

A Church that Flies

Introduction:

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 moonshots to appreciate how powerfully the dream of flight captured the imagination of ancient man.

1. The Ornithopterists
 - a. For thousands of years, inventors and dreamers have thought about ways to build a flying machine that could lift man into the heavens with the birds.
 - b. 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.
 - c. Historians of flight call such thinkers *ornithopterists* (“wing-flappers”) for their obsession with achieving flight by copying the manner in which birds do so.
2. The story of Icarus (Diagram #1)
 - a. From ancient Greek mythology, there is the story of Icarus who made wings fashioned of wood and feathers, held together by wax.
 - b. By flapping mightily, Icarus was able to navigate the skies.
 - c. 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.
 - d. You can hear generations of mothers repeating this story to their children and warning, “If God had wanted men to fly, he would have given them wings.”
3. Leonardo Da Vinci (Diagram #2)
 - a. In the fifteenth century, Da Vinci sketched out a number of flying machines.
 - b. His designs often betray the same confusion of form and function.
 - c. Flight was thought to be possible only by giving man equipment similar to that of birds: large wings, attached to the arms or driven mechanically by pedals and chains, which could be flapped up and down to achieve lift.

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.

1. The Wright brothers decided not to focus on birds but on the problem of flight itself.
2. Rather than building a better “flapper”, they built one of the first wind tunnels to study the effects of wind on wings.
3. With the handful of aerodynamic principles which resulted, they designed a machine to take advantage of those principles—whether it looked like a bird or not.

The rest, as they say, is history. On December 17, 1902, Wilbur and Orville flew their “Kitty Hawk Special” (Diagram #3) 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.

I. The Quest for a Church that Flies

A. The history of the church has, in ways, paralleled the history of flight.

1. For decades, we have looked at the NT and dreamed of being a church that flies.
 - a. We have listened to Paul's soaring ideals for the church and shared John's vision of a holy community. We have looked enviously at Antioch's missionary fervor and Philippi's loving fellowship.
 - b. We have searched for the minutest clues regarding the behavior of early churches in hopes that some formula for effective church life would emerge.
 - c. We have dissected and classified and described every detail of early church anatomy—right down to feathers and beaks and claws.
2. Like the ornithopterists of old, we've assumed that "function" is inextricably bound to "form" . . . that to fly *with* the first century church requires us to fly *like* it.
 - a. In our minds, a restoration of the first century spirit and dynamic can be possible only when we give the modern church the same "equipment" as the ancient one.
 - b. Copying first century structures, organization, patterns and behaviors has become for us the best and necessary means for restoring the vitality and performance of the primitive church.
 - c. If only we could reinstate the *forms*, *function* would follow.

B. Increasingly, this assumption is being called into question.

1. After 150 years of analyzing the New Testament church for "marks" and "patterns," many 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.
2. We look at our passion for doctrinal correctness and wonder that for a people so "right" we seem unable to be unified and loving and harmonious.
 - We examine our ambition to recover NT forms of worship and marvel that our worship services so often fail to move us or bring us into God's presence or cause us to cry out in confession and praise.
 - We note our fastidious care in determining the gospel message and are surprised that it has not resulted in a powerful, world-changing witness to the lost.

We want a church that flies. All the gilded 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 created in the mind of God and envisioned by his holy apostles. We don't need to build a better "flapper"—more accurate, more true to scale, more meticulously detailed. We should rather be concerned to build a church that is sensitive to the same "aerodynamic principles" which lifted the church in the first century world, whether we end up looking exactly like that church or not.

The church that results will not be covered by 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.

II. Learning Church Aerodynamics

A. A Lesson from the Wright Brothers.

1. Perhaps it is time—past time—to do for the church what Wilbur and Orville did for the airplane: stop focusing on *how* the ancient church flew and start thinking about *why*.
2. Rather than continuing the attempt to fly *like* the first century church, we might better spend our time studying the aerodynamic principles that impact the church in the Apostles' day or in ours.
3. The time has come for us to build a spiritual wind tunnel.

