

A TRIBUTE TO “DEACON”

Wednesday morning my precious wife's father, Paul Wright passed into the presence of our Savior. When I married his daughter Barbara, I did not know what to call him. I was trained to speak to my elders with utmost respect; therefore I could not just call him "Paul." It seemed I was not quite worthy to call him "Dad" and Brother or Mister Wright was too distant. But there was a name that personified him better than any man I have ever known and it was "Deacon." And that's what I called him. In my youth my father in his pastorates would call men whom he highly respected "Deacon." Whomever Dad simply called "Deacon" was always a man of high character and sacrificial service. And after I met and got to know Paul Wright, he, above all men, was a servant to Christ and humbly served His Lord and His servants in the church with undying loyalty. He was smart, kind, innovative and full of fun. You could not be around Paul Wright and not have a good time. In his retirement, he finally got to become the fisherman he always wanted to be. He was so good at fishing, that there was a saying on Lake Taneycomo in Missouri: "If Paul Wright ain't catching 'em, they ain't biting!" I remember one day, my sons and I went out fishing with him for Rainbow Trout and in a half hour all four of us had caught our limit. It has been said that children are the best judge of characters. And kids of all ages were attracted to him. He was a magnanimous magnet. He was always a "people person" and to know him was to love him.

My wife was four years old when her parents Paul and Bettie Wright got saved. He was a drastically and wonderfully changed man. He immediately developed an insatiable desire to see his friends who were not Christians also get saved. There are great stories of the lengths he would go to win people to Christ. I like the story of his desire to see his friend Pete Lapina (Eddie Lapina's dad) saved. One day he actually jumped on the back of Pete's tractor and put the witness on him. He never gave up on Pete and his other friends until they got born again! He was a long time deacon at First Baptist of Hammond, Indiana. Brother Hyles told me soon after I was dating Barbara, "Paul and Bettie Wright are the salt of the earth." He also was one of our deacons here at Christchurch Baptist Fellowship in Houston, Texas for several years. He was the godliest layman I have ever known. In the 1960s he bought and serviced one of the buses in the church fleet at First Baptist. He averaged driving that bus 300 miles per Sunday for several years, picking up kids for Sunday School and then taking them home. The Wrights would get back to First Baptist just in time for the evening service. For 9 years of my wife's youth she never had a sit-down meal on Sunday afternoon. She ate baloney or peanut butter sandwiches along with the other kids on the bus. Her mother

prepared a sack lunch for every kid on the bus every Sunday! When Barbara and I were in college and even after we were married, her dad went back to driving a bus for the Sauk Village route.

While growing up, he was the youngest surviving son of a very large family. Much tragedy struck this family when he was just a lad of nine. The youngest brother died as a baby and this made him the youngest boy again, whom his mother lovingly doted over. His father died tragically in an oil field mishap in Southern Illinois. This brought his family that was already struggling as a result of the Great Depression into deeper financial woes. One Christmas young Paul received only one present, an orange, and even that was rotten.

Paul Wright was a great family man. He married Bettie Byrley, a lovely young lady from Lawrenceville, Illinois. Had he survived to their next anniversary, they would have been married for 70 years! The kids born to this blessed union are Kenny, Randy and Barbara. My personal favorite was Barbara! They had 8 grandkids and 19 great-grandkids. You would never find a man who loved being with his family like Paul Wright. Some of the very fondest memories of our kid's youth were when they came to visit them in their Missouri home nestled in the scenic Ozark Mountains. Grandpa and Grandma Wright took them to observe and perform in all the local bluegrass music festivals. They also repeatedly gave them seasonal passes to Silver Dollar City in nearby Branson, took them to Shepherd of the Hills and Passion Plays and every family oriented family show in Branson. Grandpa Wright had a bass boat on Bull Shoals and a pontoon boat on Lake Taneycomo that he christened with names from three of his granddaughters, "The Missy Dawn Marie." He always looked forward (and so did our children) of not only the sheer joy of a boat ride through some of the most beautiful scenery in America, but when they dropped their lines, Grandpa Wright always guaranteed them a catch. The man knew where the fish were!

I have visualized the warm reception from his mom, who had double duty in his formative years. And what a great Christian his mom was! But one really blessed event is the epochal reunion he has now enjoyed with his boy, Kenny. William Kenneth Wright, the oldest child, was the first to get saved as a little boy in their family and the first to go to Heaven. Kenny, a loving husband and father died suddenly with a heart attack at only forty-five years of age. In all my years I don't believe I have witnessed such parental grief and heartbreak as when Kenny passed. They both had infectious laughter. I can hear them in my mind and just thinking about these two men seeing each other again brings a smile to my heart.

In the midst of our grief, one of the joys to my heart is knowing that the deacon now has seen our Lord and Savior whom he loved better than life. His favorite hymn was "Savior, More Than Life to Me." I know Heaven is the happiest place in the universe, but it might have just become a little happier.

Pray for his wife Bettie and our family. Randy, his youngest boy shares the joy of music together with his dad. As long as Randy has his guitar and crazy

songs, the sounds of my father-in-law shall survive. My wife, the only girl, has always been a "daddy's girl." Because he was such a great husband and dad there was a built in respect that transferred over to me on our wedding day, when he graciously gave her away. I will always be indebted to the man who reared such a wonderful wife, the best wife this unworthy man could ever have. To say he will be greatly missed is the understatement of the year. His funeral will be Wednesday, June 28th at 10:30 AM at our church, Christchurch Baptist Fellowship, 12501 Champion Forest Drive, Houston, Texas 77066. The visitation will be between 5:00 PM and 8:00 PM on June 27th at Klein Funeral Home on Champion Forest Drive in Spring, Texas.

I cannot begin to thank everyone in our church for the prayers and help you have all been. I must say a brief thank you to Michael Manning. Mike is a fireman who lives five minutes from us. At 9:00 PM Tuesday, Mike came to help Randy get my fallen father-in-law back to bed. Just a few short hours later at 2:00 AM, my mother-in-law discovered that her husband had "slipped the surly bonds of space and touched the face of God." Barbara and I were in Missouri with Heather and her husband involved in the Living Springs Youth Camp where I was preaching. Barbara's mom informed us "Dad is gone." I suggested that she immediately call 911. Caleb, the Manning's son who works as an EMS officer, picked up the call, woke Mike up and Mike immediately came over and got to the Wrights before the first responders. He stayed from 2:00 to 6:00 AM, went to work while his wife and daughter prepared supper for our family and delivered it after work. And he is not the only one to help. The Walters have been a big help along with Sharon Peterson, Don Knowles and visits from the Youngs, the Solizs, the Prazacs, Mrs. Lord and the Sargents. Time would fail to thank everyone in our church. From the bottom of my heart my wife and I thank you and we love you Christchurch -- forever!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Johnny Pope". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.