

The *Didache* for Today: Encouragement from an Ancient Document

Introduction: What Is the *Didache*?

The *Didache* (pronounced di-dah-chay) was composed sometime during the first century, perhaps as early as the 40's. *It is not Holy Scripture*. The Church did not consider it as such (though it is congruent with Scripture). It's "Jewish" in its structure and thought. Matthew's Gospel seems to be its source, with much material drawn from the Sermon on the Mount. As well, many of Paul's exhortations are reflected in it. We're not certain who compiled it, where it was first written and put into use (more below). However, many of the church fathers attest to it (existing), and it can be used as a window into *how the early Christians were putting their faith into practice*. Think of the *Didache* as an apostolic church manual.

A Little Information and Background

The title of this document comes from the longer one (see below). *Didache* is Greek for "teaching." A handful of you may have heard of it; others may be wondering, "What is this? Is this one of the books some people claim should be in the Bible?" Again, no. This is not Scripture, nor does it claim to be. It was a tool Christians used when planting churches in pagan or Gentile areas. These congregations would be comprised of both newly converted Jews, as well as pagans who were now Christian. The concern from the beginning was: *how are we to live together as faithful Christians amidst a culture that is completely hostile to God's Law and the teachings of Jesus handed down by the apostles?* To better answer this, allow me to provide some history about the *Didache*'s origin based on scholarly works.

While on vacation, I was at the same location as Dr. Arthur Just, professor of New Testament at Concordia Theological Seminary (Fort Wayne), who has done some work on the *Didache*. We had a nice conversation about it (he was teaching Acts as I am on Sunday mornings), and we reflected on a 2011 interview he did on the document. The likely provenance of the *Didache* was Antioch. This was the Church's base-of-operations after many were driven out of Jerusalem due to persecution. See Acts 11:19-26. It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians. Antioch became the place where Paul and Barnabas launched their missionary journeys, first into Asia (Modern Turkey) and then Greece. Antioch then is a likely place for the *Didache*'s composition.

Whether it was written down formally at first is unclear. Much of what was handed down was oral, face-to-face instruction. See 2 Thessalonians 2:5. But over time, it's likely the oral teaching became codified by the Apostles. The best candidates for this "codification" were Saints Paul and Barnabas. The *Didache* was compiled and used before the entire New Testament was written. In fact, in this period (mid 40s), the only Gospel we believe to be written was Matthew. This is why the *Didache* refers to "his Gospel" when citing the Lord's Prayer. There was likely only one extant at that point (Luke came next, then Mark and John).

How Was This Document Used in the Ancient Church? What Was Its Function?

So what was being taught to the first disciples at the very beginning of the Church? Sometimes we forget that there were faithful Christians *before* the Bible was completed.

They of course had the Jewish Scriptures, what we call the “Old Testament.” But what was their source material for catechesis? The *Didache* reads very much like an document meant not only to teach the faith, but *how to practice this faith among those who don’t know or believe in Christ*. The Church had short creeds and hymns from the beginning. We find many examples in the pages of the NT (Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-20 for instance). They of course had the direct apostolic teaching from the apostles’ own mouths. But what if one didn’t have an apostle handy, like the Roman Church? One could turn to the *Didache*.

Which leads to a little speculation, grounded in Scripture and history. Paul’s letter to Rome, his longest and most fully-developed, was written to people he had not met. One reason for Romans’ length might be Paul wanted to make sure they had the same “face-to-face” content in written form. What if the *Didache* supplemented his teaching and provided the manual to “be the Church” in a thoroughly pagan place? Listen to what Paul says in Romans 6:17. “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to *the standard of teaching* to which you were committed.” This phrase is literally the “type of the *didache*.” Paul may be referencing an *actual* document, already in use, that would teach them how to live obediently, like disciples. We see later Paul reflect something similar. “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine (*didache*) that you have been taught; avoid them.” (Rom 16:17) When I shared my speculation with Dr. Just, he heartily agreed that this could be a likely scenario for the use of such a document, even epistolary evidence of the *Didache*’s use in Paul’s ministry.

What Does the *Didache* Give Us? How Might We Use It?

