INTRODUCTION:
We are accustomed to our Christmas carols, but we have to take care not to get used to them in the wrong way—where we are somehow singing and celebrating on autopilot. The word carol comes from the word carola, which means a circle or ring dance—a folk dance. Christmas carols, rightly understood, are a sacred kind of folk music, making them much more traditional than many of our other songs. This means they are more potent, both for good and ill.

THE TEXT:
“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:13-14).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:
You almost get the impression that the angel of the Lord had to tell somebody what had just happened, and the shepherds were the only ones still up. And then the angel was joined in the refrain by a multitude of the heavenly host (stars), and they were all singing about the most glorious thing that God had ever done for our sorry world.

SOME BACKGROUND ON THIS CAROL:
This carol was first published in 1739, just a year after Charles Wesley was first converted. It was modified slightly for George Whitefield’s Collection (1753). Wesley wrote over 6,500 hymns and this one and Jesus, Lover of My Soul are usually reckoned as being among his finest. The Jewish/Christian composer Mendelssohn wrote the tune over a century later (in a work celebrating the 400th anniversary of the printing press), to which these lyrics were set by another composer, and published in the form we use in 1857. One of the things that Wesley was able to do, in a magnificent way, was combine high poetic worth with high theology. This hymn is actually a short course in systematic theology. And that is how we are going to treat it now. First, look at just some of his likely sources.

THE CAROL, ANNOTATED:
Hark! The herald angels sing (Luke 2:13), ‘Glory to the newborn King (Matt. 2:2);
Peace on earth, and mercy mild (Luke 2:14), God and sinners reconciled (2 Cor. 5:19)’!
Joyful, all ye nations rise (Ps. 117:1), join the triumph of the skies’
With th’angelic host proclaim, ‘Christ is born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2)!’
Christ by highest heaven adored (Luke 19:38); Christ the everlasting Lord (2 Pet. 1:11);
Late in time, behold Him come (Gal. 4:4), offspring of a virgin’s womb (Is. 7:14).
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see (Heb. 1:3), hail th’incarnate Deity (Phil. 2:7),
Pleased as man with men to dwell (John 1:14), Jesus, our Emmanuel (Is. 7:14).
Come, Desire of nations, come (Haggai 2:7), fix in us Thy humble home (2 Cor. 13:5); Rise, the woman’s conquering Seed (Gen. 3:15), bruise in us the serpent’s head (Rom. 16:20). Now display Thy saving pow’r (Rom. 8:11), Ruined nature now restore (Heb. 2:8-9); Now in mystic union join Thine to ours (John 17:21), and ours to Thine (Heb. 2:11). Adam’s likeness, Lord, efface (Eph. 4:22), stamp Thine image in its place (Col. 3:10); Second Adam from above (1 Cor. 15:45), reinstate us in Thy love (Rom. 5:5). Let us Thee, though lost, regain, Thee, the Life, the inner man (Eph. 3:16): O, to all Thyself impart (Col. 1:27), formed in each believing heart (Gal. 4:19). Hail, the heav’n born Prince of Peace (Is. 9:6)! Hail the Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2)! Light and life to all He brings (John 1:4), Ris’n with healing in His wings (Mal. 4:2). Mild He lays His glory by (Phil. 2:7), born that man no more may die (Rom. 6:6), Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth (John 3:3). Hark! The herald angels sing (Luke 2:13), ‘Glory to the newborn king (Matt. 2:2)!’

REAL THEOLOGY:
Theologians sometimes say that true theology should be followed with doxology. This is because theologians like to use words with -ology as a suffix. What they mean is that doctrine should be followed by praise, and I would want to make the connection even tighter. Doctrine should be mingled with praise. Look at Paul’s response at the end of Romans 11, a hard passage of hard theology—it makes him burst into song. This hymn is a similar model for us. Hymns of praise need not be composed of fluffy clouds and sparkly unicorns. Poetry need not be heretical in order to work as poetry. We need to re-imagine the whole enterprise—Berkhof’s Systematic Theology: The Musical. We need a name for the soul-damaging practice of making stupendous things dull. Jesus taught with authority, and not like the scribes (Matt. 7:29). Remember the three-fold aspects of true teaching, according to Augustine. It needs to instruct, delight, and move. We need a name for principled dullardry so that we might be able to post warning signs on every side. We must have a wedding between the content of what we say we believe and the shape we put it in.

WHAT THEN?
What do we have here then? We have, in the first place, joy (the herald angels sing). We have the message of salvation, the message of the gospel (God and sinners reconciled). We have a postmillennial vision (all ye nations rise). We have fulfilled prophecy (born in Bethlehem). We have the exalted Person of Christ (highest heaven adored). We have the virgin birth (virgin’s womb). We have the Incarnation (incarnate Deity). We have the indwelling Spirit (humble home). We have the defeat of Satan (conquering seed). We have the new humanity (now restore). We have perichoretic union (Thine to ours). We have the doctrine of regeneration (give them second birth). And all this is just a portion.

We are not to simply sing our way into a particular emotional frame of mind. We are to sing with knowledge, and into knowledge. As we sing we are “teaching and admonishing one another,” as Paul says to do (Col. 3:16). We are to sing our way into knowledge—but it needs to be the kind of knowledge that provokes more singing. And all of it is get to not got to.