

THE CELL GROUP INVITATION

A parable of what might have been by Barry Chant

Once upon a time Neoh Cheng Hean and his wife Boon Nee had just moved into a small apartment on the fourteenth floor of an ageing residential building. The old-fashioned timber floor creaked and the ceiling sagged, but it had been freshly painted, the curtains were bright and the décor colourful. There was one comfortable bedroom, one cold bathroom, one cosy study, one cramped kitchen, one crowded dining area and one colossal lounge room. So-except for the cramped kitchen-it was ideally suited for a cell group meeting.

Cheng Hean and Boon Nee had been married for thirty two years and the last of their children had just left home. They decided to make the most of their new-found freedom and approached one of the pastors at their church to see if they could arrange a cell meeting in their colossal lounge room. Permission was soon given and before long there were four couples gathering with them each Friday night.

They were very pleased with the way things went. All ten were believers and they sang lustily, prayed fervently, read the Scriptures eagerly, talked ebulliently and ate their supper enthusiastically.

But Cheng Hean and Boon Nee were still not satisfied. They longed for their neighbours in the apartment building to know the Lord as well.

'I wish we could reach the couple on the floor above,' Boon Nee said wistfully one day.

They were sitting at the meal table in their crowded dining area. Cheng Hean was reading the paper.

'Mm,' he said obligingly.

'I've tried talking to them, but I don't get very far.'

'Mm,' said Cheng Hean.

'Do you think I should try a new approach?' asked Boon Nee.

'Mm,' replied Cheng Hean.

'I wonder if I should give them a New Testament?'

'Mm,' murmured Cheng Hean.

'Or maybe that would be too obvious.'

'Mm,' observed Cheng Hean.

'Perhaps I should just ask them to drop in for coffee?'

'Mm,' said Cheng Hean.

'Yes, I think that's what I'll do,' said Boon Nee brightly. 'What do you think?'

'Mm,' Cheng Hean replied.

'Good,' said Boon Nee. 'Then that's what I'll do.'

She prised her way through the crowded dining area into the cramped kitchen humming to herself.

'Mm,' said Cheng Hean.

The next day, Boon Nee climbed the stairs to the fifteenth floor and knocked on the door of #15A. A young woman opened the door a short distance, its safety chain still attached. She looked a bit worried but it was hard to tell because of the shadow cast by the door.

'Good morning,' said Boon Nee brightly. 'I'm Neoh Boon Nee and I live in #14A.'

'What do you want,' asked the troubled young woman suspiciously.

'Well, I was wondering if you would like to drop into our place one evening and have some supper with us. We have a cramped kitchen and a crowded dining room, but a colossal lounge room. We'd love to have you visit us.'

'I'll have to ask Joshua,' the woman replied. 'He doesn't like to socialise much.'

'Well, what about Wednesday night?' Boon Nee responded brightly. 'Eight o'clock?'

'We'll think about it.'

'Okay. By the way, what should I call you?'

'I'm Elizabeth,' the woman answered from the shadows. Then she added grumpily, 'And don't call me Liz!' With that, she shut the door.

The next morning, Cheng Hean was again reading his newspaper. There was a small rustling sound and a note appeared under the door which read, 'Thanks for the invitation but we can't come. Elizabeth.'

'That's a bit terse,' Boon Nee commented. 'Well, at least I tried. Do you think I should try again?'

'Mm,' said Cheng Hean.

'All right, I will,' replied Boon Nee, encouraged by Cheng Hean's response.

A couple of days later, Boon Nee met Elizabeth in the lift. 'We're really sorry you couldn't make it on Wednesday,' she said brightly, her dark eyes shining. 'We'd still love you to drop in some time.'

Elizabeth looked uncomfortable. She would not look Boon Nee in the eye, but dropped her gaze to the floor. Her long brown hair needed brushing, but could have been striking if she had given it a little more attention. She was wearing a faded track suit which disguised what was probably a trim figure, but she did not look well. 'Maybe one day,' she murmured.

Over the next few weeks they hardly saw each other. Meanwhile the cell group meetings continued with their lusty singing, fervent prayer, eager Scripture reading, ebullient talk and enthusiastic suppers.

One day the two women met again in the lift.

'Good morning, Elizabeth,' said Boon Nee brightly. 'Lovely to see you.'

'Morning,' mumbled Elizabeth sullenly.

'On Friday night, we are having a few friends over. Would you be able to drop in, too? We'd love to have you!'

'We're busy on Friday,' Elizabeth responded.

'What about the following Friday?' Boon Nee persisted.

'Busy then, too,' said Elizabeth.

'Well, if you change your mind, just come. You'll be welcome,' said Boon Nee as cheerfully as she could, trying to hide her disappointment.

