

The Didache

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The Life and Thought of the Christian Church: Beginnings to about 1500 A.D.

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The Didache is possibly one of the oldest patristic documents the Christian church has benefit of. The author (or authors) and place of origin of this ancient text are unknown but many speculate it might have originated in Syria or possibly Egypt. Uncertainty over authorship and origin have complicated the dating of the document with scholars disagreeing over whether it belongs to the close of the first century or the beginning of the second. Its authority in the early church was evident as numerous early fathers refer to the Didache, with some prescribing its reading to new converts. Ambiguity over its authorship, origin, and date do not detract from the historical value and insights into the first century church this early essay provides.

The full title of the Didache is “The Lord’s Teaching to the Heathen by the Twelve Apostles.” Despite this ambitious title, the Didache (meaning “the Teaching”) is in fact a rather brief book containing sixteen chapters. The content of the teaching consists of two distinctive parts, each containing noticeable subsections. The first segment is educational and appears to be aimed at new Gentile believers; containing the instruction of the “two ways,” with subsections on the way of life and the way of death. The second portion is essentially a church manual, providing practical insight for these new believers as to what to expect in worship, instructions regarding leadership, and teaching concerning the second coming of the Lord.

The teaching on the “two ways” sets down Christian moral ideals by contrast with the evils of paganism. The majority of the section emphasizes the positive attributes of

the Christian life with a very short portion devoted to “the way of death.” New converts (referred to as “my child”) are commanded to love God and their neighbor and to refrain from treating people in ways you would not want to be treated. Beyond these overarching guidelines, the author collects and recites numerous exemplary scriptural maxims from Old Testament passages, contemporary New Testament documents, and noncanonical sources. The much shorter “way of death” culminates with the admonishment to avoid being led astray and to do the best one can to “bear the Lord’s full yoke.”

And at the start of chapter six the Didache changes direction in its content. Here begins a set of instructions concerning food, baptism, fasting, prayer and the Eucharist. While these instructions are useful for leaders in the church, they provide a framework of expectation for new converts who may not be familiar with the practices of their new faith. This section provides details as specific as the particular verbiage to use as well as how many times to pray each day. Following these particulars, the teaching provides instruction on how to greet and respond to itinerant as well as local leadership. These sections detail evaluation of leadership (false versus genuine), as well as guidelines on providing for the physical needs. The second part of the Didache closes with a short section calling Christians to prepare for the coming of the Lord, but remaining “ready” for his imminent return, and guarding against false prophets.

Although the exact date of the Didache is unknown, the practices and teachings it contains can clearly be placed in the context of the first century church. The document divulges transition in the early church from a Jewish cult to a distinct Christian religion as well as responses to some of the challenges posed by this transition. As evident in the

title, this manual was intended for gentile converts to the Christian faith, yet many of its recitations are derived from distinctly Jewish documents and motifs (i.e. the “two ways”). These Jewish notions combined with early Christian traditions are indicative of the state of flux the early church was in. As the first century church began to grow transculturally, the introduction of non Jewish converts with their Hellenistic worldview required a response. These Gentiles were not familiar with the ethos and teachings Christianity had abducted from Judaism. Documents such as the Didache provided rudimentary instruction in these themes on which Christianity based its beginnings. Moral instruction of the “heathen” assisted Christianity in promulgating its unique faith, becoming an agent of growth, as Christians living their lives with new moral certitude shared their faith with others.

As any institution grows, so does its requirement for organization. Christianity’s expansion both numerically and geographically placed demands on the fledgling faith. As the number of converts multiplied, geographic communities sprouted churches. In the beginning most of these churches were supplied with itinerant leadership, made possible through the considerable transportation system of the Roman Empire. The Didache provides evidence of an early organization of local leadership, along with instructions on how to deal with the increasing number of itinerant prophets and teachers. The early Church was in a period of initial organization, beginning weekly meetings, instituting sacraments, and formalizing their faith. All of these elements are evident in “the Teaching.”

It is evident that the Didache addressed many of the issues confronting the early church. In its effort to address the ignorance of the new convert, and in establishing

elementary organizational norms, the document was so practically instructive that it could be perceived as legalistic and works orientated. Countering this perspective is the redeeming verse 6:2, “If you can bear the Lord’s full yoke, you will be perfect. But if you cannot, then do what you can.” Although many of the early apostolic fathers did not regard the Didache as worthy of canonical status, several suggested its reading for further instruction. While not part of the canon “The Teaching” does provide valuable tradition regarding the sacraments for the contemporary Church to ponder. Many of the recitations regarding behavior are already known to us, but the insights pertaining to leadership are refreshing. When distilled, the leadership perspective the Didache takes is that leaders should “walk their talk” and avoid financial motivation in their ministry. The Didache remains an ancient document with a timely message for those involved in professional ministry in our modern western world.