

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Chapter 3

The *Didache*

I grew up in a “churched” family. My mother and father were both strong Christian believers, and they raised my two sisters and me to be the same. We went to church whenever the doors were opened, said prayers before meals and at night, lived by a biblical code of right and wrong, and knew what God expected from us.

I also grew up in a “churched” nation. That is not to say that everyone in America went to church, or that all of the founding fathers were stout Christian believers. But there was a strong element of religious experience in America where people knew what the Bible taught (whether they believed it or not), and churches were found in every city and town, regardless of size.

So when I made my personal commitment of faith to God in Jesus in 1972, I came into the relationship with my Lord with a good bit of prior knowledge and experience! I had seen and been taught a good bit about the Christian walk, and while I needed to grow into it, it held a sense of normalcy for me.

Sometimes I find it interesting to consider some of the other avenues into faith. Imagine you were a pagan Greek, living in Antioch, Syria in the 1st century. What would it be like if you converted to Christianity? You would not have been nurtured in the faith, or even among those who were of faith. What would you learn first, and how would you learn it? What would the worship service be like? You might have been to a pagan worship opportunity at a local temple or shrine. You might have even attended a Jewish synagogue service. But you did not stumble into a Christian church building, because they didn’t exist yet. How would you be baptized? What immediate changes might others see in your behavior? How would you try to live your day-to-day life?

Answers to these questions are found by culling through a number of ancient sources, most notably the *Didache* (pronounced *di-dah-kay*). Scholars generally date the *Didache* between 50-90AD.¹

¹ Most modern scholars since the 1950’s have assigned a date between 50 and 90AD to the *Didache*. The most cited reasons for the early dates are the references to church structure that seem to indicate that the “single Bishop for a region” had not been fully developed yet. The reasons for a late date are the apparent references (or awareness) in the *Didache* to Matthew’s gospel. Of course, if conservative scholars are correct on dating Matthew’s gospel early, then the *Didache* rightly takes its place as a very early document in at least the 50-75AD time range.

THE DIDACHE

The *Didache* itself is not a book of dogma or doctrine. Nor is it a gospel. It contains very little on subjects of grace, justification, forgiveness or the life of Christ. The book contains very straightforward and simple instructions about life, closely akin to parts of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). It speaks directly to how to live day-to-day as well as how to conduct core services as a church, or group of believers.

Scholars generally agree the *Didache* is a training manual for 1st century Christians written to give advice on morality and daily living as well as church practices. While the book likely originated as an oral collection of instructions to be memorized and applied, it soon was put into writing and passed around to churches both as a guide for the newly (most likely Gentile) converted to bring their lives into greater holiness. It also served as a guide to all believers who seek to live righteously before the Lord.²

As such, the book gives us great insight into practical 1st century Christianity, useful in light of our ways of instructing and mentoring new Christians today. It also provides a glimpse into 1st century Christianity that helps us better understand certain passages in the New Testament, not surprising since it was likely composed during the same time as many of the New Testament books.

We do not know who authored the *Didache*. Most scholars believe that it was never written by “an individual,” but rather was the end product of a number of people and communities. As such, the *Didache* was circulated among a number of Christian communities for their use and practice.

Those scholars who assigned a very late date to the work (300's AD), generally did so based on wanting to distance the doctrinal ideas and practices as late as possible lest they distort prior notions about early church activity and beliefs.

² There are a number of works on the *Didache*. The predominate resources used here, in addition to the actual *Didache* text, include: Del Verme, Marcello, *Didache and Judaism, Jewish Roots of an Ancient Christian Work*, (T&T Clark 2004); Milavec, Aaron, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, & Life of the Earliest Christian Communities, 50-70 C.E.*, (Paulist Press 2003); Milavec, Aaron, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary*, (Liturgical Press 2003); Niederwimmer, Kurt, *The Didache* (Hermeneia Commentary Series, Fortress 1998); O'Loughlin, Thomas, *The Didache, a Window on the Earliest Christians*, (Baker 2010); Schaff, Philip, *The Oldest Church Manual Called the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, (Wipf & Stock 2009), originally published 1885.

