

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 3

The Didache

BACKGROUND

What would it be like to go to a first century church service? Edward Cutts does a good job of contrasting the first century church experience to that of a modern service in early chapters of his History of Early Christian Art (London 1893). Cutts approaches the issue from the perspective of discussing early Christian art (which in the first century would include the worship premises as well as the worship items used in the Eucharist or Lord's Supper).

By and large, New Testament churches met in homes. History, archaeology, and common sense all dictate that the homes were frequently those of the more well to do. First, this is so because the Christian slaves would not own a home in which there could be meetings. Further, the wealthier would have the larger homes that would more readily accommodate a number of believers.

In the New Testament, we read of Jesus and the Apostles meeting in the upper room in Jerusalem for the first communion (Luke 22:12). We know that the Apostles stayed together at some house in Jerusalem, most likely the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (not the Apostle John). Many people stayed there and gathered there (Acts 12:12) and many scholars surmise this was the same house where the Apostles conducted much of the church's business referenced in Acts (1:15; 6:6; 15:4-6). Understanding this room gives us insight not only into the early Jerusalem church, but also into the other house churches in that area.

The term "upper room" is *huperoon* in Greek (υπερωον) and *coenaculum* in Latin. It was a room that was on the second floor in the nicer homes. It was a large room that was typically accessible by an outdoor staircase connected to the house's courtyard. We do not know for certain where the Jerusalem upper room was, but St. Cyril of Jerusalem in 347 asserted that the upper room of the apostles was what was then known as the "Upper Church of the Apostles."¹ If he was right, then we can assume the room was about 30 by 50 feet.

¹ *Catechetical Lectures*, 16.4

This simple room would have been relatively unadorned with minimal furnishings. We can assume a table with the communion elements of bread and wine but little else. There would not be a bunch of folding chairs useful for church. In fact, Eastern congregations stand for their worship and most scholars agree that was the case for the first century church.

We can easily imagine the early Christians arriving in the upper room for worship. The men, with heads uncovered, would have likely stood on one side of the room, while the women, wearing their veils as coverings, would have stood on the other side. The Apostles likely would have presided at the table as the congregants came forward to take the communion elements. The assembly would have sung psalms, hymns, and other spiritual songs to melodies we no longer know. They would have prayed, read scripture, perhaps read apostolic writings, and listened to teaching and proclamation of God's will.

While the New Testament never sets out a "How To" manual for churches beyond 1 Cor. 14, we do have other writings that give us a good indication of the practices of the early church. One such document is the *first century document called the Didache* (pronounced *di-da-kay*).

Scholars date the *Didache* between 50 A.D. and 100 A.D. The reason for the early dates is 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 to 75 A.D. time range.

Regardless of the dating disputes, scholars 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.

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).

In fact, if the book is truly a mentoring guide for the newly (most likely Gentile) converted to bring their lives into greater holiness, it is interesting to read the book not only for insight into early Christianity, but also to contrast it to our ways of discipling and mentoring new Christians today.

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

Most scholars also believe that the *Didache* was initially an oral teaching later reduced to writing. Originally, the *Didache* had no title. It was merely the oral teaching for new Christians and new Christian communities.² The written copy was at some point titled, “The Training of the Lord Through the Twelve Apostles to the Gentiles.”³ “Training” is the Greek word “*didache*,” hence, the reason for the shortened title scholars give the book today.

Were the twelve apostles the original oral source of the written *Didache* as the title suggests? No one knows⁴. Certainly, much of the teaching in the *Didache* is dead-on accurate from a biblical perspective. Still, some of the teaching in the *Didache* goes beyond the express content of our New Testament.

² 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 all their possessions and holding everything in common, 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. 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.

³ We have only one complete manuscript of the *Didache* and it dates from the start of the eleventh century. It was discovered in 1873 in quite dramatic fashion. The manuscript has two titles, a long one and a short one. The long one is given above. The short one is merely, “Training of the Twelve Disciples.” Because both begin with *didache* (“training” or “teaching”), most scholars and English versions merely carry the title *Didache*.

⁴ We do know that at times the Apostles wrote, they would have rather been speaking in person (1 Thess. 2:17-3:5). We also know that at times, there were writings because it was preferred over oral communication! (2 Cor. 2:1-4)

Someone wishing to study the *Didache* can find a number of resources. Aaron Milavec recently published a compact, yet relatively new, translation and commentary, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis and Commentary* (Michael Glazier Books 2004).⁵

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 (page 43) 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. 1. *Training Program in the Way of Life (1:1-6:2)*

The *Didache* begins by setting out a choice of two roads in front of us: the way of life and the way 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.”) (1.1-1.2).

⁵ This is a thin paperback, not to be confused with his 1,000 page longer treatment published by Paulist Press in 2003!

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 bad of us. Next, we are to pray for our enemies, *etc.*

Clearly reflecting the teaching of Jesus, these passages Matthew recorded in the 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 used for mentoring in day-to-day life.

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

Christians are to abstain from fleshly desires that are sinful. Should someone seek our cloak, we give them our tunic. When someone borrows something of ours, we give it without expecting 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 one trains by telling what to do. Chapter two 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” 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 we are not to “hold grudges” or “speak badly” of anyone (2:3).

We are not to covet, be greedy, be a hypocrite, be “bad-mannered”⁷ or arrogant. Neither should we hate anyone, even though some we will reprove (2:6-7).

The Sermon on the Mount continues to be echoed in the third chapter of the *Didache*. We are 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 the love of money lead to theft; and grumbling and self-pleasing leading to blasphemy (3:4-6). Instead, we should “be gentle since the gentle will inherit the earth” (3:7).⁸

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!

⁸ The Greek used in the *Didache* for “gentle” is *πραυς* (*praus*). This is a different form of the same word (*πραεις*) Matthew used which is translated “blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

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 very much applicable to adult decision makers.

Baptism is an immersion in the name of the “Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit⁹” (7:1). It is to occur in flowing water. If flowing water is not available, then immersion should take place in still water, and there is 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 be poured three times, once in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (7:3).

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).

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.

In chapter 8, the Lord's Prayer is set out. The *Didache* teaches that the trainees are to pray the Lord's Prayer three times daily. The prayer reads very closely to that in Matthew:

Our Father, the [one] in heaven, your name be made holy, your kingdom come, your will be born upon earth as in heaven, give us this day our bread [that is] coming and forgive us our debt as we likewise forgive our debtors, and do not lead us into the trial but deliver us from evil because yours is the power and the glory forever. (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).

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. Moreover, "camping" (taking your tent and sleeping gear) was most common.

Now with the church, you have an independent need from that of commerce or the governmental functions for traveling and visiting. 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).

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 “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 and deacons “worthy of the Lord.” Scholars differ on whether this amounts to an official Bishop in the role that the church experiences the rise of a monarchical bishopric over the various churches in the coming century (15:1).

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 not termed the “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).

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. Salvation is a real turning point in life.
2. What happens afterwards is worthy of our best teaching and efforts.
3. Christ has taught us God's heart in his law. It applies to all people of all time.
4. Christ is coming again and the church of each age should get and stay ready!