

PEWS - A disjointed history

Pew - wooden seats or benches in the church. Pews only appeared at the end of the medieval period. Often pews had carved bench-ends and were carved with animal or foliage designs.

Pews and Status

From the 1600s through the mid 1800s, Churchgoers of most denominations were seated in their houses of worship according to social rank, whether by assignment or purchase. This expressed a nearly universal Christian perception of social rank as part of a divinely ordered hierarchy of creation. The highest ranking pews were close to the pulpit, the lowest furthest from the pulpit. Private pews gave rise to the practice of numbering pews for easy record keeping.

Some pews were set aside as general seating for special groups. Details varied according to town, location, date and circumstances. Variants included reserving seats for adolescents, the poor, widows, the hard-of-hearing, and black people.

These last were called Negro Pews. These pews were sometimes numbered, sometimes labelled "free" or "Negro."

Negro Pews in 19th Century America

In the USA there would also be pews for the use of black people (free or enslaved) and Native Americans.

Often the Negro Pews would be in upper galleries, as far as possible from the pulpit. White people would be appointed to oversee or monitor them. Apparently slave owners had to purchase pew space for their slaves in their churches, just as they did for themselves.

From the 1840s to the 1930s churches gradually shifted from private pews to free and open seating, giving rise to the term "free church". Old pew numbers and labels were usually left in place.

This transition occurred in a society that was increasingly democratic in its outlook toward white people, but remained racially segregated. The adoption of free seating must have placed black Americans in an ambivalent social position; especially where old "Negro" labels remained in place.

Most of the liturgical fittings in an average church, such as the pulpit and pews, were installed in the 19th century. Only fonts are likely to be older. That this should be the case is a testament to two things: reformation and restoration.

The Reformation the mid 16th century stripped churches of all of their images. The Medieval windows would have been full of stained glass, and brightly coloured pictures of saints and religious scenes would have been painted on the walls. There might have been a rood screen across the chancel arch, and above it the rood, a life-size representation of the Crucifixion. All these images were destroyed at the Reformation as being 'superstitious' or 'idolatrous', because the Protestant reformers believed that people were worshipping the actual images rather than God. This process of destruction did not stop at the Reformation. During the Civil War, many carvings and superstitious pictures were destroyed.

After the turmoils of the Reformation and the Civil War, religious life calmed down. Most churches received new fittings, such as pulpits and box pews. Old fittings were often swept away during late 19th Century restorations. 19th-century restorers believed that they were putting the church back to what it had been in the middle ages, but in the process they often threw away a great deal of history. Guide books often refer to 19th-century restorations as 'modern'. but as we move into the 21st century, they too are becoming part of history.

Changing times

By the early 19th century, the old parish system was on the verge of collapse. Its boundaries had been set in the 12th century, and the landscape of England had changed enormously since then. Growing cities like Birmingham, Liverpool, London and Manchester were particularly badly served, especially around their formerly rural fringes. Even if there was a church nearby, there was no guarantee that you could get a pew to sit on. In most churches, the pews were rented out to individual families - often a pew belonged to a house. This placed a great pressure on space, as no one else could sit there. Galleries along the sides and back of the nave for free seating were built to try and cope with this problem, but even this often was insufficient to meet the expanding population.

This was one reason why there was a programme of church building in the 19th century on a scale not seen in England since the 12th century.

Only an Act of Parliament could create new parishes, as the parish was regarded as a unit of civil, as well as ecclesiastical, jurisdiction and therefore under secular control. New chapels could be built within existing parishes, but as the funds often came from selling pews in advance, these 'proprietary' churches did not alleviate a shortage of seats. The situation was not necessarily any better in rural areas. In the north-west, for instance, old parishes were often huge and inadequately staffed.

New Testament Church Furnishings

In addition to the Jerusalem Temple, Christians at first worshiped in private homes. When persecution drove them out of the Temple, homes were the only places where they could gather.

Such archaeological evidence as we have suggests that there were only two items of furniture provided: a chapel chair for the presiding elder (sitting was the posture of authority - Jesus sat to teach (Matthew 5:1) as did all rabbis), and a table for the Lord's Supper. They usually met in a dining room, the only large room in the house, frequently occupying the entire top floor. This "upper room" was normally furnished with a table and three surrounding pews; but as the Christian community expanded and the liturgy developed, the assembly rooms became larger. By the 3rd century, they were furnished with a special table, or mensa, for the Lord's Supper. The officiating elder sat near this table on a chapel chair, or "cathedra" ... which eventually gave its name to the cathedral, which, in contrast to a parish church, is one over which a bishop presides.

There was no other seating - the congregation stood throughout!

