from the truth.*

So what we're talking about here when He says "Many will be offended," He's saying "Many will fall into sin; fall away from the truth." He is speaking here to a significant attrition rate among the Church of God. That's what He is talking about. This isn't just a lot of people will get their feelings hurt and get mad at each other. This is just talking about falling into sin, falling away from the truth.

Now notice this continued on with:

*10) And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. (NKJV)*

Now let's look at what it means "to betray." Now again, that's another English word we tend to use in a broad context. Just to demonstrate that, when you look at how we tend to use the word "betray" in English, we'll oftentimes use that in the context like "This person used to be my friend and we were close and now they don't talk to me anymore," or "They talk bad about me to other people and they treat me badly. I feel 'betrayed' by that person because they were my friend." What we refer to is "betraying" a confidence. "I shared personal private information with this person that I intended for them to keep quiet. They blabbed it to a lot of people. They embarrassed and humiliated me and they 'betrayed' me. They betrayed my confidence." Those are ways that we tend to use that particular word in English in our society.

What we're going to find here is that the Greek meaning of the word that this was translated from has a very specific meaning. Now again, I'm going to quote from *the Complete Word Study Dictionary of the New Testament* by Spiro Zodhiates. The Greek word here is *paradidomi*, p-a-r-a-d-i-d-o-m-i. It's Strong's #3860. And again I'm only reading a portion of Zodhiates' write-up on this, but you'll get a very clear definition here. He defines it as:

*To deliver over or up to the power of someone.  
(I) Spoken of persons delivered over with evil intent to the power or authority of others as to magistrates for trial or condemnation...*

Now, if you understand that particular definition, this is a whole different idea than “I shared private information with this person and they blabbed it and embarrassed me.” This is saying “plotting with evil intent to turn someone over to the authorities for trial or condemnation.” If you look in the New Testament where we see the English word “betray” or “betrayed” or various versions of the word “betray,” what you’ll find is in every case this is the Greek word that it’s translated from.

You’ll also find, if you analyze that, it is used in basically two contexts. The majority of the time it is referring to Christ’s betrayal. Now if you think about how that is used, you realize that ties very directly or exactly with this definition. Christ was treated badly by lots of people. His name was slandered by lots of people. You might say he was stabbed in the back by lots of people, but that’s not what this is referring to when it’s used in the Bible. When you see the Bible refer to Christ’s betrayal, it is specifically referring to the actions of Judas Iscariot. Now think about what did Judas Iscariot do? He plotted with evil intent to turn Him over to the authorities for trial or condemnation. He betrayed Christ to His death. Judas did exactly what the Greek word means here.

But the other context this is used in when it’s translated as “betray” is in the Olivet Prophecy. It’s used three times. The first time is what we just read here Matthew. But if we look at Mark and Luke’s use of this, it becomes very clear the betrayal they’re talking about because if you read the context, there is no question. It’s obviously referring to being betrayed to your death. Now to look at this, turn over to Mark chapter 13. We’re going to start reading in verse 11.

**Mark 13:11.** *But when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. (NKJV)*

Now notice verse 12.

*12) Now brother will betray brother to death, ... (NKJV)*

What kind of betrayal are we talking about? Being betrayed to your death. This isn’t that you were a close friend and now you’re cold to me and won’t talk to me.

*12b) ... and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. (NKJV)*

There’s no question what’s being stated here and what “betray” means. Now turn with me over to Luke chapter 21.

**Luke 21:12.** *But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake.*

*13) But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony.*

*14) Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer;*

*15) for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist.*

*16) You will be betrayed ... (NKJV)*

Notice how this word is used.

*16b) ... even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. (NKJV)*

So again, what is this referring to? We're talking about plotting with evil intent to turn someone over to the authorities for trial or condemnation. We're not talking about "You were my friend and you're treating me coldly" or "You blabbed information I talked about." We're talking about a very specific meaning.

Now when we think about this type of betrayal .... And I'm sure over the years, if you've been in the church for many years, you've read through these prophecies and you've talked about the end-times and what that might be like. When we talk about this type of betrayal, we normally think of it in the context of your unconverted relatives, your co-workers, your neighbors—people of that nature—betraying you. And that's accurate. In Mark and Luke, that's exactly what they're saying.

But notice what Matthew was saying, "And many shall be offended, fall into sin, fall away from the truth and shall betray one another and shall hate one another." Who is "one another"? We are talking about church members doing this to each other. That is what he is referring to. That's why when I say "This is a very ugly picture," this is ugly. We haven't seen anything yet. It's a sad picture when you look back to what the Church of God looked like twenty to twenty-five years ago and we see the survivors and the condition they are in today. But, brethren, we haven't seen anything yet. When we look at Matthew 24, it's a much uglier picture than what you're seeing around you today.

