

THE TWO WINGED CHURCH

Acts 2v46

Over these weeks I am looking at some of the biblical principles on which cell groups rest. Today our text is Acts 2v46, describing the first church in Jerusalem. **Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people.** These words describe a Two Winged Church. The believers met in a large setting - in the temple courts, but they also met in many smaller settings, in homes. God means His church to have two wings.

Liz and I love bird watching whether at one of the many wildfowl areas in Northumberland or in our garden. We have our own robin, sparrows, blackbirds, blue tits, greenfinches - and two collared doves who have adopted our garden table as their toilet. We have had one-off visits from two bullfinches in the snow, a gang of goldfinches and a mean looking sparrow hawk. So far, all the birds that have visited us have had two wings! From time to time you do see injured birds. They can survive for a time with a damaged leg but not with a damaged wing. A one-winged bird will soon starve or become prey to the local cat.

In his book 'The Second Reformation' (Touch. 1995) Bill Beckham argues that for centuries the church only had one wing – meetings in large settings, and this was disastrous. *"The Two Winged Church that had soared high in the heavens was now for all practical purposes one-winged. Now with only one wing, just lifting off the ground required tremendous energy and effort. And if the church did manage to become airborne, it was prone to fly in circles, lose its sense of direction, and not fly very far from its take off point. Spending more and more time in the safety and comfort of its habitat, it grew contented with an earthbound existence."*

Today some are going to the opposite extreme. The big emphasis is on unstructured informality and being "out there". But meeting all together in a larger setting each week is not thought to be necessary or even helpful. One writer compares it to having to attend a formal family wedding every weekend.

Here at County Church we are committed to a Two Winged Church. We want to give equal attention to both wings. Both are vitally important.

These first believers in our text wanted to meet together as often as possible, whether in a large or a small setting. **Every day they continued to meet.** They didn't just meet on one special day like Sunday. Any day of the week you could find believers gathering together. This is exactly what the Biblical word "church" means. It is not a religious word in the New Testament. It simply means people who have "assembled together". These first believers couldn't get enough of being together. They needed no persuading, cajoling or reminding. It's a sure sign of a genuine church.

So let's look at the two wings of this church.

1. They met together in a large setting

Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts. They gathered there because it was the biggest open space in Jerusalem. It was also the most visible. Herod the Great, in his rebuilding of the Temple, created a 30 acre platform and the Romans built their Fortress of Antonia overlooking this area to keep an eye on it. Whatever was brewing in the city could usually be traced to the Temple courts. The gathering of believers was on such a large scale that everyone would know about it. It was a crowd of thousands and growing rapidly. No one could miss them. There was no need for a street map or a timetable or a ticket. Just follow the crowd! But be prepared for a shock.

Normally when you went into the Temple Courts you met religion - elaborate rituals and formality; priestly pomp and hierarchies; strict rules and prohibitions. But this was different! Now there was a mass of people praising God! They were enjoying being together. Exciting things were happening. Signs and wonders were taking place. The name of Jesus was in the air. The Messiah had come! He had been crucified – but it was for the forgiveness of sins. And Jesus had been raised from the dead. Many believers had seen Him. He had gone into heaven and was now enthroned in glory. The proof of this was He had poured out the Holy Spirit. What a thrill to be there!

Some people don't like being in a big crowd but I have always found it inspiring to be part of a very large company of believers. My earliest experience of this was at the Billy Graham Crusades at Earl's Court, London in 1966. On a smaller scale there was the Keswick Convention. Even as a youngster I remember the thrill of Easter Sundays when the churches of different denominations in Heaton met together. It is good to gather in this way across a city or area with other believers to underline our oneness with the whole body of Christ. Our *newfrontiers* family had the Stoneleigh Bible Weeks with up to twenty thousand people present. Now we have the 'North' camp in August and our young people have 'New Day'. It is especially important to have big settings when you are in a smaller church.

Meeting all together regularly as a body in the local church is also important even if it is on a more modest scale. That is what we are doing today. For many this is a high spot in the week. Praising God all together: being encouraged and strengthened and built up together; hearing God speak to us, together; praying together with one heart and mind; welcoming newcomers into our midst together. It is a joy not a duty to gather with the whole church.

