

The little ecclesia of Luke 1 and 2*

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In Luke chapters 1 and 2 we find six people named as being involved in a positive way with events around the time of the birth of Jesus. Although not exactly fitting the pattern of modern geographic ecclesias, we can perhaps regard this group of faithful believers as an 'ecclesia' and thus gain lessons to apply in our ecclesias today.

LET US BEGIN our look at the little ecclesia of Luke 1 and 2 by introducing ourselves to its members:

Mary is a picture of humility, though she was "highly favoured" and "blessed . . . among women" (1:28). She said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant" (vv. 46-48). Like the place 'Marah' in the wilderness (Ex. 15:23), and the name Naomi assumed for herself (Ruth 1:20), her name means 'bitterness', but she was far from bitter in character; rather she witnessed the bitterness of human nature. In sorrow she would give birth, like Eve. She would have to flee to Egypt to save her son. She would be anxious when she lost him in the temple when he was aged twelve. She would watch as cruel men crucified him. Luke 2:19,51 suggests she was a deep thinker, pondering the things of God in her heart.

Joseph, from his actions, was clearly thoughtful and caring. We do not know much about him; Scripture tells us simply that he was a "just man" (Mt. 1:19).

Zacharias and **Elisabeth** "were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Lk. 1:6). They would be a powerful influence for good in the ecclesia into which John and Jesus were born. Together with their son John, as a family they prepared the way for Jesus. Each of them had a name that had a meaning that incorporated a form of the name of God.

Simeon "was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him" (2:25). His name means 'hears and obeys', or 'hearer'. A consideration of Simeon exhorts us to be constant in faith, patiently waiting for God's purpose to be fulfilled and listening quietly and obeying God as we wait.

Anna has a name meaning 'grace', a fitting description of the lady who appears to be the oldest member of the ecclesia. Like others in the ecclesia, she demonstrated quiet and steadfast faith. She "served God with fastings and prayers night and day" (v. 37).

Although we know the names of only six ecclesial members, it was probably a wider ecclesia, because there were others that showed faith at the time: the shepherds, the wise men, the neighbours and relatives of Elizabeth who "rejoiced with her" (1:58), and those in Jerusalem who "looked for redemption" (2:38).

An ecclesia that cared

Scripture describes how the members of the ecclesia showed care and respect for each other. The older generation were keen to instruct and support the young. The younger generation respected the wisdom and guidance given to them by their elders.

The generous hospitality of Zacharias and Elisabeth, two great pillars in the ecclesia, is something of note. Mary not only turned up on the doorstep and was able to stay three months, but also joined with them in praising God. It must have been a very beneficial time for Mary as she prepared for her task of bringing up Jesus.

When Jesus was brought into the temple "to do for him according to the custom of the law" (2:27), Simeon took the child in his arms, blessed God and uttered a prophecy. Mary and Joseph not only showed him respect, but also had the spiritual insight to realise that the words he gave set the scene for the work of Jesus, and its implications, particularly for Mary: "And Joseph and his [Jesus'] mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him" (v. 33).

An ecclesia that preached

The two key examples of preaching among the six were by women. Sometimes we can undervalue the role of women in ecclesial preaching because it is not their task to speak publicly in the ecclesia.

* All quotations from the NKJV.

The little ecclesia of Luke 1 and 2, an ecclesia of diverse ages, home locations, marital status and tribe, but one united in hope centred around the Lord Jesus Christ

Name	Approximate age	Home location	Tribe
Anna (widow)	“A great age”, “about 84 years” (Note 1)	Jerusalem	Asher
Joseph	Probably young	Nazareth	Judah
Mary (betrothed to Joseph)	“A virgin”—probably young	Nazareth	Judah
Simeon	Near to death—probably elderly	Jerusalem	Not stated
Zacharias (a priest)	“An old man”, “well advanced in years” (Note 2)	A city of Judah in the hill country	Levi
Elisabeth (wife of Zacharias)	“In old age”, “well advanced in years”	A city of Judah in the hill country	Levi

Note 1: Some think the wording of Luke 2:36,37 implies she was eighty-four years of age. Others think it means she had been a widow for eighty-four years (that is, probably over 100 years old).

