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## Music that Writes Culture: Reflections on “Joy to the World”, the Messiah’s Coming, & Kingdom

By **Darrow L. Miller**

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It was over 20 years ago that the power of this carol first stuck me. After being reminded year after year of this carol’s power, I have decided it is time to share my thoughts. The first time I consciously read the lyrics, I had two responses. The first was that this hymn was meant to set the course of the lives of those who profess Christ, me included. The second thought was that I needed to pay more attention to the lyrics of the hymns that I sing! In the following days, I decided to examine the historical background of this hymn and explore the lyrics to see what they had to say to me as I entered into that New Year. I believe the insights I gained those many years ago are still relevant today.

The New Testament setting of this hymn is just before Christ ascended into heaven, when he gave his people their Great Co-Mission. The commission is comprehensive: we are to take the Good News around the world – geographic (Ac. 1: 8); to all creation (Mk. 16:15); and to penetrate culture – demographic (Mt. 28:18-20). So, *Joy to the World* is not so much a Christmas carol, as it is a hymn about the coronation of Christ and the marching orders of his people for the Great Co-Mission.

In addition, even though this hymn is sung at Christmas, it is really more of a bridge to the New Year than specifically a Christmas song. Most Christmas carols focus on the birth of Christ as a little baby. In contrast, this carol focuses on Christ the king and his coming kingdom. Much of the hymn deals with our response and our responsibilities to the coming of the Messiah and so it seems to me that this is really a transition piece, helping us to face the future of all the new years in our lives, as ambassadors of Christ and his kingdom. In fact, it could be called a New Year’s carol.

In order to get started, let’s read the lyrics together:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come.

Let earth receive her king.

Let every heart prepare him room  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns,  
Let men their songs employ.  
While fields and floods,  
Rocks, hills and plains,  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground.  
He comes to make his blessing flow,  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as, far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of his righteousness  
And wonders of his love,  
And wonders of his love,  
And wonders, wonders of his love.

How rich these lyrics are. Before delving into the carols lyrics, we first need to understand its author, Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and his influence on hymnody in general.

Like so many young people today, Watts was frustrated with the quality of the hymns at his church. After one Sunday service, he shared this dissatisfaction with his father, who challenged him to produce something better. The next Sunday, at age 18, young Watts brought his first hymn to the congregation, which was very well received. For the next two years, he produced a new hymn text for every Sunday service. During his lifetime, he produced over 600 hymns and today is known as the ,father of English hymnody.`  
As a youth, Watts studied Latin, Greek, French, and Hebrew and thus had the ability to

read the scriptures in their original languages. As a teenager, he was a student of philosophy and theology, and as an adult, he wrote books on theology.

His hymns and carols are an amazing combination of deep theological understanding and beautiful lyrics, with his most famous Christmas carol is *Joy to the World*. But Watts also composed other favorite hymns such as *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross; O God, Our Help in Ages Past; Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed*; and *This is the Day the Lord has Made*.

Watts wrote hymns because he understood the power of music to speak to both heart and head, and thus to shape lives and eventually nations. It was the Greek philosopher Plato who first acknowledged the power of music to shape a nation. He said: „Give me the songs of the nations, and it matters not who writes its laws.“<sup>1</sup>

The carol *Joy to the World* was written from Psalm 98. In fact, Watts wanted to translate some of the Psalms of David into their New Testament fulfillment, so he produced *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to the Christian State of Worship*.<sup>2</sup> *Joy to the World* comes from this volume of hymns, a hymn of praise for the coming of the Messiah and his work to overcome the curse of Adam’s rebellion. But more on this later.

Following in Watts’ footsteps was Charles Wesley (1707-1787), the brother of John Wesley. While John preached Christ crucified, calling for people to repent and for England to be transformed, Charles wrote 5,500 hymns, and the lyrics for another 2,000, to be used as tools to engage the hearts and minds of the people and therefore help build a godly nation. In fact, God used the preaching of John and the songs of Charles to bring huge changes in English culture and life in one generation.

