



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
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Study Guides for

Advent Ethics

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us probe the original trajectories of Christmastide and Epiphany so that we can celebrate them faithfully and winsomely today. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

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Focus Article:

📖 The Birth of Christmas
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,
pp. 11-18)

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The Birth of Christmas

Christmas enjoys such a prominent place among modern believers that only with difficulty can we picture an age when Christians did not celebrate it. How did a feast commemorating and honoring Jesus' birth come into being, and what elements of that feast can we draw upon?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

Reflection

The gradual development of distinctively Christian seasons like Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany were a sign the Church was maturing in two significant ways: Gentiles from many cultures were being evangelized, and most believers realized the Body of Christ would sojourn in this age for an indeterminate time. The annual celebration of Christmas helped believers across diverse cultures to build their lives together around the Incarnation.

No one just "invented" Christmas. The festival emerged from worship practices over hundreds of years. Joseph Kelly highlights these steps in its development:

- ▶ *The Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* guided Christian thought because the four Gospels were recognized as Scripture in all canon lists by the mid-second century. As believers gathered for meals to honor the anniversaries of martyrs' deaths, they were celebrating the martyrs' "true" birthdays into the afterlife. This practice, along with the establishment of Easter, encouraged scholars' growing interest in finding a date to celebrate Christ's birth in Bethlehem.
- ▶ *A fictionalized account, PROTOEVANGELIUM OF JAMES, shaped popular views.* "Never a serious candidate for the New Testament canon," Kelly notes, it filled in details for the curious minded about Mary and Joseph's lives before Jesus' birth.
- ▶ *December 25 entered the scholarly discussion* in an odd way. In Jewish tradition, great figures were born and died on the same calendar day; thus, scholars hoped to determine Jesus' birthday by finding a date for his crucifixion near the time of Passover. Some settled on March 25, the spring equinox on the Julian calendar, when pagans marked the anniversary of the world's creation. Christians instead celebrated Jesus as the new Adam and harbinger of re-creation. In a variation, other scholars took March 25 to be the date of Jesus' conception in the womb, which put his birth nine months later on December 25—the winter solstice when the sun is weakest, but growing in strength, like a newborn child.
- ▶ *Celebrating Christ's birthday on December 25 directly opposed pagan feasts.* The cult of Deus Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun God) celebrated the Sun's birthday on that day. "Furthermore, many Roman soldiers and other men venerated a Persian virility deity named Mithra, whose birthday fell on December 25. To this can be added the festival of Saturnalia (December 17 to 23), a week of vigorous drinking, eating, sexual misconduct, and the overturning of social and even gender roles," Kelly writes.



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► *December 25 gradually caught on for Christ's birth.* In the early 300s, the Roman church settled on this date, and within a century it found favor throughout the empire. The Jerusalem church resisted, however, keeping the traditional Eastern date of January 6 for Christmas until about 575.

► *The Christmas season was filled out with Epiphany and Advent.* January 6 transitioned to become Epiphany, marking the date of the Magi's visit and of Christ's baptism by John. In fourth-century Gallic and Spanish churches, the time during which baptizands prepared for their baptism on Epiphany was moved up to become a preparatory period for Christmas. By the sixth century, this time was called Advent in northern Italy and Rome.

Kelly notes three trajectories in this history that should shape our celebration of Christmas. First, "ancient writers took Scripture very seriously," keeping close to the Bible when determining the date and filling in details about biblical figures. Further, they "showed respect for the differing cultures within their own faith," he observes. "We can extend such understanding not just to those who celebrate Christmas differently but to those who do not celebrate it at all." Finally, they "used the contemporary culture where appropriate" to extend their theological concerns.

Study Questions

1. How is the emergence of Christmas related to changes in the early Church—the growing prominence of Gentile believers and a new sense of time—according to Joseph Kelly?
2. In the birth of Christmas, Kelly notes, early Christians tended to keep close to the Bible, respect differing cultures within their own faith, and include contemporary cultural practices when appropriate. Examine one or two instances of each trajectory in the history that he traces. How might that trajectory guide our celebration of Christmas today?
3. What theological signals were Christians sending with the choice of December 25 to celebrate Jesus' birth?
4. Could we live without Christmas? What would we miss in our formation as disciples if we dropped the celebration?

Departing Hymn: "Oh, Wondrous Name, by Prophets Heard" (vv. 1 and 2)

Oh, wondrous name, by prophets heard
long years before his birth;
they saw him coming from afar,
the Prince of Peace on earth.
The Wonderful! The Counselor!
The Great and Mighty Lord!
The everlasting Prince of Peace!
The King, the Son of God!

Oh, glorious name the angels praise
and ransomed saints adore,
the name above all other names,
our refuge evermore.
Refrain

Fanny Crosby (1886)

Tunes: CLEANSING FOUNTAIN or FOREST GREEN



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Focus Article:

📖 Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations
(*Christmas and Epiphany*, pp. 19-26)

Suggested Article:

📖 The History of Christmas
(*Christmas and Epiphany*, pp. 84-88)

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Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations

Christmas magnifies a clash of civilizations between Christianity and consumer capitalism – each making religious claims about the meaning of life. In the consumer Christmas, the Incarnation is reversed. Human attention drifts to the materials that claim to be good instead of the Good that claims to be material.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-14

Reflection

As a rapacious kind of capitalism – “disconnected from covenant and community,” with little regard for the poor – elbows its way to be first in line at the Manger, Christmas is reshaped as “a festival of consumption” that proclaims the material goods we buy and sell give meaning to our empty lives. Many people opt out of the religious Christmas, but no one can resist the clamor of holiday sale events.

Some Christians who prophetically warn that there is “a war on Christmas” never identify the real enemy. Why? “We can look at religion, at Christmas, but consumerism is what we look through, the glasses we cannot take off,” Heinz explains. Thus, we think “the chief rival to Christmas is the anemic agnosticism of nefarious enemies of the faith, [but] give all-encompassing capitalism a pass and never train [our] analysis on the very system in which [we] are fully implicated.” Indeed, “North Atlantic Christianity is more likely to help establish and even sacralize what is in fact a system of meaning stuffed with false claims.”