Consider one other concept as well when we look at the end here. Flip over to Luke chapter 18 and we're going to break into the context here. This is the Parable of the Persistent Widow or it's oftentimes referred to as the Widow Before the Unjust Judge. The point Christ is making here is being persistent in praying to God, not losing heart, and continually going to God with your needs. In explaining all of this, let's break into verse 6 here. We're going to just read the next couple of verses, but I want you to particularly notice verse 8.

**Luke 18:6.** *Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said.*

*7) And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?*

*8) I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. ... (NKJV)*

Now notice this last sentence.

*8b) ... Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" (NKJV)*

First of all, the only people capable of having the faith He's referring to is the Church of God. Right? The people, who have received His holy spirit, but notice what Christ is saying here. "Even amongst that group, when I return am I going to find much faith on the earth amongst these people?" We're seeing a picture here of an ugly attrition rate. Just logically think about the picture that's being analyzed here. This is pretty ugly. This is what we have to endure through between now and Christ's return.

Again, I know this is a depressing picture but keep in mind, as Christ even summed up this part of Matthew, He said, "He who endures to the end shall be saved." As many of you have heard me put it, "It's the feel good, happy ending." It's Revelation 21:4. I won't turn there but that is where everybody lives happily ever after and it lasts forever. It's a beautiful picture, but what happens between now and then is pretty ugly if you think about this. How does it get this bad? How does this come about? I think we need to really be aware of this, so again, because we want to be survivors. We want to make it through this and be the ones who hear "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Come and inherit the Kingdom of God." We want the feel good, happy ending. We don't want to be an attrition statistic. That's the reason I'm giving this sermon. I don't want any of you to be an attrition statistic. That's why I'm up here saying this.

But let's ask the question: How does it get this bad? Those of you who know me well, know one of my favorite quotes is "The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior." Rick and Dorothy are over there grinning, they've heard me say it so many times. Let's utilize this particular principle in analyzing this because it's a very good principle in human nature in general. It applies to individuals and to groups because human nature doesn't tend to change. Once you start noticing, we, as humans, tend to repeat patterns and we just keep doing it again and again. That's, quite frankly, if you look in 1 Corinthians that's why the Old Testament happened. Not only why that was recorded but why it happened because God wanted that to be a teaching tool for us because He knew, their behavior, we would learn from it because human beings don't change. We tend to just keep doing the same things over and over again.

So, let's ask the question. Let's learn from our history. How did we get to where we are today? Again, if you look back twenty to twenty-five years ago, at least physically speaking, you could say within the Church of God, there was a great deal of unity. And we didn't see the divided and scattered environment that we have today. Again, at that time, you could probably count the number of Church of God organizations on your fingers and may not have needed all of them. The vast majority of God's people were primarily in one organization. And today, here twenty-five years later, it's divided, it's scattered and our numbers have dropped substantially. How did that happen?

The Bible answers that question for us. There were a number of dynamics involved in that process and I'm certainly not going to cover all of them. But the Bible points to

some very important dynamics that it primarily holds responsible for how this came about. Turn with me over to Ezekiel chapter 34. Ezekiel 34 is very much a prophecy that we can refer to as dualistic—in other words, having more than one application. It definitely refers to the physical nation of Israel, the physical descendants of Jacob and the nations that they became and what happened to them. It also refers to the Church of God because remember this refers to the “shepherds of God” and to “His sheep.” It’s referring to His people and to the ministry as His shepherds. Let’s notice what it says here because this gives us a great deal of insight into how we got from where we were twenty to twenty-five years ago to where we are today. We’re going to learn from history and project forward.

- Ezekiel 34:1.** *And the word of the Lord came to me, saying,*
- 2) *"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?"*
  - 3) *You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock.*
  - 4) *The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them.*
  - 5) *So they were scattered ... (NKJV)*

This is how God’s sheep wound up scattered. He’s giving us the answer.

- 5b) ... because there was no shepherd; ... (NKJV)*

Now particularly notice that phrase. We’re going to come back to that.

- 5 continued) ... and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered.*
- 6) *My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them."*
  - 7) *'Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord:*
  - 8) *"As I live," says the Lord God, "surely because My flock became a prey, and My flock became food for every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search for My flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock" — (NKJV)*

Again, here is God’s answer. What scattered His people? Again, there were multiple dynamics involved in that, but what is the primary thing God points to? Two things: The failure of leadership and the absence of leadership because look back at the last twenty-five years. How did we go from one major organization where most all of God’s people, or at least physically speaking, had a great of unity to these scattered hundreds of organizations fighting with each other that we have today? What started that problem? Was it not the failure of leadership? The leadership of that main organization



not feeding the flock, not doing their job and winding up trying to lead people off into heresy. That's what started this whole fragmentation process.

But let's notice how the sheep oftentimes respond to that because, again, we're learning from human behavior. Human beings have a trait of looking at their relationship with God as if they have made a covenant with a corporation or with physical leaders.