On that note, what we need today is a new generation of Wesley’s’ and Watts’ who understand the power of truth and music to transform a society. To read more on this theme please see my paper *Worldview and Art: The Call of the Balladeer*.<sup>3</sup>

Having provided some background information regarding the carol, I now want to look at it in detail and so we will examine the significance of each stanza for our lives. As I have said, this hymn celebrates the coronation of King Jesus and announces the marching orders for his kingdom and subjects.

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 342

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Watts, *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to the Christian State of Worship*, Reprint, (Teddington, England: Echo Library, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> This paper can be found at [http://www.disciplenations.org/uploads/vt/B-/vtB-gpk-2V0\\_zZU98IUvNw/Worldview-and-Art.NARRATIVE.pdf](http://www.disciplenations.org/uploads/vt/B-/vtB-gpk-2V0_zZU98IUvNw/Worldview-and-Art.NARRATIVE.pdf)

The first stanza reads:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come.  
Let earth receive her king.  
Let every heart prepare him room,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

The hymn opens with a benediction, 'Joy to the world,' an act of praise or blessing, similar to the salutations of Paul at the beginning of his letters, 'Grace and Peace to you!' Here the word of benediction is 'joy' - the delight of the heart and mind. Why is there joy to the world? Because 'the Lord is come!' It is the world - her peoples, her nations, her citizens, her institutions - that is to celebrate the coming of the Messiah and his kingdom.

Notice that Watts writes "the Lord *is* come," rather than using the past tense "has come" in this opening line. While it is true that the coming of Christ is a historic event, Watts understood that it was more than a past event. His coming as the Messiah was ushering in a new era of human history. The long promised coming of the Messiah and his kingdom is beginning. Heaven is breaking through to earth, eternity is breaking forth into time, and the kingdom of Light is breaking forth into the kingdom of Darkness. And so, Watts uses the present tense and active verb 'is come' to show that Christ's coming is an ever present and ongoing engagement in the world.

Wow, this is reason for the peoples of the world to celebrate!

In the second line, Watts says 'Let *earth* receive her king.' Note that the object of the first two lines has changed, from world to earth. I don't think this was a slip of the pen or poetic variation in his writing, since Watts was not only a hymn writer, but was also theologically grounded. I think he was carefully writing sound theology into the lyrics of his songs. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had more Christian songwriters today who were theologically astute? Too often today we must slog through new hymns lacking any real content. Many churches have moved into a sort of 'Eastern mode' reflected in the endless repetition of low-content choruses, which sound and function more like a mind-numbing Hindu mantra than rich, content-filled hymns. May God forgive us, and may he raise up a new generation of Isaac Watts' - true theological composers.

Returning our attention to the carol, I think Watts is making a careful distinction in this second line of the first stanza. The *earth* refers to the place where we reside, a part of the larger created order. This is in contrast to the *world*, which speaks of people and institutions. Watts understands that Christ is King, not only of heaven, but also of the temporal realm; he is the king of both the *world* and the *earth*.

Here, we must be careful not to think from an Atheistic-Materialistic framework and reduce the earth to a machine. While the earth is not 'alive' as neo-paganism teaches, it is filled with living things. Psalm 19:1-4 reminds us that creation praises the Creator:

,The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.  
Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.  
There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes  
out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.'

Johannes Kepler, the great Christian philosopher and astronomer, called this voice of Psalm 19 the ,music of the spheres.' The ancients called it *musica universalis*.<sup>4</sup>

So what is the earth to do? She is to receive her king.

Watts is making another significant theological point here. Christ is not only the king of the *world*, he is also *nature's* king. Psalm 98:4, from which Isaac Watts drew inspiration for this part of his hymn, reminds us of the earth celebrating the coming of the Lord: ,Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music.' The Apostle Paul confirms this in Romans 8:19-22 when he says that all of creation is awaiting redemption. Creation is to be redeemed with the coming of her king, his kingdom, and with the revealing of the sons of God.