Our consumer mentality makes it very difficult for us to recover the theological riches of Christmas from the tradition. “Contemporary consumer culture is able to absorb all previous cultures as content waiting to be commodified, distributed, and consumed in highly individualistic acts – quite apart from the sacred community that is the Church,” Heinz writes. “Abstracted from their original contexts and from living faith traditions, religious symbols lose their power and become additional products dispersed in a network of holiday outfitting and emptied of theological and ethical substance.”

Can the religious festival of Christmas be renewed today? Christmas originated in public worship, an “incarnational stage” where early Christians could “experience what they were believing and model it for a curious world. Gradually, the people of God turned into the stories they were telling: a believable body of believers became the body of Christ. Catching up with Christian worship, theology came along to define, expound, interpret, and extend the Incarnation.” Heinz continues, “Only authentic public worship, believable Christians, and convincing theology can save Christmas.” He commends that congregations should:

- ▶ *observe the entire Advent-Christmas-Epiphany season, for it is an “antidote to the powerful distractions of the market. The minions of holiday are exhausted, overspent, grim, depressed, and without hope for times and places of respite and renewal. To practice a sacred calendar is to save the date for the presence of God, to schedule planned runnings into mystery.”*



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- ▶ focus on “public, communal, historic, artful” worship that enacts the biblical drama of salvation. Personal piety alone cannot resist “the social and economic powers that drive the clash of civilizations,” he says. “The challenge of Christmas as theater of Incarnation is to summon people to re-imagine themselves as pilgrims to a sacred festival, not seasonal shoppers.”
- ▶ become “a believable performance troupe” that draws upon, claims, and renews the historic Church’s theological reflection and practices. We must “be spiritually shaped by and begin to look like the Body of Christ in the world.”
- ▶ avoid temptations for “nostalgic returns to a past time of Christian predominance” and “prohibitionist scolding,” but creatively present the Incarnation in ways that “lay new claim to all earthly things in the name of Christ.” For this we will need vigorous theologies that “integrate incarnational meanings into an entire Christian worldview, both rendering them rationally coherent and magnifying their mystery.”

Heinz concludes, “Getting Christmas right means getting ourselves right and ultimately getting God right. To see how Christmas is faring is to see how we, and Christianity, and God, are faring today. A religiously robust Christmas enables the Church to re-gift the Incarnation to the modern world.”

Study Questions

1. Why, according to Donald Heinz, does Christmas magnify the clash between Christianity and consumer capitalism? What evidence do you see of this “clash of civilizations”?
2. How does a consumer mentality make it more difficult for us to recover the theological riches of the history of Christmas?
3. Discuss the steps that Heinz recommends congregations take to recover the religious festival of Christmas. Why does he think increased personal and family devotion is insufficient?
4. What is the essential meaning of Incarnation in John 1:1-14? How is this expressed in “Of the Father’s Love Begotten”?

Departing Hymn: “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (vv. 1 and 9)

Of the Father’s love begotten,
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore!

Christ, to thee with God the Father,
and, O Holy Ghost, to thee,
hymn and chant and high thanksgiving
and unwearied praises be:
honor, glory, and dominion,
and eternal victory,
evermore and evermore!

Prudentius (b. 348), trans. John M. Neale (1818-1886)
Tune: DIVINUM MYSTERIUM



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Focus Article:

📖 Caroling
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,
pp. 27-31)

Suggested Articles:

📖 The Color of Christmas
Extended
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,
pp. 53-60)

📖 Choral Music for
Christmas
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,
pp. 89-93)

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Caroling

Carols are one of the best known bodies of religious song. Just as Christ's birth was announced by the angels' singing, so Christians through the centuries have celebrated and borne witness through song to the coming of the Messiah.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 96

Reflection

"Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD all the earth," proclaims the psalmist, "for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth" (Psalm 96:1a, 13a). Fittingly the lectionary assigns this psalm for Christmas worship every year, for it beckons us to join with one another (and all the voices of the creation) to sing praise and welcome to the God who comes to us in Christ.

Choral music plays a key role in how we enjoy and understand the Christmas festival. David Music especially appreciates the enduring appeal of carols to ordinary church members celebrating the mystery of the Incarnation. He traces the history of what we call Christmas "carols" through four stages:

- ▶ *The carol began as a type of dance music in the medieval period. Its chorus was sung at the beginning of the song and after each stanza by the dancers as they danced; its verses were performed by a soloist while the dancers rested. By the fifteenth century, the carol form of chorus-stanza was no longer associated with dancing. Clerics and monastics wrote carols (in English, Latin, or both) for spiritual entertainment in the Christmas season. The songs had no specific role in worship.*
- ▶ *As monasteries were abandoned during the English Reformation, the carol form was lost, but Christmas texts became associated with the ballad as a form of popular music. "During the seventeenth century the Puritans attempted to suppress Christmas celebrations," David Music notes, "but the carol endured as a popular song type associated with the Christmas season."*
- ▶ *With the rise of hymn singing (rather than singing versified psalms) in the eighteenth century, hymn texts were written about the Incarnation. During the nineteenth century, more hymns were written for Advent-Christmas-Epiphany and scholars attempted to preserve the earlier carols of the folk tradition. An unusual aspect of the recovered carols and new hymns alike is that often their tunes are in minor keys.*
- ▶ *In the twentieth century, American popular songs with a secular Christmas theme joined the ranks of "traditional" music that is usually heard and sung during the Christmas season.*

Churches today often use Christmas carols, like other hymns and spiritual songs, as vehicles "for praise, prayer, and proclamation in worship, education, ministry, evangelism, and fellowship," Music notes. They help teach the story of Christ's birth, if used with caution. "Many of these songs were written not by pastors, professional theologians, or biblical scholars, but by humble laypersons whose knowledge of the story may have been shaped more by legend,



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enthusiasm, and imagination than by the Scriptures.... Furthermore, carols often tell only half the story: the Incarnation is incomplete without the Crucifixion and Resurrection." Thus, he cautions, "those who encounter Christian song only at Christmas will probably have at best only a partial understanding of what it is all about."