Originally, the *Didache* had no title. It was merely the oral teaching for new Christians and new Christian communities.³ The written copy was at some point given two titles:

“The Training [or “teaching”] of the Twelve Apostles,” and

*“The Training [or “teaching”] of the Lord Through
the Twelve Apostles to the Gentiles.”*

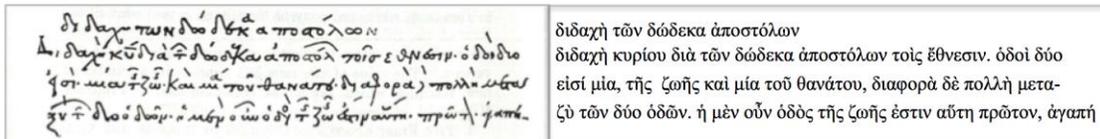
“Training” is the first word in each title. It is the Greek word “*didache*” (διδάχη); hence, the reason for the shortened title that scholars give the book today.

Were the twelve apostles the original oral source of the written *Didache* as the title suggests? No one knows. The title was added later, and the text was originally oral. It cannot be ascertained what parts, if any, were apostolic.⁴ Certainly, much of the teaching in the *Didache* is accurate and consistent from a biblical perspective. Still, some of the teaching in the *Didache* goes beyond the express content of our New Testament, and some might argue is inconsistent.

Scholars knew of the existence of the *Didache* because of references in early church writings, but no copy of the text was known in the modern world until the Greek archbishop Philotheos Bryennios (1833-1917) discovered in 1873 in a monastic library in Istanbul a copy made in 1056. Not much was made of the copy, which was found sandwiched in the middle of other early church writings, until it was fully published in 1883. The first copy to hit New York City sold 5,000 copies its first day. The copy is now maintained at the Greek Church’s monastery in Jerusalem. It is about 1/3rd the size of Mark’s Gospel and is written in the popular Greek of the 1st century (both in grammar and vocabulary).

³ This makes sense of what we remember about the apocalyptic nature of the early church. When Jesus departed and assured his disciples of his return, they believed the return to be an “any day” event. We see then the early church in Acts selling their possessions and holding everything in common (Acts 2:44-45), not surprising if you thought the world would be ending any day! Over time, the church realized that the second coming was not coming as soon as folks thought! There were multiple controversies in the early church arising from false teachings that Christ had in fact returned, but his return had been missed by those not alert or plugged into a certain brand of truth. Paul himself dispelled this falsity, as did other early church leaders (e.g., 2 Thess. 2). Once the early believers began dying, the need for written records of events and teachings became critical. We see John writing his gospel in his last days. We also see writings like the *Didache* that had some prior existence as an oral teaching reduced to writing.

⁴ We do know that at times even as the Apostles wrote, they would have rather been speaking in person (1 Thess. 2:17-3:5). We also know that at times, the apostles purposefully wrote, preferring that to oral communication! (2 Cor. 2:1-4)



Those familiar with Greek will enjoy reading the facsimile above of the first few lines of this nearly 1,000-year-old manuscript. The text is given in modern Greek script next to the ancient piece. Readily apparent are the ancient Greek abbreviations, typically shown with a line drawn over the word.

Some scholars find it hard to organize and structure the *Didache* in a cohesive manner. They attribute this difficulty, in part, to the fact that this was a general manual that was a composite of various churches and teachings. Milavec and other later scholars have found that there is a coherent and meaningful structure to the book that makes sense in light of the *Didache*'s purpose as a training manual. Milavec divides the *Didache* as follows:

1. Training Program in the Way of Life (1:1-6:2)
2. Regulations for Eating, Baptizing, Fasting, Praying (6:3-11:2)
3. Regulations for Hospitality/Testing Various Classes of Visitors (11:3-13:2)
4. Regulations for First Fruits and Offering a Pure Sacrifice (13:3-15:4)
5. Closing Apocalyptic Forewarnings and Hope (16:1-8)

We will use his outline as we look at the book.

1. *Training Program in the Way of Life (1:1-6:2)*

The *Didache* does not have much by way of introduction. After the two titles, it starts abruptly with, “There are two ways [or “roads”] – one of life and one of death.” The way of life is summed up as loving God, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and *not* doing to others what we wish others would *not* do to us (This is called a negative Golden Rule... if the Golden Rule is to “do to others as you would have others do to you,” then the same is achieved, but expressed in negative terms. “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.”⁵) (1.1-1.2).

⁵ The negative Golden Rule is also found in the intertestamental book of Tobit that reads, “Do to no one what you yourself dislike.” A similar statement is found from a prominent rabbi in Jerusalem slightly older than Jesus (Hillel – 32BC-7AD). Talmud, *Shabbat*, 31a.11-13 tells the story placing Hillel in contrast to another prominent rabbi Shammai: “On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, 'Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.' Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit that was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him,

If these passages sound biblical, it is with good reason. Consider:

Didache 1:2 “first: you will love the God who made you; second: your neighbor as yourself.”