Just look at their behavior. Look back at what we witnessed twenty to twenty-five years ago. When that physical organization started changing saying, "You don't have to keep those Sabbaths anymore. You don't have to do that burdensome de-leavening every year. That's all been done away with. You can unclean meat. You can save your money. You don't need to tithe," thousands of people bought it. I'm sure we all witnessed, even when they came out and said, "You can eat unclean meat," there were many people who went out that night, were in restaurants eating pork, shrimp, you name it. Didn't even take some time to go through the Bible and be the Bereans. You know struggle with decisions. Verify is this really true? Is this correct?

Leadership told them it was okay. It was like "Okay, I can go do that." These were people who for decades had lived this way of life, many of them their entire lives they had done this. They had lost jobs. They had sacrificed and gone through trials for decades and then they walked away from everything they had believed.

And why did they do that? One of the primary issues was the failure of leadership, the absence of leadership. This is something we have to learn from human behavior. Because, again, not only have we seen this in our time, in our own lifetimes, this is also historical precedence that we learn from Ancient Israel. Again, human nature doesn't change. That's why I always say "The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior." If you analyze those patterns of how we tend to behave, it is the best predictor of how people will respond in the future.

Turn with me over to Exodus 32. We're going to look at a very familiar story here. This is the story of the golden calf incident. To build the scene that led up to this, so you understand the full picture. As we all know, Ancient Israel was in captivity in Egypt and they were crying out to God and God delivers them from slavery. He brings Moses to them to free them from this and marches them off towards the promised land. They stop at Mount Sinai and God winds up doing a covenant with Ancient Israel. He basically promises them, "As long as you're faithful and do what I tell you to, I'll be your God; you'll be my people and I'm going to make life wonderful for you. I'm going to give you a land flowing with milk and honey. I'm going to make you conqueror over your adversaries. You can take over intact cities. I'm going to make life wonderful for you. You're going to be an example to the entire world. All you have to do is do what I tell you to and just be consistent and follow through on that. Your life's going to be great." Ancient Israel says, "Hey, that sounds wonderful. All that the LORD has said, we will do. We sign on the dotted line. It sounds great to us."

So now Moses and Joshua go upon the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. They are gone for less than six weeks. They're up there for forty days. But now watch the behavior. Remember these people made a covenant with God, but notice how they behave in the absence and the failure of their leadership because, again, people don't change. Human nature doesn't change. We've seen it in our lifetime. Let's see it in the Bible. Let's start off in Exodus 32:1.

**Exodus 32:1.** *Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."*

Their leader is absent and what are they doing? "Hey, let's give up the covenant. Go, worship other gods." Brethren, whether or not Moses ever came down from that mountain ever was completely irrelevant. They didn't make a covenant with Moses. They made a covenant with God and God had not gone anywhere. It was irrelevant whether Moses came back or not. God would still have been faithful to them and they were still accountable to the agreement they made with God. It did not matter whether Moses came back. But notice now the people behaved.

2) *And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."*

3) *So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron.*

4) *And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!"*

5) *So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord."*

6) *Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.*

7) *And the Lord said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.*

8) *They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!'"*

(NKJV)

Notice how the people behaved because we're seeing here two things—the absence of leadership and the failure of leadership. I say the failure because Aaron is left in charge and what did he do? When the people all said, "Hey, let's worship other gods," he said, "Okay, give me your gold. We'll make one." And he goes along with it. He doesn't stand against it and say, "No, this is not okay. We made a covenant with God. God hasn't gone anywhere and it really doesn't matter whether Moses comes back down in terms of the agreement that we made. We're still responsible to be faithful to God and

He will be faithful to us as long we're faithful to Him." That's what he should have done, but that's not what he did.

But notice what happened. Massive amounts of people—put it in the language of Matthew 24—massive amounts of people became offended. They fell into sin, fell away from the truth and the primary reasons they did this, again, the absence of leadership/the failure of leadership. This is what human beings tend to do.

Now in looking at this particular subject, let's ask a question. What will happen to the Church of God if Christ does not return for another say ten to twenty years?

Understand that as I'm posing this question and saying this, I'm not saying this, I'm not suggesting for a moment I have any insider information as to how long it's going to be before Christ returns. Those of you who know me well, I'm very dogmatic on the fact that Christ Himself didn't know in the New Testament. Why do we think we're going to figure it out? I'm totally against setting dates in that regard. I'm not suggesting any insider information.

But let's just consider a perspective here. Let me just tell you my own story. I grew up in the Church of God my entire life. My parents were baptized before I was born. I remember as a kid in elementary and high school oftentimes having the thought—because we always thought Christ's going to return in just a couple more years, just a few more years. Being immature as we were in the church, we oftentimes had, "Well, it's going to be this year." We kept redoing that. Not learning from the past. But we always thought it's just a couple more years.

