

AU REVOIR TO MY MENTOR, DR. RAYMOND HANCOCK

Tomorrow my wife and I will be flying out to celebrate the life of Dr. Raymond Hancock. Next month I will be celebrating forty-five years of preaching. The man whose funeral I will be preaching has been the largest influence on my ministry other than my own father. His presence, his words, his wisdom has hovered over me like a guardian angel for all forty-five years. There is an aloneness that I feel that does not provoke fear, but rather trust. I no longer have the convenience of picking up the phone in my crisis or conundrum. I must now trust in the Lord and stand on my own, which Dad Hancock was always pushing me to do from the beginning of our life-long relationship. Our relationship is what I want to talk about in this space today, because the man who influenced me has influenced you, the wonderful people I have pastored these thirty-four years.

Dr. Hancock's influence on my life goes back to a time when I knew about him and but he did not know me. There were two men in my geographical circumference as a child that were legends. Dr. Raymond Hancock was the prophet of the Tampa Bay area and Dr. J. B. Buffington was the prophet of Central Florida. In my youthful mind Dr. Hancock was Moses and Dr. Buffington was Elijah. If I could carry comparisons a little further, my dad was my Paul and I was his Timothy. In much the same humble spirit as Paul who said, *"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase"* (I Corinthians 3:5,6), Dad encouraged me glean from lives of great men. So I followed the admonition of Dad and the prophet Jeremiah who said, *"I will get me unto the great men, and will speak unto them; for they have known the way of the LORD..."* (Jeremiah 5:5).

Dr. Hancock had a Bible Institute operating out of his pastorate, the largest country church in Florida, Providence Baptist Church. My father taught at a school known more for theology than evangelism and Dad would encourage the young preachers in his classes to go sit under the teaching of Raymond Hancock and learn the nuts and bolts of the ministry. As a boy of ten and eleven years of age I was impressed with the young fireball preachers and I became especially impressed to learn that much of their fire had been kindled at the feet

of a modern Moses, Raymond Hancock. The years went by and we moved from Lakeland to Brandon, Florida. My school bus driver was the organist at Providence and every Monday morning when I got on the bus, she was beaming about how wonderful the services were at Providence. She would talk about the souls saved, the people baptized and always about the anointed preaching of Dr. Raymond Hancock. Even then God was converging our lives together as I developed a longing to get to know this man. I graduated from High School and Dad asked me to go with him to a college where he would be teaching in Louisiana. I agreed and while there in my first year, I answered my call to preach. Soon after I surrendered to preach, those fireball preachers back in Florida began to invite their old professor's son to preach for them. And it was in Lake Wales, Florida while preaching a revival that the river of my life and the river of Dr. Raymond Hancock's life met in full confluence. Dr. and Mrs. Hancock, Danny and Ernie slipped into the services just as we were getting under way. They were at a fish camp for summer vacation and needed a church to attend, so they came to the one this eighteen-year-old preacher was preaching, not knowing me from Adam. I was feeling confident and ready to go for the message that night, until the pastor, E. J. Brinson leaned over and said, "Do you know who that is that just sat down over there?" I said, "I do not." He said, "I hope this doesn't throw you off, but that is Dr. Raymond Hancock." Well, it threw me off! Moses just walked in and my frail confidence flew right out the window. With God's help, I had a measure of liberty that night. I couldn't believe my ears and my heart may have stopped momentarily when Dr. Hancock asked me to come speak at Providence on the Sunday before Camp Glory began on Monday and stay for the following five days to preach his youth camp. So I had turned all of nineteen when I first preached in his pastorate. Throughout the years I was invited back to Camp Glory again and again, even when Dr. Hancock moved to the Atlanta area and revived Camp Glory again. We always witnessed God doing something marvelous in those camps. I can say in all honesty, I witnessed the glory of God come down and move in ways past defining. These were my formative years, as I would return to preach for Dr. Hancock not only during the camp meetings, but also for revivals and special conferences. And it was not only the glory of God we experienced in meetings together, but it was the glory of God that was manifested in the personal counseling during the day and late into the night in conference with this great man of God. Dr. Hancock had no compunction about telling me where I "blew it" in a sermon and no fear of overly boosting me by extreme encouragement when he believed I needed it, which was often in those early days. I couldn't believe it--the man who fired up young preachers corporately had become my personal life-coach! If Dad

brought me under his wing as his Timothy, Moses was now schooling me as though I were his Joshua.