In line three we move from the macro, the world and the earth, to the micro, the heart of each individual: ,Let every heart prepare him room.' The Apostle Paul reminds us that we are all sinners and come short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). The great Russian novelist Alexander puts it this way, ,The line separating good and evil, passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart.'<sup>5</sup> It is the human heart that is broken and in need of salvation, thus Watts reminds us that each of us needs to prepare our heart for receiving our king.

This image is a particularly lovely one. When a young couple is expecting their first child, what do they prepare for the baby? A special room in their house. When a family is expecting a guest to come to their home, what do they do? They prepare a room for them. Each human being is to prepare a room in their heart to welcome their Lord and King.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musica\\_universalis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musica_universalis)

<sup>5</sup> Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956*, Authorized Abridgement, (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 312

Now Watts ends this stanza with a chorus, „And heaven and nature sing.´ Here, man is challenged to join heaven and nature, to sing their praises to Christ the king. Will the world and her people sing?

As the well known Christian saying goes, „There is a God shaped vacuum in every heart.´ That vacuum can only be filled by Jesus Christ. Humans are challenged to prepare room in their hearts for their Lord and King. As they do, they can join with heaven and nature to sing the anthem of joy.

Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let earth receive her King! Let every heart prepare him room and heaven and nature sing!

Moving on to the second stanza, we read:

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns,  
Let men their songs employ.  
While fields and floods,  
Rocks, hills and plains,  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

In Watts' original lyrics, the first line of this stanza reads „Joy to the *earth*, the Savior reigns.´ Many modern copies of the hymn have simply repeated the benediction of the first stanza, saying „Joy to the world“, but Watts has changed focus in a comprehensive parallelism from the *world* to the *earth* and from „*the Lord coming*“ to „*the Savior reigning*.´

For Isaac Watts, Jesus is the Savior, our redeemer, the restorer of wholeness and the Sovereign of the universe—of nations and of our lives. Often, Christians make a distinction between salvation in the vertical realm and lordship in the horizontal realm. Watts makes no such distinction. God's work is comprehensive; Christ is Savior of both the world and the earth, desiring redemption not only for humanity, but also for the earth he created. And he is sovereign over both humanity and nature.

As mentioned earlier, the Great Co-Mission reflects this comprehensive work, moving *horizontally* around the world to connect geography (Ac. 1:8) with the very important concept that the gospel is meant to bring redemption to all the earth--**all** of creation (Mk. 16:15). And it moves *vertically* to penetrate culture—to affect all people and all of culture at every level (Mt. 28:18-20). To miss this concept means to miss the opportunity for us as the church to function in the fullness of God's commands and longings for our world.

Why did Christ die on the cross? The Apostle Paul is clear: „For God was pleased to have *all his fullness* dwell in him, and through him *to reconcile to himself all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross` (Col. 1:19-20). God has a big agenda! Christ died to reconcile *all things* to himself. Does this include the soul of man? Yes! But it is not limited to the soul of man. Christ died to save all of each human being. And he died to redeem nature and nations. This is the *comprehensive* gospel of the kingdom of God.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!

How are we to respond to this good news? The answer is found in the second line of the stanza: „Let men their songs employ!` What does this mean?

To employ is „to use as an instrument of means.”<sup>6</sup> We use a saw for cutting, a pen for writing, a brush for painting, a bowl for mixing; we employ tools for their intended use. Well, we are also to employ our songs. Paul spoke of this: „Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with *psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*. Sing and *make music* in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ` (Eph. 5:18-20). Just as heaven and nature sing—the music of the spheres—so those who are redeemed by Christ are to sing and make music.

As we saw earlier, Plato once wrote „Give me the songs of the nations, and it matters not who writes its laws.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly Maxim Gorki, a Soviet author and political activist, had a phrase to describe the impact of a writer— he is “the engineer of the human soul”.<sup>8</sup> Words and lyrics shape the souls of men, create culture, and ultimately determine the destiny of nations. Isaac Watts understood this, and explains why he spent his life penning Biblical truth into the lyrics of songs, impacting the church to be the conscience of the nation.

