

## A Light for a Revelation to the Gentiles

November 29, 2020

by Stephen D. Cole

*Mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples; a light for a revelation to the gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel. (Luke 2:30-32)*

These words are the words of Simeon, and, as a part of the Christmas story, the account of Simeon actually comes fairly late in the narrative. But the language he uses is the language of the prophets recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, long before the birth of the Lord. He invokes the imagery of the Lord's advent as a coming of the light, as did the prophets of old. Isaiah, for instance, proclaimed: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; they who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them the light has given brightness." (Isaiah 9:2)

These contrasting themes of darkness and light are familiar as we head into the Christmas season, which comes in the darkest time of the year. The coming of the Lord as light appeals to and can enlighten everyone, but Simeon makes specific reference to the light coming to the gentiles. In doing so, Simeon again echoes Isaiah, as in these words: "I, Jehovah, have called Thee in justice; and I will take hold of Thy hand, and will preserve Thee; and I will set Thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the gentiles." (Isaiah 42:6)

Still the message may seem as though it is simply a general message of good news: The Lord's advent benefited everyone, both near and far. But the Heavenly Doctrine, as always, invites us to look more closely, to consider who these gentiles are, and in that way to have the words of the text speak to us in a more specific and more meaningful way.

So who are the "gentiles" of whom both Simeon and Isaiah speak? The Hebrew word that Isaiah uses is "goiim." And if people are at all familiar with this Hebrew word, they will probably know it as a term used by Jews for those who are not Jewish. And this suggests a point about many New Church people may need reminding: the term "gentile" in English is most commonly employed in the very same way, as a synonym for "non-Jew." This is worthy of remark, since in the Heavenly Doctrine, and consequently in New Church usage, this is not the way in which it is generally used, the meaning having been transferred to make reference to those who are outside the sphere of *Christianity* rather than that of Judaism. So New Church people need to realize that if they use the term in this way outside the bounds of their denomination, they are likely to be misunderstood by a majority of their listeners. The confusion extends even further, however.

"Goiim" is often also translated as "nations," as is the Greek word translated "gentiles" in our text. And likewise the Latin word "gens," used in the Heavenly Doctrine to render these words, is also sometimes "gentiles" and sometimes "nations," the latter often when it is paired with "peoples." And, indeed, even the passage from Isaiah quoted earlier, "I will set Thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the gentiles," is often rendered "for a covenant of the people, for a light of the nations." Conversely, the opening sentence of today's service, "Praise Jehovah, all ye nations; Extol Him, all ye the peoples," could have begun "Praise Jehovah, all ye gentiles."

Given its frequent pairing with "peoples," "nations" is often thought of as simply a synonym for "peoples." But, the Heavenly Doctrine points out, as with many other pairs of apparent synonyms in the Word, there is a hidden spiritual reason for the pairing. Typically, such double expressions reflect the Divine marriage of good and truth in all things of the Word. So, too, with "nations" and "peoples," "nations" being a celestial term which relates to good and "peoples" a spiritual term that relates to truth.

There is nothing in the modern concept of "nations" that would suggest why it ought to relate especially to good. But the problem is that the modern understanding of the term "nation" is quite

different from the Biblical concept embodied in the Hebrew word “goiim,” or the corresponding Greek or Latin words.

When Genesis ten gives an account of the repopulation of the earth by the descendants of Noah, the chapter concludes “These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their births, in their nations; and from these were separated the nations in the earth after the flood.” (Genesis 10:32) And regarding the use of the word “nations” in this context, the *Arcana Coelestia* explains:

The Most Ancient Church was distinguished into houses, families, and nations. A married pair with their children, and their menservants and maidservants, constituted a house; a number of houses that were not far distant from one another constituted a family; and a number of families, a nation. Hence “nations” signified all the families taken together in the aggregate. (AC 1159:3) So in the Biblical sense a nation is more like a clan or a group of related tribes.

The Latin concept of a “gens” is quite similar – an extended family going back to a common ancestor, the word ‘genetic’ coming from the same root meaning. The Romans believed that each gens had a special guardian spirit whom they called a “genius,” which word again derives from the same origin. This special character or disposition of each “nation,” in the ancient sense, is reflected in the teaching that “there were different kinds of worship in the Ancient Church, in accordance with the genius of each nation.”

