

KCC Question of the Week

9 June 2011

Dear Friends (Known and Unknown),

Here's the Question of the Week:

How many generations have there been since Adam?

Here's an attempt at an answer:

Wow. Interesting question. It's actually one that I had never really pondered until now.

There are a lot of genealogies in the Bible, and that makes sense, I think.

The Bible is not a single book, after all. It's a library spanning centuries in time. And the people telling the stories, living the stories, and interacting with the God who usually is the main character in the stories wanted to remember that it all hung together down through the years. Connecting things through the generations was one way (and not the only way) of doing trying to do this. In other words, Jesus celebrating his last Passover meal with his friends was in connection to the first Passover meal right before the slaves high-tailed it out of Egypt some 1300 years before.

Now to get at the meat of the response I'll focus on the list of generations from Luke chapter 3 in the New Testament.

Short answer: It appears that Luke says that between Adam and Jesus there have been 77 generations which fit into 7 groups of 11. There is no set number of years per generation, so let's just say a generation is 30 years. That means we could throw in another 67 generations since for a grand total of 144.

But this clearly isn't Luke's point, so it probably shouldn't be our goal.

Luke's list and the genealogy from Matthew chapter 1 are different. And both of them utilize but change genealogies from the Old Testament. It is imprecise, and they know it is.

In addition, it goes without saying that the world is older than 4320 years of age. Clearly the writers of biblical genealogies weren't researching them on the Internet's ancestors.com. And even if they had, modern research into such things is fraught with gaps, so it is more than understandable that things would have been hit or miss in the past as well.

So then, what is Luke's point?

Disciples of Christ Bible scholars Gene Boring and Fred Craddock write:

"Luke's genealogy of Jesus functions to fit Jesus into the broad sweep of the story of God's plan through the ages: Jesus is not a great man who appears on the stage as an outstanding individual, but is the climax and fulfillment of a story of which God is the director and producer. Many people in Luke's genealogy are otherwise unknown, but they played their role in the history that led to the coming of the Messiah."

Thinking in the same way about the generations since Jesus I'd say this:

God's love enters our real world. It is not just a dream in our heads. God's love invades our messy world of blood and guts and the passing of generations. The Lord wants to heal and renew that real world. Our real world. And that's ultimately why the Bible has lists of generations and not just timeless proverbs disconnected from history and family and the passage of time.

So, even if we never know exactly how many generations have passed between Adam and us, may we do in our own way something like what the different folks in Luke's genealogy did.

May we each play at least a small role in letting the world know that the Christ has come in love and grace, that Christ has risen and so death and despair have ultimately been defeated and that Christ will come again and all will be made well for however many generations there have been and will be.

Thanks for the question.

Peace in Christ,

Robert