To be fair in evaluating carols, Music says, we should remember they "seldom originate or function primarily as theological expression but as outpourings of tenderness and rejoicing.... A carol is like a snapshot: it gives us a glimpse of one aspect of the Incarnation. Add these snapshots together and we can get a fuller picture, but even then they can never exhaust the subject."

Study Questions

1. Discuss the roles Christmas carols play in your celebration of the Nativity. With whom do you sing or listen to them? How are they used in your congregation's public worship? Do you read or sing them in your personal devotion?
2. Review the Christmas carols in your church hymn book. When were they written? How do they fit into the brief history of carols sketched by David Music?
3. What Christmas carols do you enjoy each year that are not in your congregation's hymn book?
4. Consider the text and tune of your favorite Christmas carol. What does the text highlight for you in the story of Christ's birth? How is it just a "snapshot" – either incomplete, or inaccurate with elements of the story? How does the carol's tune draw you into its text?
5. In a similar way, explore the text and tune of David Music's new carol, "A Lamb is Born among the Sheep."

Departing Hymn: "A Lamb Is Born among the Sheep"

A Lamb is born among the sheep,
sing, sing nowell.
The shepherds' Shepherd lies asleep,
sing, sing nowell.
Nowell, nowell, nowell,
now sing, sing nowell.
Nowell, nowell, nowell,
now sing, sing nowell.

Eternity breaks into time,
sing, sing nowell,
while angel choirs sing songs sublime,
sing, sing nowell.
Refrain

The Light into the darkness shines,
sing, sing nowell,
as heaven now with earth combines,
sing, sing nowell.
Refrain

David W. Music (2011)
Tune: A LAMB IS BORN



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Focus Articles:

- 📖 The Shepherds' Adoration
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,
pp. 34-40)
- 📖 The Magi's Adoration
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,
pp. 32-33)

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The Nativity in Art

The shepherds' and Magi's adoration of the Christ Child are key elements of the larger nativity cycle, the story of the birth of Jesus. How does the traditional iconography used to depict these two stories in art reveal the theological depths of the Nativity?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-20

Reflection

When we hear Luke's story of Christ's birth, how can we "resist being swept back into a sentimental stupor recalling Christmas days of past childhood?" Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons ask. For Luke's original auditors, however, the story's setting and characters were wild and unsavory, associated with danger. The angels' message of peace was proclaimed not over a quaint scene, but to violent people working in a countryside known as a haven for vagabonds and thieves. In the shepherds' rush to the Manger and their return "glorifying and praising God," we see the Messiah's power to lift up the lowly, despised, and violent.

But the shepherds were not the only group to adore the Christ child. The Magi—wise men, or astrologers, who were very different from the shepherds—were also summoned to Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-12). Their story, when put beside the Lukan account of the shepherds, emphasizes the radical inclusivity of Christ. Both the lowly, menial shepherds and the sophisticated, scholarly Magi were welcomed at the Manger to worship.

Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (1483-1485) and Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* (1423) integrate elements of traditional iconography to offer perceptive interpretations of these biblical stories. Hornik and Parsons discuss the following elements in Ghirlandaio's painting, which was influenced by Hugo van der Goes's *Portinari Altarpiece*.

- ▶ *The infant Christ is placed on Mary's soft cloak* to emphasize the intimacy and relationship between them, as opposed to the distance apparent in the *Portinari Altarpiece*. Mary is depicted not only as a woman reflecting on the Savior, but also as a mother watching over and praying for her son.
- ▶ *The lamb in the standing shepherd's arms* connects Christ's birth to his passion. It not only identifies the figure's occupation, but also symbolizes Christ's atoning sacrifice as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).
- ▶ *The use of a sarcophagus for the manger* is a unique, somewhat heavy-handed, allusion to Christ's death.
- ▶ *The inscriptions on the sarcophagus and the triumphal arch* introduce the theme of the successive reigns of the Hebrews, the Romans, and Christ. The inscription on the arch cites the Roman general who conquered Jerusalem, and the inscription on the Roman sarcophagus—"...the urn which contains me shall produce a God"—points to the victory of Christianity over the heathen world.

Gentile da Fabriano's altarpiece *Adoration of the Magi*, Hornik explains, is similarly full of meaning.



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- ▶ *That the altarpiece was designed for use in a sacristy (where the clergy robe themselves and prepare for Mass) is fitting: just as Christ became manifest to the Magi, he is revealed to the faithful in worship through the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper.*
- ▶ *The rapt attention of the ox, which is a traditional symbol for the Gentiles, emphasizes the devotion of the Gentile visitors as they remove their crowns and kneel to the newborn king.*
- ▶ *Christ's manifestation to the Magi, a supernatural event, is situated within amazingly precise observation of the natural world. Hornik calls attention to the predella, the horizontal panel beneath the central composition, where scenes of the shepherds' visit, the flight into Egypt, and the presentation in the Temple "instance a sophisticated use of atmosphere (the Nativity may be the first painted night scene) and the casting of shadow determined by an identifiable light source."*

Study Questions

1. Review Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* for iconographic elements. Do you notice any significant details that you missed before? How is the painting different from Hugo van der Goes's *Adoration of the Shepherds*, which greatly influenced it?
2. How does Ghirlandaio depict the political significance of the Nativity in *Adoration of the Shepherds*? Compare the artist's interpretation to the presentation of the political import of Christ's birth in the Gospel of Luke.
3. Both Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* and Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* use the background to provide temporal depth to the main story. Discuss the theological meaning of these elements in each painting.
4. What is the theological significance of the sophisticated use of light and shadow in the predella of *Adoration of the Magi*?

Departing Hymn: "A Lamb Is Born among the Sheep"

A Lamb is born among the sheep,
sing, sing nowell.
The shepherds' Shepherd lies asleep,
sing, sing nowell.
Nowell, nowell, nowell,
now sing, sing nowell.
Nowell, nowell, nowell,
now sing, sing nowell.

Eternity breaks into time,
sing, sing nowell,
while angel choirs sing songs sublime,
sing, sing nowell.

