



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Redeeming Time
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 11-16)

Suggested Article:

📖 Meeting God in the
Church Year
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 83-88)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Redeeming Time

The church year is most meaningful, formative, and transformative when we embrace its seasons and their rhythms. It is necessarily communal, pushing us back to Christ, to the stories of his life and to the rites by which we collectively re-enact his life and enter into it through worship.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:17-22

Meditation[†]

The liturgical year is the year that sets out to attune the life of the Christian to the life of Jesus, the Christ. It proposes, year after year, to immerse us over and over again into the sense and substance of the Christian life until, eventually, we become what we say we are—followers of Jesus all the way to the heart of God. The liturgical year is an adventure in human growth, an exercise in spiritual ripening.

Joan Chittister

Reflection

“Marking time by the calendar of the Church instead of the calendars of our culture—the school year, the civic year, the fiscal year—sets you apart,” Kimberlee Conway Ireton observes. “Ordering my life by the Christian year means I am immersed year after year in the story of Jesus and the story of the Church.”

The first half of the church year focuses on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ; the second half focuses on our life together in Christ’s body, the Church. The first half features two cycles of celebration that center on the holy days of Christmas and Easter. Each cycle begins with a season of preparation (Advent and Lent) that leads to a season of celebration (Christmas and Easter) and a special day of rejoicing (Epiphany and Pentecost). The second half of the year is ordered by feast days related to saints and to Christ’s work (including Trinity, Transfiguration, and Christ the King Sundays) and a three-year plan of scripture reading to guide discipleship.

“To fully enter into the church year, and the life of Christ which is its heart, requires the community of believers gathered together in worship,” Conway Ireton writes. “Living the church year in community with other disciples of Jesus forms us as the people of God, the Body of Christ, as one part of a much larger whole. To be formed in community means our individual needs can be met by the community, our desires can be transformed by the vision of a larger purpose, and our fears can be assuaged by the assurance that we are not alone.”

Conway Ireton gives practical examples of how the distinctive church seasons are forming her into likeness to Christ:

- ▶ *With Advent’s spotlight on joyful and expectant waiting for the Messiah, she tries to practice “patience and self-control, perhaps by waiting until Christmas to eat a favorite holiday treat or listen to a favorite carol.”*
- ▶ *During the twelve-day Christmas season, which focuses on the incarnation of Christ in Jesus and in the Church through the hearts and lives of believers, “I seek union with God; just as Jesus was one with the*



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Father, so I too can be one with Christ," Conway Ireton notes. For this purpose she adopts a distinctive practice—continuous praying of the Jesus prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me").

- ▶ *In the Epiphany celebration of God's glory made manifest to all peoples, she focuses on forming habits of relating to her family, friends, and strangers in hospitable ways—"habits like biting my tongue (sometimes literally) when I am frustrated, or really listening to others when they speak, instead of only half-attending and letting my thoughts wander."*
- ▶ *In Lent, a season of repentance, she fasts from a food or an activity in order to learn patience and to make space in her life for hearing God's voice. Whether she hears a call "to repent of some habit of thought, word, or deed," or "words of comfort, reminding me how deeply and wholly I am loved," she reports, "listening to God's voice helps me to see myself more clearly and draws me deeper into relationship with Christ."*
- ▶ *The Easter focus on Christ's resurrection teaches her to rejoice and "see beyond present darkness to the promise of new life. This season calls me to live a resurrection life: daily to die to sin and live the new life God has graciously given in Christ."*
- ▶ *Pentecost, which highlights God's Spirit indwelling and empowering the people of God, reminds her to "incorporate all the disciplines I embraced earlier in the year, seeking to allow them to create space for God to work in and through me, transforming me into the likeness of Christ."*

Study Questions

1. What are the best reasons in the article by Kimberlee Conway Ireton and meditation by Joan Chittister for ordering our time in Christian community by the church year?
2. What seasons or special days of the church year are emphasized within your congregation? Discuss the practices and rituals that make those times formative in your discipleship.
3. If your congregation does not follow parts of the church year, how can you incorporate those parts into your small group, family, or personal devotion? What other practices in your congregation continually "push you back to Christ"?

Departing Hymn: "All Praise to Our Redeeming Lord" (vv. 1 and 2)

All praise to our redeeming Lord,
who joins us by his grace;
and bids us, each to each restored,
together seek his face.

He bids us build each other up;
and, gathered into one,
to our high calling's glorious hope,
we hand in hand go on.

Charles Wesley (1747)

Suggested Tunes: ST. PETER (Reinagle) or NEW BRITAIN

† Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 6.

