

THE TEACHING OF THE 12



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12

believing & practicing
the primitive christianity
of the ancient didache
community

tony jones



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The Teaching of the Twelve: Believing and Practicing the Primitive Christianity of the Ancient Didache Community

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Dedicated to Doug and Sarah Jones,

who trained me up in the way of the Lord

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preface

This has not been an easy book to write. For over a year I've read the *Didache*, alone, in groups, and with various online communities. I've read commentaries on it, and I've had extended conversations with New Testament scholars, church historians, and a couple of truck drivers. And, much to the chagrin of my longsuffering friends at Paraclete Press, I am long overdue at handing in the manuscript.

This is a fascinating little book, the *Didache*. And in the process of unpacking its history, the teaching therein exhibits extraordinary relevance to our own contemporary situation. When it comes to study, I'm an amateur polymath—I like the history, the theology, and the biblical study that the *Didache* conjures. So you'll find some of each of that in this book.

Far too often, academic work allows us to stay one (or more!) steps removed from our subject. Indeed, we're allowed and even taught to *objectify* the item of our study, to hold it at arm's distance. The personal implications of the study are rarely considered, except by the wizened emeritus professor, reflecting on a career well spent. But, growing up in the faith, the writers I admired most were Henri Nouwen and Frederick Buechner, men who combined theological acumen, pastoral experience, and deep introspection to produce beautiful, meaningful books on the Christian life.

It's in the shadows of these great writers, and others I've come to admire more recently (Phyllis Tickle and Barbara Brown Taylor among them), that I attempt to walk with this first-century text and community known as the Didache in *The Teaching of the Twelve*. A mysterious document—a glimpse into the most primitive Christianity—the Didache has challenged me for months now. I pray this book does honor to the anonymous Christ-followers who first penned this handbook of faith.

I offer my gratitude and thanks to my many friends at Paraclete Press and the Community of Jesus, primarily to Jon Sweeney and Pamela Jordan. Thanks to my agent, Kathy Helmers, for helping me map a literary trajectory. Thanks to Tim Owens for letting me read his Th.M. thesis on the Didache. And thanks to the many folks in my own community, Solomon's Porch, for thinking and praying through the Didache with me.

Special thanks are due to the Cymbrogi. In a way, the Didache community of the late first or early second century were pre-church. That is, they were gathering and deciding how to live in the Jesus Way before there really was any formal church structure as we know it today. While writing my last book, I met a small band of folks in rural Missouri who can only be considered post-church. Calling themselves the Cymbrogi—Celtic for “Companions of the

Heart"—they seek to live out a Christian community that is free of many of the trappings of modern church. When I told one of their number, whom we all call Trucker Frank, that I was writing a book on the Didache, he told me that the Cymbrogi had read the Didache together in their quest for a new perspective on faith—a new perspective from an ancient document. In fact, Frank himself had undertaken a thorough historical study of the text. I asked if they might journey through the book again with me, as I wrote, and they agreed. You will see more from them in coming pages, and read more about their community of faith in chapter 3. This book is immensely richer as a result of their partnership.

My heartfelt thanks to my children, too, whom I love more than life itself.

And, to my parents, to whom this book is dedicated:
I love you.

—Tony Jones

THE TEACHING OF THE 12



1

The Most Important Book You've Never Heard Of

The Didache is the most important book you've never heard of.

In short, this strange, short handbook is a guide to living the Jesus Way in a very early Christian community. Who exactly wrote it, we're not sure. And when it was authored, we also don't quite know.

But what we can surmise is that the Didache (DID-ah-kay) records for us a most primitive Christianity, written about the same time as the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and before the Gospel of John; between the birth of the church (at Pentecost) and the official imprimatur of the emperor on the church (with the Edict of Milan in AD 313). Maybe most interestingly, the Didache records a Christianity seemingly unfamiliar with the theology and writings of the Apostle Paul.