Refrain

The Light into the darkness shines,
sing, sing nowell,
as heaven now with earth combines,
sing, sing nowell.

Refrain

David W. Music (2011)
Tune: A LAMB IS BORN



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Focus Articles:

📖 A Feast Worthy of Devout Celebration
(*Christmas and Epiphany*, pp. 75-78)

📖 Distinctive Traditions of Epiphany
(*Christmas and Epiphany*, pp. 69-74)

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The Festival of Epiphany

Augustine called Epiphany “a feast worthy of most devout celebration.” This festival completes the season of Christmas by inviting us to discern the identity of the Christ child. Three traditions – baking a Kings’ Cake, marking a door lintel with the Magi’s blessing, and elaborating worship with lighted candles – help us interpret the Christmas season appropriately.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Meditation[†]

We, beloved, of whom the Magi were the first fruits, we are the inheritance of Christ even to the ends of the earth.... Let us so proclaim him on this earth, in this our mortal life, that we may not return the way we have come, nor retrace the footsteps of our former way of life. This is why, too, the Magi did not return the way by which they had come. A change of way meant a change of life.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

Reflection

The feast of Epiphany on January 6 begins a season – extending in some church traditions for several weeks to the beginning of Lent – in which we celebrate God’s manifestation in Christ Jesus. When Epiphany began in the third century, it highlighted Christ’s baptism; by the next century, it also marked his manifestation to Gentiles in the persons of the Magi; later it included his self-revelation by creating new wine for the wedding at Cana.

But when Augustine described the festival as a “noteworthy celebration...throughout the world,” in his Epiphany sermon in 412, he highlighted the story of the Magi. For this reason, he noted, “the whole Church of the Gentiles has adopted this day as a feast worthy of most devout celebration.” In that sermon Augustine reminds us of three crucial truths, Mike Clingenpeel notes.

- ▶ *God draws us with “hints and signs”* like the star that drew the Magi to Bethlehem. God is not easy to discern, Clingenpeel admits, but “the more we probe the life and work of Jesus, ponder his words and practice his deeds, the more likely we are to experience the depth and breadth of God’s character.”
- ▶ *The good news of Christ is for everyone*, uniting Israelites (represented by the shepherds) and Gentiles (the Magi). Extending this theme to include rich and poor, and global as well as local persons, Clingenpeel writes, “Epiphany rebukes the provincialism and spiritual myopia of too many Christians.”
- ▶ *Meeting Christ “leaves us altered, different persons.”* As the Magi “left for their own country by another road” to avoid Herod (Matthew 2:12), so our lives are deeply changed by Christ.

The Magi continue to fascinate us. Christian tradition and art have embroidered their story by adding their number (three), names (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar), motives (kings coming to honor the King), and colorful mode of transportation (camels). Amber and John Inscore Essick commend three traditions to help us live into the



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Magi's story and experience the mystery of Christ with them. "Like the Magi who anticipated, recognized, and welcomed the infant king, congregations and families can recognize and proclaim the appearance of God's chosen one."

- ▶ *Sharing a Kings' Cake (Rosca de Reyes)* — a pastry with a toy baby hidden inside — with our family and friends draws attention to the themes of searching and hospitality in the story.
- ▶ *Marking the front door frame with the Magi's blessing* helps us "acknowledge [with them] that Christ's entrance into the world makes our homes places of peace and hospitality."
- ▶ *The use of lighted candles in homes and churches* reminds us that the Magi followed a star's light to Christ. Celebrants might process with candles, or walk on paths marked by luminaria, to a place for worship. "The Magi observed the heavens with great acumen, but their efforts to find the newborn king ultimately required insights gained from a close reading of the Scriptures.... The lighting of candles in worship serves as a visual representation of the Church's need for divine assistance to read faithfully about God's presence in our midst."

Study Questions

1. Why, in Christian tradition, was the story of the Magi highlighted at the Epiphany festival? What themes are most important in the story?
2. Often in crèches we see the Magi standing beside the shepherds and angels. Do you think this popular emendation to the Nativity stories draws out their meaning, or distorts it?
3. Discuss how the three traditions described by Amber and John Inscore Essick can enrich your congregation's worship during Epiphany. How might you use them in your home to celebrate Christ with friends and family? How can these traditions help you share the good news in other contexts?
4. How does Reginald Heber's "Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning" draw us into the Magi's story?

Departing Hymn: "Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning" (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

Brightest and best of the stars of the morning,
dawn on our darkness and lend us your aid;
star of the east, the horizon adorning,
guide where our infant redeemer is laid.

What shall we give him in costly devotion?
Shall we bring incense and offerings divine,
gems of the mountain and pearls of the ocean,
myrrh from the forest or gold from the mine?

Vainly we offer such lavish oblation,
vainly with gifts would his favor secure;
richer by far is the heart's adoration,
dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

Reginald Heber (1811), adapted
Tune: MORNING STAR

† St. Augustine, *Sermons for Christmas and Epiphany*, Sermon 202 (New York: Paulist Press, 1952), 173.



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?

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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.

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

The Birth of Christmas

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To trace the early development of the feast of Christmas.
2. To draw guidelines for our celebration of Christmas from three trajectories evident in the birth of the feast – adhering to Scripture, respecting differing cultures, and critically appropriating cultural practices.
3. To reflect on the importance of celebrating Christmas for our formation as disciples.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christmas and Epiphany (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Oh, Wondrous Name, by Prophets Heard” locate one of the familiar tunes CLEANSING FOUNTAIN or FOREST GREEN in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

“Christianity long ago made a wager on December, that it would be better to appropriate ‘pagan culture’ than try to eradicate it. But the pagan rootstock has proved remarkably persistent, and some wonder if we should now burn down the fields,” Donald Heinz has noted. “The Puritans were convinced Jesus would have disapproved of his birthday celebrations, that nothing in the Bible authorizes Christmas, that its ritualization lies hopelessly in an unreformed Catholic orbit, that a sufficiently determined prohibitionism might be able to eradicate an entire culture of excess going back hundreds, or thousands, of years.” (*Christmas: Festival of Incarnation, Study Guide for Adult Education/Small Group Discussion, 14*; available online at fortresspress.com/media/downloads/0800697332Studyguideadulted.pdf)

Though we are not ready to “burn down the fields” of modern Christmas celebrations, we might want to do some selective weeding. Joseph Kelly’s exploration of the origins of Christmas helps us understand how early Christians arrived at the date and some key details of the feast. From his review of that process he draws some important guidelines for our faithful celebration of the Incarnation today.