And I remember thinking "Hey, I may not graduate high school. College is certainly questionable." The idea of getting married, having a career, that's probably out of the question. planning for retirement—that would never be something I would have to consider. Here I am in my mid-forties giving you this sermon. None of this was supposed to happen because we were all convinced it's just a couple more years, a couple more years. It's all going to end just right away. And time has proven that not to be true.

So, let's think about it from that perspective. And realize I'm not trying to say, "My lord delays His coming," but I think it behooves us, again, to learn from the past because what have we done? Many people live their lives from the standpoint, "It's just going to be a few years. I don't have to plan for the future." And here we are. Here I am again in my mid-forties giving this sermon. I questioned whether or not I would get through college twenty years ago.

To share a story, there was an individual from my church area and he coached YOU basketball from when I was a teenager. He got accepted to AC multiple years ahead of me. And I remember sitting with him at a basketball game one time having a conversation. He looked at me he goes, "I know if I get accepted to college, I'll never graduate because the end will come." And I was totally in agreement. Well, he gets

accepted to college and then he graduates. I get accepted to college. And a year or two after I graduated, this individual wound up working on the Big Sandy campus. I'm back at the campus visiting after I already graduated and we run into each other. We're both in the men's restroom and we're up at the sinks washing our hands off. We had our graduation rings off and we put them on the counter. I looked over at him—his name was Dean—and I said, "Dean, do you remember this conversation we had?" We both kind of laughed and I said, "Here we are both graduates with our rings." That conversation happened over twenty years ago. We're still here.

So, let's ask the question: What happens to the Church of God if Christ doesn't return for another ten to twenty years?

Again, one of the things that we have seen not only from our personal example and what we've experienced but also from Biblical history, when there is the absence of leadership or the failure of leadership, people tend to go astray. There tends to be massive attrition. Now let's look at the leadership of the Church of God and what will naturally play out over the next ten to twenty years, again, assuming Christ doesn't return.

If you look at the leadership of the Church of God, just the ministry in general, I'm not talking about any specific organization, just across the board. There's an observation that's kind of obvious that you have to make. That group is heavily weighted towards people who are either hitting at or beyond retirement age. That's a major portion of the leadership of the Church of God. To demonstrate this, to give you a graphic picture, I'm going to read you some statistics that were reported by the largest Church of God organization in February of this year. I'm going to read specifically from a council report that they put out talking about the age demographics of their pastors. Realize as I quote this that these numbers are specific to one particular organization, but the general trends here are true across the board and that's why I'm illustrating this. Again, just to quote verbatim here, it says:

Our U.S. pastoral demographic presently includes 23 pastors, full-time, part-time and volunteer out in the field who are 70 years-old or older. Even more, when home office assigned men are counted. Then we have 26 pastors between the ages of 62 and 69. Next, we have 32 pastors between the ages of 40 and 61. Five of them will turn 62 this year. We must urgently begin to replace our aging pastors with younger ones coming along. When a pastor reaches 62, we begin to discuss active retirement planning. That process is presently underway for 49 of our 81 pastors.

Now, again, I'm just going to do some math based upon this to illustrate a point here. And I know this is specific to one organization, but trust me, this trend is true across the Church of God. Just to illustrate something here, I do staffing for a living. I've worked in human resources for the last fourteen years. So, as you can imagine, this type of subject is something I take an interest in. I've been watching this issue for at least about twelve years. I've seen this coming for quite some time. I've discussed it with

ministers in various groups, some in great detail in terms of these issues. Trust me these issues exist across the board. It's an inevitable issue we're going to deal with going forward in the Church of God.

Let's just do some math based upon the numbers that we just read. Forty-nine out of eighty-one is 60 percent. Notice they also said that five more men would be turning 62 this year. This report was given in February of this year. This is now October we're having this conversation. So those men have either turned 62 by now or they will in the next two months. That brings our math to 54 out of 81. That gets you between 66 and 67 percent. A full two-thirds are at 62 and above. Project that forward ten years. We're at 72 and above. Do you see where this is headed? You can see that we're going to have a manpower crisis in a matter of time.

Certainly, and again I've talked to a number, even in the larger organizations, of the plans they have in place to try to deal with this, but when you look at it from a staffing perspective, you've got the bulk of your manpower that is going to be reaching retirement age. What is naturally going to happen as this plays out? What happens when people hit their 70s and 80s and such? You start losing people just to death from this. Not only, health issues kick in. You wind up just from health issues and other reasons where people are retiring or not able to function the same way they were before because that's just naturally life of what happens with aging. So, when you have that large of a percentage of your leadership basically soon in the coming years where they're not going to be able to function in that way or they will not be around in that time frame, you have to have a large number of candidates (qualified, available, and willing to take the job)—because again I do staffing for a living—to be able to backfill this.