This is an interesting history lesson, as far as that goes. But is there any reason *for us* to use this manual? We of course have the full biblical canon; we have thirteen of Paul’s letters. We have the three Ecumenical Creeds (Apostles, Nicene, Athanasian). We have thousands of writings from the Church Fathers. We as Lutherans have the Small Catechism and Confessions. What could the *Didache* teach us we don’t already know?

Narrowly viewed, perhaps very little. But if we see the *Didache* as a window into what the Church was already teaching from the very beginning (45 AD!), then the *Didache* becomes a corroboration of our Bible, and more importantly, *a condensation of what it means to be a Christian in every time and place*. Sure, some things in it are culturally specific. But most are not. Most things address issues we deal with today. Prohibitions against abortion, fornication, homosexuality. Encouragement for Christian hospitality in a pagan world full of idolatry and corruption. The roots of the historic liturgy still in use. The *Didache* specifically warns of things we face, seeks to give guidance to Christians who need clear instruction, and shows a pattern of worship already in place.

We can also see how the *Didache* fleshes out what the Church was doing at the very beginning. Acts 2:42-47. Again, my emphasis added:

And they devoted themselves to *the apostles’ teaching* and *the fellowship*, to *the breaking of bread* and *the prayers*. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done *through the apostles*. And all who believed

were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The *Didache* teaches how the Church was to be the Church before the New Testament was written, in a way faithful to the Apostolic Teaching. We can pattern our lives in a similar way.

What you will read below is evidence of how the Church was practicing the very things we practice. Baptism, prayer, the Eucharist on the Lord's Day, every Sunday. Living in community together. The liturgical life of the Church being lived out. I marvel at the fact that we see in this ancient document an almost *identical version* of the Lord's Prayer that we pray! We also see much instruction on living a holy, Christian life as a follower of Jesus. We can be encouraged that the very first Christians were navigating some of the same challenges we face. In no way does the *Didache* supplant Scripture, nor overrule the Bible in cases where it speaks clearly. But it does "fill in the gaps" of the first century Church and shows us how developed the teaching of the Church already was.

Below, I provide large sections of the *Didache*. Later editors added chapter divisions and numbered sections for organizational purposes. Printed out in full in the format I'm using is about eight pages. I provide a lengthy sample to give a flavor for the whole. If you want the whole text, let me know. Enjoy!

The *Didache* of the Lord Given to the Gentiles by the Twelve Apostles

1.1 There are two ways: one is the Way of Life, the other is the Way of Death; and there is a mighty difference between these two ways.

1.2 The way of life is this: first, you shall love God who created you; second, your neighbor as yourself; all those things which you do not want to be done to you, you should not do to others.

1.3 The training about these words is this:

Bless those who curse you;

Pray for those who are your enemies;

Do fasts for those who persecute you.

What benefit is it if you love those who love you? Do not even the gentiles do that?

Rather, you must love those who hate you, and so you are not to treat the other person as your enemy.

1.4 Abstain from carnal desires.

If someone strikes your left cheek, then turn the right cheek towards him also, and you will be perfect.

If someone makes you go one mile, then go the extra mile with him.

If someone takes your coat, then let him have your jacket.

1.5 Give to everyone who asks help from you, and do not seek a return because the Father wants his generosity to be shared with everyone.

2.1 Now, the second part of the training is this:

2.2 You shall not murder.
You shall not commit adultery.
You shall not corrupt boys.
You shall not be promiscuous.
You shall not steal.
You shall not practice divination.
You shall not practice with magic potions.
You shall not kill a child in the womb nor expose infants. You shall not try to take your neighbors' goods.

2.3 You shall not perjure yourself.
You shall not act as a false witness.
You shall not speak evil of others.
You shall not hold grudges.

2.4 Do not be fickle or deceitful because the deceitful tongue is the snare of death.

2.7 You shall not hate anyone, rather you should correct some people, you should pray for other people, and yet others you should love more than your own life.

3.1 My child, run away from every kind of evil, and even from everything that looks like it.

3.3 My child, do not lust after sex, for such lust leads on to fornication. You should not be someone of obscene speech nor someone with a roaming eye, for these too lead on to fornication.

3.4 My child, you must not become someone who works at telling the future by divination, for such doings lead on to idolatry. Nor should you be involved in casting magic spells, nor an astrologer, nor one who purges curses, nor should you allow yourself to become curious about these things, for they all lead on to idolatry.