B. A Wind-Tunnel for the Church

1. We begin by recognizing the role of Scripture in the life of the church (Diagram #4). Like a huge turbine-blade, it generates the wind to which the church must tune its wings.
 - a. The Bible, and the Spirit which energizes it, blows its gale-force breath from 2000 years in the past. It is an ancient wind, but remains living and active and powerful for the church today.
 - b. We recognize that the only legitimate source of “lift” for the church today comes not from programs or eloquent preaching or marketing but from the insistent and compelling winds generated by the mouth of God.
2. We recognize, secondly, that the modern church (Diagram #5) must be part of any tunnel we construct.
 - a. It is suspended there at the end of our hypothetical tunnel, doing its best to conform itself to the divine wind, adjusting its shape so that it ceases to fight against the word and is able, instead, to soar upon it.
 - b. Many times God's word has buffeted the church, insisting on changes here and redesign there so that the church can fly smoothly in submission to God's will.
 - c. We acknowledge the right of Scripture to change the church . . . that is at the heart of the restoration plea. Indeed, we welcome such changes. Let the wind blow straight and true, direct from the pages of our Bibles and across our willing and yielded wings.
3. What we have a harder time accepting is that there is a third component to this thing we are constructing—the tunnel itself. (Diagram #6).
 - a. The biblical wind has to blow *through* something to get to us—time and culture.
 - b. No sooner does Scripture leave the mouth of God then it is affected by the times to which it speaks—not diluted, but certainly affected. Because the church is suspended in *these* times and in *this* culture, it must deal with the cross-currents and eddies which are the realities of our daily lives.
 - c. We might wish for a church that trimmed her wings to the blow of Scripture and Scripture alone—as if there were no turbulence to deal with, no backwash created by the times in which we fly. We would like to ignore the contours of our present age and pretend that God's word blows straight from Scripture across our yielded selves.
 - d. But the truth is that God has never expected to play a duet with his people. He has always recognized the existence of a trio: His word, His people, and the world.

III. An Example of the Impact of the World on God's People.

A. Dealing with reality as we pursue God's ideals.

1. Most often, we think of the world's influence as something which must be resisted by the church at all cost. It is a contaminating influence, a God-distancing influence. Often that is exactly the case.
2. But there are also realities about our life in the world which must shape the kind of church we are or else we cease to function as God wants us to. Things happen around us which must be accounted for, which must change us, if we are to be true to our calling.

B. An Example from the OT

1. The Tabernacle
 - a. When God gave the law to Moses on Sinai, he gave more than the 10 Commandments. Part of his revelation had to do with building a "tabernacle."
 - b. Large sections of Exodus and Numbers are dedicated to describing the Tabernacle in great detail: coverings of ram skins and the hide of sea cows, curtains and poles, dimensions and measurements.
 - c. The Tabernacle was, essentially, a large tent—a perfect house of worship for a nomadic people who would be on the move for centuries to come.
2. The Temple
 - a. Four hundred years later, things had changed.
 - b. The Israelites were settled in the promised land, Jerusalem had been established by David as the capitol city, and David had just completed the building of his own royal palace—a substantial and luxuriant residence for the king.
 - c. David felt embarrassed to be living in a palace while God resided in a tent (2Sa 7:2). He determined to build a permanent Temple for the Lord.
 - d. Scripture makes clear that this was David's idea, not God's (2Sa 7:7). But a new situation for the people of God introduced the need for a new house of worship. Though the Temple was made from different materials from those God had originally specified, though it was built to different dimensions, though it would be permanent rather than mobile, God nonetheless blessed David's plan and granted his presence to the new Temple (1Ki 8:10-11).
3. The Synagogue
 - a. Four hundred years later, things had changed again. Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple in 586 B.C. and carried Israel away into captivity.
 - b. Cut off from the Ark and the altar and the sacrifices, Israel found herself in a strange land, struggling to relate to her God in a radically changed situation.
 - c. It was during this period that Synagogue worship evolved. There were no daily sacrifices as commanded in the Law, no high and holy days, no atonement offered at the Ark of the Covenant. Instead, there were prayers and songs and readings from Scripture.
 - d. Hundreds of years later, even after the Temple had been rebuilt, synagogue worship continued. Jesus showed God's approval for this creative adaptation on the part of his people by participating in the synagogue—even though it was never commanded or authorized in the Law.