Note 2: Numbers 8:23-26 gives the maximum age of a serving Levite as fifty years. If this was applicable to the priests, either it was not being applied or people aged fifty were regarded as “old men” (an interesting thought for those of us nearing fifty!).

“Now Elisabeth’s full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. When her neighbours and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her” (1:57,58). It would be relatively easy to share the joy of a birth with friends and neighbours, but for Elisabeth it was also an opportunity to declare the great mercy of the Lord.

Anna, like Elizabeth, preached using her everyday conversation with people around her: “she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (2:38).

We might think the parallel between the faithful people in the first two chapters of Luke and ourselves breaks down when we realise that these people saw angels and received specific Spirit-gifts. Zacharias, Mary and Joseph saw angels. The Holy Spirit “was upon” Simeon (v. 25) and “filled” Elisabeth (1:41), and we speculate what it means when we read that Anna is described as a “prophetess” (2:36). However, what the angels and the Holy Spirit revealed to these people

can be revealed to us if we carefully read God’s Spirit Word, our Bibles. With the message of the Bible in our hearts we can declare the great mercy of God and the promises of God centred in Jesus.

The tribes of Israel united

At least three tribes are represented in the little ecclesia of Luke 1 and 2. Anna was from Asher (2:36), Joseph and Mary from Judah, and Elisabeth and Zacharias from Levi; a tribe from the northern kingdom, a tribe from the southern kingdom, and a tribe with its inheritance spread around. Here is a picture of divided Israel united, providing a glimpse of the greater fulfilment of Jeremiah’s prophecy of future unity: “In those days the house of Judah shall walk with the house of Israel, and they shall come together . . .” (3:18).

The Brotherhood today, which in many ways is a pattern of Israel, sometimes struggles to show unity. Yet the lesson from Luke 1 and 2 is that we each in our small way can show the potential for the full unity that will emerge

when Christ returns. Anna, whose name means 'grace', as mentioned earlier, came from the tribe of Asher, a name meaning 'happy'. Like the Old Testament history of the northern kingdom and its relationship with God, Anna's widowhood lasted longer than her marriage. However, she foresaw grace and happiness in the future by association with the child Jesus that was born of the line of Judah.

The focus of the unity is the Lord Jesus Christ. Without him there would have been no ecclesia in Luke 1 and 2 and there would be no ecclesias today. Jesus was the seventh named member of the ecclesia (or the eighth if you include John).

An ecclesia in a dark world

There was darkness over the land at the time of the birth of Jesus; the Old Testament era was closing, and for 400 years there had been no light of Divine revelation. There had been conflict, wars, intrigue and now the Roman occupation. It is with a joyful thrill that we learn that after 400 years there was a little band of people waiting. In today's darkening 'last days' we can find strength and comfort in this. Our period of waiting has been about five times longer. Are we quietly waiting? At the time of the birth of Jesus many in Israel were watching for a Messiah, but many missed him. Those that did not miss him were characterised by their lives of devotion, a quiet submission of the heart and a complete desire to sacrifice worldly ambitions.

About four hundred years before Christ, Malachi had been outspoken about the corruption of Israel's spiritual leaders: "But you have departed from the way; you have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi" (2:8). About thirty years after the birth of Christ, Jesus was also outspoken about the corruption of spiritual leaders: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! . . . Woe to you also, lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear" (Lk. 11:44,46). If it was like this before and after the time of the birth of Jesus, we can surmise that most spiritual leaders in Israel at the time of the birth of Jesus were similarly corrupt.

It is interesting to consider how this affected the ecclesia at the time. We read how they were still determined to carry out the Law; see, for example, 2:21-24,39. They would see corruption around them and a failure by many people to grasp the underlying aims of God's laws. How-

ever, this did not stop them trying to adhere to the laws.

Zacharias was "righteous before God" (1:6) and yet still served in what was an apparently corrupt system of temple worship. It would have been challenging to him to keep faithful to his beliefs in such circumstances. Simeon perhaps witnessed spiritual conflict that prompted him to rejoice in the prospect of peace presented by the coming of Jesus: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation" (2:29,30). Anna was in the temple area every day and would know what was going on there; she would see Herod's building programme and much turmoil as well as corrupt aspects of temple worship. Perhaps there were days when she felt like overturning the tables of the money-changers and the seats of the dove-sellers, but she recognised that was not her role. Rather, her response was prayer and dedication.