With such an understanding of what were meant by the nations in Scripture, we can begin to see how nations relate to good or to love. So let us look at one more passage from the *Arcana* that sums it up: The rule of love toward the neighbor prevails among those who dwell separated into houses, families, and nations; but the rule of the love of self among those who dwell together in a society. Among those who live separated into houses, families, and nations, it is the father of the nation, and under him the fathers of families, and under these the fathers of each household, who rule. He is called the father of the nation from whom come the families, and from the families the households. But all these rule from love like that of a father toward his children, who teaches them how they ought to live, bestows benefits upon them, and as far as he is able gives them of his own. Nor does it ever enter into his mind to subject them under himself as subjects or as servants; but he loves that they should obey him as sons obey their father. And as this love grows as it descends (as is known), therefore the father of the nation acts from a more interior love than the immediate father of the sons himself. (AC 10814)

Ideally, then, a “nation,” in the Word refers to a larger unit of human society, still bound together by love of the neighbor. A “people,” on the other hand refers to those who are have in common only the fact the they are under the government of one ruler. Interestingly, the Heavenly Doctrine points out :

“Kings have reference to peoples, and thus not to nations. The children of Israel, before they sought to have kings, were ‘a nation’ and represented good, or that which is celestial; but after they desired a king and received one, they became ‘a people’ and represented not good or that which is celestial, but truth or that which is spiritual.” (AC1672)

So what of the “gentiles,” who are referred to by the same word as the nations? Notice that in our lesson from Isaiah the gentiles were paired with the kings: “And the gentiles shall walk to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.” (Isaiah 60:3) As we might expect from what has gone before, the “kings” refer to those who are in truths and the “gentiles,” those who are in good. These are obviously not mutually exclusive categories, as this prophecy looks forward to the visit of the three kings, who were not simply gentiles, with respect to the Jews, but also magi, learned in the ancient prophecies in the Word regarding the Lord’s advent.

And in the text itself, the gentiles are similarly contrasted with Israel: “a light for a revelation to the gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel.” Here we may understand “Israel” as those who have the truth directly from the Word and the gentiles as those who are in good, but yet are in ignorance, a

darkness without light – both of whom will benefit from the coming of the Lord, but each in their own ways.

The prophecies of Isaiah, and even the utterance of Simeon most specifically regard the state of the world at the Lord's first advent. And in that context, the gentiles can be seen in the traditional sense of "non-Jews." But in an extended sense these prophecies carry over into the Christian era and the next grand cycle of darkness and light in human spiritual progress. Who are the gentiles in this next cycle?

Historically, Christians tended to refer to non-Christians, not as "gentiles," but as "heathen." This term, however, clearly has negative connotations. And those connotations go along with the traditional notion that all those outside of Christianity must necessarily be damned, unless, of course, they converted to Christianity. In the New Church, though, we meet a very different idea of the non-Christians. Not only does the Heavenly Doctrine speak of the gentiles being saved, it often says that the well-disposed among the gentiles may be *better* than the Christians. (AC 2853:2) How can this be? How can those who are ignorant of much of what is taught in the Word be better than those who are well versed in its teachings?

The answer, as it is stated in the work *Divine Providence*, is that "In the spiritual world, the world every person comes into after death, no one asks what your faith was or what your doctrine was, but what your life was like." (DP 101:3) Every human culture has a basic code of moral or spiritual conduct which corresponds roughly to the Ten Commandments. And every human being who lives a life according to such a code, trying thereby to benefit the neighbor and society at large, is on the path to salvation.

So if such a basic set of precepts is all that is really needed, and people can possess these without any direct knowledge of the Word, why if it even necessary for some to have the Word, to study it, and to pursue what may seem to be complex and abstruse doctrine?

In times of happiness and light, a simple faith and a straight-forward life based on that may, indeed, be all that is needed. But when the spiritual state of humankind grows dark and obscure, those who have a simple straightforward moral code become confused and can be led astray. They become the people who walk in darkness or who dwell in the shadow of death. This is the point at which the references in the prophecies to light or glory become important.

Those who dwell in darkness obviously are in need of light. Spiritual "light" is clearly truth. But it is the Lord as the light that is promised in the prophecies that we have looked at and this light is identified with His "glory." People may commonly think of "glory" as fame, renown, or honor. But in the Word "glory" is predicted of light, especially the spiritual light that flows into the natural.

The *Arcana* explains:

It shall now be told what "glory" is. "Glory" in the supreme sense is the Lord as to Divine truth, thus it is the Divine truth which proceeds from the Lord. But "glory" in the representative sense is the good of love toward the neighbor, or charity, which is the external good of the celestial kingdom and the internal good of the spiritual kingdom of the Lord... The spiritual heaven is called "glory" because whatever is there appears in light, in brightness, and in radiance. (AC 5922:3)

Given this understanding of what "glory" means, let us look at the word "glorification." There are two distinct ways in which this word is used in revelation – one is the more familiar usage in English: to celebrate in song or in words of tribute or praise. The other usage refers to the process whereby the Lord made the Human in Himself Divine. At first there may not seem to be much connection between these two usages, nor yet between these and the idea of glory and light. But these all may become more meaningful to us if we begin to see the relationship.