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 guide our understanding and celebration of the Incarnation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Isaiah 9:2-7 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this opening study we reflect with Joseph Kelly on the birth and early development of the Christmas celebration. (Kelly uses “Nativity” for Jesus’ birth and “Christmas” for the feast that celebrates that event.) Use his account of why and how the early Christians began celebrating Christmas to encourage members to reflect on the festival’s purpose in our discipleship. Keep the focus on the early Christians’ motives and decisions. In the next study guide, “Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations,” we will critically review more recent developments in the commercialization of the feast.

Study Questions

1. Joseph Kelly notes that the first Christians relied heavily on their Jewish background: they worshiped in the Temple on the Sabbath as well as gathering with one another on Sunday; because they believed Christ would return soon, they had little reason to develop distinctive feasts and seasons of worship. Two things changed in the first hundred years: increasingly Gentiles were evangelized and became leaders in the Church, and believers recognized the Church would exist in this age for an indeterminate time. What would bind Christians from various cultures together, and how would they organize for a longer time of earthly ministry? Kelly explains, “Charisms such as prophecy and glossolalia declined as Christians established the necessary elements for an ongoing community – such as organized if uncharismatic offices, a canon of their own sacred writings, and specifically Christian feasts.” The widespread desire to honor the birthday of Jesus and proclaim to the world the radical nature of the Incarnation led scholars and ordinary believers alike to search for the date of Jesus’ birth and construct a proper season of celebration.
2. Form three small groups to investigate the trajectories in the birth of Christmas that Kelly identifies. There is some tension among the trajectories: can we keep close to the Bible while we are respecting different cultures and appropriating contemporary cultural practices? Discuss these tensions when the small groups report their findings.

Examples of the first trajectory, *keeping close to the Bible*, include reliance on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke, using allegorical themes from the Bible (the new creation and the sun-like divine glory of Christ) to guide selection of a date for Christmas, and appealing to biblical allegory and prophecy to fill in details about the Magi. Admittedly, popular imagination raced ahead to fill in other details with material from the *Protoevangelium of James*. Examples of the second trajectory, *respecting differing cultures*, include embracing the Jewish tradition of identical dates of birth and death for significant figures, and allowing Church groups to celebrate Christmas on different days and with different customs. Examples of the final trajectory, *including appropriate cultural practices*, include celebrations of martyrs’ “birthdays” based on Roman meals to honor the dead, and appropriation of March 25 and December 25 as feast days. Of course, these practices were greatly changed in order to provide a clear witness to the culture about the radical significance of the Incarnation.

3. December 25 marked the winter solstice (the day with the shortest time of sunlight in the northern hemisphere) according to the Julian calendar (a common reckoning of time begun in 45 BC by Julius Caesar). Choosing this date sent a positive signal: Jesus Christ is the true sun of righteousness (Malachi 4:2), the Logos that shines into the darkness (John 1:5). It also countered competing theological claims of the cult of *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun) that was popular in a revived official paganism that threatened to persecute Christians, the veneration of a Persian fertility deity Mithra, and the festival of Saturnalia – a week of licentious revelry (December 17-23) tied to the worship of Saturn which originally was intended to support the government and distract citizens from military defeat. Christmas announced the birth of Jesus Christ who is more real than idols and more important than the empire.
4. Answering this question provides a transition to the next study, “Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations.” Some group members may be fed up with the excessive consumerism and theological denudation of Christmas; for others, it has become a painful pretense that they and their families are successful and happy by cultural standards; still others may have doubts about the big theological ideas in Christmas, such that celebrating the Incarnation seems more than they can do. Yet the early Christians believed they really needed this feast; they sought to construct it from the stories in Scripture and the cultural fragments around them. How would we celebrate the Incarnation without Christmas? How would we announce it to our (sometimes doubting) selves and share it with a needy world? If theological Christmas were not shaping our lives each year, what would take its place?

Departing Hymn

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

Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review why the festival of Christmas magnifies the clash between Christianity and consumer capitalism.
2. To consider how a consumer mentality makes it difficult for us to appropriate the theological riches of the Christian tradition of celebrating Christmas.
3. To discuss steps that congregations can take to recover the religious festival of Christmas.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage 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 "Of the Father's Love Begotten" locate the tune DIVINUM MYSTERIUM in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Question

"Did God foresee how Christmas would turn out? Did God consider the risks of Incarnation?" Donald Heinz asks. "In the evolution of Christmas celebration we witness the amazing three-scene story of how an original religious festival celebrating the very heart of Christianity relentlessly expanded the divine investment in 'lived religion.' The play opens with the original Christmas story and its protagonists embedded in the texts of the New Testament. The Christian Church then comes to understand itself as a theater of Incarnation with the church as its festival house. Finally, spilling far beyond sacred pages and ecclesiastical auspices there spreads across time and place, to cathedral square and market and home, an expanding range of human celebration until all the world becomes the stage for Christmas. By its very nature, Incarnation seems to authorize a risky trajectory far beyond Bethlehem as God takes up residence in many cultures. We are deeply implicated in how God's venture turns out." (*Christmas and Epiphany*, 22)

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 the divine love that shines through Jesus Christ, giving meaning to our lives and all our relationships.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read John 1:1-14 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this study we critically review with Donald Heinz recent developments in the commercialization of Christmas in North America. Heinz borrows the phrase "the clash of civilizations" from Samuel P. Huntington's influential book *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order* (1996), which predicted people's cultural and religious identities would replace national agendas as the main source of conflict after the Cold War. Christianity and consumer capitalism are the "civilizations" contending over the meaning of Christmas. Highlight three points in Heinz's analysis of the clash: (1) it is a struggle to determine the meaning of the material world; (2) we are tempted to misidentify the opponent as "secular humanism" since we examine the struggle with a consumer mentality (as he says, "consumerism is what we *look through*, the glasses we cannot take off" when we view the clash); and (3) the consumer mentality blocks recovery of historical theological resources we need to restore Christmas by reducing them to mere cultural products to mix and match as we decorate our holiday celebration.