Simeon and Anna were not distracted by surrounding corruption such that they missed the one whom they were waiting for. Around us there are some things that are not according to God's commandments (sometimes even within the Brotherhood). For many of us it is not our role or it is not appropriate to be outspoken in a critical manner. The example of the ecclesia at the time of the birth of Jesus is that we deal with such things by speaking the things of truth in a quiet manner to any who will listen, making sure that all the time we are focused upon our love of Jesus, showing qualities of character like his and always trying to follow the commandments ourselves. There will be sadness, but there will also be joys. Simeon had to prophesy about future hardships that would come to Mary—a sword would 'pierce her soul'—but he had joy in the fact that Christ was to be "a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of . . . Israel" (2:35,32).

Concluding exhortation

In some parts of the world today some ecclesias are quite small. However, the little ecclesia of Luke 1 and 2 was not preoccupied with the problem of falling numbers. Instead, what mattered to them was developing qualities of devotion, caring, prayer, righteousness before God, looking for redemption, following the commands of God and serving Him night and day. In quietness they determined to explain their hope to any who would listen. These qualities meant that they

were able to overcome positively any problems presented by those around them who sought to present another gospel.

Above all, the ecclesia at the beginning of Luke's Gospel recognised the importance of Jesus in their midst; he was the promised Messiah

bringing peace. At the end of Luke's Gospel a new ecclesia was forming. In order to strengthen it, "Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, 'Peace to you'" (24:36). Let us put Jesus in the midst of the ecclesias today, that peace might prevail.

The 'holy songs' of Luke

The songs of Elizabeth, Mary, Zacharias and Simeon

Eric Marshall

A unique feature of Luke's Gospel is his detailed account of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus, in particular the inspired utterances of four faithful men and women involved in these momentous events. These 'holy songs' depict the great joy experienced by the faithful of those times, joy in the knowledge that God was at last fulfilling the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament about the Saviour to come.

THE BACKGROUND to the birth of Jesus is carefully traced out by Luke in his Gospel record. Consequently, the part played by key figures, and especially their reactions to the amazing developments that they experienced, are documented. We are given the reactions of four named participants in the events surrounding Jesus' birth: Elisabeth and Zacharias, the parents of John the Baptist, who was destined to be the messenger to go before the face of Messiah; Mary the mother of Jesus, who spoke of the prospect of his birth; and Simeon, who met the baby Jesus in the temple with Mary and Joseph.

Each of these was a faithful believer in God's promises. What we see in each case is the reaction of a person who has firmly believed God's promises and now is faced with their actual fulfilment and their close involvement in it. The promised event, firmly believed, and its fulfilment yearned for, is now about to happen. In a sense what was confidently expected had unexpectedly come to pass. Maybe we can see something of what our position, as believers in Christ's return, will be at the moment of its happening. If our minds, as theirs were, are filled with God's promises and His Word, then we shall know how to respond, as they did, willingly, with praise.

The responses of each to the situation are sometimes referred to as 'holy songs'. Certainly the words of Mary have been put to music in the Magnificat and sung throughout the world for centuries. The record gives no direct indication that their utterances were actually sung. Elisabeth "spoke out with a loud voice", Mary "said", Zacharias "prophesied" and Simeon "said"; and God's Spirit was, of course, active in what was said.

Their words, taken together, give praise to God for His work of salvation in Jesus, as the culmination of His promises to the fathers of Israel and through His prophets. The words used by each draw heavily on earlier Scripture, which came readily to their minds. We have here an illustration of Peter's comment, "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy [Spirit]" (2 Pet. 1:21).

We will consider what each has to say in the order given in the Gospel.

Elisabeth's song: 1:42-45

ELISABETH'S words are prompted by Mary's arrival and salutation. What Mary actually said, beyond a simple greeting on her arrival, we do not know. However, under Holy Spirit influence Elisabeth and her unborn baby respond with joy. Her words are both a confirmation of Mary's special role and of the fulfilment of God's word through Gabriel to her. Gabriel had called Mary "highly favoured", one that had "found favour with God" (vv. 28,30). Elisabeth describes her as "Blessed . . . among women" (v. 4). This