This puts the Didache in an elite company. We have very few documents from the very early days of the church—the short era between the apostolic age, known to us from the biblical letters of Paul, Peter, John, and Hebrews, and the

era of the ante-Nicene fathers, those churchmen such as Tertullian and Origen whose work predated the conversion of the emperor Constantine (AD 313) and the watershed Council of Nicaea (AD 325). What documents we *do* have from the turning of the first century of the common era into the second are primarily apocryphal, Gnostic writings, long since rejected as not reflective of the life of the burgeoning orthodox Christian church. Ultimately, no other work outside of the Bible is as early as the Didache, making it a unique text in the history of Christianity.

The early Christians were a small, if growing, band of believers, spreading across the Roman Empire. A blend of educated and uneducated, female and male, poor and rich, slaves and free, Jew and Gentile, just as the Apostle Paul had hoped, they had to keep their religion under wraps.

One of the elements that had contributed to the unprecedented Pax Romana—a period of relative peace in the empire, between 27 BC and AD 180—was that all religions were allowed, with one caveat: no matter one's religion, everyone in the empire still needed to pay the annual poll tax and declare the divinity of the Caesar. Both Jews and the new Christians chafed under the imperial cult, being that they were strident monotheists—paying the tax was one thing, but stating that the emperor was divine was beyond galling to them.

As a result of this, the burgeoning Christian church tried not to attract too much attention to themselves, though they did suffer several persecutions as various emperors blamed them for the troubles of the empire. Thus, outside of the canon of the New Testament, few documents have survived from this era of the early church. Seminarians often hear of these few in the first week of early church history class: *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *The Epistles of Clement of Rome*, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, *The Apocalypse of Peter*, and the Didache.

But, although it stands in this august company, the Didache receives far less attention than any of the books of the New Testament, simply for the fact that it is not considered sacred by the church. When the New Testament canon was closed, several centuries after Jesus' life, the books that made it into the Bible were destined for a readership in the billions, and those that were not were relegated to dusty seminary libraries—a cliché that is actually true of the Didache. As such, it remains largely unknown to Christians who have not studied the early church.

Yet it is—and I hope you will agree—a treatise that deserves a much wider readership.

The Long, Strange Journey of the Didache

In 1873, a forty-year-old archbishop was browsing through the library at the Greek Convent in the massive Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Istanbul when he came across a little book of 120 pages of parchment and a leather cover. In a library full of dusty, ancient texts, the book seemed unexceptional. Archbishop Philotheos Brynnios took the book with him back to his office with the intent to figure out what, exactly, it was, but his ecclesial duties pressed in on him, and when he told other scholars of his find, they, too, were unimpressed. It was several years before he turned his attention again to the book, and looking closely at it, he realized that he had something incredible in his hands.

What lay there on the archbishop's desk was an unknown and forgotten treasure of the earliest Christians, a manual for living used by the generation of Jesus followers immediately after the apostles. Modern scholars knew that it had once existed, for the Didache is mentioned in other ancient texts. Origen (AD 185–254) and Athanasius (AD 293–373) both wrote that it should not be included in the Bible, for it was just too local in its content, while other church fathers argued for its inclusion. Fifteen centuries later, scholars had resigned themselves to the fact that the Didache, like so many other ancient treasures, had been lost for good.

In 1882, nine years after it was discovered, another scholar, Adam Krawutzcky, was studying another ancient text, and

it became clear to him—and he subsequently proved—that the text he was studying, written around AD 400, was in fact based on the little book discovered by the archbishop.

Now they knew that they had something special on their hands, and they rushed it to publication. The discovery of the Didache was an overnight sensation on both sides of the Atlantic; the day it was released, it sold over five thousand copies in New York City alone. Some hailed it as a lost treasure, while naysayers considered it a modern forgery, saying that it was not as authentic as the contemporaneously discovered Epistle of Barnabas. The former group prevailed, however, and the Didache is now unanimously considered one of the most important documents in the history of Christianity.

What Is It?

