



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 When Grace Appears
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,
pp. 79-83)

Suggested Article:

📖 Seeing Epiphany Whole
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,
pp. 61-68)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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When Grace Appears

The entire season of Epiphany can seem like a cacophonous party based on disjointed events: the Magi's visit to Bethlehem, Christ's baptism by John, and Christ's miracle at the wedding at Cana. What ties this wealth of images together?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Titus 2:11-15

Meditation†

Epiphany is a celebration of a light that has shone and is shining — it shone in Christ, and it shone into our lives — and as a celebration, Epiphany is a response of gratitude and of trust.... To have come to see this light which shines through the gospel story, to have come to see it without refusing it, rejecting it, or perverting it, is to live truthfully.

John Colwell

Reflection

The long season of Epiphany — starting with a feast on January 6 and continuing through the weeks leading up to Lent — is a time to celebrate the manifestation of God in Christ Jesus. The Scripture readings and acts of worship in this season developed over several centuries. Epiphany was “a commemoration of the baptism of Christ beginning in the third century, but by the fourth century in the West it also became associated with the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi. Subsequent associations with events in the life of Jesus have included Christ’s miraculous provision of wine for the wedding at Cana,” Steve Harmon notes. Yet the season’s focus has always been “the truth that the Triune God reveals in Jesus Christ, and the truthful living engendered by our encounter with this revelation.”

Titus 2:11-15 summarizes the “truthful living” that should result from our encounter with the manifestation of Christ. Bill Shiell says of this passage (which opens the lectionary readings for Christmas): “Titus sees the flash of the glorious, unexpected appearance — or epiphany — of Christ beginning a transformation that continues throughout our lives. We are to become students following a new curriculum of grace, reflecting the difference Christ’s presence makes in the world.” Titus describes the community that is being transformed by the coming of Christ:

- ▶ *The community remembers the story of Jesus.* “The passage evokes memories of Jesus’ birth in the back of a Bethlehem cave,” Shiell observes. “As the passage is read, the community remembers God’s first appearance (vs. 11) and hopes for his second epiphany (vs. 13).”
- ▶ *The community rejects the curriculum, or paideia, of the Empire.* Embracing the Christ child’s story means rejecting “ungodliness and worldly passions” (vs. 12). “In the ancient world, the virtuous life revolved around the personal attainment of prudence, justice, temperance, and courage,” Shiell notes. When this becomes a self-help project, an attempt to improve life by one’s own efforts, it is bound to fail. “People’s desire to live better does not make them better people. Through Christ’s birth, God provides divine



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help by exposing the darkness of our hearts.... The baby that appeared in Bethlehem requires us to lay down our attempts at living apart from God's revelation and getting things right on our own."

- ▶ *The community trains in how to love and be loved by the Christ child who instructs us.* "Grace teaches that without God's help and training, nothing is possible. As we hear these instructions given in community, our lives are linked together virtuously with others who hear. We teach, correct, and train each other in a grace-full process of accountability."

Titus gives us a glimpse of how the early Christians gathered week after week "to be shaped around a common identity in Christ and to be taught how to live the Christ life," Shiell concludes. "They listened to texts read aloud by discussing, arguing, interrupting, responding, debating, and questioning them. Through this process, Christ became a real and continuing presence who constantly confronted them and transformed their gathered communities into the living Body of Christ."

Study Questions

1. When does the celebration of Christmas end for you each year? What signals the season is over?
2. Discuss John Colwell's description of the role of the season of Epiphany in the Christian disciple's life. How can we continue to reflect on and grow into the meaning of the Incarnation for our lives beyond the time of Christmas?
3. Bill Shiell says the Christian life depicted in Titus 2:11-15 involves following "a new curriculum of grace." How is it *new*? In what sense is it a *curriculum*? And what is the role of *grace*?
4. Titus 2:11-15 depicts believers as living in "the present age," an interim time between Jesus Christ's appearing and his coming again. Compare that description of discipleship with the one in William Dix's "As with Gladness."

Departing Hymn: "As with Gladness" (vv. 1 and 4)

As with gladness men of old
did the guiding star behold;
as with joy they hailed its light,
leading onward, beaming bright,
so, most glorious Lord, may we
evermore be led to thee.

Holy Jesus, every day
keep us in the narrow way;
and when earthly things are past,
bring our ransomed souls at last
where they need no star to guide,
where no clouds thy glory hide.

William C. Dix (1860)

Tune: DIX

† John E. Colwell, *The Rhythm of Doctrine: A Liturgical Sketch of Christian Faith and Faithfulness* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007), 56-57.