When and how are men to employ their songs? Lines three and four of the stanza seem to offer the challenging answer: „While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains repeat the sounding joy.` What does this mean? First, that heaven and nature – fields, floods, rocks, hills, and plains – sing praises to their creator and king. This is the *musica universalis*. Second, nature's joyous song is repeated over and over again: nature never ceases her song. Third, is the phrase „*the sounding joy*.` There are two major

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<sup>6</sup> Noah Webster, 11828 American Dictionary of the English Language, s.v. „employ`

<sup>7</sup> Schmidt, How Christianity Saved the World, 342

<sup>8</sup>John Hersey, ‘Engineers of the Soul,’ *Time Magazine*, October 9, 1944

understandings of the word 'sounding' that are worth noting in this context. The first is that of making a *sound* – to use a trumpet or voice to make an announcement or praise. So we are to make a joyful noise unto the Lord. But there is a second understanding and that is the *sounding*. Here the word means to probe the depths of something, as in determining the depth of the ocean by using a lead line.<sup>9</sup> How deep and profound is the coming of the Messiah and his kingdom! Our songs are to ceaselessly probe the depths of the meaning of the coming of the Messiah and his kingdom.

So our challenge as Christians is to make our song as joyful and enduring as that of creation, and to employ our words and lyrics to plummet the depths of Christ and his kingdom before a watching world. A wonderful example of this is found in Acts 2, when there was the breaking through of heaven to earth, the meeting of the eternal with the temporal at the day of Pentecost. Here, the Spirit of God broke upon man in a spirit of word, song, and prophecy.

How can you begin to consciously employ your words and your songs to shape your community, culture, and nation?

I mentioned at the start of this paper that I had a revelation years ago when I was singing this hymn. The revelation occurred while we were sing stanza four:

No more let sins and sorrows grow.  
Nor thorns infest the ground.  
He comes to make his blessing flow  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as, far as the curse is found.

The first things that struck me what that this stanza includes an imperative: „No more let sins and sorrows grow!` How far? „As far as the curse is found.` Here, nestled in the middle of this hymn are marching orders for Christians. It is interesting that this stanza is left out of many of the modern renditions of this carol. I can't help wondering if perhaps it is left out because it is a call for action in response to a message, not simply a happy proclamation. It asks for human responsibility and accountability for engaging in God's big agenda. In the middle of the „feel good` season of the modern Christmas, perhaps we don't want to hear anything that requires actual effort.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sounding>

As cultures move away from Biblical revelation, the celebration of Christmas has deformed from being primarily a reverent celebration of Christ's birth to include St. Nicholas, Santa Claus, snow, a red-nosed reindeer, Christmas trees, and, of course, massive consumer spending. But this carol calls us back to reality.

The setting for this stanza is the Garden of Eden after the fall. There is pain in childbirth and there are weeds in the garden. This pain and sorrow has grown over the years into three major forms of evil. The first is *personal* evil. Human beings are sinners. We think evil thoughts, say evil words, and make evil decisions. The second is *natural* evil. There are weeds in the garden, floods, droughts, earthquakes, famine, pollution, sickness, and death. Third, there is *institutional* evil: slavery, apartheid, the caste system, children and female sex trade, corruption in every level of society, the frank promotion of evil by the media and arts, and abortion.

Christ has come to make his blessing flow as far as the curse is found, but his people are to engage in this restoration and transformation process when we are called to "no more let sins and sorrows grow." This call relates to both the *world* and *earth*. In our world, privately and publicly, for cultures and nations, we are to stand against personal and institutional evil. In the earth, we are to stand against the natural evil, the thorns that infest the ground. We are to be stewards of the earth and protect and nurture the garden.

As Watts points out in the opening line for the stanza, there is a relationship between the growth of sins and the growth of sorrows. Sin always has its consequent sorrow, but we live in a world in which human responsibility is downplayed. We are all like addicts. The problems we face are not of our making; they are always someone else's fault. "The devil made me do it!" "It was my brother's fault!" "It was my wife/husband!" "It's God's fault!" "It's the government's responsibility to fix it!"