Luke 10:27 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Didache 1:3 “speak well of the ones speaking badly of you, and pray for your enemies...for what merit [is there] if you love the ones loving you? Do not even the gentiles do the same thing?”

Matt. 5:44-46 “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...If you love those who love you ... are not even the tax collectors doing that?”

Didache 1:4 “If anyone should strike you on the right cheek, turn to him also the other...if anyone should press you into service for one mile, go with him two.”

Matt. 5:39-41 “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also...If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”

The design behind this training is interesting. The manual sets out a general goal (“love your neighbor”) in 1:2, then follows up with verses that explain in practical everyday terms how to meet the goal. First, Christians are to speak well of others, especially of those who might speak badly of us. Next, we are to pray for our enemies, *etc.*

Clearly reflecting the teaching of Jesus, these passages, also found in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, let the readers and trainees know something very important. Jesus was not merely teaching an ethic for his Jewish followers, but was imparting the way of God for all people across cultural lines. It was the teaching the church rightly used for mentoring in day-to-day life.

So, the *Didache* reminds and teaches that loving and speaking well of those who love us and treat us well is no more meritorious than what the unsaved do. Christians are to aim higher (1.3).

‘What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.’

Christians are to abstain from fleshly desires that are sinful. Should someone seek the believer's cloak, the believer should give his or her tunic as well. When someone borrows something, it should be given without expectation of getting it back (1.4).

Chapter 2 of the *Didache* continues the mentoring, but does so in the negative sense. By that, we mean that chapter 1 trains by telling the believer what to do. Chapter 2 trains by telling what *not* to do.

The manual sets out a long list of “do not’s.” Christians are to abstain and “not do” a number of things including the obvious “murder, adultery,” *etc.*, as well as the more subtle, like “practice magic” or “astrology” that are also found within scripture. Several additional items are included that might seem wholly unnecessary to us today, but were really a departure from Roman life on the whole. For example, the list includes instructions not to “corrupt boys” (a sexual deviance in our day that was acceptable in the pagan Roman world) and not to abort the unborn (another practice acceptable in the Roman world, but forbidden to the church) (2:2).⁶

The trainee is taught not to swear falsely, bear false witness, or be double-minded (all biblical teaching as well). The *Didache* gets a bit more explicit in these areas than our scriptures. The *Didache* adds that believers are not to “hold grudges” or “speak badly” of anyone (2:3).

Believers are not to covet, be greedy, be a hypocrite, be “bad-mannered”⁷ or arrogant. Neither should believers hate anyone, even though some will warrant a degree of reproof, while others are prayed for and loved more than one's own life (2:6-7).

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount continues to be echoed in the third chapter of the *Didache*. The believer is told not only to avoid murder, but also avoid the anger that leads to murder (3:2) (*compare* Matt 5:21-26). Similarly, the *Didache* teaches to avoid lust which leads to adultery (3:3) (*cf.* Matt.5:27-30). The training continues to avoid divination and astrology as leading to idolatry; falsehood and

⁶ Lawyer's footnote! When the Supreme Court ruled that there was a constitutional right to an abortion in *Roe vs. Wade*, the court used Roman law, in part, for the justification noting that abortion had been allowed in Roman times. Fortunately, the court doesn't follow Roman law for setting out other rights or else we would have polygamy, infanticide, slavery and a host of other cultural evils!

⁷ This is not in the sense of “no elbows on the table while eating!” It means don't behave badly!

the love of money lead to theft; and grumbling and self-pleasing leading to blasphemy (3:4-6). Instead, believers should “be gentle since the gentle will inherit the earth” (3:7).⁸

In chapter four, the *Didache* teaches the trainee to honor the trainer! The trainee is not to seek handouts as a taker. The trainee is to learn to put his hand out as a giver! We Christians of all people should understand that we are givers, reflecting the ransoming of our sins by the gift of the Savior. The way of life is a way of hospitality, focus on others and confession of shortcomings (4:1-14).

The way of death is diametrically different. As set out in chapter five, evil and accursedness are on the road to death. The *Didache* lists 22 categories of traits and actions on this evil road. Along with the obvious “murders,” “thefts,” and “adulteries,” we have the more subtle “jealousy,” “haughtiness,” and “arrogance.” Chapter five then lists a good number of basic, biblical teachings about right and wrong in life.

