
Ancestry

A generation is often defined as the period of time from when a child is born until they have their first child. The length of a generation varies a little from culture to culture, but, on average, we can define a generation as being about 25 years.¹ It is approximately 2025 years since Jesus was born (give or take a few years because the original calculations were not quite correct), which means that 81 generations have passed since the incarnation of Jesus. That may seem like a lot, but if we had the records of those generations, it would not be an impossible task to memorize the names of our ancestors. Sadly, records do not exist for most of us before the 1600s, so we can't do that memory work, but it would be fascinating if we could.

As I reflect on it, it would not have been hard for my ancestors to have taught their children the names of those who had gone before, and if they had been diligent in passing that information along, I would have had access to that list and maybe I would have been able to list my ancestors back to the time of Jesus. I'm not sure what benefit that would have, and perhaps that is why the lists have not been passed from one generation to the next. Still, it is fascinating to know that my grandparents from 80 generations ago lived at the same time as Jesus. And my ancestors from 160 generations ago lived at the same time as Abraham. Saying that Abraham lived 160 generations ago makes him seem a lot closer than if we say he lived 4000 years ago.

In the Bible we have a number of genealogies. The first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles are mostly genealogies, and we find many more scattered throughout the Bible. In the New Testament, there are only two genealogies, both of them of Jesus, one found in Matthew 1 and the other in Luke 3. These genealogies serve several purposes, but the primary purpose is connect people from different periods of history. Thus, Abraham, by means of genealogy, is connected to Noah. Jesus, in Matthew's gospel is connected to Abraham and in Luke's gospel, to Adam who is connected to God his Creator. Although genealogies played an important role in the Bible, Jews today do not keep the same genealogical records, for there is no significant reason for them to do so. As long as a Jewish person can trace their lineage back a generation or two to someone who is also Jewish, that is sufficient to guarantee them an identity as an ethnic Jew. They do not need to go back all the way to Abraham to prove that they are part of the people of Israel. Further, not all people who identify as Jewish can trace their ancestry back to Abraham because some of them are descendants of those who converted to Judaism and were accepted into the Jewish community. While for some Judaism is a mere ethnic attribute, true Judaism is a religious one, and someone who is truly a Jew by faith is considered part of Abraham's family by other Jews.

For a Christian our biological ancestry does not determine our faith. I do not know when my ancestors first became followers of Jesus Christ, but from what I can tell, for generations my ancestors have been Christians. I am part of a long Christian heritage. I suppose I could go back to the church records and find

¹ Note that English translations of the Bible sometimes use the word, "generation," but it may not be the best translation of the original language. For example, in Genesis 15:16, "generation" seems to refer to a period of 100 years. This is a mistranslation, not a problem with the original text.

dates of baptisms and professions of faith, and I could determine the depth of my Christian background, but that would not serve any real purpose. What includes me in the Christian community is not my ancestral heritage but my relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In other words, while I am grateful to belong to a long Christian heritage, I am even more grateful that by God's grace, I am included in God's family.

I am included in God's family through adoption. My sister and her husband are in the process of adopting their foster child, and the paperwork should be finalized in a few weeks. Their son will gain a new family name, and his ancestry will become my sister's ancestry, and, by extension my ancestry as well. In Christian-speak we would consider his adoption to be his conversion, for he is becoming part of a new family just as we become part of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ.

I am an adopted child of God through Jesus Christ, and my genealogy has become the genealogy of God's family. In other words, because I am Jesus' adopted brother, his ancestry becomes my ancestry. While my biological genealogy might be unknown, my faith genealogy is found in the Bible. The genealogy of Jesus becomes my genealogy because of my adoption.

I suppose it would be nice had my ancestors passed down the list of names of my ancestors for the past 2000 years. It would not have been hard to memorize those 80 or so names. But for what point? What would I gain by knowing the names of people I have never met and will never meet this side of heaven? Probably very little. But God, in his grace, has adopted me as his child, and he has given me an ancestry which leads right back to him through Jesus Christ. Jesus' ancestry becomes my ancestry, and, for that reason, I know to whom I am connected. I am connected to God and am his child. I may meet many of the people from those 80 generations when I get to heaven, but, more importantly, by God's grace, I will meet the rest of my family, beginning with Jesus who I will see face to face.

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