3.7 Rather, you should act with humility for the humble shall inherit the earth.

3.8 You should be patient and merciful and without guile and quiet and good and you should treasure, with respect, these commandments you have received.

3.9 Do not be haughty, nor let your heart draw you off into false pride. You should not associate with the mighty, but live with the people who are righteous and humble.

3.10 Accept as blessings whatever happens to you, being aware that nothing happens without God.

4.1 My child, remember always, day and night, the one who speaks to you the discourse of God, and honor that person as you would the Lord: for wherever the things of the Lord are spoken about, there the Lord is present.

4.2 Furthermore, every day you should seek out the company of the saints so that you can be helped by their conversation.

4.3 Do not be someone who creates factions, rather work for reconciliation between parties. You should adjudicate with justice and so not show partiality when correcting transgressions.

4.7 You must not be slow to be generous with alms, and do not grumble when you do give them, eventually you shall come to know who is the One who is the Good Paymaster who rewards all.

4.9 You should not keep back your hand from your son or daughter, but, from their youth, train them in the fear of the Lord.

4.13 You should not abandon the Lord's commands, but hold fast to what has been handed on to you without addition or subtraction.

4.14 You should acknowledge your transgressions in the church; and you should not set out on your prayers when you have a bad conscience.
This is the Way of Life.

5.1 Now, by contrast, here is the Way of Death.

First, it is full of wickedness and is cursed: it is full of murders, adulteries, lusts, acts of fornication, robberies, acts of idolatry, magic and sorcery, thefts, false accusations, sham, double dealing, fraud, arrogance, malicious intentions, stubbornness, covetousness, obscene language, jealousy, haughtiness, pride and pomposity.

5.2 This is the way of all those who persecute good people; of those who hate the truth and who love lies; of those who do not know the reward of righteousness, who are not devoted to what is good, and who do not give just judgements because they are not looking out for what is good but for what is evil. These people do not know gentleness, they lack patience, they love worthless things and pursue money. These people are without mercy for the poor, and do nothing on behalf of the oppressed.

These people do not know who was their Maker.

They are murderers of children, they are corrupters of God's image, they turn away from those in need, oppress the afflicted, are advocates of the wealthy, treat the poor unjustly. All told, they are full of sin!

Children, may you be kept safe from all this.

6.1 Take care that no one leads you astray from this Way of the Teaching, because any other teaching takes you away from God.

7.1 With regard to baptism, here is the teaching:

You are to baptize in this way. Once you have gone back over all that is in the Two Ways, you baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water.

7.3 And if you cannot get access to either [running or still water], then pour water three times on the head in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

8.1 You must not let your days of fasting be at the same time as those of the hypocrites. They fast on the second day of the sabbath and on the fifth day of the sabbath, so you should hold your fasts on the fourth day of the sabbath and on the Day of Preparation.¹

8.2 Nor should you offer prayers as the hypocrites do.

Rather, you should pray like this, just as the Lord commanded in his gospel:

Our Father, who is in the 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 as we forgive our debtors

And do not lead us in the trial

But deliver us from evil

For yours is the power and glory forever.

8.3 Say this prayer three times each day.

¹ This would be Wednesday and Friday (the day of our Lord's crucifixion).

9.1 Now this is how you should engage in giving thanks,² bless God in this way.
9.2 First, at the cup, say:

We give thanks to you, our Father,
for the holy vine of David, your servant, which you have made known to us.
Through Jesus, your servant, to you be glory forever.

9.3 Then when it comes to the broken loaf say:
We give thanks to you, our Father,
for the life and knowledge which you have made known to us.
Through Jesus, your servant, to you be glory forever.

9.4 For as the broken loaf was once scattered over the mountains and then was gathered in and became one, so may your church be gathered together into your kingdom from the very ends of the earth.

Yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.

9.5 Only let those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord eat and drink at your Eucharists. And remember what the Lord has said about this: do not give to dogs what is holy.

10.1 After you all have had enough to eat, give thanks in this way:

10.2 We give you thanks, holy Father, for your holy name which you have made to dwell in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality which you have made known to us. Through Jesus, your servant, to you be glory forever.