Study Questions

1. Christmas highlights the goodness of the material world as we share our lives through gift-giving, parties, and family reunions. Christianity and “rapacious” consumer capitalism make rival religious claims about the meaning of these celebrations. Christianity says their goodness points beyond themselves to the Good that is God, who in love created the world and became flesh in Jesus Christ to redeem it. Consumer capitalism says their goodness is found in products, which is all that there is; there is nothing “beyond,” for what we buy and sell are all that give meaning to life and make us happy. These accounts are incompatible. In Heinz’s memorable phrase, “In the consumer Christmas, the Incarnation is reversed.” Invite members to review specific examples of clashing messages about the meaning of Christmas.

2. “Contemporary consumer culture is able to absorb all previous cultures as content waiting to be commodified, distributed, and consumed in highly individualistic acts,” Heinz writes. In this consumer mentality, “The Church is easily construed as just another religious merchandiser” and “the Incarnation is just another ornament.”

Invite members to give examples of how some elements of the biblical story – e.g., the Holy Family, the baby Jesus, the angels’ song, the shepherds, the Magi, the Manger (and animals), the star of Bethlehem, etc. – are often commodified and detached from their theological and ethical meaning. Some other elements of the story – e.g., the birth of John the Baptist; Mary’s song and Zechariah’s prophecy; the slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem and the flight into Egypt – have not been commodified. Why is this?

3. “Personal piety expressed in family life...is not sufficient for a determined Christian resistance to the social and economic powers that drive the clash of civilizations,” Heinz believes. “The Incarnation must play in public, not merely in private homes,” as it has from the beginning of the Christmas festival. Public worship is necessary both to form the Christian community in Christlikeness and to announce the Incarnation to the world.

Heinz’s recommendations for congregations fall under three headings: in order to recover the religious festival of Christmas we need “public worship, believable Christians, and convincing theology.” Invite members to examine how well their congregation performs public worship at Christmas, is formed in discipleship by the incarnational narrative, and thinks theologically about the meaning of the Christmas story.

4. Rather than describe the events of Jesus’ birth and infancy, the Prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-14) articulates the meaning of Incarnation: it is the Word of God which existed “in the beginning with God,” and who “was God,” that “became flesh and lived among us” in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is “the life and the light” that displays the glory of God to all people, enlightening a darkened world, and offers to all who receive him the “power to become children of God.” Unpacking the Incarnation theologically and representing it before God and the world is what Christmas worship, music, and art are all about.

Aurelius Prudentius (b. 348), a Roman lawyer and judge from Spain, was “the prince of early Christian poets” according to John Mason Neale, who translated Prudentius’ poem *Corde natus ex parentis* as “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.” The two verses here identify Christ as creator and redeemer, as a member of the Godhead. Other verses develop these themes and describe Christ as “righteous judge,” “righteous king,” and the long-expected Messiah who “shines” into the world.

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.

Caroling

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review the history and diversity of Christmas carols.
2. To consider the roles that Christmas carols can play in spiritual formation through public worship and personal devotion.
3. To share and critically appreciate the value of particular Christmas carols.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christmas and Epiphany (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Emilie Griffin knows the power of music and poetry to interpret the mystery of the Incarnation during Christmastide, the twelve-day season of Christmas. She recounts hearing an old favorite, Menotti's opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, performed by members of her Louisiana congregation. She writes, "The church was not crowded. Some of us were rain-soaked. Wet umbrellas were everywhere. The Wise Men in their tall gorgeous turbans and silken hats were magical, but a little worried about how to deal with the winter rain. Yet our small cathedral was filled with the grace of God. I felt a sense of God's abundant mercy. It was enough to take us through storm and trouble in search of the amazing Christ.

"When the opera ended, we all trundled over to the reception where we would have hot punch and cold punch and sandwiches and cake—and the beauty of each other. Along the way, as I inched down the rain-soaked ramp (built for people like me who are handicapped and rely on a cane) I passed the child Amahl and one or two Wise Men. In the story, Amahl had left his crutch behind to follow the Lord Jesus.

"I felt sustained and lifted up by the healing power of grace," she reports, for "inwardly I had felt a spiritual healing with Amahl, who rose out of poverty to meet the mystical visitors and to join their search of the mystical child, the gift of grace.... The music had flooded my heart." (*Christmas and Epiphany*, 59-60)

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 you to himself through the music and poetry of Christmas.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 96 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This is a chance to enjoy members' favorite Christmas carols and to learn some new ones. Invite members to bring their favorite Christmas recordings, or briefly survey the ones that Mark Suderman reviews in "Choral Music for Christmas." Take the time to critically appreciate a few carols: consider their strengths and weaknesses in telling the story of the Nativity, sharing the gospel in the culture, and forming us morally through public worship and personal devotion.

Study Questions

1. You might divide into smaller groups to discuss *when* members use carols, *what* carols they use, *how* they use them, and *where* they use them. When the small groups report back, you can explore the overlap among their answers.

In response to the “when” question, liturgical churches follow a pattern of singing Advent hymns during the Advent season, Christmas carols on Christmas Eve and the twelve days of Christmastide, and Epiphany hymns (including verses about the Magi) in Epiphany season. It’s not so tidy in many congregations and through the wider culture: Christmas carols are used right after Thanksgiving and for a few days past Christmas Day. In regard to the “what” question, members might discuss whether they gravitate to old favorites or seek out carols that are new to them, enjoy carols from a wide range of places and times, enjoy some carols that are rarely sung in their congregation, have carols that are favorites personally or in their family, and so on. The “how” question might lead to a discussion of whether members sing or listen to carols (on the radio, on recordings, in live performances), share carols with others through caroling, read carol texts meditatively, and so on. The group with the “where” question might consider the use of carols in public worship services, various church programs, personal devotion, programs in non-ecclesial institutions, shopping mall sound systems, flash mob performances, family gatherings, Christmas parties, and so on.