It was two weeks before they met again. This time Elizabeth looked so sad, Boon Nee asked, 'Are you all right, Elizabeth?'

'I'm OK,' she replied. 'And anyway, it's nothing to do with you. It's not your problem, is it?'

'Well, maybe it is,' said Boon Nee. 'Is there something I can do for you?'

'No, thank you,' replied Elizabeth firmly. 'Just leave me alone.'

'Well, all right. But don't forget, any time you want to drop in, you're welcome.'

The following Friday, Boon Nee told the rest of the group about Elizabeth and Joshua and how hard it had been to win their confidence. They decided to pray about it right then and there. Just as they began, without warning, there was a strange creaking noise above them. Even though they were praying, they could not help but look up to see what was happening. Suddenly a cloud of dust and flakes of paint fell from the ceiling right over their heads. There was coughing and spluttering and much brushing of dust from hair and clothes. Then the shower gradually stopped.

'We're terribly sorry about this,' said Boon Nee with some embarrassment. 'We'll have to get the ceiling looked at as soon as we can.'

'Mm,' agreed Cheng Hean.

The dust settled and the prayers continued.

They finished praying and while they were quietly listening to a reading from the Bible, there was a loud scraping noise above as if from a heavy piece of furniture being moved. A couple of people looked up but nothing further happened and the meeting proceeded.

'We have to do something about that ceiling first thing in the morning,' Boon Nee whispered to Cheng Hean.

'Mm,' he replied.

Matthew, the song-leader, had begun strumming his guitar, and they were just about to sing when there was a splintering sound overhead and the whole ceiling burst open like an exploding firework. To their complete astonishment, a lounge chair dropped right through the ceiling and landed with a shuddering, shaking thud in the middle of the floor in the colossal lounge room. Sitting in the chair was Elizabeth!

The dust hovered in the air, the floor quivered, the people sat open-mouthed with shock and Elizabeth sat pale as a ghost, trembling violently, and gripping the sides of the chair until her knuckles were white.

There was a great gaping hole in the ceiling. Termite-eroded timbers were leaking brown dust. Fragmented plaster hung down like ripped paper. One piece of flooring dangled precariously, swaying too and fro as if trying to decide where to drop. Another jutted out on an angle like a great spear ready to thrust itself into the room below.

Soon everyone recovered from the shock. They variously jumped to their feet, pointed, shook themselves, brushed dust away, grabbed the person next to them, sprang towards Elizabeth, bumped into one another and all began to talk all at once.

'What in the world...'

'What's happening?'

'Will you look at that!'

'Gracious me, whatever next!'

'Golly, what a mess.'

'I thought the world was coming to an end.'

Boon Nee was quick off the mark. She sprang to the lounge chair, leaned over and grabbed Elizabeth in her arms. 'You poor dear,' she said. 'You must be terrified! Are you all right? Are you hurt? Have you broken anything?'

Elizabeth was too stunned to reply. Her face was ashen; her eyes were wide; her jaw had dropped; her body was stiff; her fingers were locked to the chair; her feet were flat to the floor. She sat there, motionless, stunned and dazed.

Suddenly there was a wild pounding at the door. Joshua burst in, his face red with exertion from racing down the stairs in panic to see what had happened to his wife.

As it turned out, all was well. Apart from being rather shaken, she was not injured. The chair was old and well padded and it had broken her fall.

'Hey, everyone,' said Boon Nee. 'This is Elizabeth and Joshua. They live in the apartment above. We invited them to come to the meeting tonight!'

Later, when they had cleaned up the mess, they settled down for supper, an enormous amount of which somehow emerged from the cramped kitchen through the crowded dining room into the colossal lounge room.

'Well,' said Boon Nee eventually, 'I know I asked you to drop in, Elizabeth, but I didn't expect you to take me literally!'

For the first time since they had met, Elizabeth smiled.

Next morning, at breakfast, Boon Nee said wistfully, 'Well, it looks as though God has answered our prayers after all. But I certainly didn't think it would happen like this,'

'Mm,' said Cheng Hean.

But Boon Nee did not hear him. She was already wondering how she might reach the people in #14B. Whatever happened, she definitely wouldn't ask them to drop in. They were both overweight and, to be honest, somewhat round in shape. Then she began to chuckle to herself.

'What if I were to ask the people in #14B to *roll up* to our next meeting?' she wondered aloud.

'Mm,' said Cheng Hean and went on reading his paper.

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About Dr Barry Chant

Barry Chant is Senior Pastor of the Wesley International Congregation in Sydney, Australia. He is a regular speaker at church services, seminars, conferences and conventions. Hundreds of thousands of his books have been sold around the world. He has degrees in arts, theology and ministry, a diploma in education and a PhD in history. He was the initiator and former president of Tabor College, Australia.

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