C. What are we to make of this movement from Tabernacle to Temple to Synagogue?

1. For those of us raised on the notion that the slightest deviation from God's plan would result in fire from heaven (remember Nadab and Abihu?), this monumental move from the plans of Exodus poses a difficulty.
2. The solution, of course, lies in the fact that the world of the Jews had changed.
 - a. Faced with different circumstances, Israel implemented different solutions to the worship of her God. And God blessed the changes!
 - b. It would have been folly for Israel to insist on 'Exodus or nothing' during the exile. God did not require that of Israel. Indeed, he required just the opposite—a creative solution to a changed situation.
 - c. [Refer back to the diagrams.] God's *word* had not changed—the “wind” still blew strong from the Law. Israel was still God's “church.” What had changed were the times and circumstances in which Israel existed—the “wind tunnel” had created turbulence which God's people had to account for if they were to avoid cracking-up.

D. A preview of the same process in the NT Church.

1. Next week, we will see the same thing taking place in two NT churches.
 - a. Jerusalem and Antioch were both churches attempting to adapt themselves to the new wind that was blowing from the life of Jesus and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
 - b. But, as we will see, they were very different churches because of where they were and to whom they ministered. Jerusalem was a Jewish church and conducted business in strictly Jewish ways. Antioch was a Gentile church and did things in a Gentile manner.
 - c. Was one right and the other wrong? Many members of the Jerusalem church thought so (Antioch had “digressed” in their opinion). But they were mistaken. Different circumstances necessarily make a difference in the shape of the church—at least if the church wants to be effective.

Conclusion:

The church today is flying in turbulent times. Suspended in the middle of late-20th century America, we find ourselves buffeted by cross-winds we have never experienced before. Those cross currents force us to rethink styles of preaching and teaching, the issues which we must address, the kinds of ministry in which we engage, the nature of our relationships, and even the lenses through which we read Scripture. There are calls to update worship styles to permit contemporary worshippers to express themselves more sincerely. There is a growing recognition that we are not having the impact on the world around us that we should—and a growing consensus that we must adapt our methods to changed circumstances. We are reassessing everything from leadership styles to community involvement to long-cherished doctrinal positions.

Increasingly, we are aware that present times differ significantly from the first-century world—or even from the 19th-century world in which our movement has its roots. For some of us, that difference comprises a clear call for the church to hold the line and refuse to “compromise” with the world by making any changes whatever—“Acts or nothing!” Others of us believe that, unless changes are made, we will cease to speak to our world (and eventually ourselves) with the life-changing message that “Jesus saves.”

All of us want to be true to the biblical winds that blow across the centuries. Should we, to be a faithful church, simply ignore the times in which we fly in order to protect the shape of the church we have inherited from our fathers? Or must we recognize that, to be an effective community of faith in these turbulent days, we are required to make changes in *form* so as to carry out our God-given *functions*?

In 1 Chronicles, Israel found herself in yet another period of turbulence and transition. Saul had died and David was to be crowned King. All Israel gathered at Hebron to anoint him. Among those who gathered were 200 chiefs of Issachar. They had fought for Saul in his battles against the Philistines and had not supported David during his exile. But times had changed. Saul was dead and David was the best candidate to lead the nation. So they came to Hebron to lend their approval to his coronation. It is interesting that the Bible notes of these men that “they understood the times and knew what Israel must do” (1Chr 12:32).

The church is in desperate need of such people today. Wise people, committed to the kingdom, who understand the times and know what the church must do. We need people who know the difference between the ever-changing shape of the church and the never-changing core at its heart. We need people who know the difference between changing to compromise and changing to be effective. We need people who are so familiar with the heart of God and the mission of his church that they can help us see the opportunities for powerful ministry in these difficult days rather than bemoaning the times in which God has placed us. May God raise up such people among us so that we can be a church that flies.

You can use the following images to help you illustrate this lesson. Cut them out, magnify them on your copier or copy them to an overhead transparency, and you've got a ready made visual!