“Glorifying the Lord” in the sense of praising or celebrating Him might also be termed “giving Him glory.” And, of course, there is the theological truism that we cannot supply the Lord with any good thing which He does not already possess. As the *Arcana* says:

They who are not in the knowledge of interior things cannot believe otherwise than that the Divine wills the humiliation and submission of man, as a man does who is in the lust of glory; and consequently that the Divine wills glory therefrom, and is affected with the glory which man ascribes to Him. But the case is altogether different. The Divine is not in any affection of glory, for what glory has the Divine from man? But He wills humiliation and submission, not for His own, but for man's sake. (AC 4347:2)

To speak of “giving glory” to the Lord is similar to speaking of “blessing the Lord,” when, in fact, it is He who blesses us. And, indeed, the words of our text were introduced by these words: “and he received Him into his arms, and blessed God.” Concerning which we are taught:

Of Zacharias and Simeon we read that they “blessed God” (Luke 1:64, 2:28). Here it is evident that “to bless the Lord” is to sing to Him, to proclaim the good tidings of His salvation, to preach His wisdom and power, and thus to confess and acknowledge the Lord from the heart. They who do this cannot but be blessed by the Lord, that is, be gifted with those things which belong to blessing, namely, with celestial, spiritual, natural, worldly, and corporeal good; these, when they follow each other in this order, are the goods in which there is happiness. (AC 1422)

If “blessing the Lord” means to “to ascribe to Him all blessing; also to pray that He would bless, and to give thanks for having blessed,” then giving glory to the Lord, or “glorifying Him,” would similarly mean to ascribe to Him all glory; also to pray that He shed His glory upon us, and to give thanks for having received it.

And the Lord is able to shed this glory on us because He came into the world to “glorify” His human – to become the Word made flesh – as we are told at the beginning of the Gospel of John: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt in a tabernacle among us, and we observed His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” (1:14)

And if the connection of glory with spiritual light is not clear enough in this, we need look only a few verses earlier: “He was the true Light, which enlightens everyone who comes into the world.”

The idea of that the Lord’s advent “enlightens everyone who comes into the world” brings us back to the point that it is not only for within the church that the Lord came. The Lord’s advent made possible the salvation of the gentiles as well.

Not simply that those who do not have the Word can nevertheless be saved if they live the life of charity to the best of their ability, but “that by means of the Word there is also light for those who are outside the church and do not have the Word” (SS 114 = TCR 267) So those who have the Word can serve a use not only for themselves and others within the church, but also for those who are outside of the church, indirectly, as it were. Insofar as they read the Word and practice its precepts in their lives, so far do they also increase the enlightenment available to those who are unfamiliar with the Word.

But clearly the opportunities of those within the church are not limited to this. Jesus taught concerning this in the Sermon on the Mount, again using the comparison with light: “You are the light of the world. A city that is laid out on a mountain cannot be hidden. Neither do they light a lamp, and put it under the bushel, but on the lampstand, and it shines for all who *are* in the house. So let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who *is* in the heavens.”

The light of the Lord’s advent was not only to allow for more indirect light to reach the gentiles, it was for a new revelation. And how is this new revelation to reach them if they are not already in

possession of it? Some within the church have the role of letting the light shine by teaching and preaching and otherwise proclaiming the good news of the Lord in His Divine Human, as revealed through His second advent. But note that the focus of the Lord's words is on "your good works," letting the light shine in an exemplary life of charity – to the point that others who observe it will glorify your Father who in the heavens, which we now know means that we can, by our actions, make it possible for the Lord's spiritual light to shine.

*Amen*

**Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6; Luke 2:25-32**

*Arcana Coelestia* 9256:6. That the church is transferred to the Gentiles who acknowledge the Lord, is evident from many passages in the Word, as from these which follow. In Isaiah:

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, Thou hast made great their joy (Isa. 9:2, 3). It shall come to pass in that day, that the root of Jesse, which standeth for an ensign of the peoples, shall the Gentiles seek; and His rest shall be glory (Isa. 11:10). I Jehovah have called Thee in righteousness, and I will take hold of Thy hand, for I will keep Thee, and will give Thee for a covenant to the people, for a light of the Gentiles; to open the blind eyes, to bring out the bound from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house (Isa. 42:6, 7). Behold I have given Him for a witness to the peoples, a prince and lawgiver to the Gentiles. Behold thou shalt call a nation that thou hast not known, and a nation that knew not thee shall run unto thee, because of Jehovah thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel (Isa. 55:4-5). The Gentiles shall walk to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, they all gather themselves together, they come to thee; thy sons come from afar, and thy daughters are carried by nurses at thy side. Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall be amazed and be enlarged; because the multitude of the sea is converted unto thee, the armies of the Gentiles shall come (Isa. 60:3-5). And in the prophecy of Simeon concerning the Lord when a child:

Mine eyes have seen the salvation of God, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples; a light for the revelation of the Gentiles (Luke 2:30-32). [7] In all these passages the subject treated of is the Lord, in that the Gentiles shall come unto Him; and they come unto Him when they acknowledge Him as their God. And wonderful to say, the Gentiles worship the one only God under a human form; and therefore when they hear about the Lord, they receive and acknowledge Him; nor can a new church be set up with others.