Think about the impact this is going to have across the Church of God. How many small independent organizations do we have out there in the Church of God that are primarily, if not exclusively, run by individuals in their 60s and 70s? Probably most of them. Think about the impact this is going to have in ten to twenty years. We're going to have a lot of them out of business just to be very direct and blunt about it. Now this is also going to affect your larger organizations as well. They will have an easier way of being able to cope with this because, again, more resources, more manpower to talk to. Again I've discussed this issue with even some council members of some of these organizations because I've seen this coming for over a decade and I've seen some of the plans that some of them have. Let me tell you it's not an idea of we'll just naturally have all these guys retire and just backfill all those positions exactly. That ain't anybody's plan because that's not a realistic idea. Think about this. You have to have, again, a candidate pool of people available, qualified, willing to take the job to fit into that. There are numerous factors I can't get into today in detail to do that.

But also think about this from the standpoint of your larger organizations from a financial perspective. To understand that you need to understand some background for this and probably that's going to be a little bit longwinded because I have to paint a picture for you to understand what the impact of this will mean.

The vast majority of the full-time pastors in your larger organizations have been in the full-time ministry since the days of the Worldwide Church of God. Now it was standard operating procedure within the Worldwide Church of God to claim an exemption that the IRS and the United States made available to religious workers to opt out of (a religious exemption to) the FICA tax. I'm not going to go into all the details of what that means but basically what FICA tax is it is a tax that is cut half and half between the employee that pays their part of it and the employer. It's half and half of who pays into it. What this tax funds is the Social Security and Medicare programs that in the United States is the staple of most people's retirement planning, if it's not solely their retirement planning because Social Security benefits provide them with financial assistance and Medicare is the medical insurance that they rely upon.

Again it was standard operating procedure in The Worldwide Church of God to claim the religious exemption to that simply because the mindset at that time was, again, "Christ is going to return in just a couple more years. Retirement is not an issue we need to worry about. We can utilize all these funds much more effectively right now for the work." That was the logic that was utilized. Obviously, we see now that plan didn't play out too well. But in doing that, what that meant was all these people opted out of paying into this tax. That means you also opt out of receiving the benefits on the other end.

When that organization busted apart—and I say what I'm about to say here because I've talked to some council members in some of these organizations and know this is in fact true. The majority of these guys—even when they started another organization and moved on—continued doing the same thing. So what this means is when they go to retire, there is not Social Security and Medicare as a support means to do that. What that means is these organizations then have a financial commitment to guys that are retiring so that they have some subsistence to work with. Again, it's a reduced amount from what they would make working full-time.

Basically it comes down to essentially a 2:1 ratio. I say that because I had a conversation with a long-term pastor in one of the larger organizations earlier this year about this particular subject. He expressed it to me like this and I'll just quote his exact statement. He said, "If we retire 30 guys, we can afford to hire 15 with the same budget." Basically he was giving a 2:1 ratio. They have kind of a half-salary commitment to these guys to support them in retirement. So that means with the same budget you can turn around and hire half as many coming in. Again, if you have a large organization with more resources, you can flex; you can cut back other things.

But again, think about what this means. That means you start cutting back more and more of the services you can provide. You have to cut your budget somewhere because you have a growing expense as this moves forward. So you can see the financial impact that this will have.

Now let's make another observation. Go to a feast site, most any feast site in most any organization, and look around that the crowd. There's an observation that you're going to make that you can't miss. You're going to see a lot of gray hair. Now you have an

age distribution there that is much broader than what we're talking about here with the ministry because in the ministry, you tend to have older men involved in that. When you look at congregations, you have everything from the little kids playing on the floor and your young couples, all the way up to retirement age. But, again, just look at the age distribution of the group. Look around at the crowd that we have today. You see it more heavily weighted towards retirement years than you do the younger people.

Now church organizations financially exist based upon what? The tithes and offerings, the donations that their members send in. What naturally happens when people retire? Their donation income significantly goes down. Does it not? That's just the natural course of action. Now project both of these forward. What you see happening is rising expenses and dropping income.

Now this gets into difficult choices you have to make because obviously you have a finite amount of money and you have to decide where you're going to place it. Again, if you're a large organization and you've offered a lot of services, you have to start cutting back somewhere.

Now let's add human nature to the picture. What happens when you have to start making controversial choices that people feel passionately about and don't necessarily agree on? What has history taught us in that regard in the last twenty to twenty-five years? That tends to lead to fragmentation. It tends to lead to people feeling, "I feel very strongly and passionately the priority should be here." Another guy says, "No, it should be here." If that gets strong enough, what happens? We part ways. And what winds up happening? One organization becomes two or three. What happens to resources? They become more and more scattered, more and more divided. You see where this is headed. You wind up with less and less in terms of services that can be made available to people. If you just play this out, you start seeing the picture of what this is going to mean for the average person.