10.3 You are the mighty ruler of all who has created all for your name's sake, and you have given food and drink to human beings for their enjoyment so that they might give thanks to you. But to us, from your generosity, you have given spiritual food and drink, and life eternal, through your servant.

10.4 Above all things we give thanks to you because you are mighty: to you be glory forever.

10.5 Remember, Lord, your church, deliver her from evil, make her complete in your love, and gather her from the four winds into your kingdom you have prepared for her, for yours is the power and the glory forever.

10.6 May grace come and may this world pass away.

Hosanna to the God of David.

If anyone is holy, let him advance; if anyone is not, let him be converted.

Maranatha. Amen.³

11.1 Now, whoever comes to you and teaches all these things which have just been set out here, you are to welcome him.⁴

11.2 However, if a teacher has himself wandered from the right path and has begun to teach a teaching that is at odds with what is set out here, you should not listen to him. On the other hand, if his teaching promotes holiness and knowledge of the Lord, then you should welcome him as you would the Lord.

11.3 Now, turning to apostles and prophets you must treat them according to the rule of the gospel.

² A direct reference to the Eucharist, which means "giving thanks." Giving thanks=Eucharist.

³ There is warrant in seeing "chapter ten" as a sort of "eucharistic liturgy." The Words of Institution would have been employed, as we see in 1 Cor 11.

⁴ This reference is likely concerning itinerant preachers who would travel around to different churches, including the apostles themselves. Much of this would apply to pastors today.

11.7 Now if any prophet speaks in the Spirit he is not to be tested: for every sin can be forgiven but this sin cannot be forgiven.

11.8 However, not everyone who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet: only those who show that they follow the Way of the Lord. It is by the way that he lives that the true prophet can be separated from the false one.

11.9 Now if a prophet speaking in the Spirit orders a banquet, then that man should not partake in it; if he does eat the meal, then he is a false prophet.

11.10 And any prophet who teaches the truth, but does not live according to his teaching is to be considered a false prophet.

12.1 Now anyone coming in the Lord's name should be made welcome; then you can test him, using your own insight [into human nature] to see if he is genuine or a fraud.

13.1 Any true prophet who wishes to settle down among you is worthy of his food. In the same way, any true teacher is like a laborer who is worthy of his food.

14.1 On the day which is the Day of the Lord gather together for the breaking of the loaf and giving thanks. However, you should first confess your sins so that your sacrifice may be a pure one;

14.2 and do not let anyone who is having a dispute with a neighbor join until they are reconciled so that your sacrifice may not be impure.

15.1 Select for yourselves bishops and deacons: men who are worthy of the Lord, humble, not greedy for money, honest, and well tested, because these too carry out for you the service of the prophets and teachers.

15.2 Therefore, you should not despise them but treat them as your honored men like the prophets and teachers. Now when you come to correct one another, this is to be done in a composed way, and not in anger, just as you find in the gospel.

15.3 And when someone does wrong against his neighbor, let no one speak to him, indeed he is not to hear anything from you, until he repents.

15.4 Now with regard to your prayers and almsgiving, indeed all your actions, do them all in the way that you find them prescribed in our Lord's gospel.

16.1 Watch over your lives. You must not let your lamps go out, nor should you let your loins be ungirded, rather you should be ready because you do not know the hour at which our Lord is coming.

16.2 Gather together frequently and seek those things that are good for your souls. Otherwise what use will having faith over all the time of your life be to you, if at the end of time you are not made perfect.

Summary: Why Study This Ancient Christian Document?

- ❖ The Didache gives us a window into ancient Christian practices from the first century, that helps us see the world in which the Bible was written and then implemented in the early life of the Church *in the planting of churches*.
- ❖ It also shows that there is already an order, a structure, a liturgical framework to not only their worship, but catechesis and life together.
- ❖ It also provides reassurance of how much of the New Testament was already (being) composed and seen as *authoritative*.

- ❖ One may see how much of Matthew's Gospel and Paul's teaching was already being implemented in the first decade of the Church.
- ❖ It allows us to test whether our practices and patterns are in keeping with the first Christians *who had direct contact with the apostles*, in so far as they are fully congruent with the Holy Scriptures.