

Billions of Years

When and Why did churches begin to embrace that idea?

- WHEN: Most churches did not begin embracing billions of years until the 19th and especially the 20th century, after new geological and later astronomical theories became widely accepted.
- WHY: Most were **not** firm in their view of the Scriptures being the literal, inspired, and inerrant word of God.

What Does the LCMS Believe?

Brief Statement, Adopted 1932

- We teach that God has created heaven and earth, and that in the manner and in the space of time recorded in the Holy Scriptures, especially Gen. 1 and 2, namely, by His almighty creative word, and in six days.
- We reject every doctrine which denies or limits the work of creation as taught in Scripture.
- In our days it is denied or limited by those who assert, ostensibly [allegedly] in deference [respect] to science, that the world came into existence through a process of evolution; that is, that it has, in immense periods of time, developed more or less of itself.
- Since no man was present when it pleased God to create the world, we must look for a reliable account of creation to God's own record, found in God's own book, the Bible.
- We accept God's own record with full confidence and confess with Luther's Catechism: "I believe that God has made me and all creatures."

Beliefs Over the Past 300 Years

Before the 1700s: Virtually all Christian traditions—Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and others—assumed that:

- Adam and Eve were historical individuals.
- The genealogies of Genesis provided a rough chronology of early history.
- The earth was thousands of years old, not millions or billions.
- Noah's Flood was a real worldwide event.

Before the 1700s: Not all theologians insisted on calculating the earth's exact age, but no major church body taught an earth millions or billions of years old. For example:

- Martin Luther (1483-1546) accepted the Genesis chronology and six-day creation.
- John Calvin (1509-1564) treated Genesis as real history.
- Augustine of Hippo (354-430) interpreted aspects of Genesis differently than many later Christians but still believed creation occurred only thousands of years before Christ, not millions of years ago.

Late 1700s–1800s: Geology Changes the Discussion:

- The major shift began with geologists such as: James Hutton (1726–1797) and Charles Lyell (1797–1875). They argued that geological formations resulted from slow processes operating over immense periods of time.
- This led many Christians to conclude that the earth must be much older than traditional chronologies suggested.

Late 1700s–1800s: Geology Changes the Discussion: To reconcile Genesis with these ideas, several interpretations arose in the 1800's:

- Gap Theory (a long gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2)
- Day-Age Theory (the creation days represent long ages)

After 1859: Darwin's Influence:

- The publication of *On the Origin of Species* intensified the debate.
- Many churches rejected Darwinian evolution initially, but some theologians began rethinking Genesis considering evolutionary theories.
- Acceptance came gradually and unevenly.

Early 1900s:

- Many mainline Protestant scholars accepted an ancient earth.
- Some began accepting evolutionary explanations for human origins.
- Conservative churches generally continued to defend a recent creation and a historical global Flood.

Mid-1900s to Present:

- Acceptance of an ancient universe became widespread after developments in astronomy and physics.
- Observations associated with: Edwin Hubble, the expanding universe, modern cosmology, and radiometric dating led most Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and mainline Protestant theologians to accept ages measured in billions of years.

Today: Churches that embrace billions of years:

- The Catholic Church permits belief in an ancient universe and earth.

- Most of the Anglican Communion accepts an ancient earth.
- Most mainline Protestant denominations do likewise.
- The Eastern Orthodox Church generally does not oppose old-earth views, though opinions vary.

Today: Churches that continue to reject billions of years: Some church bodies maintain the traditional / BIBLICAL understanding:

- Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
- Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
- Evangelical Lutheran Synod
- Many independent Baptist churches
- Various conservative Reformed churches

Today: Churches that continue to reject billions of years: Those groups generally believe that:

- Genesis describes six ordinary days.
- Adam and Eve were the first humans.
- Death entered through sin.
- The Flood was worldwide.
- The biblical genealogies point to a history measured in thousands rather than billions of years.

Conclusion:

- Historically speaking, belief in a universe and earth billions of years old is a relatively recent development within Christianity, becoming common only during the last 150–200 years.
- For roughly the first eighteen centuries of NT church history, Christians overwhelmingly assumed that creation occurred only thousands of years before their own time, even though they differed on some details of how Genesis should be interpreted.