Dad Hancock was my first introduction to the world of independent Baptists and what a wonderful world it was! When he was moderator of the great Southwide Baptist Fellowship, he was the first to extend me an invitation to preach there. So, here I was standing before a crowd of six thousand, most of whom were preachers. And after he introduced me to the crowd of his independent preachers, I was soon receiving invitations to preach from all points of the compass. I have been blessed to stand on the shoulders of giants and I had no bigger giant in my life than Dr. Raymond Hancock. The first ten years of my ministry, I was doing the work of an evangelist with a brief tenure as a college professor. When I began pastoring, the first man I invited to preach at our then fledging church was my mentor, Dr. Raymond Hancock. He did not ask me how many I was running or how we would take care of him, he just came. One of the things I will miss most about his absence from this world below is that I knew beyond any shadow of a doubt that here was a man who loved me unconditionally.

I would be remiss, if I did not speak of the influence Dr. Hancock had on my most personal life. He not only wrote books about being filled with the Spirit, he was filled with the Holy Spirit. He not only wrote books about the local church, he allowed Christ to build His Church by being “...meet for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work” (II Timothy 2:21). I not only heard what he taught, but I caught what he threw out from his life. I could have been a better student, I could have learned more, but how thankful I am for what I did catch and what I did learn from this life so well lived. I already felt part of the Hancock family before I met and married Barbara but as soon as we wed, we were down in Florida and later in Georgia with them. Barbara was adopted! I am going to write something here that I have never said publicly: after Barbara and I were married and we were at Providence, Dad Hancock threw out the prospect of my coming to work for him. Humanly speaking, I was not ready and I knew in my heart, I would not measure up to his expectations and I loved him too much to disappoint him. This never detoured him from using me or later preaching for me. Fathers don’t disown their sons.

Dad and Mom Hancock were two of the most in-love couples Barbara and I have ever known. Through their great love of a lifetime we witnessed how very happy two people could be whose lives merged perfectly into one. This is one reason we were not surprised all to learn of Dad Hancock’s terminal condition soon after his Nell had taken off for Heaven. They modeled love

before us and we soon learned and we are still learning how very wonderful it is to be a team together for God as they most certainly were. They had four children, two girls followed by two boys. We have four children also, two girls followed by two boys. Like most preachers' kids (and all kids) their kids were not perfect, but Barbara and I observed with great admiration this undying and unconditional love this couple had for their kids. Yes, Dad and Mom Hancock taught us how to love imperfect kids. Never once did the Hancocks ever stop believing that eventually all of their kids would be serving Jesus. We saw in their life together the three abiding most wonderful gifts to be given, faith: believing God when the world says, why bother. They showed us hope: more than something to hang on to--Someone to hang on to when there is seemingly no ground beneath you. And finally, but not least of all love: that agape charity that proceeds only from God. Together Dad and Mom Hancock built up and ministered to the Body of Christ all their long and blessed lives, but they gave their greatest love, after Christ, to their family, who in turn made me feel a part. Just before he died he called and told me he had this very unusual dream in which he told in detail of being in a setting of Heaven. His wife was there, my dad was there and I was there, too. It thrills me to know as he visualized this life beyond the grave that we were there with him! Family lasts beyond this life.

Now as I must go and pay my final respects, I will take his admonition and advice from his most famous sermon, "I'll just go on anyway." Allow me to borrow his phrase and encourage you to just go on anyway as well. That's what he would want all of us to do.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Johnny Pope". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.