This carol was written within the framework of the reality that we are made in the image of God; we are moral creatures; and thus have the ability to make decisions that have real consequences. We are to function as responsible human beings. Where do sorrows come from? They come from sin.

As an example, let's look at the "global economic crises" that unfolded in 2008.<sup>10</sup> The pain and sorrow of this crisis is being felt around the world and may well continue for years. But what set it off? I believe it was behavior stemming from not following Biblical

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<sup>10</sup> See the DNA blog to read the complete series, <http://disciplenations.wordpress.com/tag/global-economic-crisis/>.

principles of personal integrity and sound economic stewardship. It was not one thing, but was a plurality of sins. Congressmen passed laws that paved the way for institutions to offer unsecured loans, and so these financial institutions saw a way to make a quick buck during a housing boom and offered those unsecured loans. Federal watchdog agencies failed to be watchdogs and turned a blind eye to the institutional evil. Loan officers sold loans that they knew people could not pay off. People bought houses that they could never afford. They wanted something that they did not have to work and save for. And, there were Christians involved in these practices at all levels of the process—but they were not functioning as Christians. Now we are facing all the sorrows from this long, long tale of sinful decisions. Christians are not to ,go along to get along.` We are to stand against personal, natural, and institutional evil.

In terms of natural evil, modern science was birthed out of this older theological understanding. Francis Bacon, Johannes Kepler, and Isaac Newton were scientists who functioned consciously from a Biblical worldview. For them there was no separation between faith and science. They understood the significance of the fall, and the relationship between thorns and sins and their corresponding sorrows. Their lives were given to fight against the natural evil in the world, and from that fight was birthed what we know today as ,modern science.`

Like these godly men, we are to work for restoration – towards a garden free from weeds, a city free from corruption and poverty, art and music that promote a culture of life and beauty. We are not to be spectators of what is unfolding in our communities and nations; we are to be the shapers of our cultures, the builders of our nations. We are no longer to let sins and sorrows grow or thorns infest the ground. We are to be Christ's instruments for the flow of his blessings as far as the curse is found. How are we consciously seeking ways to stand against sins and sorrows?

We are coming to the end of our look at the New Year's carol, *Joy to the World*. We have celebrated with Watts the joy and reason for the joy: Jesus is the Messiah and his kingdom is coming. Christ is Savior and Lord of the world and of nature, our earth. We have seen that we are to ,employ our songs` for influencing our communities and nations and that we are to actively combat the results of the fall – the weeds in the garden. So, now we will turn our attention to the final stanza, which deals with the advancement of Christ's kingdom:

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of his righteousness

And wonders of his love,  
And wonders of his love,  
And wonders, wonders of his love.

The stanza begins with a proclamation: ‚He rules the world with truth and grace,‘ words that describe what Christ does, rules the world, and how he does it, with truth and grace, and ends with a response from the nations – which prove ‚the glories of his righteousness‘ and ‚the wonders of his love.‘

Many Christians believe that Christ is the king of heaven today but will only be king of earth when he returns. This belief has encouraged a spirit of disengagement from the world and an attitude of waiting for Christ’s return. But Christ encourages us differently. After his resurrection and before he gave the *Great Co-Mission* (Mt. 28:19-20), Jesus makes a *great* claim to his disciples (Mt. 28:18): ‚All authority in heaven and *on earth* has been given to me!‘ Christ is king of heaven and earth, **now**. It is on his authority as king of earth that Christ gives the Great Co-Mission: ‚Therefore go and *make disciples of all nations*, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to obey* everything I have commanded you‘ (Mt. 28:19-20, italics added). Note that the Great Co-Mission is nothing less than to disciple all nations. Christ is king and his kingdom is governed by laws and ordinances, which is why part of the commission is to teach the nations the laws that Christ has commanded.

The prophet Isaiah wrote:

‚For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and *the government* will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. *Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness* from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.‘ (Isa. 9:6-7, italics added)

Christ is king now, and the nature of his kingdom is that it will continue to *increase*.