2. *Regulations for Eating, Baptizing, Fasting, Praying (6:3-11:2)*

The trainees are taught to abstain from sacrificial meals that tied them in allegiance to pagan gods (“dead gods”) (6:3).

The *Didache* sets out the baptismal rite with detail. Before we focus on the exact teaching, we should note that there is no provision in the *Didache* for infant baptism. The baptism discussed is clearly applicable only to adult decision makers.

Baptism is an immersion in the name of the “Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (7:1).⁹ It is to occur in flowing water. If flowing water is not available, then immersion should take place in still water, and there is then a preference for cold water! Most likely, the cold preference is to remind the participants of flowing (“live”) water. The point behind live/flowing water is to denote the living nature of the rebirth signified in the baptism (7:1-2).

The manual does make provision for pouring water in the event that there is not sufficient water for immersion. With the pouring option, however, the water is to

⁸ The Greek used in the *Didache* for “gentle” is *πραῦς* (*praus*). This is the same word Matthew used in the well-known passage, “blessed are the meek [*πραῦς*], for they will inherit the earth.”

⁹ We can fairly assume that this was not a “formula” finding magic in the “names” of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Rather, the “baptism in the name of” should connect to the Hebrew sense of the one baptizing doing it in the authority of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

be poured three times, once in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (7:3). This wording of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is almost identical with the admonition given by Jesus to his apostles as written in Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The *Didache* teaches that the initiate and the one baptizing should both fast one to two days before the baptism. Those in the community who can should join in the fasting (7:4). The community as a whole was expected to be fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays as well (8:1).

In chapter 8, the Lord’s Prayer is set out. The *Didache* teaches that believers are to pray the Lord’s Prayer three times daily. The prayer reads in the Greek, just like Matthew’s recording of it, with four small variations, hardly noticeable in English:¹⁰

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name; your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debt [singular rather than Matthew’s use of plural] as we likewise forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil because yours is the power and the glory forever [Matthew in the oldest manuscripts does not have the last line](8:2).

In chapter nine, the instructions for the Eucharist are set out. Prayers for the cup and bread include thanks to God for the life and knowledge revealed through God’s servant Jesus. Communion itself was specifically closed, and no one was to partake of it unless baptized.

This section of the *Didache* closes with prayers for the church and conversion of the masses (10:1-11:2).

¹⁰ In the opening clause of the prayer, Matthew literally reads, “Our Father in the heavens” (plural) while the *Didache* reads “Our Father in the heaven” (Singular). Both use the singular form in the later clause, “on earth as it is in heaven.” Matthew has “forgive us our debts” (plural) while the *Didache* has “forgive us our debt” (singular). Matthew has “as we forgive those...” in a Greek tense called the “aorist.” The *Didache* has the passage in the present tense. Here, there is no real difference in effect between the two. Finally the *Didache* has the added line “For yours is the power and the glory forever.” This phrase is missing from the oldest copies of Matthew.

3. *Regulations for Hospitality/Testing Various Classes of Visitors (11:3-13:2)*

The church and its members are taught hospitality, not only to their friends, but even more so to visiting strangers. This makes sense if we remember that the *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace) initiated more widespread travel and commerce than historically possible. Yet, there was not a sudden deluge of Holiday Inns built. Before the *Pax Romana*, there were local inns that would provide limited hospitality to those in a region able to pay; it was never present on a large scale. It was simply not economically viable prior to significant travel. “Camping” (taking your tent and sleeping gear) was most common.

Now with the church, you have a need for traveling and visiting that is independent from that of commerce or governmental functions. There was a gospel message to proclaim to the world.

So, Christians were taught to open their home to the traveling teachers and witnesses of Jesus. Of course, this hospitality was open to great abuse. We see in the *Didache* teaching about how to extend the hospitality. It went to those who came in authority as teachers, but with a catch! If the traveling teacher wanted a loaf of bread for the road, fine. But if the traveler asked for money, then that indicated the traveler was a false prophet. Similarly, if the prophet seeks other manners of enrichment at the expense of others, then the church could assume their falseness as well (11:3-12).

This passage helps us better understand Paul’s comment in 2 Thessalonians 3. The early church was besieged with “teachers” or “prophets” who went church to church for their own financial benefit, rather than out of true mission for the gospel.¹¹ This lets one see more readily the reason behind Paul’s claim,

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread [even a “loaf” as allowed by the *Didache*] without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies (2 Thess. 3:7-11).

