

On Clocks, Chairs, and Pews.

I am fascinated with clever clocks. This may seem odd since I have not worn a watch in 20 years since reading a book in 1999 called [“Unwinding the Clock”](#) written by a Swedish physicist. She argues that our understanding of time and our experience of time are deeply affected by the invention of the clock.

Technology can actually change the quality of our life and existence. If you want a fascinating rabbit-hole to fall down, look up Taylorism and how it changed everything from working in factories to the Olympic games when we measure races down 1/100th of a second. Humans became mechanized (part of the machine of productivity and achievement) in a brand new way.

I was made even more aware of time when I visited the Notre-Dame Basilica in Montreal, Quebec (Canada) which was constructed in 1672 and the new addition completed around 1832. It was one of the most impressive Gothic structures I have ever been in and so I took the tour. The monk (brother?) who led the tour pointed out all sorts of interesting features, additions, and changes in the first 3 centuries of its existence.

At one point he said that the pews were added many years after its original construction due to the changes in society with the invention of the clock.

What do pews have to do with clocks?

It turns out that before the invention of standardized (clock) time church happened an entirely different way. Think about it this way: before the 1880s you couldn't say 'everyone be here at 10 am' and then start once everyone had arrived.

Instead, the cathedral sanctuary was arranged in a series of stations. People would queue up in the entryway (narthex) as they arrived after walking to church. Some would come from the countryside after the cows were milked and fed, others lived in the city. Once 8-12 people had arrived, one of the brother would take them around the stations for a bible lesson at one, prayer at another, singing a hymn, and eucharist, etc. The next group would then begin queuing up and once 8-12 had arrived, another brother would lead that group and this would go on all day as people arrived.

It was only after the clock and the standardization of time that pews were added to the sanctuary and the entire structure of worship was also standardized and synced. Isn't that amazing to think about? What a massive change and a complete transformation of the experience of the worshiper.

It is amazing how our technology (including furniture) alternately reflects our theology at times but affects (or limits) our theology at other times. Our furniture and our technology can literally transform (or deform) our view of the church and of worship (ecclesiology).

If I had my way, I would chop up every pew in N. America – not just because they are uncomfortable (which they are) but because they are embedded with an ecclesiology that is performance based, stage oriented, and makes the people of God into spectators at a spectacle. It is disgusting. God is not glorified when we look at the back of people's heads like we are at a movie theatre or performance. The sanctuary should not look like an amphitheater or an auditorium.

A worship space should both look like and function like a *living* room or *family* room. IMHO.

But back to time and the clock ...

You might be interested to know that there was a conception of time that predates the invention of the clock and it holds an exciting possibility for people of faith.

We are familiar with what the ancient Greeks called *chronos* – chronological time. This comes after that in a linear and pretty predictable way.

[Although, as an interesting side note, experienced time can fluctuate wildly within chronological time. Have you ever been in an amazing conversation and 'the time just flies'? Have you ever been in a terrible conversation and time seemed to drag? You watch a good movie and it seems like it was 30 minutes too short. You watch a bad film, of the exact same length in clock time, and it feels like it was 2 hours too long.]

The lost concept of time, in contrast to *chronos*, is *kairos*. This is a different kind of time. We have lost the word but the concept lingers in our language.

We say that it is harvest-time. That is not a clock or calendar time – it is earth time.

We say that 'it was his time to go'. Or her time of the month.

These are not exact times that obey the clock watch or the Google calendar.

This understanding of layered time opens for us a horizon of meaning when it comes to worship and the life of faith.

Worship is not something that happens only at 10:30 Sunday morning.

Worship is not something that happens only in the sanctuary.

Worship is not only the songs we sing (worship songs)

Worship is a whole life response lived in the awareness of God's imminent presence in the world.

The same can be said for maturity in the life of faith.

Maturity is not something that can be assumed because of chronological time.

Maturity is a cultivated character (*habitus*) that grows in time (*kairos*)