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The Bishop's Boys and the Centennial of Flight

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Nevertheless, the most exhilarating technological development of the twentieth century must have been the invention of the airplane. The development of heavier-than-air powered flight opened a new epoch of human history. No longer were human beings bound to the earth. The advent of flight promised that the geographic obstacle of space could be collapsed even as time for travel was radically reduced. No previous invention had so collapsed space and time to human advantage.

December 17, 2003 marks the centennial of the Wright brothers' first successful flight. On the morning of December 17, 1903 the Brothers' took their primitive airplane to Kill Devil Hills at Kitty Hawk, located on North Carolina's windy coast. The rest is history.

The background to that historic landmark is a fascinating story of human dreams, colossal failures, and grim determination. James Tobin, author of To Conquer the Air: the Wright Brothers and the Great Race for Flight, noted that the dream of human flight was routinely discounted by many authorities of the day. "In the entire world," Tobin recounts, "only a handful of men with any standing in science had suggested that human flight was possible."

In the years prior to the Wright brothers' success, various inventors had made their own gallant attempts at flight. The French, who had pioneered human flight with lighter-than-air balloons, fervently hoped to be the first to succeed at powered flight by means of a "flying machine." Even after the Wright brothers reported their success, many Frenchmen claimed that the Wrights were "liars not fliers." The German pioneer Otto Lilienthal had produced a series of successful gliders, but died in a crash in 1896. Percy Pilcher, an intrepid Scotsman, died in a similar crash in 1899. Experiments at flight did not make for a long life.

In America, the most promising pioneer in aviation appeared to be Samuel Pierpont Langley, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. Langley had everything going for his proposal. He had the backing of the United States government, access to the best suppliers, and a great deal of media attention. His attempts at powered flight garnered a great deal of attention as the experiments took place in the middle of the Potomac River, observed by a gaggle of reporters. His plane, called the "Great Aerodrome," crashed into the Potomac for a second time just nine days before the Wright brothers' success at Kitty Hawk. The Wright's first flight, with Orville at the controls, lasted for only twelve seconds and traveled only 120 feet. Three other flights took place on that historic day, the longest of which was 59 seconds in duration and 852 feet in length.

Once the news of the flights traveled from Kitty Hawk to the world, many responded with indifference. Frank Tunison, an Associated Press reporter stationed in Dayton, dismissed the report as insufficiently newsworthy. Misreading the telegram that reported a 59 second flight as 57 seconds, Tunison responded; "57 seconds, hey? If it'd been 57 minutes then it might have been a news item." Tunison missed one of the great news stories of the century.

Orville and Wilbur Wright were the younger sons of the Rev. Milton Wright, a bishop in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, and a staunch defender of conservative doctrine in his denomination. The Wrights grew up in an active household that was unquestionably led by a strong father and infused with a work ethic. Long before turning to flight, the Wright brothers had already established a printing operation and were running a bicycle shop in their hometown of Dayton, Ohio. Dayton then stood at the statistical population center of the United States and, despite its rather modest population, ranked third in the nation in terms of new patents.

Wilbur Wright was the first to turn his interest to flight. Observing the attempts of others, he noted a critical failure of both technique and technology. Speaking before the Western Society of Engineers, Wilbur had earlier noted that the greatest challenge to flight was "the balancing and steering of the machine after it is actually in flight." Wilbur gave himself to this challenge and was later joined by Orville. Their pioneer understanding of the mechanics of flight came only after repeated failures and lengthy experiments they conducted in one of the first wind tunnels ever developed.

Looking back over the last century, we can now see that powered human flight transformed life across the globe. In a very real sense, human history can be divided between the age prior to flight and the age of aviation.

Among the transformations brought by powered flight, none has eclipsed the reality that human beings can now travel to the most remote parts of the earth within 24 hours. Modern jet aircraft can circumnavigate the globe faster that some previous generations could travel only 100 miles. In the United States, the development of the airplane brought a commercial revolution and virtually ended the age of passenger transportation by railroad. Cities rushed to develop airports and to gain their place in commercial aviation. The first commercial flight, flown in 1914 between St. Petersburg and Tampa, Florida, offered only a hint of what was to come. The globe is now webbed by a worldwide system of airline transportation.

The development of the airplane also brought immediate transformations in warfare. This was evident already in World War I, when all major European powers had an air force of some form at the onset of the conflict. The primitive aircraft with which the war began were quickly followed by more powerful and sophisticated craft that demonstrated the shape of things to come. As historian Walter J. Boyne notes: "By 1918 almost every aspect of modern air warfare, with the exceptions of nuclear weapons, space-based satellites and precision-guided ammunitions, had been demonstrated."

Now, supersonic aircraft and high-capacity bombers are accompanied by ballistic missiles and a host of military supporting aircraft. The rise of strategic bombing as a strategy of war brought not only a revolution in military strategy, but death from the air for thousands. One Brazilian aviation pioneer actually committed suicide when he saw how airplanes were now used for war rather than for peace.

Like every technological innovation, the airplane can be put to uses both good and evil. On September 11, 2001, the world saw passenger planes flown into skyscrapers–a parable of modern marvels turned into murder weapons. At the same time, the airplane has also made the nationwide system of organ transplantation possible, with donor organs flown from one part of the country to another at requisite speed. Aircraft are crucial to search and rescue efforts, to national defense, and to emergency medicine.

Christians should also ponder the impact of the airplane for the cause of the Great Commission. Prior to the development of the airplane, missionaries traveled to distant lands by boat and overland transportation, often taking months and longer to arrive at their destination. The airplane opened the modern missionary age, an era in which missionaries can leave their homes one day and arrive at their field of service the next.

Furthermore, small aircraft opened vast regions of interior territory for the cause of the gospel. Among the great missionary martyrs of the twentieth century were Nate Saint, Jim Elliott, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, and Roger Youderian. These missionaries became martyrs for the faith as they sought to take the gospel to a tribe in remote Ecuador. Nate Saint, the group's pilot, served with Mission Aviation Fellowship. Today, MAF works with a fleet of 70 aircraft

working from over 40 bases worldwide. Other mission agencies also depend on the airplane for deployment and routine support. The airplane has been put to use as an airborne chariot for the Gospel.

The airplanes of the future may bear little resemblance to the aircraft of the present. Revolutionary developments in composite materials and computerization are already transforming both aircraft and the role of the pilot. Automated systems can now fly airplanes from takeoff to landing, whatever the weather and visibility. As Arlen Rens, a test pilot for Lockheed Martin told National Geographic: “Airplanes are now built to carry a pilot and a dog in the cockpit. The pilot’s job is to feed the dog, and the dog’s job is to bite the pilot if he touches anything.”

The world of 1903 seems more than a century away. Looking back, the achievement of the Wright brothers has lost none of its luster, even as human flight has lost none of its wonder. Speaking 45 years after his uncles made their historic flight, nephew Milton Wright observed: “The aeroplane means many things to many people. To some it may be a vehicle for romantic adventure or simply quick transportation. To others it may be a military weapon or a means of relieving suffering. To me it represents the fabric, the glue, the spruce, the sheet metal and the wire which, put together under commonplace circumstances but with knowledge and skill, gave substance to dreams and fulfillment to hopes.” The bishop’s boys deserve their place in history.