¹¹ Lest anyone should think this only a 1st century problem, check the popular Internet article, “Man Of Who? 15 Of The Most Suspect Preachers Around,” at: <http://madamenoire.com/318964/15-suspect-preachers-around/#sthash.uy1ZGG9p.dpuf>”

Those travelers who came and stayed two or three days were fine. But, those who wanted to stay longer should be put to work. Idleness was not a Christian virtue! In fact, anyone who would not either use his or her trade or learn one was warned against as a “Christ-peddler!” (12:1-5)

One can’t help but wonder what would happen if the teachers of the *Didache* could time transport to the 21st century and watch much of “Christian” television....

4. *Regulations for First Fruits and Offering a Pure Sacrifice (13:3-15:4)*

The early church taught that the “first fruits” of “income” were to be given away for God’s purposes. Whether the fruits were crops or livestock, in a raw or processed form (for example, bread and wine), they were to be given to the teachers and prophets. If there were no teachers or prophets to receive the gifts, then they were to go to the beggars (13:3-7).

The church was to meet together as God divinely instituted and break bread. Before breaking the bread, sins were to be confessed and those who had conflicts with others in the church were to iron out the problems (14:1-3).

The churches were also instructed through the *Didache* to appoint bishops (“overseers”) and deacons “worthy of the Lord” (15:1). This is one passage used for early dating of the *Didache*. The bishops (*episkopos*¹²) were to be chosen or appointed by the congregations, which many scholars take as an indication that the one Bishop hierarchy that later was manifested in churches was not yet in play. Of course this also has significant interplay with the idea of apostolic succession of the specific bishops as opposed to the office of bishop.

5. *Closing Apocalyptic Forewarnings and Hope (16:1-8).*

The manual closes by reminding the reader to be watchful for the Lord “for you do not know the hour in which our Lord is coming” (16:1). As the church awaits the coming of Jesus, it should continue meeting together and continue growing into maturity. The Christians are reminded that false prophets and deceivers will multiply in the last days. There is also a coming “world-deceiver” who will act Christ-like with signs and wonders. Though it does not use the title “Anti-Christ,” the description is accurate. The world-deceiver will do horrific things that are unlawful and “never have happened from the beginning of time” (16:4).

¹² Read of *episkopos* from the discussion on 1 Clement in last week’s lesson available for download at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

After the world-deceiver appears, there will be a testing/burning process for humans. Those who hold onto faith will make it through the testing. Many others will be trapped and utterly destroyed (16:5).

A resurrection of the dead and the coming of the Lord atop the clouds will follow these events! (16:7-8). So ends the *Didache*!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).*

Conversion is a true turning point in life. To “repent” indicates a changed mind and a turning away from the prior life. It is a recognition that there are two roads, two ways to live. The believer is making a choice to walk the road of faith, a road that changes life choices, just as much as it changes eternal destination.

Likewise baptism is the Christian action proceeding from a decision to place one’s faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. It is a deliberate choice assigning one publicly into the fold of believers who have made the same choice of faith.

2. *“Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven...’ (Mt. 6:9).*

The earliest Christians were taught and encouraged to pray the Lord’s Prayer three times a day. Many 21st century Christians tend to abstain from such injunctions lest we become “legalistic” or mindlessly repetitive in our actions.

I like the admonition to pray the prayer three times daily. It goes nicely with Paul’s teaching we are to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). As for legalism, I do not pray to merit God’s love or out of fear of retribution. I pray to pray! On the idea of mindless repetition, that issue is faced in prayers before meals, before sleep, and many other times. The solution to that is reflective prayer, not mindless prayer.

Consider making 2015 the year to pray the Lord’s Prayer three times daily. Join the ancient church practice and see what happens in your life! (Anybody ready to add fasting every Wednesday and Friday?)

3. *“Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.”* (1 Thess. 4:17-18).

This life is not the end. We end this life only because we are moving into an eternity with the risen Lord who will come again for his own. There can be no greater comfort! Amen, come quickly, Lord Jesus.

HOME WORK

To recap, we are memorizing 1 John this year in the English Standard Version. That amounts to two verses a week. To be current, we need to have memorized 1 John 1:1-4. This week we add 1 John 1:5-6. We provide all six verses below for your help!

1John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **3** that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. **6** If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.