The Church House

The house church was superseded by the "Church House". Since public buildings were not an option - they'd be pulled down in the next persecution, almost as soon as they were put up - Christians with the means to do so built private homes with a view to their use for worship. Their plan was basically the same. Sometimes a central open court was the meeting place, sometimes the "upper room".

313 AD Church Furnishings

When the Emperor Constantine made Christianity an official religion, Christians were at last free to erect permanent buildings. They did so on the plan of the most common architectural design of public buildings in the Empire, the Basilica, which was used primarily as a law court.

The Basilica was a simple structure: a roof supported on two rows of columns, and extended

on both sides by lean-to additions. The one feature, architecturally, was the apse, a semi-circular recess in the far end wall which focussed attention. In the semi-circle of its wall seating was located, central being the Magistrate's or Emperor's Seat. Along the chord of the apse stood an altar on which libations were offered to the locally recognised deity, and forward into the main hall were two lecterns which bore the books of Roman Law out of which judgment was given.

Christian basilicas were structurally no different, but some furnishings were changed. The altar was replaced by a large table, and placed central in the building, after the pattern of the house church ... as the ruins of many basilicas in North Africa show. The seating in the apse remained the same, the Emperor's Seat becoming the seat for the presiding elder (later the Bishop), and the lecterns remained, the Scriptures being read and the sermon preached from them.

As congregations grew, a crush barrier around the table became necessary, tending to push it further back toward the apse, from which a fence extended outwards into the body of the building to enclose it. These later became communion rails.

Chrysostom, the great preacher, brought the lecterns much further forward then, so as the better to be heard, and with that development the pattern had almost completely reverted to the Roman model. The table now lay along the chord of the apse where the pagan altar had once stood, with a screen to frame it, and the scene was set for the development of the familiar and traditional Cathedral plan.

In Medieval times, the Table was more and more seen as an altar, where the sacrifice of the Mass was offered. It ceased to be a table on legs, and became a slab altar again (not infrequently the sarcophagus of a martyr - through a hole in whose lid bread and wine were sometimes dropped to the dead saint below!). The "holy mysteries" there enacted were hidden from the profane eyes of the laity by the erection of more and more elaborate screens, so the altar finally was placed against the rear wall.

There is some evidence to suggest a further reason for this recession of the altar to the rear wall. The first basilica to be orientated East-West, it seems, was so built to enable the officiating priest to face the rising sun (a symbol of the resurrection) across the Table as he broke the bread and poured the wine. The congregation immediately wanted to face it with him, with the result that subsequent East-West basilicas required the priest and congregation to face the same way. The stage was thereby set for the altar to be placed against the apse wall.

With the establishment of cathedrals as the "chapels" for their resident religious community, the choir pews assumed their familiar chancel configuration, rows of pews facing each other across an aisle; this facilitated antiphonal chanting, but it also left a narrow viewing corridor for the congregation in the nave to observe what the screen was opened to allow them to observe!

Baptism

Baptisms had normally taken place in nearby rivers or streams. When baptisteries were built they were often circular or octagonal stone tubs, with steps leading down to a space in the centre which allowed room only for the candidate to immerse himself by kneeling there. Few were large enough for an officiate to lay the candidate down backwards in simulation of a burial. When immersion was phased out in favour of infant christening, the font came to be placed near the church entrance, since baptism was the "doorway" through which you entered into the fellowship of the gathered Church.

Pews and Chapel Chairs

The congregation almost never had pews or chapel chairs until the Reformation. In the great Cathedrals, the only place to sit was along the low stone shelf that ran along the side

walls of the building, where sat those who were too weak or ill to stand; hence the saying, "The weak go to the wall."

The Centralised Plan

Early Christian architects also developed the centralised plan, based on the circle, the square, the polygon, or the Greek cross (arms of equal length). In a centralised plan the centre of the structure, usually surmounted by a dome, becomes the liturgical focus. (The dome was universally understood from Roman imperial times to symbolise the dome of heaven.) Altar and lectern were placed geometrically central. The plan generally worked because the congregation was not seated; people were free to stand around on all sides at their convenience. There are many surviving examples, notably in Greece and Turkey. The Eastern Orthodox branch of the church favoured the Central Design, whilst the Western Roman branch of the Church favoured the Basilica (Cathedral) Plan. A striking modern example of the centralised plan is the Roman Catholic Metropolitan Cathedral Church of Christ the King in Liverpool, U.K.

