

## Introduction

Thoughtful Christians are aware of the fact that Christmas has a meaning that is difficult to incorporate into a Christian worldview. You might get the impression from what I am saying that Christmas and Christianity are opposed to one another. To be clear, that impression is correct. Our culture took Christmas from its original context and transferred into an alien environment. For example, the same medley of Christmas songs will have "Silent Night" along with "Here Comes Santa Claus." Interestingly, the music promotes faith in a mythical omniscient person who knows if you have been bad or good with the implication that good deeds earn his blessings. Elements of biblical teaching, and false teaching, come in blended form through music, stories, movies, and commerce on a large scale. This question therefore presents itself: can we get Christmas back into a Christian worldview? Should we try (for example, by pouring new meaning into Christmas trees, candles, and even Santa Claus; there are some creative attempts to do this, cf. the music CDs of Margi Harrell)?

I am not going to answer this question directly, but I will lay a foundation on which to build an answer beginning with the elementary fact that Christmas refers to the birth of Christ. You may put Santa on your front lawn, but next to him, you will also put a manger scene. With all the clutter, Christ's birth is at the bottom of things pertaining to Christmas. However, the birth of Christ is a fact of history that comes to us within the biblical worldview. Therefore, we can go to Scripture and see how Christmas fits within a Christian worldview. Thus, it is not that we have to get Christmas back somewhere; it is already there, what we need are eyes to see it. One way to get a Christian perspective regarding Christmas (the birth of Christ) is to look closely at Luke 2.14, a classic Christmas passage.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> And all went to be registered, each to his own town. <sup>4</sup> And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, <sup>5</sup> to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. <sup>8</sup> And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. <sup>10</sup> And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Verse 14 is a capstone in the birth account. Specifically, the heavenly host ascribes glory to God *with regard to the birth* of Christ. If we look at the context, we can see how God's glory is the main point of Christmas. Then it takes very little reflection to see how deeply this contrasts with Christmas sentimentality, superficial, even anti-Christian Christmas sentimentality. I have two hooks on which to hang our thoughts on this topic: "Christmas within a Christian Worldview. 1) We are to glorify God because of His mercy, and 2) we are to glorify God because of His sovereign mercy.

### 1A. First, we are to glorify God because of His mercy

The general context reminds us of the great history of redemption and the covenant of mercy promised to Abraham. Consider Mary's "Magnificent" where she acknowledges her need of the Savior ("**from God my Savior,**" Lk. 1:47). God's blessing on Israel is coming through Mary "**in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever**" (1:54-55). The promise to Abraham narrowed down the earlier promise to Eve that a descendent will come that

will bring restoration from the effects of the fall into sin (Gen. 12:1-2; 3:15; 2:16; 3:6). Thus, the apostle Paul states, **"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned"** (Rom. 5:12). On this side of the fall, we have sin and death but through Jesus Christ we have righteousness and life (5:18): **"For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous"** (5:19).

There is no superficial sentimentality here. Instead, what we have in Scripture is a matter of life and death, of righteousness and sin, and of justification and condemnation. The backdrop of the birth of Christ includes the fearful fact that **"for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek"** (Rom. 2:8-9). In direct address, Paul says, **"because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed"** (2:5). These weighty teachings are essentials in the meaning of Christmas in a Christian worldview. Instead of sentimentality and syrupy relationships between people, we have mercy and a saving relationship between God and sinners. For this, we are to honor, praise, and glorify God. Our minds must focus on God's mercy to sinners in desperate need in order to separate Christmas from cultural reinterpretation, misreading, and distortion.

2A. Second, we are to glorify God because of His sovereign mercy

Although an almost forgotten truth, in Luke 2:14, it is the sovereign election of God that ties the loose ends of the passage together. Glory to the highest interweaves with peace on earth *to those upon whom God bestows His electing love*. We can best appreciate this fact if we sort of climb up some steps to it.

1) First, consider the vertical direction of the account

To see this direction of things, you need to observe the difference in translation between the King James Version (KJV) and the English Standard Version (ESV).

**KJV- Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.**

**ESV- Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!**

The ESV reading has the best support (cf. *The Text of the NT*, Metzger, pp. 239-30). The idea is not peace and good will to men. More specifically, it is not even that God gives peace and good will to men so that they live at peace with one another (showing good will to each other). In this incorrect interpretation, good will is a gift God gives to men and a gift they display. Others read this half of the verse (14b) as a call to peace among men and a call to good will man to man. However, we should stress the point again that interpretation begins with an incorrect reading.

Instead, the idea is that peace comes to those upon whom God bestows it according to His good pleasure. As Metzger puts it, peace on earth comes to "men of God's good will, i.e. those persons on whom his favour rests, chosen to be the recipients of the gift of his Messiah" (230). The good will of this text is not man's good will but God's good will. Moreover, it is precisely at a point like this that people wrongly place an accent on man rather than on God. An accent on man taints biblical Christianity by religious superficiality. In contrast to thinking horizontally on a merely human plane, this peace is not first between men. Jesus secured peace between God and sinners; that is what is first in this peace.

2) Second, consider the monergism of this account

Monergism is not a commonly used word. Interestingly, we are more readily acquainted with the opposite of monergism, which is synergism. The synergistic principle is when people work together; it is what happens when groups of stores combine in a synergism to make a shopping mall. Literally, it refers to cooperation, to a co-work, in which each party does his work and together they obtain some desired result. However, monergism refers to "one work," to a single work that God does on behalf of sinners. The heavenly host makes it clear that we are to glorify God because *He grants* peace to sinners by the coming of Christ. It is totally His work. How else can those who love darkness and hate the light ever come to the light? He must give eyes to see before sinners can see, understand, and believe the good news (cf. Jn 3:19 with 3:3 and 1:12-13). Accordingly, Luke's famous account tells us that those who receive peace, mercy,

and all the promises of the covenant are those upon whom God's favor rests in a special saving way.