When the disciples asked Christ to teach them to pray, He said this: ‚This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, *your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*‘ (Mt 6:9-10, italics added) We are to pray that his kingdom would come to earth and that his will would be done on earth. Christ is king of heaven and earth and we have a part to play in the increase of his kingdom.

Does our king rule arbitrarily? No. He governs through his eternal laws and ordinances. Living within the framework of God's order, people and nations will prosper, and conversely will suffer impoverishment and enslavement by choosing to live outside of this order. We are measured against God's laws and ordinances. The Lord's Prayer reminds us that Christ wants heaven to come increasingly to earth.

Isaac Watts understood this and is why he wrote 'He rules the world.' How does Christ rule the world? With *truth* and *grace*! In John 1:14 we read that Christ is the personification of grace and truth: 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, *full of grace and truth.*' (Italics added) Christ himself is full of grace and truth! His nature is his means of governance and so as grace and truth were made flesh in Christ, they are also to be manifest through his body, the church.

The Greek word for truth is ἀλήθεια (*alētheia*): 'that which is in accord with what really happens, facts that correspond to a reality, whether historical (in the time/space continuum), or an eternal reality not limited to historical fact.'<sup>11</sup> So truth corresponds to reality the way God has made it. It is interesting that this Greek word is derived from the negative participle of the word λανθάνω [*lanthano*]: 'to be hidden, to be hidden from one, secretly, unawares, without knowing.'<sup>12</sup> For much of the ancient world and the modern worlds, truth is hidden. Some say 'There is not truth!' Others say that there is truth, but that it cannot be known. The religions of the East—Hinduism and Buddhism—shroud truth and reality in mystery. Well, Christ is truth revealed! Truth is no longer hidden, it is revealed for all to see in the life of Christ.

Christ is **the truth**, the revelation and splendor of truth. We no longer need to live in a world of illusion. We can now live in reality. There is Truth, and we can know the Truth and the Truth will set us free.

The Greek word for grace is χάρις [*charis*]: 'good will, loving-kindness, favor < the merciful kindness \*of+ God.'<sup>13</sup> Often it refers to God's unmerited favor. Christ is grace himself and rules by grace. Because he willingly died on the cross for our sins, we no longer need to live in fear of punishment by a just God. Justice was served at the cross. God's goodwill is towards man.

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<sup>11</sup> *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek*, s.v. 'ἀλήθεια'

<sup>12</sup> *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*, s.v. 'λανθάνω'

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, s.v. 'χάρις'

What does Christ's rule by truth and grace *prove*? ,The glories of his righteousness and the wonders of his love. `

Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary defines the word 'prove' as: ,to establish or ascertain as truth, reality or fact; to ascertain the genuineness or validity of; to verify.` There are 'hard walls' and 'sharp edges' in reality. We bump up against these things and know they are there. For example, if you jump from the roof of a tall building, you will know the affects of the physical law of gravity. If you attempt to break the moral law of ,you shall not commit adultery,` you and your family, not the law, will be broken. Truth is always self-authenticating. Lies are self-defeating. God makes the nations ,prove,` makes them authenticate reality. They will be healed and prosper within the framework of His truth and grace, or they will suffer greater sickness, earlier death, and increased poverty by living outside of this framework.

Because all people and nations live in the reality God has made, they are forced to acknowledge the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love. The breaking through of the reality of the kingdom of God is both now and not yet. Now people are confronted with the reality and prove it by bending to it. In the future, every knee will bow:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9-11)

God's righteousness demanded a payment for my sin and then God's love provided the payment: Christ died on the cross for my sins, as well as the sins of the world. It has been said that the cross is the place where God's love and his righteousness meet and kiss. What a beautiful image. What an incredible love. What a wondrous and glorious God.

In closing I challenge you to think about how this hymn can cast a vision for you this New Year? Let us, in word and deed, repeat the sounding joy.

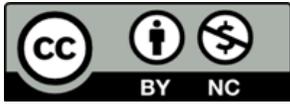
Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king!

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