Diagram #1—Icarus

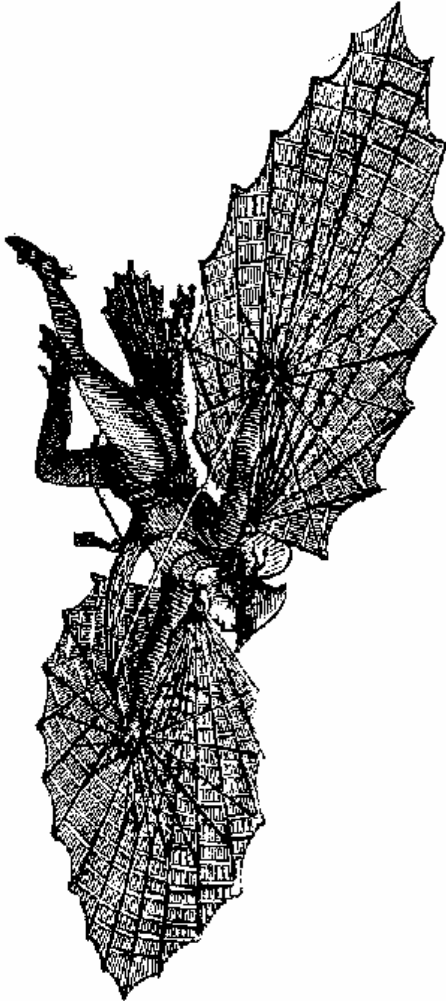


Diagram #2—Leonardo Da Vinci

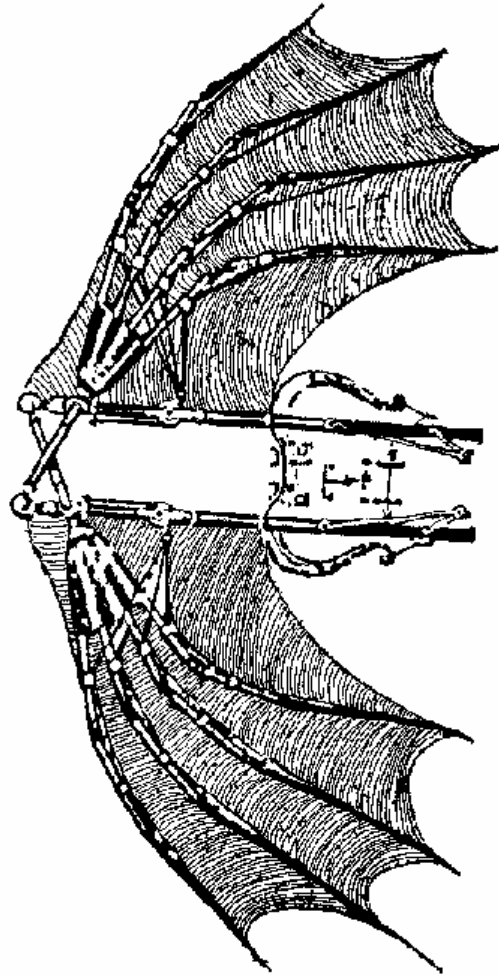


Diagram #3—"Kitty Hawk Special"

