

Worship Notes

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THEME: The Dawn of Redeeming Grace

The Canticles of Christmas (Luke 1 – 2)

The birth narratives in Luke's gospel contain four psalms of praise to God by individuals involved in the story of Christ's advent. These four texts have been set to music by many different church composers over the centuries (from Monteverdi, to Bach and Mozart, to Dvorak and Bruckner, to William Walton and John Rutter), often in Latin, but also eventually in other languages as well. These poetic texts, or *canticles* (a canticle is defined by the dictionary as: "a song or chant, esp. a hymn containing words derived from the Bible"), are often identified by the first word or words of their text in the Latin Vulgate translation. Together they provide a wonderful exposition of some key truths that underlie the familiar Christmas story.

Mary's Magnificat
"My soul *magnifies* the Lord . . .)
(Luke 1:46-55)

THE HUMBLE EXALTED

In 1978 Kenneth Kantzer wrote a thought-provoking article entitled "The Theology of Christmas: The Way Up Is Down" (*Christianity Today*, December 1, 1978, pp. 20-24). In it he

describes what he calls "the cornerstone of theology," a crucial biblical concept embodied not only in the Christmas narratives and in the truth of the Incarnation, but which also is a fundamental understanding of God's saving work through Christ.

This principle is expounded in the words of Mary's psalm-like expression of praise and gratitude for the part God is allowing her to play in his plan for the world. She recognizes that she has been chosen to show how God can bless and use a common person who is willing to submit herself to serving the Lord and trusting in His Word (1:38). She recognizes that she has been "favored" by God (1:28) (literally *graced*; she is a *recipient* of grace, not a *bestower* of grace—as some hold) and elevated from her low estate to a role of great responsibility and privilege; meanwhile those who presume to exalt themselves God will humble.

This principle has been called the "Reversal of Fortunes" motif, and is common throughout the Bible; some examples: Abraham and the residents of Babel (they say, "let us make a name for ourselves," Genesis 11:4; God says to Abraham, "I will make your name great, 12:2); Moses and Pharaoh; David and Goliath; Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. And this exaltation of the humble and the humbling of the (self-) exalted is suggested throughout the birth narratives: not only Mary, but also the shepherds (considered at the very bottom of the working class) and ultimately the despised Gentiles themselves (see under Simeon below), will be elevated in importance as recipients of God's gracious working, while the Jewish leaders are found wanting and are left behind.

"The
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We see this principle operating on a broader political level as well. God is moving in and through the lowly Jewish nation (for years now having suffered under the Roman yoke) to bring forth the Savior of the world, of whose kingdom (unlike Rome's) "there will be no end" (1:33). And later in Luke 3:1-2, where after reviewing a "who's-who" of the leading Roman and Jewish figures of that time—Tiberias Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Phiip, Lysanias, Annas, Caiaphas (all enthroned in great cities)—Luke then ironically states that "the word of God came to *John* the son of Zechariah in the *wilderness*"!

Most importantly, the pattern of the Reversal of Fortunes theme is exemplified by the Savior Himself, as expounded by Paul in the familiar verses of Philippians 2: though exalted Himself with the Father (v. 4), yet He humbled and emptied Himself to become one of us (v. 7), and submitted Himself to die on the cross in our place (v. 8); and "therefore God highly exalted Him" (v. 9). Kantzer writes, "By God's own standard, his greatest glory was his greatest humiliation; his greatest humiliation brought his greatest exaltation" (p. 21).

God works this way Himself, and so he is pleased to cause this principle to operate among human beings as well, "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Ephes 1:6). Salvation comes only as a gift to those who will humble themselves before God and receive it in faith, rather than presuming it as something which they have in any way earned or deserved; so that, as Paul writes, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the *Lord*" (1 Cor 1:31). There is application to our Christian walk as well (as Philippians 2:1-5 makes clear): "For man, as for our Lord, the way up to the greatest exaltation and fulfillment is the way down to humble, loving service" (Kantzer, p. 23).

Zacharias's *Benedictus*

("Blessed be the Lord God of Israel . . .")
(Luke 1:67-79)

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

The people of Israel, aware (often arrogantly so) of their unique status as God's chosen people, had long expected Him to act decisively to

bring liberation from their enemies and redemption to the nation—which to them at the time of Christ meant the throwing off of the hated Roman rule.

Zacharias, filled with the Holy Spirit (1:67), praises God in his psalm (1:68-75) for finally beginning to bring about the long-awaited fulfillment of these promises that the prophets had communicated long before. However, his words take an unexpected turn, for he goes on to describe the coming salvation not in terms of political emancipation, but rather as "the forgiveness of their sins" (1:77). In fact, there is a wealth of redefinition going on here in Zacharias' words: a redefining of salvation (the forgiveness of sins), of the true enemy (not Rome, but sin); of God's expected visitation (it will be face to face, in human flesh); of peace or *shalom* (it will be inner).

The visitation from on high of the Sunrise (a Messianic title) would have the effect of bringing *light* "to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (1:79) because of their sin-caused alienation from God. The English translator of "Silent Night" must have this passage in mind when he wrote of "the dawn of redeeming grace" (in verse 3 as we normally sing this carol).

God, who is Light and in whom "there is no darkness at all"

(1 John 1:5) said first of all at the Creation, "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3) and there was. God is often described in the Bible in terms of light, and sin in terms of darkness. And so Isaiah expresses the Messianic hope in terms of a light shining into the darkness: "The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them. . . . For to us a child is born . . ." (9:2,6); "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (60:1).

