

“BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

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THE HISTORY OF BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

Is Biblical chronology really relevant and important? Most modern Bible believing Christians do not think so. **Most** believe that it is **not relevant** to **Biblical theology**, and most have heard that there are “gaps” in the chronology. They have been told that virtually nobody today believes in “**Ussher's** chronology,” and this has created in their minds the idea that Archbishop **Ussher** was doing something unique when he put down his Biblical chronology. (Ussher's chronology, dating creation at 4004 B. C., is found in older King James Bibles.)

This is not the case, however. First, Biblical chronology is very important theologically, as future essays in this series will seek to demonstrate. Christianity is a religion of history, and chronology is the backbone of history. I shall argue that the gnostic tendency to turn the faith into an ideology is what lies behind modern dismissals of Biblical chronology. Moreover, the **Biblical** chronology is precisely a chronology of the center of history, of the sanctuary, of the Word of God as He is manifest in the Old Covenant history. For that reason, Biblical chronology is of clear importance in understanding the theology of the Old Covenant. There is a specific theological reason why the Bible gives a chronology from creation to the cross, but does not bother to give tight chronological information in the **post-cross** era (e.g., the book of Acts).

Beyond this, however, is the fact that in the history of the Christian Church, the chronology of the Bible has always been accepted. It was only in the late nineteenth **century**, under the pressure of secularist speculation and scholarship as I believe, that there was a departure from Biblical chronology. In this essay, we need to look at the history of the Church in this area.

The Great Conversation

Why bother with Church tradition, though? Because looking at Church tradition is an important step in getting guidance from the Holy Spirit. It is not the **step**, but it is an important step. Jesus said, “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth” (John **16:13**). How does the Spirit do this? He does it by guiding the Great Prophetic Conversation in the Church.

A study of prophecy in the Bible will show that a prophet is a man who has access to God's Great Heavenly Council. A prophet is a **Councilmember**. God takes him into His confidence, tells him things, and even asks his advice. Originally the Council consisted of the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When the universe was created, the angels were immediately admitted to the Council, as junior partners. Men were designed to grow and mature

18, where we see God sharing His plans with Abraham, and then condescending to seek Abraham's advice. God did not have to do this, but He chose to do it as a way of maturing and **honoring His image**, the man Abraham. We see another example of this in Amos **3:7** and **7:1-9**, where God consults with His prophet Amos and “changes His mind” when Amos argues with Him. God knew all along what He was going to do, but he honored Amos by taking him into His counsel.

In the New Covenant, all God's people are given Council access (Acts **2:17-18**). This is because the Spirit has come to guide the **conciliar** discussions in the Church. As the local church meets to discuss prayerfully what is to be done, various members contribute ideas as they are led by the Spirit. There is nothing mystical about this. Christians are often afraid to say, “I think the Spirit would have us to do such and such,” and instead say, “I think we should do such and such.” But in reality, the Spirit is guiding the Great Conversation. What is true in the local churches is true also of the Church at large in history.

Notice that God's first suggestion to Abraham was not what He and Abraham finally decided on. Notice that God “changed His mind” about His initial proposal to Amos. Just so, the Spirit does not always put the final decision into the mouth of the first speaker. The Spirit prompts one man to make a suggestion that is not the best one. This provokes another man to stand up and, under the Spirit's guidance, make an alternative proposal. The discussion goes **on and on**, until a **consensus is** reached. Next week, the consensus may change slightly. The guidance of the Spirit, based on the inerrant and infallible Bible, is continuous.

Now, this ongoing Great Conversation is the truest and best meaning of the “tradition” in the Church. Protestants have reacted against “tradition” because in the Medieval church the “tradition” was made absolute, and was put alongside the Bible. Let's not throw out the baby with the bath water, though. The true tradition is the background for what the Spirit is saying today. If we cut ourselves off from the full history of the Church, and try to start from scratch, we are despising the Spirit.

Similarly, Paul says that Jesus has ascended on high and has sent gifts to men. Clearly His first gift was the Spirit, on Pentecost. Paul elaborates, however, and says that Christ's gift of the Spirit manifests itself in “apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors-teachers,” and that these exist for the gradual “building up of the body of Christ” until by the end of history we have become “mature” (Eph. **4:8-13**). If we despise the voices of the great

great teacher to make a great error, in" order to **provoke** another teacher to see a **new** insight. Thus, the "tradition" must always be open for improvement. This is what the Protestant Reformers insisted over against the Medieval Church.