The leatherbound book that Archbishop Brynnios found in 1873 had been produced 817 years earlier, for it was signed by a long-forgotten monk, "Leon, scribe and sinner, 11 June 1056." As was common in the Middle Ages, many monks spent their days copying by hand the theological and philosophical treatises of the ancient world, and Brother Leon's mundane obedience produced a text that found its way onto the shelf of a monastery library and sat there, undiscovered, for eight centuries.

The whole text is just 2,190 words in Greek—that's less than half the length of the shortest of the four Gospels. It begins with a title, "Didache of the Twelve Apostles," and subtitle, "Didache of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles to the Gentiles."

The word *didache* is Greek and means "teaching." Contemporary words like *didactic* and *doctrine* come from the same root. Although today we capitalize it as the title of a book, the original manuscript, which we don't have, wouldn't have had any capital letters. In fact, it wouldn't have had any punctuation or spaces between words.

Various forms of the word *didache* are used a couple dozen times in the New Testament, often like in this verse in Matthew: "And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching." In fact, this is the most common use of *didache* in the New Testament, referring to Jesus' teaching. In the Didache, Jesus is rarely mentioned, and *didache* lacks the pronoun *his* and thus is best translated as "the teaching." But the Didache does seem to assume throughout that the reader understands that Jesus is the progenitor of the teaching.

The Didache can be segmented in several ways. Some scholars see four natural sections, while others see six, and yet others see five. Although some scholars think of the Didache as the work of a single author, the consensus

is that the "didachist" was more of an editor, stitching together four previous documents, a common practice in the ancient world, and not considered plagiarism by our modern standards. Those four sections are: the moral teaching drawn from a Jewish document known as "The Two Ways" (chapters 1–6); a liturgical treatise (chapters 7–10); a church organization treatise (chapters 11–15); and an apocalyptic section (chapter 16).

Here are the four sections in more detail:

1. Training in the Way of Life (1:1–6:2). Beginning with the now-famous and stark line, "There are two ways, one of life and one of death! and there is a great difference between the two ways," the opening section of the Didache is also the longest. This section is a detailed account of how a catechumen (or convert) to Christianity is to live and behave prior to her or his baptism. This section of the Didache has also been found as a fragment in other ancient documents, and most scholars agree that it is based on an earlier Jewish document.

2. The Rhythms of Community Life (6:3–11:2). In the second section, the Didache community takes up the various regulations for followers of the Way after they are baptized and have joined the church. Rules for eating,

baptizing, fasting, praying, and sharing the Lord's Supper are all addressed.

3. Visitors Welcome (11:3–15:4). The third section of the Didache addresses various regulations regarding visitors to the community. Most of the time is spent on wandering prophets and teachers who come with wisdom, and occasionally with earthly requests for food and money. While hospitality is vaunted, limits are also imposed. Next, the community again addresses the Eucharist, further exhorting community members to cleanse both their hands and their consciences prior to partaking. The criteria for choosing community leaders is also explicated.

4. The End Is Nigh (16:1–8). Finally, as with the New Testament, the Didache concludes with an apocalyptic section. The community is warned to prepare for the end of time, and they're told the signs that will indicate the end.

It's as though the members of the Didache community took several short pamphlets on the Christian life and bound them together for use as a handbook. More specifically, it can be considered a "rule of life" for the Didache community. More commonly known from its later use in monastic communities (for instance, with the Benedictines), a rule of

life is a book of precepts used by all who submit themselves to some form of community. In other words, the Didache is fundamentally *practical*. And just as it guided the earliest Christians in their daily practice of faith, it is now attracting the attention of many who desire to learn from the earliest followers of Jesus about their way of life. For the first 150 years since the Didache's rediscovery, it has been primarily the purview of academics. But the time has come for this ancient document to inspire its intended audience: those starting out in their faith.