So what about the "formal family wedding" criticism? There *is* a danger of Sunday meetings becoming routine and predictable and of us coming along out of duty or habit. But we don't believe the answer is to put on a good show each week. Our meetings are not performances. We deliberately don't publish in advance who is leading worship or preaching. The culture of the day is so consumer-led that people can treat church like a superstore. Which has most attractive display? What's on offer?

So what is the answer? We do need to be welcoming to everyone who comes among us and our meetings should be relevant to people's lives. But it is as we encounter Jesus in our midst that things stay fresh and dynamic. When the Holy Spirit is welcome there is no chance of our meetings being routine.

2. They met together in a small setting

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. Small groups of believers were meeting in many homes scattered about the whole city and area - more of the importance of homes next week. For the moment we concentrate on the principle of the smaller setting.

Small groups are the basic unit of this church. They could be called by many names but we use the word "cells", a reference to cells in a body. These groups meet in homes each week, but "cell" is much more than that. It is a basic Christian community where we come close to one another with Jesus Himself the DNA in each cell. When our cells are healthy, the body is healthy.

So what are cell groups up to? Look at the first church our text.

They ate together. The smaller setting is all about getting up close to one another; of building friendships. In the New Testament meals are at the heart of relationship building. I am an enthusiast about meeting as a small group around the meal table as often as possible. I believe this is one of the keys to the success of Alpha. Let's eat and drink together more! Keep it simple. Different people can bring different dishes. You can either start with a meal or, if the table is big enough, spend the whole evening around the table worshipping and talking and laughing and praying and looking at the Scriptures – perhaps between courses. Eating together helps us to be real with each other. It relaxes the nervous. It revives the tired. It is a great context for the first time visitor. It celebrates hospitality – probably the most underrated of gifts.

They broke bread. They celebrated Christ's death in bread and wine as they ate. This puts remembering Christ's death by bread and wine back into its' original setting - a home and a real meal. Their chief focus was always Jesus and what He had done for them on the cross. He was at the centre of their home group. They wanted to encounter Jesus in their midst.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. (v42) In New Testament times having a meal together was a well known context for Jews to study the Torah with a circle of like minded people. This is what seems to be going on in the Jerusalem cell groups. They heard the apostle's preaching in the big setting and now they processed it and talked about what it meant for their lives. We do the same in our cell meetings.

.. and to the fellowship: here we find the wonderful New Testament word *koinonia*. We can reduce this to something limp like having tea and biscuits together. It is more bracing than this! Think of Tolkien's *'The Fellowship of the*

Ring' – with Frodo and Sam, Merry and Pippin, Aragorn and Gandalf, Legolas, Gimli and Boromir! They were strangers and very different when they set out. There were many trials along the way. But they became a *fellowship* – a band of brothers on a mission. So too, those first believers were a band of brothers and sisters on a mission. And so are we. We are bound together by chords of love and loyalty. We will live and die together and for one another. This is what the *fellowship* of the church means, and it is fostered and deepened in the context of the small group.

.. **and to prayer.** This is such a vital dimension of the small group setting. Prayer for one another: even this week many of you have experienced this; but also prayer for the world around you; for friends and family and neighbours who have not yet come to faith in Christ.

One of the highest priorities of each cell group is to introduce others to Jesus. Cell life is geared towards developing relationships with people currently outside the church. Like cells in the body, healthy cell groups grow and multiply as new people are added. With this in mind cells are outward looking. Our desire is to see every cell in this church grow and multiply.

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This Two Winged Church in Jerusalem multiplied rapidly. They enjoyed **the favour of all the people** and **the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (v47)**

Both wings of the church play their part in this growth. The larger setting is many people's introduction to the message of Christ, and they are then welcomed into a circle of warm relationship and support. For others their introduction to the gospel is through a small group of believers in their neighbourhood, and they are then taken along to the big celebration.

Both wings were vital back then in Jerusalem; and they are today. God wants his church to have two wings so that we can fly.

John Wilthew. September 2007