

## Diachronicity

The Greek word, *chronos*, gives rise to a number of English words. We use the word, chronic, to speak of an illness that lasts a long time. A chronicler is someone who writes history as it occurs over a period of time. And there are three English words which take a prefix, and when they do, they take very different meanings.

Synchronic (from which we get the word *synchronize*) is used when things happen at the same time. For example, a number of years ago, my wife and I experienced a synchronic failure of vehicles' braking systems. On the same day we both had to get hundreds of dollars of work done to repair very similar problems. Although the brake failures were synchronic, the two had absolutely no relationship to each other; the vehicles happened to break down at the same time. We have to be careful with synchronic events, for we might well suspect that they had a similar cause or source, but just because several things happen synchronically does not mean that they are related to each other.

Diachronic is entirely different. When we explain something diachronically, we tell why things have become as they are. A diachronic study of an event will take into account the factors that led up to the event itself. Returning to the example of the automobile, a mechanic might explain to the owner that his brakes failed because he had his foot on the brake pedal all the time, even when he is accelerating. In fact, this same owner might have two cars whose brakes failed at the same time, and the mechanic might attribute that the owner is mistreating his vehicles. A diachronic explanation asks, "How did we get here?"

A third word, used less frequently, is anachronic. Anachronic literally means "against time." It often refers to something that is very out of place. For example, someone might be driving a car out of the 1950s, one that has an old-fashioned carburetor and massive fins on its back fenders. This anachronic car doesn't fit in because it is from a different era. Anachronic things don't fit into the time period in which they are found. Pioneer museums would be considered anachronic places.

Churches can fit into one of these three categories. Some churches tend to be more synchronic in that they try to synchronize themselves to the world around them. As one example, churches often adopt music styles that are similar to the music produced by the world. They argue that being synchronic makes the relevant. We could argue that being synchronic in the area of music style is not terribly critical, for music styles have changed over the centuries with very little impact on the believers. But being synchronic in other areas might be a lot more troublesome. A church might avoid talking about hell because no one in our culture wants to believe that it exists. A church might compromise on its view of human sexuality because the world around it has done so. Synchronizing churches are in danger of following the way of the world. Not all synchronic decisions are bad, of course, for sometimes the church should adapt to the culture. Although switching worship services to English from the Dutch was a big deal for many, in reality this kind of synchronicity was a blessing.

Opposite of the synchronic churches are the anachronic churches. They tend to keep old practices just because that is the way things used to be. Anachronic churches rarely spend much time considering what they are doing, but they keep doing them because "that is the way it was done." Anachronic churches

---

argue that this is the way things should be because that is the way things were. For some reason, they have come to the conclusion that the way things were is the best way although they do not have any strong grounds to support their view. Anachronic churches tend to appeal only to those who are already part of them, for their practices are strange to the outsider and since no explanation is given, the outsider cannot understand why things are done as they are. Anachronic churches tend to look at other churches who are not anachronic and accuse them of being synchronic.

The third kind of church is the diachronic church. Again, a diachronic explanation is one that studies the past to understand why things have become as they are. For example, a church may avoid the rather common order of worship found in many evangelical churches (songs, announcements, prayer, message, song) for the one that we are more familiar with (call to worship, greeting, confession, God's Word, response, benediction, all interspersed with songs) because they understand where this order of worship came from and why it is important. In other words, a diachronic church can explain why they do things as they do. They may hold onto older practices, and they may adopt newer ones, but they always can say why they did what they did. A diachronic church is one that knows why they are doing what they are doing.

A few days ago I had a discussion with a young man who was struggling with a change in his church. The change involved communion, and his church had just changed from having all participants gathering in groups around a table at the front of the church to having small cups distributed in the pews (as we are accustomed to). He was bothered by the change, and he explained why. The elders of the church said that it took too long to have communion when the people had to go to the front to participate. Serving people in the pews was more efficient. This young man was troubled by this, for he felt that his elders were becoming too synchronic, making the worship service more palatable by doing things for non-spiritual reasons. But, as I continued my conversation with him, I discovered that he was not anachronic. He didn't want to go back to the common cup at the front of the church because that was the way it was always done. He believed firmly that Scripture gave us the pattern of participating in communion by gathering around a table, and that is what we should do. He knew that I disagreed with him on this point, but he impressed me, for he showed a deep desire to follow God's Word, and the elders of his church, in his opinion, didn't seem to care.

He illustrates what a diachronic church (and that does seem to be the best of the three) should be. We can explain all of our traditions and practices in some way or another, but what we need to do is always return to Scripture. A diachronic explanation must go back all the way to the Bible, or it is a fallacious argument. In fact, everything that the church does should be rooted in Scripture, and, if it is not, it can be abandoned without a second thought. If a biblical basis cannot be given, the church may be in danger of becoming anachronic (we do things because that is the way they were done) or synchronic (we want to make ourselves relevant to the world). A diachronic explanation must always return us to Scripture, for if the explanation for what we do does not, the explanation is not good enough.

It is always beneficial for us to ask ourselves what kind of church we are. Are we a anachronic church, doing things because that is the way they have been done, with no explanation as to why we do things in this way? Are we a synchronic church, adopting principles and practices of those around us without asking if they conform to Scripture? Or are we a diachronic church, seeking explanation for what we do, rooting our principles and practices firmly in Scripture?

*Pastor Gary*