### 3) Third, consider the wider biblical perspective

Surprisingly to many people, Scripture teaches that sovereign mercy is a fundamental reason for ascribing glory to God. God's electing love is a reason to glorify God *to the highest*. It is fitting, vital, and essential to worship. In the book of Acts, the early church addresses God in prayer as "Sovereign Lord" (a common OT way of addressing God) by whose hand Pilate, the Gentiles, and Israel did what He "had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:24, 28). We are to praise God as sovereign covenant Lord who says, "I will show mercy upon whom I will show mercy, and I will harden whom I will harden" (Rom. 9:14-18). Therefore, Ephesians 1:3-6 tells us that God's electing love serves His glory:

**"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved."**

In Romans 8, Paul teaches that all who are called will be justified and glorified (v. 30). Thus, the calling of some Jews and some Gentiles (even us) is His efficacious call of His elect in a way that magnifies His glory:

**"What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory- 24 even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?"**

Reprobation, the passing over of some in the electing of others, is a vital part of the process by which God reveals His glory. Words fail us as we try to articulate the power and impact of these verses. We can only fall on our faces in light of the severity that some justly receive and the kindness that we receive by sovereign mercy. We can say nothing in our own defense. To see the kingdom, to believe in Christ, and to embrace the Father are the gifts of sovereign mercy and the elements that make peace between God and man. Therefore, we must ascribe glory to God in the highest!

### Applications

How do these things apply to you? They apply by requiring specific responses (none of which suggest a "humbug" posture regarding Christmas in our culture; they suggest a rich biblical outlook; they take us way down a different and much blessed road!).

#### 1) The proper response to these things is to acknowledge your comparative smallness.

You must acknowledge your need and helplessness. You have to ponder His severity to some and His kindness to you. Then, you will confess that what you have is only what you have received because of God's sovereign purposes in Christ from before the foundation of the world. This perspective cuts away all man-centeredness. It places everything where it belongs, in the hands of God. Here, you can truly say, "my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness." If there is any other basis of hope then it is something less. The gap between God and man is so great that it is impossible for man to cross, for man to do anything whatever to help himself across the chasm. The God of all possibilities must do the work and He does it by electing love in Christ. He is great in this work; by comparison, you must admit your smallness, your helplessness, and your childlikeness.

#### 2) The proper response to these things is to work at good works.

Grasping what He has done for you and knowing that you contribute nothing, should move you to that which glorifies the Father in heaven. He is glorified through good works defined by the law in its true spirit and intent (Matt. 5:16-20). Where then will you go? You will go to the law in its entirety; it will examine the thoughts and intentions of your heart, and it will bring cleansing in Christ *because it directs you to Him*. You will accent the true spirit and intent

of the law by continual reexamination of it *and of your life* with openness before your risen Lord. You will recognize discontinuity in the shift from the OT to the NT, but you will accent continuity looking squarely at the abiding validity of the law. Your king binds you to both testaments as treasures new and old. In a pointed exhortation, I can simply repeat Paul: **"Whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"** (1 Cor. 10:31). That is how Christmas applies to you.

3) The proper response to these things is faith and repentance.

Angels proclaim the *gospel* by a summons to glorify God (Rev. 14:6-7, **Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim... 7 And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory)**. That means turning from self to God, not seeking your honor but His. It means reverential fear that gives glory to God in thought, word, and deed. You thus pray from the depths of your heart "You, O Lord, are worthy of all praise, honor, obedience, and glory both now and forevermore." Turning away from ourselves, we say, **"Not unto us, not unto us, but to your name give glory, O Lord."** Turning from self, you say, **"Not unto me, not unto me, but to your name give glory, O my Lord."** The true spirit of Christmas involves *faith* in the triune God who is sovereign in the bestowal of mercy to needy sinners; it involves turning from self glorification to glorifying God.

4) The proper response to these things is worship with a profound sense that all glory, maximal glory, belongs to God.

Glory in the highest (Lk. 2:14) and glory forever (Rom. 11:36) belong supremely to God. You must praise Him even though you do so with feeble lips. Still, you must praise Him with wholeheartedness because He has made you whole and given you eyes to behold His majestic greatness (1 Pet. 2:9, **But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.)**

I am stunned. The simple words of this text cause my mind to go into over drive (**Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!**). I have to say, "This is amazing, it is live changing, and it has radiance and warmth like the brightness of the Sun." This is an experience of awe; it is awesome. It strikes the consciousness with a sense of awe. It hits and strikes hard like a two-by-four bouncing off the forehead. It takes time to absorb this theme of the glory and perfection of God. It has to percolate into the heart. It stops the mouth, overwhelms the heart, and when I can finally say something, I have to say, **"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, it is high, and I cannot attain unto it"** (cf. Ps. 139). The point is that so much must be taken to heart that we have to long for and cry out for a thousand tongues to sing, say, preach, and proclaim "my great redeemer's praise."

So there we have it. Wonderfully, the Lord takes up our salvation in the supreme goal of His own glory as it serves His sovereign good pleasure and our good.

**My we bow down before the majesty of our God and say, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased! Amen.**