

Thirty-Year Anniversary of Christchurch Baptist Fellowship

Today we celebrate thirty years as pastor of Christchurch Baptist Fellowship. When we moved to Houston, Barbara and I had just celebrated our seventh wedding anniversary. I was twenty-nine years old and my dear wife, of course, was quite younger. We had a three-year-old little girl named Heather and a one-year-old named Juliana. Jonathan was born the next year and Sean followed three years later. Before we moved here, we asked God to move us to a place where we could spend the better part of our lives. We desired a life work, not a place to go which merely gets us ready for the next step. God has honored that prayer. Our hearts have been knit to this people and place like no other. Christchurch and Houston have willingly and graciously become our home. Barbara and I have lived here longer than anywhere. This is where our children were reared. Even as I write these words, I do not see myself anywhere but here. To borrow an old phrase you will often hear me say: "There's no place like this place anywhere near this place; this must be the place." Allow me to open my heart to you and tell you why I have loved Christchurch for thirty years.

1. I love this place because I learned how to be a husband here.

I had come off the faculty of Hyles-Anderson College and although I was keeping up my pastoral duties and still keeping up my preaching schedule, I entered a graduate course with Christ as my tutor. I was convicted by I Peter 3:7 which says, "*Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them (wives) according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered*" (I Peter 3:7). Since God commands us to dwell with our wives according to knowledge, I decided to enter into "Marriage 101" with Christ as my Instructor. I made a concerted effort to be the husband God intended me to be. It was here we instituted the date night and became determined to do whatever we needed to do to keep the honey in the honeymoon. Although Chicagoland was where I first courted my wife, it was here in Houston that our marriage blossomed and bloomed. So when I think about Houston, I think about my sweetheart, my wife.

2. I love this place because our kids grew up here.

I now see what older folks who had adult children meant when they warned us to enjoy each and every moment with our kids; they are here, grown and gone so fast. It has been said, "A man never lays on his deathbed regretting the time he did not spend at the office." How true! We have tried to attend every concert, ball game, play and event our kids participated in. We went with them to state competitions, national competitions and enjoyed every one. We took family vacations to Silver Dollar City, Disney, Universal Studios, the Smokey Mountains, the Grand Canyon, Pike's Peak, Florida beaches and every major battlefield of the Civil War. Although I wore out my kids with the battlefields, we tried to make it fun. We shopped for the best rates and sometimes on a frugal budget we cramped all six of us into one small room just to spend one more fantastic day somewhere adventurous. We shall never forget the annual spring pilgrimage up the Bluebonnet Trail to Washington on the Brazos. We were always mindful of the

command of Deuteronomy 6:7, *“And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.”*

Whether we were at home with our kids or traveling, we were always trying to instill within them the wonder of God, the personal relationship with Christ and obedience to the unenforceable, i.e. the willingness to do right without someone making you do right.

I love this place because Christchurch was patient with a not so perfect dad and not so perfect kids. I can honestly say, Christchurch never got in the way between our kids and us; they helped us on our way with our kids. For all of you who have prayed for our family and continue to do so, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

3. I love this place because I learned to pray here.

I had a regular prayer life before coming to Houston. But in the early eighties, it was revolutionized. Our youngest child, Sean Patrick was born with respiratory distress syndrome. Repeatedly, the team of doctors attempted to pull Sean off the ventilator, but he simply could not breathe on his own. At one time, our doctor said, “We cannot assure you that Sean is going to make it.” It was at this time I became more serious about prayer than I had ever been before. I returned to an hour of prayer every day with God. I was so blessed when our little boy could breathe on his own. The doctor said, “What we have here may be a miracle.” As far as we were concerned, it was a miracle. I remember God speaking to my heart and encouraging me to teach our people, especially our men, to pray. You will not find anywhere in the Bible where Jesus teaches a man to preach, but you will find where Christ taught men to pray. I decided to do that same thing. How can I ever forget those “Alive at Five” early morning prayer meetings between five and six, as a group of men learned with Christ in the school of prayer. We have seen miracle answers to prayer. And I am thankful there are still a group of men who arise early to pray the price at Christchurch. It was here I learned to pray. *“...The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much”* (James 5:16).

4. I love this place because I love the people here.

I know it is a nice place to live in January and perhaps that is one reason some may move here. Others don't like the heat here in the summer and that is a reason they don't want to live here. Others move here because of the job opportunities, others don't want to live here because of the large city effect and traffic. Put all the plusses and minuses together and this is not what keeps me here. What keeps me here? My wife and I have, to God's glory, a wonderful and secure marriage. My kids are grown. So we could feasibly live somewhere else. We could minister somewhere else. But I want to minister here because of you. I love you. While in Israel, I told the group we were with that I pastor the greatest people in the world. You have given me the freedom to be everything God has commanded me to be. You have given me a hearty Amen, even when I am addressing sensitive issues. You have forgiven me my mistakes and blunders and taken care of my family and me with love and appreciation. You have also done

something I am convinced the average church would not have done -- you have freed me up to preach to needy people, especially young people around the world.

A few years ago, a pulpit search committee had made two trips to our city and our church to seek me out as a prospective pastor. When I discovered what was happening, I told them, "I have a problem. I cannot leave here because I love the people here." Christchurch is so much more than an opportunity; it is the flock God called me to shepherd. Had I gone to another church at anytime during the thirty years, that church would have gotten only part of me. Rest assured, Christchurch, you have all there is of me.

When you put it all together, we are a blessed pastor and people because we are centered together in God's will. For those of you who have chosen to rear your family here, we do not take it for granted. For those of you who have met or shall meet your spouse here, I cannot think of a better place to be. For those of you who have stayed to grow old with us, hang in there. God bless you as you celebrate thirty wonderful years with us and should Christ not return soon, may He give us the best years ever!

-Pastor Pope-