

THIRTY-THREE REASONS WE ARE STILL IN HOUSTON!

The dream began 33 years ago. On a beautiful winter Sunday morning in Houston, 33 years ago (January 18, 1981), I preached my first sermon as pastor of Christchurch Baptist Fellowship. I was 29 years old, my wife, 27. Our eldest child, Heather was a bubbly, bouncy 3 year-old, our second child, Juliana had just turned one. Jonathan and Sean were yet to be born. We were meeting in a small rented old church house with limited parking on what was then State Road 149, 22 miles from downtown Houston. Our sign was a portable one with removable letters. Before me that day sat a group of smiling people wondering what kind of pastor I would be. Would I stay? Would I help them? Is this the place we want to rear our families? I was looking at them wondering what kind of pastor I would be also. On the following Tuesday, January 20, 1981 after our first Sunday, we moved into our first house. It was rented and simple, but it was home. And we were glad to be there. I was no longer working for the world's largest Sunday School under a strong leader. I was now employed by God, shipwrecked on shores of Providence with the hammer of the Word of God. But we had dreams! Big dreams! As we moved our furniture in, we plugged our 19-inch television set in and raised our small antenna. The first thing that appeared on the set was the face of Ronald Regan as he was giving his first inaugural address as President of the United States. Perhaps this is one reason I have always felt a kindred spirit with President Regan, because we shared a new beginning together. His beginning was publicized; only few made note of the Pope's new beginning, however I felt as though God noticed. We believe after all these years God more than noticed -- He orchestrated the whole thing. On that day, President Reagan said, "It is time for us to realize that we're too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams...we have every right to dream heroic dreams." On January 18, 1981, I started dreaming with Christchurch Baptist Fellowship and I am believing God for the answers to our greatest prayers and fulfillment of our grandest dreams. Above all, I long to bring glory to God and exalt the majesty of Christ Who died, was buried, lives forevermore and will soon return for as many days and years the Lord will allow us to preach and pastor.

Allow me to give you a reason for each year that we are still at home in Houston.

1. I left the decision in God's hands.

Prov. 3:5-7 says, *"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil."* A man makes no mistakes when he leaves the decisions in God's hands. For those times we have made the wrong turn or detoured from center, I am so glad told us, *"A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps"* (Proverbs 16:9).

2. I wanted to remain where God had placed me.

I did not come to this church to use it as a stepping-stone for a bigger or what would be categorized a better place. I was determined this was going to be the place to live and rear our family. Before we ever came here I prayed, "Lord, lead us to a place where we could spend the better part of our life." *"But godliness with contentment is great gain."* (I Timothy 6:6).

3. I was convinced it was the Lord's plan.

Psalms 32:8 promises, *"I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye."*

4. There was no plan "B."

I took the attitude of Paul who said, *"Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before"* (Philippians 3:13).

5. I was free here.

There is freedom in the perfect will of God! *"Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit"* (Psalm 51:12)

6. I was required to stay sharp in Bible Study.

To this day I appreciate the requirement to produce at least three new sermons per week, staying fresh, which has been good for me. *"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth"* (II Timothy 2:15). *"But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word"* (Acts 6:4). *"Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful"* (I Corinthians 4:2).

7. I learned the secrets of prayer here.

"And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour?" (Matthew 26:40). I learned the power of one hour in prayer here.

8. My father-in-law asked me if I had ever considered Houston.

"A wise son heareth his father's instruction: but a scorner heareth not rebuke" (Proverbs 13:1).

9. My dad approved of this decision.

"A fool despiseth his father's instruction: but he that regardeth reproof is prudent" (Proverbs 15:5).

10. I like it here.

"Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass" (Psalm 37:4,5).

11. I like the history of this area.

The rich history of this area has always intrigued me.

12. I love the people.

God gave me a heart for the people. People from all over the world have come to Houston. We literally live in the heart of a great mission field.

13. There is a challenge.

Before moving here I was warned that this is the place of the Independent Baptist's graveyard. I never bought into that defeatist attitude. I believe now more than ever the challenge is before us, *"...because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world"* (I John 4:4).

14. I love this church.

"Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (Ephesians 3:21). "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it" (Matthew 13:45,46)

15. Others have prayed for us.

Mom, Mom-in-Law, Mrs. Beverly Lowry, Mrs. Mary Ann Clayton, Mrs. Aubrey Skinner, Anna Lund, Mrs. Diehl, Brother Don and Judy Hawkins, Dr. and Mrs. Hancock, Dr. and Mrs. Buffington and myriads of others prayed for us. *"Finally,*

brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you" (II Thessalonians 3:1).

16. This is the place of vision.

*"Where there is **no vision**, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he" (Proverbs 29:18).*

17. Our marital love grew here.

"The perfect will of God is fertile ground to grow a marriage. "Marriage is honourable in all..." (Hebrews 13:4).

18. Our kids were reared up here.

"That our sons may be as plants grown up in their youth; that our daughters may be as corner stones, polished after the similitude of a palace" (Psalm 144:12)

19. This church loved my family.

20. This church has been the greatest conduit of God's provision.

"For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward" (I Timothy 5:18).

21. I learned the secret of the exchanged life here.

"For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3).

22. I have liberty to preach here.

"Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (II Corinthians 3:17)

23. This church has become a harbinger of generational blessings.

What a joy to see kids grow up here who are now rearing their kids here!

24. Everyone is welcome here.

"My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?" (James 2:1-5).

25. It is a healing place.

"Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" (Jeremiah 8:22).

26. It is a breeding ground for miracles.

27. It is a place where dreams come true.

28. You can get to anywhere in the world from here.

29. This church is balanced.

I have never known a more gifted and more eclectic people than the membership of Christchurch!

30. This church has a great manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"And he said unto him, If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence" (Exodus 33:15).

31. I was given peace in prayer that this was the place.

"Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6).

32. The door was opened by the Lord Jesus Himself.

"I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name" (Revelation 3:8). "For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries" (1 Cor. 16:9).

33. The Lord confirmed it through His Word.

God used Psalm 31:21 to confirm I should go to Houston: *"Blessed be the LORD: for he hath shewed me his marvellous kindness in a strong city."*

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Johnny Pope". The signature is written in black ink and has a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.