

1/ Ornithopterists and Their Spiritual Cousins

It did not take the human race long to grow dissatisfied with the limits of gravity. Among the earliest narratives of recorded history—accounts of ancient legends and myths and dreams—are stories of men looking enviously at birds and coveting their ability to fly. It is impossible for those of us raised with airline schedules and moon-shots to appreciate how powerfully the dream of flight captured the imagination of ancient people.

For thousands of years, inventors and dreamers have thought about ways to build a flying machine that could lift humans into the heavens with the birds. Most of these dreamers made the assumption that to “fly” meant to soar not just *with* the birds but *like* the birds, by flapping some sort of mechanical wings. Historians of flight call such thinkers *ornithopterists* (“wing-flappers”) because of their obsession with achieving flight by copying the way that birds fly.

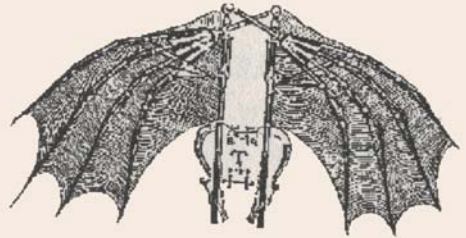
From ancient Greek mythology, there is the story of Icarus who made wings fashioned of wood and feathers, held together by wax. By flapping mightily, Icarus was able to rise into the atmosphere and navigate the skies. Unfortunately, he flew so high and close to the sun that the wax melted and his feathers fell off, plunging Icarus into the Mediterranean where he drowned. (You can almost hear generations of mothers repeating this story to their children and



warning, “If God had wanted us to fly, he would have given us wings.”)

In the fifteenth-century, Leonardo Da Vinci—fascinated with birds and the possibility of flight—sketched out a number of flying

machines. His designs often betray the same confusion of form and function. In Leonardo’s mind, flight would become possible by giving man equipment similar to that of birds: large wings, attached to the arms or driven mechanically by pedals and chains, that could be flapped up and down to achieve lift. There is no evidence that Leonardo ever built and tried one of his designs. If he had, he might have ended up like Icarus.



More centuries passed, and still the notion that a man-made flying machine would have to look and act like a bird dominated the thinking of inventors. Had the ornithopterists been successful in achieving flight through slavish imitation of the bird’s form that would have been the end of the story. But an embarrassing string of failures and the deaths of numerous “aeronauts” proved that a flying machine—if it was to function—would have to be designed around a different form.

It wasn’t until the last hundred years that inventors were finally able to disconnect function from form, and question whether flight might be possible without mimicking the manner in which birds achieved it. The Wright brothers, among others, decided not to focus on birds but on the problem of flight itself. Rather than attempting to build a better “flapper,” they built one of the first wind tunnels to study the effects of wind on wings. With the handful of aerodynamic principles that resulted, they designed a

machine to take advantage of those principles—whether it came out looking like a bird or not.

The rest, as they say, is history. On December 17, 1902, Wilbur and Orville flew their “Kitty Hawk Special” four times, the longest flight lasting 58 seconds. Their “flying machine” wasn’t covered in feathers. It didn’t have bird-shaped wings. The wings did not flap up and down.

But it flew.

How Do You Make a Church Fly?

In many ways, the history of the Churches of Christ has paralleled the history of flight. For the past one hundred and fifty years, we have looked enviously at New Testament churches and coveted their ability to fly. We gazed longingly at their loving fellowship, life-changing ethic, Spirit-led worship, and evangelistic witness. We noted the fervor of their faith and the courage that led them to the arena and the stake. We watched as a band of twelve grew into a church of three thousand and, then, matured into a movement that turned the world upside down.

Looking up at the early church, we grew dissatisfied with the limits of our own religious experience and yearned to fly with those first Christians. We dreamed of building a contemporary church that recaptured the same dynamic and faithfulness exhibited by the first-century exemplar. However, like the ornithopterists of old, we assumed that “function” was inextricably bound to “form”... that to fly *with* the first-century church required us to fly *like* it. In our minds, a restoration of the first-century spirit and dynamic would only be possible when we gave the modern church the same “equipment” as its ancient counterpart.

Copying first-century structures, organization, patterns and rituals became for us the best and necessary means for restoring the vitality and performance of the primitive church. If only we could reinstate the forms, function would follow. And so the past 150 years have been spent analyzing the New Testament church for “marks”

and “patterns.”¹ Several generations of our ecclesiological ancestors have given their best to reincarnating the primitive model. They poured over the available evidence, both biblical and historical, searching for the minutest clues regarding the behavior of the early church. They dissected and classified and described every detail of early church anatomy. They debated verb tenses and necessary inferences.

Had we been successful in building a functional modern church through slavish imitation of first-century forms, that would have been the end of the story and there would be no need for the ideological tug-of-war that is presently pulling at our fellowship. But, as a movement, we have experienced an embarrassing string of failures—divisions, stagnation, a sense of being increasingly marginalized in our culture, a loss of identity, and the spiritual deaths of people we know and love. We can’t seem to get the contemporary church off the ground—no matter how hard we flap our first-century wings.

Increasingly, the assumption that “function will follow the restoration of correct forms” is being called into question. Many of us are growing frustrated with a modern church that may look like the ancient church in the particulars but fails to function with anything like its power and life-changing dynamic. Some are beginning to ask whether it might be possible to be the Church of Christ today without the focus on forms that has become our hallmark.

There is the nagging sense that our focus on the details of early church life has dulled us to “the weightier matters” that animated the spiritual walk of our first-century counterparts. We fear we have become a people who major in the minors and minor in what is truly major. We question whether the many issues that have consumed us and dominated our discussions have grown out of all proportion and diverted a movement that, at its inception, addressed higher ideals.

If we are honest, however, the pressing motivation for questioning the way we do church is rooted less in our sensitivity to the

spiritually central than in the growing acknowledgement that our movement is no longer able to capture the imagination of a new generation. The issues that served as points of identification and rallying flags for the church through much of the last century, fail to ignite the passions of those who must carry the church into the next millenium. Increasingly, we find ourselves in the difficult position of holding a debate we do not want in order to secure a future we fear is slipping from us. As has been true of many movements before us, desperation is driving us where theology should but does not.

This book represents a small attempt to construct a spiritual “wind tunnel”—to study how the God who built Abram’s family and the nation of Israel and the church of Pentecost might be working to build a faithful church today. Central to this endeavor (and no doubt problematic for some readers) is a willingness to disconnect form from function, to assert that function is primary, and to suggest it is possible to build a contemporary church that pleases God even if it does not look exactly like the church of the first or the nineteenth-century.

We want a church that flies. All the guilded models that capture the most intricate details of churches past are of little use to us if they cannot get off the ground. What is required is a church for today that soars with the same power and faith as the church of our first fathers. We don’t need to build a better “flapper”—more accurate, more true to scale, more meticulously detailed. Rather, we should be concerned to build a church that is sensitive to the same “aerodynamic principles” that lifted the church in the first-century world, whether we end up looking like that church or not.

The church that results will not be dressed in first-century culture and attitudes. It will not meet in catacombs or adopt the worship patterns of the synagogue. It will not insist on recreating every facet of ancient church life and practice.

But maybe, just maybe, it will fly.