Our reason for going into all this is to make the point that it is the position of the great teachers of the Church, and the overall tradition of the Church, that Biblical chronology is true and valuable. For this reason we need to pay very serious attention to it. Of course, perhaps the tradition needs to be revised on this point. At present, however, this issue **is** not taken seriously. Rather, twentieth century evangelical have blithely ignored Biblical chronology, assuming without good reason that it is not a subject worthy of consideration. By doing this, they have cut themselves off from the Great Conversation. In a future essay I shall take up the main arguments against Biblical chronology, and show that in fact there are no "gaps" in the chronology. My point for now is to insist that we take seriously the voices of our fathers.

Biblical Chronology and the Church

So, what do our fathers tell us? In the ancient church, we can look at the two great schools of Antioch and Alexandria. **Theophilus** of Antioch, founder of the Antiochene school of exegetical theology, set the date of creation at 5509 B. C., using the **Septuagint**.¹ (The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Bible, and its chronology differs from that of the Hebrew Bible). On the other side Augustine of Hippo, a follower of the Alexandria school of interpretation, accepted the chronology and labored to construct it systematically, seeking to clear up problems created by his Septuagint **version**.²

How about the Protestant Reformers? Martin Luther's positive assessment of the chronology is seen in his remarks on Genesis 11:

But Noah saw his descendants up to the tenth generation. He died when Abraham was about fifty-eight years old. Shem lived about thirty-five years after Abraham. Shem therefore lived with Isaac about 110 years and with Esau and Jacob about fifty years. It must have been a very blessed Church that was directed for so long a time by so many (pious) patriarchs who lived together for so many years.³

1. See Martin Anstey, *Chronology of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1973), p. 24. Originally published as *The Romance of Bible Chronology* (1913), p. 44.

2. Augustine, *The City of God* XV:10ff.

3. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Genesis*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondewan, 1955), p. 19S.

John Calvin was very clear in his commitment to Biblical chronology. In the *Institutes* he noted that "the world, now declining to its ultimate end, has not yet attained six thousand years."⁴ In another amazing passage Calvin likened the truth of chronology to the doctrines of the Trinity and of predestination:

Profane men, I admit, in the matter of predestination abruptly seize upon something to carp, rail, bark, or scoff at. But if their shamelessness deters us, we shall have to keep secret the chief doctrines of the faith, almost none of which they or their like leave untouched by blasphemy. An obstinate person would be no less insolently puffed up on hearing that within the essence of God there are three Persons than if he were told that God foresaw what would happen to man when He created him. And they will not refrain from guffaws when they are informed that but little more than five thousand years have passed since the creation of the universe, for they ask why God's power was idle or asleep for so long.⁵

Affirmations of Biblical chronology can be found in the writings of Puritans John Owen⁶ and Matthew Henry.⁷ The great German expositors C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch completely accepted the Biblical **chronology**.⁸ In the twentieth century, the "father of Reformed Biblical theology," Geerhardus Vos, was a follower of the Biblical chronology: "The chronology is attached to the Sethite line, for the chronology is the frame-work on which in Scripture the progress of redemption is suspended."⁹

Thus, the tradition of the Christian Church is quite clear in this area. If we are to reject this point in the tradition, we had better have very good reasons for doing so. Sadly, the modern evangelical scholarly establishment has assumed that the matter was settled in the late nineteenth century by two essays by W. H. Green and B. B. Warfield, neither of which is very persuasive, as we shall see in future issues. As a result, the evangelical establishment has ignored or side-stepped the issue.

4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 1:14:1.

5. *Ibid.*, 3:21:4.

6. John Owen, *Discourse on the Holy Spirit* (1674): in William H. Goold, ed., *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, [1650-53] 1965) 3:254.

7. Matthew Henry's *Commentary* (many editions), prefatory comments on Genesis 5.

8. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol 1: *The Pentateuch*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans [19th c.] 1965), p. 34. (Introductory comments on the book of Genesis.)

9. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1945] 1971), p. 58; newer pagination: (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 47.