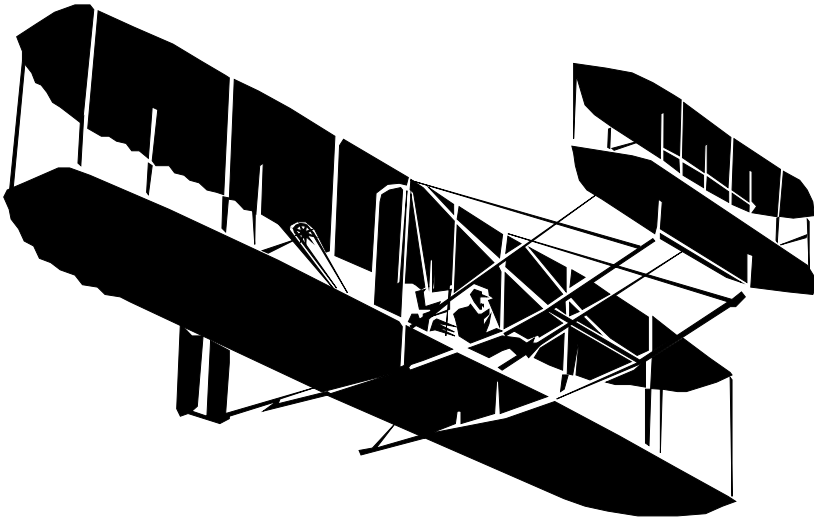


Diagram #4—Turbine Blade

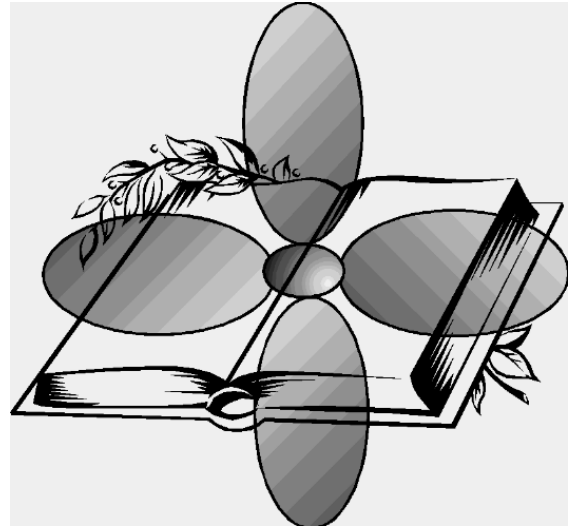


Diagram #5—The Church

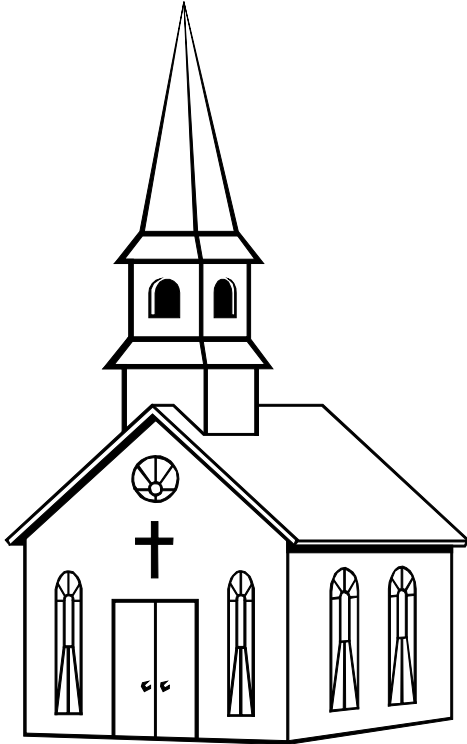
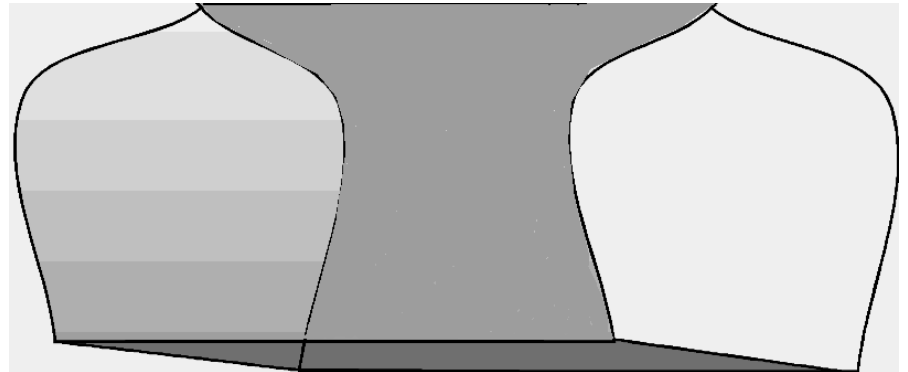


Diagram #6—The Tunnel



The windtunnel model goes together like this
(see pg 3):

FAN > TUNNEL > CHURCH