2. To respond to this and the next two questions, have copies of your congregation’s hymnal available, or prepare a list of the hymns in the Christmas section of the book. (The contents of many hymn books are catalogued online at www.hymnary.org.) The hymnal will give the date of composition of the text; you can find more information about the hymn writer and composer on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch). Denominational hymnals may include some recent texts by hymn writers in that denomination.
3. Members who have been believers for many years may remember Christmas carols that once were popular, but are not in the current hymnal. Ask members who grew up in different Christian denominations if they remember different carols sung in church. Members may have heard or sung a newer Christmas carol that is not in the hymnal. Some members, especially those who are new to the Christian faith, may identify popular Christmas songs that are not in the hymnal. In each case, explore why the carol is memorable for that person.
4. Do members agree on a few favorite carols, or do they prefer different ones? You might break up members into smaller groups to study a few selected carols more carefully. David Music distinguishes those with “sophisticated theological messages” from others with “simple, child-like expressions of faith and joy.” He notes that some retell portions of the Nativity stories in Matthew and Luke, while others use bits of the Christmas story to address different, but related subjects. Some carols mention details that are not in the biblical stories. Commenting on this poetic license, Music writes that “It undoubtedly aids the memorability of carols to sing that the angels appeared to the shepherds at midnight, that there was hay in the manger, or that the birth took place amid cattle and donkeys, though none of these features are mentioned in Scripture. Whether these elements are literally true or not, they certainly reinforce the biblical message that Jesus was born in humble circumstances.”

If time permits, you might sing a few of these favorite carols. Another interesting project is to study the full text of the carols in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch). You may find a few gems among the verses that are not included in your hymnal, or you may be glad the editors left those verses out!

5. David Music’s “A Lamb is Born among the Sheep” may be sung in the original fashion (with everyone singing the chorus at the first and then after each stanza, and a soloist singing the stanzas). The first two verses allude to the Nativity story in Luke 2, referring to Christ with the metaphors of Lamb and Shepherd; in the third verse, the phrase “the Light into the darkness shines” refers to John 1:5, but it is also suggestive of the light of God’s glory that shown around the angel who speaks to the shepherds in Luke 2:9.

Departing Hymn

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

The Nativity in Art

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (on Ghirlandaio's painting)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To survey the traditional iconography in Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* and Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi*.
2. To enrich understanding of the Nativity stories through the theological interpretations of them in these paintings.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 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 articles before the group meeting. Search online for detailed images of Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (1483-1485) and Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* (1423) to enhance your discussion of the artwork.

Begin with a Story

In his novel *Helena*, based on the life of the Emperor Constantine's mother, Evelyn Waugh has Helena praise the Magi as exemplars of those who are "late comers" to Christ because of their sophistication and education. He writes:

"[Helena] forgot her quest and was dead to everything except the swaddled child long ago and those three royal sages who had come from so far to adore him.... 'Like me,' she said to them, 'you were late in coming. The shepherds were here long before; even the cattle. They had joined the chorus of angels before you were on your way. For you the primordial discipline of the heavens was relaxed and a new defiant light blazed amid the disconcerted stars.

"How laboriously you came, taking sights and calculating, where the shepherds had run barefoot! How odd you looked on the road, attended by what outlandish liveries, laden with such preposterous gifts!

"...You too found room before the manger. Your gifts were not needed, but they were accepted and put carefully by, for they were brought with love. In that new order of charity that had just come to life, there was room for you, too. You were not lower in the eyes of the holy family than the ox or the ass.

"You are my especial patrons,' said Helena, 'and patrons of all late-comers, of all who have a tedious journey to make to the truth, of all who are confused with knowledge and speculation, of all who through politeness make themselves partners in guilt, of all who stand in danger by reason of their talents....

"For His sake who did not reject your curious gifts, pray always for all the learned, the oblique, the delicate. Let them not be quite forgotten at the Throne of God when the simple come into their kingdom.'" (Evelyn Waugh, *Helena*, [Chicago, IL: Loyola Classics, 2005] 208-210)

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 welcoming all people – Jews and Gentiles, lowly and exalted, shepherds and Magi – to worship him at his Nativity.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 2:1-20 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study is designed to be a hinge between your focus on the Christmas and Epiphany seasons, in which the stories of the shepherds and Magi respectively are featured. Through the study of art, Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons highlight theological emphases in and relationships between the stories of the shepherds and the Magi.

Alternatively, you may divide the material in this study, discussing Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* in your series of studies on Christmas, and discussing Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* later when you focus on the Epiphany season. If you do this, use the "Begin with a Story" feature with the latter study.

Study Questions

1. Ask members of the group to brainstorm a list of significant iconography, details, and elements of composition in Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds*. They might notice Jerusalem and Rome in the background; a bustling train of horsemen (presumably the Magi) headed towards the Manger; the sheaf of wheat beneath Christ's head (representing the Eucharist); symbols of Christ's death—the sarcophagus/Manger and goldfinch (associated, because of the thistle seeds it eats, with Christ's crown of thorns); the revealing postures and attitudes of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds; and so on.
Compare the composition of Ghirlandaio's painting with the altarpiece by Hugo van der Goes. Note the differing placements of Joseph, Mary, and Christ, and depictions of the shepherds. How do these artistic choices communicate theological interpretations of the story?
2. Ghirlandaio depicts successive reigns of the Hebrews, the Romans, and of Christ through iconographic elements: the arch representing the triumph of Rome's paganism over Judaism and the Hebrews, and the sarcophagus of Christ's Manger signifying the victory of Christianity over the heathen world. Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons say the artist "makes the audacious claim that the transition of dominance from the Romans to Christianity is to be found not in Emperor Constantine's conversion or his mighty Christian army, but rather in the birth of a child who is first adored by lowly shepherds rather than cosmopolitan Magi." For Ghirlandaio, Christianity triumphs not through political power, but the humility of Christ who condescends to become human and die on the cross.
Luke's interest in politics is more concerned with legitimizing Christianity, then a tiny Jewish messianic set, within the larger Roman Empire—"trying to forge a way for the movement to survive while at the same time holding true to its central tenets."
3. Hornik and Parsons interpret the background of Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* in this way: "The most distant hill on the right is believed to be Jerusalem with the Dome of the Rock visible. In the center of the background is a view of Rome, which includes the Torre delle Milizie and the mausoleum of Hadrian. Therefore, the two world empires, Hebrew and Roman, are now in the background to the beginning of Christ's new kingdom." In this visual depth the artist communicates temporal depth, not only representing the transition of empires, but also depicting the entourage of the Magi on their travels to Bethlehem. Discuss how the artist uses this depth to depict the all-encompassing invitation of the Incarnation.
4. Prepare a large image for members to study the three scenes in the predella of Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi*. The scene on the left of the Nativity, Hornik writes, "may be the first painted night scene"; the shadows are cast by an identifiable light source—the glory of God surrounding the angels announcing Christ's birth to the shepherds. In the next two scenes—the flight into Egypt and the presentation of Jesus in the Temple—the Holy Family can be identified by their similar dress; the composition and lighting of these scenes are more traditional.