Jesus Christ is often in Scripture given names and titles (by Himself and others) relating to this theme of light (see page 4 below). Zecharias's son John would be the forerunner of Him who would offer redemption from the heart's slavery to sin

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(Rom 6:6) and a far deeper, truer, and all-encompassing *shalom* (peace, 1:79). This great One would be the “Light of the World” (John 8:12), the “light of men” and the “true light” which “shines in the darkness” (John 1:4,5,9). “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

Simeon’s *Nunc Dimittis*

(“Now let your servant *depart* in peace . . .)
(Luke 2:29-32)

A LIGHT TO THE GENTILES

Without lessening the significance of the Messiah’s advent to the nation of Israel, Simeon also proclaims prophetically (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, 2:26-27) that the salvation which this One brings will be extended to the Gentiles as well.

This was of course not a new concept to a Jews who knew their Old Testaments. In fact, as far back as the call of Abraham (Gen 12) we see God’s plan to bless the whole world through the descendants (or, as we understand from our vantage point, through one great Descendant. But in terms of the common stance of many of the Jewish leaders this

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was undoubtedly a controversial and even unwelcome reminder.

The light theme continues here in Simeon’s psalm—only here that beam of light is redirected and refocused to shine on the Gentiles as well (2:32a). Israel’s greatest glory (2:32b) will be as a conduit and a source for the blessing of the whole world through the One come from its midst. This is consistent with Isaiah’s prophecy, where God speaks to the Messiah: “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:6).

The Angels’ *Gloria* (“*Glory* to God in the highest”) (Luke 2:14)

GLORY TO GOD!

This most familiar of all Christmas texts is the jubilant chant of the heavenly host in response to the angel’s announcement to the shepherds of the birth of “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (2:11). This text was expanded during the early centuries of the church into a great hymn to the Trinity that now forms part of the Roman Catholic mass, the Eastern Orthodox rite, and Lutheran and Anglican services. Here is the version in the *Book of Common Prayer*:

Glory be to God on high
And on earth peace, goodwill towards men.
We praise thee, we bless thee, we worship thee,
we glorify thee;
We give thanks to thee, for thy great glory,
O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father
Almighty.
O Lord, the only begotten Son Jesu Christ;
O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
Thou that takest away the sins of the world, have
mercy upon us.
Thou that takest away the sins of the world,
receive our prayer.
Thou that sittest at the right hand of God the
Father, have mercy upon us.
For thou only art holy;
Thou only art the Lord;
Thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost art
most high in the glory of God the
Father. Amen.

Thus the Christmas story (and its spiritual legacy) rings with the refrain of a grateful ascribing of glory to God, who bestows His peace and favor upon mankind through the sending of One called “Son of the most High” (Luke 1:32); son of David (1:32); “Son of God” (1:35); “Lord” (1:43; 2:11); “Savior” (2:11); “Christ” (2:11); the Lord’s “salvation” (2:30). And we celebrate the stunning truths of these canticles at Christmas and throughout the year: the incredible glory of God’s massive condescension to us in the incarnation and redeeming work of His Son, the Light of the World, who wondrously continues to shine into and re-make human hearts. *Truly something to sing about!*

JESUS CHRIST

The True Light

“The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.”
(John 1:9)



The Star of Jacob

“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not
near:
a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.”
(Number 24:17)



The Light of the World

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying,
“I am the light of the world.
Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness,
but will have the light of life.”
(John 8:12)



The Sun of Righteousness

“But for you who fear my name,
the sun of righteousness shall rise
with healing in its wings.”
(Malachi 4:2)



The Lamp of God's Glory

And the city has no need of sun
or moon to shine on it,
for the glory of God gives it light,
and its lamp is the Lamb.
(Revelation 21:23)



The Sunrise from on High

“The Sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”
Luke 1:38-39)



The Bright Morning Star

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you
about these things for the churches.
I am the root and the descendant of David,
the bright morning star.”
(Revelation 22:16)

ARTICLE REVIEW

John D. Witvliet, “Isaiah in Christian Liturgy:
Recovering Textual Contrasts and Correcting Theological Astigmatism”
(*Calvin Theological Journal* 39 (2004):135-56)

Access pdf of article [HERE](#) or at
<http://www.calvin.edu/worship/idis/theology/consultation/files/witvliet.pdf>

Don't let the title scare you away! This article is not for the faint of heart, but it's well worth working through.

John Witvliet, Director of the *Calvin Institute of Christian Worship*, discusses how we basically use in worship no more than about twenty short passages from Isaiah, which he terms “The Pretty Texts of Isaiah.” He goes on to point out that when we use these texts (usually at Christmastime), we “tend to strip texts from their contexts in ways that also strip the texts themselves of key dimensions of their meaning or their rhetorical force” (135).

Witvliet shows how Isaiah's prescription for addressing the idolatry of his day—and ours—can work potently in our contemporary situation. He gives a lot of very practical examples of how we can let these passages speak more powerfully in our services by briefly explaining the context and situation out of which they come in Isaiah's prophecy.

This is a masterful study in letting the Scriptures speak for themselves in worship, and not just pulling out convenient proof-texts or “pretty texts.” A thoughtful study of this article could make our practice of worship far more biblically rich and biblically faithful.

WORSHIP EVENTS

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Creation, The Fall and Worship



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