What we have come to define as "normal" in our lifetime in the Church of God is going to radically change. Consider this. In the Church of God today, I think the average church member, who has lived from the days of The Worldwide Church of God until today, has, in my view, a very myopic view of the definition of "normal." And the reason I say that is because we define "normal" in the Church of God by what we experienced in the Worldwide Church of God—large organization, full-time paid ministry serving the people, a couple of college campuses, an international foundation, 150,000 people coming to the Feast of Tabernacles and all that comes along with a large organization and all the services it can provide. We tend to think of that as the norm because listen to what you hear a lot of people in large organizations talking about. They're still looking for the way we can get back to those glory days. But do the last twenty to twenty-five years paint any picture of that? No, if we're honest about it, it's going in the opposite direction.

Here's why I call it a "myopic view of normal." If we define that as "normal" for the Church of God, look at New Testament history. I'm talking Acts 2 and forward over that

time. Is what we experienced in The Worldwide Church of God under Herbert Armstrong the norm? Not even close! That's the anomaly that's off the charts. For the vast majority of the history of the Church of God, it was small. It was scattered. It was oftentimes persecuted. Read the New Testament. "To the church that meets at Chloe's house;" they were living room congregations. I know a lot of you here will relate to that. Trust me, that's going to become more and more the norm by necessity as all of this plays out. Oftentimes we think about in just a few more years, either Christ is going to return or we're going to get back to the glory days. That's not what history is telling us. If you look over the last several decades, it's going very much in the opposite direction. And we just need to be aware of that.

Another one of my favorite quotes is "Let's deal with reality as it is and not as we would like it to be." That's the point in this sermon.

Let's deal with reality as it is and not as we would wish it to be because what does the Bible paint for us? It paints for us a difficult picture. It's a very challenging picture of what it looks like for the future. And I just wanted to be very realistic and warn about this because we need to be aware of that so that we set our expectations, again, to deal with reality and realizing what we need to do as individuals to successfully endure and to survive through this.

Again, we want the feel-good happy ending. We want to be a part of this wonderful picture that we look at the Millennium and God's Kingdom and all that's about. And we can because God will be faithful in taking care of us as long as we're faithful to Him. We just need to understand the responsibility that puts upon us and our own responsibility in staying thankful through this because God didn't promise us a rose garden. That was His promise to Ancient Israel. In the New Testament He tells us, "You're going to have to endure harsh trial." He wasn't kidding when He said, "He who endure to the end." He used that very graphic image for a reason because we have to endure to the end. And there's a fantastic picture at the end of it that we can all inherit, but we have to successfully endure through what's ahead of us to receive that. And we need to be aware of that. In understanding this we need to realize our responsibility of what we have to do to remain faithful to the covenant that we made.

Again, the natural human tendency that we've witnessed in our own history and even in what we can see in the Old Testament, how does human nature tend to work? Human beings tend to function like they made a covenant with an organization or with particular leaders. When that gets shaken up or removed from their lives, they oftentimes can walk away from what they agreed to.

We have to remember, again just to use the analogy of Ancient Israel, whether or not Moses came back down from that mountain was completely irrelevant from the standpoint of they didn't make a covenant with him. They made a covenant with God. God hadn't gone anywhere. God was still there and God would have still delivered on everything He promised. He could have picked somebody else up to be a leader. He's God. He can make that happen. And He would have been faithful to them as long as



they remained faithful to Him. The problem is always us. It's never God. God's always faithful to us. The question is "Are we faithful to Him and do we follow through on our commitments?"

Just look at the mentality of the church today. One of the common things you hear around today is "God only works through our group." God only works where we tell Him He can—that's how I love to look at it. "We've got God in our pocket and we tell Him where He can work or not." I think we've got it backwards. I think He's God and He tells us where He's going to work. Look at that mentality. Look at the logic behind it. It's as if I made a deal with an organization or with a particular leader. I've had individuals look me in the eye and say, "As long as I'm following this particular guy, I've got a leg up on the Kingdom of God, a leg up on the place of safety." That's a direct quote. That's how people tend to think.

Now think about removing that structure, removing that particular individual or removing that organizational structure around them. If they're thinking in terms of "This is about my organization," what if you lose your organization? That's like whether or not Moses came back down from the mountain. It's irrelevant in terms of the covenant you made. When you went into the water, I'm sure you probably heard the words—whether it fully sunk in or not—"You're not baptized into any organization. You're baptized into the body of Christ" because you were not making a covenant with a human being. You were making a covenant with God and we've got to think of it in those terms.

Paul gave some advice, very specific down this road, to the church in Philippi. Turn with me over to Philippians 2:12.

***Philippians 2:12.*** *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;*

*13) for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*  
(NKJV)

Here is Paul the apostle writing to them saying, "I started this congregation. I've been your pastor, but I'm in prison now. I'm not able to be with you, but you have to stay the course. Even if your leadership is not there, you made a covenant with God. You didn't make a covenant with me. And you have to stay faithful to that. You have to stay on the track and endure to the end." This is what He's emphasizing for them. This is something we need to learn from because, again, we need to follow the same thing. If we wind up in a situation where it's inert or absent, you don't have that structure, God didn't go anywhere. God is still there. He is still faithful to us. We just have to be faithful to Him.