Drawing primarily from Jewish-Christian sources, the Didache seems to be particularly for non-Jews (Gentiles) and Hellenized Jews who had converted to Christianity and were joining the community of Jewish-Christians. The text—particularly chapters 1–5 (“The Two Ways”)—was circulated fairly widely in the early church, leading to its many references in other ancient documents. But, as Christianity grew and became the dominant religion in the empire, the Didache's popularity waned. For one thing, the Didache contains no mention of clergy or priesthood, nor does it grant bishops ecclesiastical authority, so it wouldn't have been a very popular book for the burgeoning church hierarchy in the fourth and fifth centuries. Secondly, the Didache's version of the Lord's Supper liturgy is dramatically different than that of Paul's direction in 1 Corinthians; in the

Didache, there is no mention of Jesus' death on the cross as the reason for Communion, and the traditional order of bread and cup is reversed, putting it at odds with even the earliest liturgies of the church.

Finally, the Didache is a book entirely consumed with a Christianity that is both everyday and ordinary. It lacks Paul's interest in complex doctrine and reflects none of the early church's predilection for proclaiming the heavenly titles and deeds of Christ. The cosmic Christ of John's Gospel is nowhere to be found in the Didache, nor are the apostolic miracles found in the Acts of the Apostles. Instead, it is a book interested in other simpler things: how to know right from wrong, how to baptize one another, and how to treat visiting preachers.

Our last known reference to the Didache in other Christian writings comes from Patriarch Nicephoros of Constantinople. He listed it among a list of apocryphal books. That was in the 820s.

After that, the Didache was silent for over one thousand years.

When Was It Written? And By Whom?

The date and author of the Didache have been debated for years. When it was first rediscovered, most experts thought it surely must have come from the late second,

or even early third, century. But over time, that opinion has changed considerably. Currently, there are two major camps: one group of scholars dates the Didache at AD 110–130; the other group dates it between AD 50 and 70. For the sake of comparison, most New Testament scholars date the letters of Paul in the 50s, the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) between 60 and 110, and the Gospel of John around 110.

The reasons for this early date are various, but they mainly have to do with both the context and the style of writing in the Didache. Further, the authors seemingly had no familiarity with either the letters of Paul or with John's Gospel, which would be increasingly unlikely in the second century. In the end, the Didache is, as I have said, the record of a primitive Christianity, a glimpse into the lives of some of the earliest followers of Jesus. So let's put it this way: portions of the Didache were written a couple of decades after Jesus' crucifixion, and in the version we have it, the book was compiled very early in the second century.

Where these Jesus followers lived is even more mysterious. Some think Egypt, since that's where several of the earliest manuscripts have been found. Others argue for Syria, based on the writing style, the allusions to mountains and hills, and the lack of running water mentioned in the

baptismal regulations. Still others say that Palestine, or the Syria-Palestine, border is most likely due to the Didache's similarities with the Gospel of Matthew. In fact, each of the New Testament Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—was written to a particular geographical and ethnic audience, and has theological distinctives that betray that audience. In this sense, the Didache is no different.

We can say with relative confidence that the Didache was used by a community of Christians who lived in a relatively rural area, and who were a mixture of Jews and Gentiles who had converted to the Way of Jesus. Although the title, which was probably added later, notes that this book contains the teaching of the twelve apostles, that doesn't mean they authored it. It was common practice in the ancient world to attribute a work to an author or authors who would lend credibility to the document. So instead of being authored by the apostles, the Didache is a distillation of their teachings, the teachings of the earliest church.

Some Notes for Reading

Most likely, you'll be reminded of the Bible when you start to read the Didache—specifically, it will remind you of Matthew's Gospel (we'll talk about this more in chapter 3). When possible, try to free yourself from the

preconceptions that you carry about the Bible, and try to remind yourself that the Didache is a similar, but different, kind of document.

The first suggestion I have for you is to *read slowly*. From the earliest days of Christianity, the process of “sacred reading” (*lectio divina*) has been practiced by Jesus followers. I encourage you to try this with the following chapter, which houses the entire text of the Didache. Read it at about half the speed that you’ve read this chapter. If you find your mind wandering, gently stop, regain your concentration, and go back to reading.