The Reformation

With the Reformation, a radical change affected church design. The pulpit now became the dominant feature, usually standing above and behind the Communion Table, which replaced the altar. In Non-Conformist meeting houses the Table frequently extended well out into the body of the congregation. Where fonts were still used they tended to be near the entrance, after the Anglican pattern; but open baptisteries tended to disappear beneath a floor covering under the Table. Curiously, where they were free standing, they shifted either to the side of the pulpit, or in front of it; the practical requirements of easily accessible clothes-changing facilities tended to over-rule theological considerations! Much the same applied to the organ. Its array of pipes came to assume a commanding position above and behind the pulpit, so that with its attendant choir pews it became the dominant architectural focus ... which is theologically terrible, as though we worshipped the great god Pan! There were designs that located organ and choir behind the congregation, usually at gallery level (e.g. the Zion Baptist Church, Cambridge and the Marylebone Presbyterian Church, London), which is more appropriate, as the choir is an oral, not a visual aid to worship. But the pride of organ builders tended to over-rule theological considerations. In Cathedrals, the organ was normally more appropriately located in a transept.

Overall, theological considerations have generally determined church architecture ... until today (!), when theological considerations, it seems, are hardly taken into account at all. Table and pulpit/lectern have become moveable options; only the baptistery is fixed. Almost all recent Baptist churches in Queensland are not sanctuaries at all, but auditoriums. Their design reflects a total lack of any theology of worship. The prime requirement has become a stage for the band, as though what we really believe in is a stage performance. No Bible, no Chalice, no Pulpit, and often no visible Table.

History of Pews

Some churches have experimented with the liturgy leading to a rearranging of pews (i.e., some parishioners now face each other). I've learned that pews were not introduced until the Middle Ages, and would like to know what led to their introduction - why were they introduced then? Also, how does changing the traditional seating structure change the role of the priest/celebrant?

Some say that moving pews about doesn't change the role of the presider very much but it does change the dynamics of the assembly, and furthers the call to "full, conscious and active participation" in the liturgy that Vatican II called for. Simply put, a church in the round makes visibility better for everyone, fosters a non-linear way of seeing and thinking within the ritual that hopefully carries forth into the lives of the people, and subtly encourages community and equality. It does allow the presider freedom of movement he would not otherwise have - he can walk around the sanctuary while preaching, for example, and make contact with the people in a way that can't be done with traditional forward

and make contact with the people in a way that can't be done with traditional, forward facing pews. Same concept as a theatre in the round.

In the early church people stood to worship, and we can see that reflected in art - from the walls of the catacombs to more sophisticated renderings. People prayed with hands lifted up in the "Orans Position." This is a direct carry-over from Jewish worship and liturgy. Kneelers have gone hand-in-hand with pews when they were introduced, and kneeling was unheard of Jewish worship, and likewise in the early church. (The posture of penitence would be prostration.) Kneeling is also a medieval addition, the influence of courtly behaviour of submission to the king. Jewish worship still has no kneeling.

The pews: Some minimal seating existed from the early church - the first liturgies were conducted in house churches and seating for those who might need to sit, the elderly or infirm, for example, was in place.

The bishop got a seat as time went on, but the rest of people, including the ministers, generally stood. After Constantine allowed Christianity as the official religion of the empire, seating was provided for those of high status - particularly political status. Monastic life contributed to the encroachment of the pews since monks and some other clerics sat in "choir," - a choir pew area between the people in the assembly and the altar. They would sit against opposite walls, facing each other, a style still seen in monastic settings.

From here, pew seating basically simply evolved - after the Carolingian period a kind of haphazard or even "bring-your-own" seating emerged for laity, a chair here, a bench there, a mat on the floor. This increased during the 14th and 15th centuries and by the 16th century pews were common. This development, as mentioned above, further separated the people from the priest and the liturgy - dividing the church up and keeping the laity at bay. The Reformation contributed greatly to the pew design - the Reformers placed the emphasis on hearing, not seeing, and they rejected the lush visual elements of worship. So to emphasize hearing the Word of God, the people sat. They also began to read in worship - the printing press and growing literacy encouraged that.

Roman Catholic Churches also embraced seating at this time, but the invasion of the pews was a particularly northern European and New World affair. The wealthy began to buy their own pews as well.

One other element - a renewed interest in gender separation also contributed to the pew seating arrangement in some places.

One can still see examples of pew-less medieval churches in Europe - the gothic Cathedrals in Dublin, Ireland, for example. Chapel chairs have been brought in, but not pews. The open space is beautiful. Orthodox churches also often have pewless sanctuaries. No pews, no chairs. Everyone stands - for very long liturgies. A handful of chapel chairs, only for those who absolutely needed to sit, are provided.

When some American churches were completed in the past and the floor had been laid, areas for the closed pews were laid out, marked with chalk, and given a number. These areas, much like house lots, were then auctioned off to the highest bidders who were given deeds certifying their possession of each respective area. They then constructed their pews according to their own desires and tastes. Therefore, there was little consistency in the design of the pews as we see them today. Perhaps much "keeping up with the Jones's" went on unless the incumbent laid down the law.