There was a promise that God made to Joshua. "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Those words absolutely apply to all of us but we oftentimes like to think of them in the context that it was said to Joshua. And the reason I say that is because when God said this to Joshua, they were in the process of going and taking the promised land.

Basically, the promise was: “Hey, I won’t leave you. You’re going to be victorious. You’re going to walk in. You’re going to conquer your enemies. You’re going to take over intact cities. I’m giving you a land flowing with milk and honey. And, as long as you’re faithful physically, everything’s going to be wonderful for you.” We love to think of it in that context. Don’t we? And again that’s exactly what God did. God was totally faithful in everything that he promised.

God made a similar promise to the apostles in the New Testament church, worded very similarly, but it played out differently in their lives. Turn with me over to Matthew 28:18.

**Matthew 28:18.** *And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.*

*19) 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,*

*20) teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; ... (NKJV)*

And notice this last statement.

*20b) ... and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (NKJV)*

He was basically saying to them, “I will never leave you nor forsake you. I will be with you through it all.” And He fulfilled on that. But let’s consider how those guys’ lives ended. The guys who were hearing this, the majority of them, how did their lives end? They were violently murdered while they were being faithful to God and doing exactly what He wanted them to do. God didn’t leave them nor forsake them. They’re going to come up, as we know, and sit on thrones governing the Twelve Tribes of Israel in God’s Kingdom. They’ve got a fantastic future ahead of them. That didn’t make their physical lives easy. It wasn’t a matter of “We’re just going to walk into the promised land and everything’s going to fall in our favor and everything’s going to work out for us. It’s all going to be a rosy picture.” No, it was hard trial. It was challenging for them.

Consider Paul’s life. Obviously Paul wasn’t called yet when these exact words were stated here. He wasn’t here for that conversation, but it definitely applies. If we think about what was said in Corinthians when Paul gives his list of his trials, what does he tell us? He was in prison. He was shipwrecked. He was beaten. He was stoned. He went through all manner of harsh trial. And who of us would want to say “Yeah, I want to sign up for Paul’s job?” No, thank you. I’d rather learn from reading his writings. It doesn’t sound like lot of fun. But think about all that this man went through. God never left him nor forsook him. It didn’t mean he had an easy life and we all have to consider that. We may have to go through similar situations, but, again, God’s going to be faithful to us as long as we’re faithful to Him. But to have a part in these beautiful promises that we look at here in the Feast of Tabernacles, picturing the Millennium and all the exciting stuff that we look forward to be a part of, we have to successfully endure between now and then to inherit those promises, to be a part of it.

Now let's look at one other thing. As I mentioned, not only is it an issue of us remaining faithful and enduring through whatever is thrown at us in the years ahead, I've painted you a picture of organizations, of resources being stretched out, of manpower being limited. Now think about that. The average church member over the years, especially going back into the Worldwide Church of God, has oftentimes developed a mentality. I'm not criticizing this; I'm just being honest about our culture. We tend to look to church organizations to meet all of our needs, because, again, if you look back into the days of the Worldwide, we had a large organization, typically lots of organization around the congregations and such. And what did we tend to do naturally? What we were even sometimes coached to do? We looked to church, to headquarters, to leadership to meet all needs.

Now what happens if you wind up with very limited resources in terms of the leadership? The needs of individual people don't go away. Humans still have the same needs as they've had all along. And sometimes we need to think about this and not so much look at the issue of always looking to organized church leadership to handle every individual need. Please understand that I am not in any way advocating for people to self-appoint themselves into roles that God didn't give them. We have way too many apostles and prophets and two witnesses in the Church of God today who have appointed themselves into offices that God never gave them. I am not advocating that. And I'm not saying that there is not a legitimate need for the ministry. Yes, God created the ministry for a purpose and there are functions that are unique to the ministry that God didn't give to anyone else. I am not throwing that away. Please understand.

The issue I'm talking about is being our brother's keeper, because oftentimes the human nature reaction when we see unmet needs, we think, "Somebody ought to do something about that. There's a need not taken care of. Somebody ought to do something." And that tends to have one of two definitions. It either means someone in leadership, someone in an official organization who is an elder or a deacon, they should step up and do something about that. Or it's more generic than that. It's "Somebody—somebody other than me—should step up and meet that need." I'm going to encourage you in this sermon to think about it a little differently. Instead of just looking at an unmet need, ways that we can serve and take care of one another and thinking "Someone ought to do something about that," I'm going to encourage you to think "I'm somebody. Maybe I should do something about that. And let me give you an outstanding example of an individual who did that.