Second, remember to whom the Didache was written, and try to read it from their perspective. To the Didache’s original readers, Jesus’ death and resurrection was within recent history—even memory. They were converts to Christianity, either from Judaism or from Roman paganism. And, most significantly, remember that those readers didn’t have the Bible as we know it; they knew the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), but much of the New Testament had not yet been written—the stories that we know from the New Testament, they knew because they had been passed by word of mouth from town to town. At most, they had read or heard the Gospels of Matthew and Luke; more likely, they had heard stories from those Gospels before those Gospels were finally composed.

Finally, don't get hung up on the chapter and verse numbers and the subtitles. They've been added to help us as modern readers, but they weren't in the original document. If you find them helpful, use them. If you find them an annoyance, ignore them.

I've used indentations and extra spaces to indicate my thoughts of how best to read the Didache and to notify the reader about sections that most likely went together originally. And I've bracketed two verses (4:1 and 10:7) that I consider later additions to the text.

But Most Important . . .

What you are about to read is an unparalleled glimpse into the earliest Christianity. As I said, it may immediately remind you of a part of the Bible, and you may be tempted to treat it as passé for that reason. But don't. That would be a mistake.

For the Didache offers something of an alternative to what many know of Christianity. The real power of the Didache is its ability to remind us what is truly important in Christianity: showing the love of Jesus to the world.

The people who wrote and compiled the Didache were just figuring this out. They must have been confused, and they were probably scared. They had little to go on other than

some stories about Jesus, maybe a letter or two from a nearby church, and a fresh experience of God's liberating Spirit.

At first, it might be difficult to see this in the *Didache*. You might instead see a pretty simple handbook that seems similar to the Bible. But you've got to read between the lines a bit and imagine what was really going on in those days as Christianity spread, slowly and illegally, across the empire. And you may have to temporarily set aside some patterns and traditions that Christianity has picked up in the two millennia between the *Didache* and today. Of course, that's not easy, because ours is the only Christianity that we know.

But, in the end, we have a lot to learn from those long-departed, early saints of the church—they call out to us from a little desert village outside of Antioch, in the late first century. They have something important to tell us, if only we will listen.

Thoughts from Trucker Frank

At the end of each chapter, I'll recount a pertinent portion of my conversation with Trucker Frank about how he and the Cymbrogi have applied the *Didache* to their own community.

In the Cymbrogi, "Everyone has grown up with modern interpretations," Frank told me. They'd been reared in

families and churches where words like *church* and *pastor* had definite meanings, so when they ran across words like that in the Bible or in their communities of faith, they naturally assented to the conventional meanings of those words. "When we discovered the Didache," Frank said, "we realized that these were new things in that day. Everything was new to them, and the Didache captured our desire to get back to a Christianity without the doctrines and creeds." Frank continued, "All the people in the Didache community had was this person Jesus who had lived an extraordinary life and died an extraordinary death. That's all they had." What I think Frank meant was that, although the people in the Didache community were likely versed in Jewish theology and Greek philosophy, they didn't have much Christian theology yet. What they had, instead, was a powerful, life-altering experience with the Lord Jesus. They were left trying to figure out what it meant to live a life worthy of that Lord, and the Didache is their attempt to do just that.

Questions for Reflection, Study, and Discussion

1. The Cymbrogi appreciate the early date of the Didache and feel that it adds to their understanding of the Bible. Is it a new idea to you that there were other texts written at the same time as the New Testament books that weren't

included in the New Testament? How does that change your understanding of the New Testament? How does the early date of the Didache affect your perception of the book? Does it make you think it's particularly important?

2. Think of a book or two that altered your perception of God and/or Jesus? What was it about that book that affected you?
3. When you turn the page, you'll begin reading the Didache, maybe for the first time. Before you dive into it, what are your thoughts, apprehensions, and expectations?