Departing Hymn

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

The Festival of Epiphany

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 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider the key role that the biblical story of the Magi plays in the festival of Epiphany.
2. To discuss how three historical Epiphany traditions help us interpret the festival and celebrate it appropriately.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 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 articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning” locate tune MORNING STAR in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

A few years ago I received a phone call out of the blue from a woman who had read me quoted in a local newspaper article about Christmas. Would I come to Stillwell Retirement Center and lead a weekday devotion- al that she prepares for fellow retirees, she wondered. Since the festival of Epiphany was coming up, I volunteered to do a chalking of the lintel service to share the Magi’s blessing with her friends. I adapted a brief liturgy that I had learned from church friends the year before.

About fifteen residents showed up – most of them struggling with walkers or wheel chairs (it was a large turnout, she assured me) – to pray, sing, and create small signs of blessing for one another on colored paper with magic markers. After the worship service, several folks invited me to eat lunch with them in the dining hall. But first, my host wanted me to do one more thing for her. Leading me down the hall to her small apartment, she said: “This is where I live now.” Rolling a bit of scotch tape into a ring on the back of the blessing “20 † C † M † B † 09,” she asked be to attach it to the door lintel that was too high for her to reach. “Now it feels more like home,” she said. “Thank you.”

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 the revelation of his love to us, as it once was revealed to the Magi, in the birth of Jesus Christ.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 2:1-12 from a modern translation.

Meditation

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

Reflection

This study and the next one, “When Grace Appears,” reflect on Epiphany – the feast on January 6 and the season that follows – as an appropriate culmination of the Christmas season. For many Christians today, Epiphany is the least understood and celebrated part of the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany festival season. You

might use Mike Clingenpeel's reflection on Augustine's sermon to begin developing the theological significance of Epiphany and our formation as disciples during this time. (More will be said about these in the next study.) Let Amber and John Inscore Essick guide you to activities for your study group (or member's families) to enjoy these deep truths of Epiphany and share them with others.

Study Questions

1. Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Christ to "all the nations," including the Gentiles. By the fourth century, the festival became focused on the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem, for according to Scripture they were the first Gentiles to know and worship Jesus. Because Matthew's story of the Magi is entirely separate from the Lucan story of Jesus' birth, it was easy to focus on Luke's story of the shepherds and angels at Christmas and save the story of the Magi's visit for the Epiphany celebration a few days later.
Following Augustine's sermon, Mike Clingenpeel highlights three themes in the Magi's story: God draws us into relationship with subtle "hints and signs" that require our faithful attention; God draws all people (Israelites and Gentiles) through the Christ; and the experience of Christ deeply changes what we value and how we see the world. Amber and John Inscore Essick address the same themes in different ways: correlative to the divine hints and signs is the Magi's spiritual searching, which is embraced and deepened by their guided study of Scripture; God's welcoming of the Gentiles is embodied in the hospitality of the Holy Family, and stands in stark contrast to the false flattery shown by King Herod; the change the Christ brings is like being led out of our darkness into the light of God's love.
2. Crèches quickly get crowded with various figures combined from the stories in Luke and Matthew and elaborated with appropriate animals: sheep for the shepherds, camels for the Magi, and an ox and donkey (symbolizing Gentiles and Israelites respectively). Is this visual conflation of the biblical stories merely confusing to young Christians and a source of scandal to historically minded modern people? Or is it an attempt to depict the theological riches of the nativity? (To clarify things a bit, some Christians start with the Holy Family at the crèche, but add the shepherds on Christmas Day and the Magi on Epiphany.) In some contemporary crèches, Santa Claus and his reindeer show up as well. Does this demean the biblical witness, or creatively extend it into the secular realm?
3. Congregations might incorporate the King's Cake, the Magi's blessing, and lighted processions into public worship, or use them in more intimate settings of spiritual formation groups, choir meetings, fellowship meals, and so on. Families can use these powerful celebrations alone, share them with Christian friends, or share them as a witness to unchurched friends in the neighborhood. Amber and John Inscore Essick suggest using the Magi's blessing at any time during Christmas or Epiphany "to bless a room in a hospital, nursing home, or extended-care facility; to inaugurate the spring semester in a college dormitory room;... and so on. Recalling the Inscore Essick's recommendations to "hold the tradition lightly" and "involve as many people as possible when establishing your traditions," encourage members to brainstorm on how they might adapt all three traditions in these and similar contexts.
4. Reginald Heber uses "we" throughout to help us identify with the Magi, to see the story from their perspective. He does not focus on details of the story, but on the meaning of those details. For example, in the first verse the "star of the east, the horizon adorning" points ahead to God's love in Christ Jesus that will "dawn on our darkness." In verse three, the Magi's gifts represent all elements of the creation returned now to the creator in "costly devotion." However, the essence of the Magi's gifts, and ours, is described in the final verse: they represent humility, or what Jesus calls for his disciples to be in the Sermon on the Mount—"poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3).

Departing Hymn

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

When Grace Appears

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
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.