I'm sure for many of you who are hearing this today if I'd mention the name Ruben Gusman, it probably doesn't ring a bell for a lot of you. But I'm willing to bet if you have been single in the Church of God over the last ten years, that name probably does ring a bell for you. Ruben Gusman is a church member in the Kansas City, Missouri area. About ten years ago, he made an observation that lots of people have made in the Church of God over the years. And that's that Church of God organizations don't tend to do a whole lot for singles in the Church of God, particularly if you're in your thirties or older. If Church of God organizations tend to do much for singles, it tends to be those in their 20s and maybe early the 30s and then it drops off and there's really not much of

anything beyond that. And that' been true, I know, my entire life. Ruben made this observation that many have made over the years.

But instead of looking at it and going, "Somebody ought to do something about that." This was the man who had the thought, "I'm somebody. Maybe I should do something about it." So he did. On his own, in no official capacity with no official backing by anybody, he started a social networking site on the internet exclusively for singles of the Church of God. He called it "Single Adults of the Church of God." This wound up affecting the lives of literally several hundred people. On his own he started this and it wound up being people from all over the world, literally, who were a part of this site. This enabled people not only to meet for relationships purposes, but just for friendships, to fellowship with others of like mind and to get together.

Over a ten year period, he not only did this, he typically for most of those years, on his own, organized social events, typically three or four days, oftentimes meeting in Kansas City or some other cities, oftentimes over the fourth of July weekend. He did all the leg work on his own. Again, oftentimes donating his own time and sometimes at his own expense and with just the help of some others that would donate here and there to support him in his efforts, put together, did all the leg work, all the stuff behind the scenes that oftentimes people don't even notice or appreciate. This guy donated his own time in doing all of this. And again, this wasn't an issue of "I want a following and I want to have people see me and put myself forward." For the Sabbath services and putting on seminars and such, he would typically invite seasoned ministers of reputable Church of God organizations to come in and conduct services and put on Biblically based seminars for the group. And he did this consistently for a ten year period.

As a result of his efforts, there are at least a dozen marriages that have come about. And that's not an official number. I don't have an official total. That just all the ones I know about.

Now this doesn't even take into consideration all of the friendships that were developed, the fellowship that came about. I've talked to people outside of the US in remote areas in foreign countries that were younger singles that had really no one in their area just to be friends with who is in their point in life, who understands the struggles that they go through that they can just be friends with and connect with. This enabled them to have a means to connect with other people to share their struggles and to build friendships with and to connect with people in other areas because there was no one in their area.

All this came about affecting the lives of several hundred people because one guy in no official leadership position with no official backing by anybody saw an unmet need and, instead of going "Somebody ought to do something about that, somebody else," decided "I'm somebody. Maybe I should do something about that." I'd like to encourage all of you to think of it that way because as we go forward in the coming years, as I mentioned, I have no idea how long it's going to be before Christ returns. I'm not claiming I have any insider information, but as has been mentioned a couple of times in this Feast—and I won't take the time to quote this scripture; it's already been

read a couple of times—as Paul tells us in Corinthians “divisions and factions must exist among you that those who are approved can be made manifest.”

Quite frankly, that’s one of the reasons I feel this process is going to play out. And again that is a personal opinion and my opinion and \$5.00 will get you a latte at Starbucks. That’s where you file personal opinion. But again, for that reason I feel there are thousands of people that still are going to have to go through that testing process and that this whole demographic meltdown is going to take place as a result of that and it is going to play out in testing all of God’s people. But as that happens, as you can see, resources are going to become more and more stretched and the church is going to become more and more scattered.

But we all still need each other. We still have a Biblical responsibility to be our brother’s keeper and to look out for one another so that we can all make it because let’s face it. We’re all trying to what? To be molded in the image of God, to have His agape love, to act and think like He does. We all have an individual responsibility. I’m not advocating us to, again, try to self-appoint ourselves as scholars and to be recognized as a teacher; “Look at me. I’m in a self-appointed office.” I am not advocating that.

What I’m advocating is that we all take the personal responsibility to be our brother’s keeper, to look out for the needs of our fellow brethren. Not just to look back and think “Some elder or some deacon, they should take care of that person’s needs.” Maybe you should think, “I’m somebody. Maybe I should do something. Maybe I should step up and do something.” God holds all of us responsible for being our brother’s keeper. I know not all of us have the time, the resources, the talent to do something as large as Ruben did. I’m not suggesting that we do. But we all have our own talents, our own ability, our own sphere of influence of those that we can help out. I just think all of us need to look at this from the standpoint of we are our brother’s keeper. We have a responsibility to take care of one another, even again, if that leadership is strained or not even around. We can help our fellow brethren.

So think of it that way. Instead of having that human nature reaction when you see an unmet need of thinking “Somebody ought to do something about that,” again I encourage you to have the thought, “I’m somebody. Maybe I should do something.” Or let me put it to you in the words that Mordecai said to Esther, “Who knows maybe you were called to the kingdom for such a time as this?”