June 9, 2016

Dear Brethren,

Two weeks ago I was standing next to a freshly dug grave in a small country cemetery, conducting the funeral service for Don Waterhouse. Every funeral is sad, some more so than others, but the acknowledgment of death and the loss of a loved one are never easy. Don Waterhouse was buried on Monday, May 23, in Mount Olive Cemetery, a short distance outside the small East Texas town of Scurry, population 716. He was well-known in the Church of God, partly because of his older brother Gerald, but primarily because he was a dedicated servant of God for more than 50 years. During that time he gained a reputation for hard work, devotion to the brethren and a great sense of humor. He will certainly be missed by his family, his friends in the ministry, and the members he served.

His ministry began in 1965, when he was ordained in the Radio Church of God. That was more than five decades ago! What a different world we live in today, when compared to 1965! The world’s population has increased from 3.4 billion to 7.4 billion, more than double. Along with a doubling of the population, there has been an increase in wars, famine, disease, earthquakes and religious deception, which are described in Matthew 24:8 as only “the beginning of sorrows.”

In Foreign Policy (FP) magazine an article appeared in January of this year written by Jean-Marie Guéhenno, titled “10 Conflicts to Watch in 2016.” The author wrote: “Pulling together a list of the wars most in need of international attention and support in 2016 is challenging for all the wrong reasons. For 20 years after the end of the Cold War, deadly conflict was in decline. Fewer wars were killing fewer people the world over. Five years ago, however, that positive trend went into reverse, and each year since has seen more conflict, more victims, and more people displaced. 2016 is unlikely to bring an improvement from the woes of 2015. It is war—not peace—that has momentum” (http://ir.blogs.ie.edu/2016/01/11/10-conflicts-to-watch-in-2016/#sthash.imgZFcsw.dpuf).

The 1960s was a time of great growth for the Church of God. In 1961 the Feast of Tabernacles’ attendance for the Radio Church of God was 11,000, but 12 years later, in 1973, attendance had increased to 96,000. It was inspiring to witness the growth. But in the 1990s all of that changed, and instead of growth, there was an exodus from the core beliefs of the Church. The Sabbath, the holy days, the nature of God, the definition of sin, the importance of the commandments, the true meaning of grace and other major doctrines were cast aside, prompting thousands to leave the Worldwide Church of God.

But many longtime members did remain faithful to the truths from God’s Word. Over the past two years, I have spoken at the 50th anniversaries of congregations in Miami, Florida; Fort Worth, Texas; and Fort Smith, Arkansas. At each occasion there was at least one member who had been in attendance at the very first service, in 1964 for Fort Worth and Miami, and 1966 for Fort Smith.
My personal association with the Church goes back to the early 1950s, when my mother began listening to *The World Tomorrow* radio program. At that time we had no congregation to attend. That changed in July of 1961, when a congregation began in Memphis, Tennessee. After a few months’ delay, we attended our first Sabbath service in January of 1962. When it comes to the Feast of Tabernacles, I have clear memories of the property east of Big Sandy just off U.S. Highway 80, where my family and I traveled each year for about a decade to observe the Feast. Over the years I have met many brethren who trace their Church history back to Big Sandy as well, some going as far back as 1953. My question is, How does one remain faithful for that length of time, given all that has happened?

I believe the answer lies within an understanding of the word *faith*. We refer to those who endure as being “faithful.” Hebrews 11:1 states, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” In this one chapter there are 16 named individuals who proved themselves faithful. In Revelation 17:14 we read a description of the saints who will be with Christ when He returns, “These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful.” We have been called and chosen, but the question is, Will we remain faithful?

Matthew 16:18 tells us that Jesus Christ, referring to Himself, said He would build the Church on “this rock.” Oh, yes, there were human beings in that foundation—the apostles and the prophets (Ephesians 2:19)—but they were not *the* rock. That title goes to Jesus Christ. Real faith is the “substance” of things hoped for. What do you hope for? Is it the Kingdom of God? Is it the return of Jesus Christ? Real faith is the evidence of things not seen. Do you really believe in that future Kingdom, even without seeing it?

Whenever there is a death in the Church, especially the death of someone we all knew well, it forces us to reflect on our own mortality. God has not promised that we will live until Christ returns. These days, there are several self-appointed prophets and witnesses who, by their conduct and outlandish predictions, discredit the Church of God. Our faith should never be in human beings or human predictions. We must stay the course, remaining faithful to the end, whether it’s the end of our lives or the end of this age, whichever comes first.

Fifty years is a long time to remain faithful, and it is a long time to serve in the ministry. But, before you know it, if time continues, another decade will swiftly pass us by. In writing this letter, I want to encourage all of us to observe the upcoming Day of Pentecost as a celebration of the sealing of the firstfruits in preparation for the next holy day, the Feast of Trumpets, which symbolizes the return of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of the saints.

This year Sharron and I will be in the Philippines for Pentecost, while another group of members, about 90 altogether, will be keeping this holy day in Jerusalem, just a short distance from where the events described in Acts 2 took place. For them, I am sure this Pentecost will have a deeper meaning than any previous one. But when you consider its significance in God’s plan, Pentecost 2016 should have a deep meaning for all of us. It defines who we are—Christians, saints, the children of God, committed to being faithful to the end!

Sincerely, your brother in Christ,

Jim Franks