Redeeming Time

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To briefly outline the structure of the church year (which is also called the Christian year or liturgical year).
2. To consider how the practices and rituals that are distinctive to each season of the church year can be formative of our discipleship.
3. To discuss how observing the church year “is necessarily communal, pushing us back to Christ.”

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Advent Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “All Praise to Our Redeeming Lord” locate one of the familiar tunes ST. PETER (Reinagle) or NEW BRITAIN in your church’s hymnal or online in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“Most of my childhood spiritual formation occurred in the context of an Assemblies of God elementary school,” Kimberlee Conway Ireton writes. “Weekly chapel and Bible memory verses formed the spine of my understanding of faith. In junior high and high school, I internalized much of what I had learned in elementary school and embraced it as my own. But my faith really came alive when I learned of older traditions, ones that had been around for centuries, ones with strange customs like marking foreheads with ashes or refraining from the word ‘Alleluia’ for weeks on end. Such customs fascinated me, and through them I slowly entered into the tradition variously known as the liturgical year, the church year, and the Christian year.”

Reflecting on her experiences among friends in the Church, she concludes, “I’m not alone in my hunger for traditions that are older than I am” (*Advent Ethics*, 83).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to draw us to himself through each of the seasons of the church year.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 2:17-22 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This introduction to the church year precedes five study guides that treat the special emphases of Advent, the first season of the church year, and how they form our discipleship. However, you may use this study guide as a stand-alone discussion of the value of observing the church year or as an introduction to other studies based on church seasons.

For further study of the church year, see the four excellent resources that Kimberlee Conway Ireton reviews in “Meeting God in the Church Year” and her own book *The Circle of Seasons: Meeting God in the Church Year* (InterVarsity Press, 2008). Among the most helpful Internet resources on the church year are *The Text This Week* (www.textweek.com) and *The Revised Common Lectionary* (<http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu>).

Study Questions

1. Kimberlee Conway Ireton writes, “Embracing this way of marking the year has formed my faith and my character, in large part, because I am repeatedly thrust back into the life of Jesus through the stories told and retold each season.” The weekly lections (readings), practices, and rituals “place Christ daily before my eyes and point me back to the One whom I am all too prone to forget in the busyness and bustle of my life.” She allows the distinctive emphasis of each season to suggest a particular practice or focus for spiritual reflection.

Joan Chittister agrees that the church year shapes Christian character through thoughtful repetition of scriptural reflection, practices, and rituals: the church year is “an adventure in human growth, an exercise in spiritual ripening” as it “sets out to attune the life of the Christian to the life of Jesus, the Christ.” It accomplishes this by immersing us “over and over again into the sense and substance of the Christian life.”

Conway Ireton also highlights the communal nature of the church year. It is one way that, by God’s grace, we “are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Ephesians 2:22b). “To be formed in community means our individual needs can be met by the community, our desires can be transformed by the vision of a larger purpose, and our fears can be assuaged by the assurance that we are not alone,” she writes. “We are not the center; Christ is the center – the head and the heart; we are the body, bound to one another by our mutual sharing in the life of Christ in Scripture and sacrament. The church year deepens this community by calling us, both individually and collectively, year in and year out, to re-live and live out the life of Christ, to be formed in the likeness of Christ, to become the body of Christ incarnate in the world.”

2. Most congregations feature special communal celebrations of Christmas and Easter; many are beginning to mark the associated periods of preparation (Advent and Lent) and days of rejoicing (Epiphany and Pentecost); some may mark some of the special days during Ordinary Time. Many congregations add “local” annual emphases – such as revivals, or seasons of commitment, preparation, celebration, and remembrance – to their calendars. After you briefly review together the congregation’s shared calendar, invite each member to choose a meaningful day or season in the church year and talk about how its associated practices and rituals have been formative of their discipleship.
3. After the group has canvassed the congregation’s use of the church year (including its local annual days and seasons of commitment, preparation, celebration, and remembrance), look for parts of the church year that are ignored or deemphasized. Ask members to share how they have marked some of these ‘missing’ parts of the church year in other congregations or through small group, family, or personal devotions. Members might select one of the ‘missing’ parts and brainstorm on how they could begin to mark it within the congregation or with other Christians.

List other practices in your congregation that continually “push you back to Christ.” These might include regularly scheduled days of Christian social service, church maintenance, communal singing, Scripture study in small groups, and so on. How do these days or seasons supplement or replace elements of the church year in your local congregation? Would there be an advantage of relating some of these local activities to the church year?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.