When Grace Appears

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 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To unify key biblical passages and acts of worship during Epiphany under the theme of being transformed by the manifestation of God in Christ.
2. To understand Titus's description of the community that lives in the light of God's revelation in Christ.
3. To discuss how congregations can foster the season of Epiphany as a time to reflect on the meaning of the Incarnation.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-14 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christmas and Epiphany (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "As with Gladness" locate the familiar tune DIX in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

To help us identify with Titus's community, Bill Shiell notes that "like in ours, community identity and memory were shaped by popular heroes, gods, and political figures. Communities erected statues and leaders commissioned coins featuring their worthies. Most people in the ancient world, including Crete where Titus lived, assumed that the gods appeared in human form, magically intervened in our affairs, and then returned to doing whatever it is that gods do." He compares these ancient "drop in" heroes, divine and human, with celebrities and athletes who drop into our communities today for a short time to advertise a good cause and be associated with it. "People stand for hours along a red carpet, snap pictures of their hero, and donate money, but never get personally involved in the cause. Much like the ancient world, the supposed gods descend, wave a few times, and return to whatever it is they do."

The coming of Christ to the world was totally different from the visits of ancient heroes and gods, according to Titus. As Christians gathered week after week to listen to texts read aloud, "discussing, arguing, interrupting, responding, debating, and questioning them[,]. . . Christ became a real and continuing presence who constantly confronted them and transformed their gathered communities into the living Body of Christ." (*Christmas and Epiphany*, 80)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for drawing members together to study and reflect on the manifestation of God's grace through Jesus Christ.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Titus 2:11-15 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study focuses on the theological heart of the season of Epiphany. It is a companion to the previous study, "The Festival of Epiphany," that introduced a primary biblical text for the season—the story of the Magi—and

associated acts of worship. Bill Shiell draws from Titus 2:11-15 a winsome depiction of a Christian community that continues to reflect on and be formed by the Incarnation. Though the lectionary incorporates this passage (and Titus 3:4-7) into worship on Christmas Eve and Day, it serves here as a guide to understand Epiphany, the culmination of the Christmas season.

Study Questions

1. Bill Shiell writes, “Most of us abruptly end our celebration of Christmas, perhaps after lighting a last candle on the Advent wreath and singing a carol or two. December 26 brings the bustle of ‘after Christmas sale’ shopping and holiday gift returns, and New Year’s Eve parties loom just around the corner. No sooner have the candles been extinguished and the New Year’s countdown begun than the holy season is over and we put it away as a memory.” Ask members to reflect on their own experience. Maybe Christmas ends for them when they return to work or school, when visiting family members leave, or when they take down the decorations. Why is the church calendar of Christmastide and Epiphany so ignored at this time of year?
2. John Colwell describes Epiphany as a season of “response of gratitude and of trust” during which we come to see more clearly and embrace more fully the Incarnation of Christ in our lives. How long does it take for gratitude to sink in, for trust to emerge? These are not responses we can switch on and off in a moment. The church calendar reserves twelve days of Christmastide and several weeks of Epiphany for acts of worship and distinctive practices to help us grow in gratitude and trust. The Advent-Christmas-Epiphany triptych commences another year to reflect on the life and teachings of Christ, leading to Christ the King Sunday in November.
3. Bill Shiell contrasts the Christian life depicted in Titus 2:11-15 to our habit of making New Year’s resolutions, in which we devise goals for ourselves, summon our strength of will to accomplish them, and (usually) forget them when we fail to achieve the results we seek. In contrast, Titus describes a community that has been given a new vision, and graciously empowered through texts, reflection, and practices to grow into that vision. Behind it all is the Christ who will “purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:14), and this will be accomplished “according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). Shiell notes there work for us to do together—the word translated “training” in Titus 2:12 comes from *paideia*, or curriculum—as we join the early Christians in “listening to texts read aloud by discussing, arguing, interrupting, responding, debating, and questioning them.”
4. William Dix’s familiar hymn “As with Gladness” likens our discipleship—following “the narrow way”—to the Magi’s faithful journey to Bethlehem. Starting out from a startling birth announcement, we proceed toward a fulfilling meeting with the king who is drawing us to himself. Verses 2 and 3 (not printed here) develop the metaphor further: the Magi’s “joyful steps” to Bethlehem “to bend the knee” before the newborn Christ prefigure our “willing feet” to approach the “mercy seat” to receive Christ’s gracious pardon; and the Magi’s “gifts most rare” prefigure the offering of our lives—our “costliest treasures” that are now “pure and free from sin’s alloy”—in service and praise. These journeys—the Magi’s and ours—occur in the context of community. Perhaps this is most clear in Dix’s use of plural pronouns and his offering the text for congregational singing, reflection, and discussion.

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.