

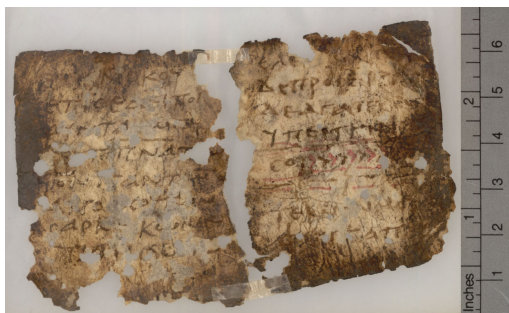
“May your church be gathered together”

Week 4: Introduction to the *Didache*

All churches have written documents that govern their polity, guide their worship life and express their faith such as constitutions, charters, guidelines and by-laws. They are essential to stating the mission, core beliefs and practice of Christian public ministry and fellowship. It may come as a surprise that such documents are not simply a modern way of guiding life in the Spirit, but have been around since the earliest Christians sought to define their life together.

This week our series on the *Apostolic Fathers* continues with an anonymous writing known as the *Didache*, meaning “the teaching.” This writing is the oldest surviving written church order, a document meant to lead the ethical, liturgical and catechetical life of a church. It contains sixteen brief chapters on the teachings of Jesus, liturgical prayers, and instructions on Christian ministry. This text is the oldest document outside of the New Testament, meant to govern Christian worship and communal life.

Few manuscript discoveries have created the sensation that the *Didache* has since it was discovered by Archbishop Philotheos Bryennios, metropolitan of Nicomedia, in 1873 at the library of the Patriarch of Jerusalem in Constantinople. Bryennios discovered the text in a Greek manuscript named Codex Hierosolymitanus (dated 1056), which contains is the only surviving complete text of the *Didache*. This text is also partially preserved in two 4th century papyri fragments found among the Egyptian Oxyrhynchus Papyri, and in a 5th century Coptic papyrus text in the British Museum. The *Didache* is also reproduced in Book 7 of the *Apostolic*



Constitutions, a fourth century church order, as well as paraphrased in an ancient Ethiopian church order. Though it is thought to be a church order for an early Christian community in Syria or Egypt, it is impossible to know for certain the original community for which it was written. (*The image to the left: The Didache Oxyrhynchus papyrus fragment, lines 2:7b– 3:2a (Sackler Library, Oxford).*)

Though the *Didache* was lost from the fourth century until its rediscovery in 1873, it remained known through writings of early church theologians. The text likely circulated in Egypt and was known to Clement of Alexandria, to Athanasius who said it was to be read in catechesis, to Didymus the Blind who considered it scripture, and to Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.25) as a non-canonical writing “known to most of the writers of the church.”

The rediscovery of the *Didache* opens a view onto early Christian thought and liturgy around the years 70 to 110. Indeed, the *Didache* is older than many of the writings of the New Testament and was read alongside New Testament writings in the early church. The text of the *Didache* restates the teachings of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, and also contains Eucharistic prayers, which display a close connection to early Jewish-Christian liturgical practice.

The poetic language of the *Didache* has come down to us today via modern hymnody. For example, the hymn “*As the Grains of Wheat*” (ELW #465) contains words from one of the Eucharistic prayers in this church order (the *Didache* 9.4):

“As the grains of wheat once scattered on the hill were

gathered into one to become our bread; so may all your people
from all ends of earth be gathered into one in you.”

The ancient writer(s) of the *Didache* would no doubt be pleased to know that their words continue to be sung during Christian worship today, inspiring our imagination and strengthening our faith in Christ, who gathers his body together from the ends of the earth.

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Excerpts from the *Didache*:

(Full title): “*The Teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles (Nations) by the Twelve Apostles.*”

[1] There are two ways (paths), one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways. [2] Now this is the way of life: first, “you shall love God who made you”; second, “your neighbor as yourself”; and “whatever you do not wish to happen to you, do not do to another.” [3] The teaching of these words is this: “Bless those who curse you,” “pray for your enemies,” and “fast for those who persecute you.” “For what credit is it, if you love those who love you? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” But you must love those who hate you,” and you will not have an enemy. Abstain from physical and bodily cravings. “If someone gives you a blow on your right cheek, turn to him the other as well,” and you will be perfect. If someone “forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles”; “if someone takes your cloak, give him your tunic also”; “if someone takes from you what belongs to you, do not demand it back,” for you cannot do so. “Give to everyone who asks you, and do not demand it back,” for the Father wants something from his own gifts to be given to everyone. Blessed is the one who gives according to the command, for such a person is innocent...

[5] But the way of death is this: first of all, it is evil and completely cursed; murderers, adulteries, lusts, fornications, thefts, idolatries, magic arts, sorcerers, robberies, false testimonies, hypocrisy, duplicity, deceit, arrogance, malice, stubbornness, greed, foul speech, jealousy, audacity, pride, boastfulness. It is the way of persecutors of good people, of those hating truth, loving a lie, not knowing the reward of righteousness, not adhering to what is good or to righteous judgment, being on alert not for what is good but for what is evil, from whom gentleness and patience are far away, loving worthless things, pursuing reward, having no mercy for the poor, not working on behalf of the oppressed, not knowing him who made them, murderers of children, corrupters of God’s creation, turning away from someone in need, oppressing the afflicted, advocates of the wealthy, lawless judges of the poor, utterly sinful. May you be delivered, children, from all these things! ...

[7] Now concerning baptism, baptize as follows: after you have reviewed all these things [with those to be baptized], baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in running [literally “living”] water. But if you have no running water, then baptize in some other water; and if you are not able to baptize in cold water then do so in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” And before the baptism, let the one baptizing and the one who is to be baptized fast, as well as any others who are able. Also, you must instruct the one who is to be baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand...

[9] Now concerning the Eucharist, give thanks as follows. First concerning the cup:

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

And concerning the broken bread:

We give you thanks, our Father, for the life and knowledge
which you have made known to us through Jesus, your servant;
to you be the glory forever.

Just as the broken bread was scattered upon the mountains
and then was gathered together and became one,
so may your church be gathered together from the
ends of the earth into your kingdom; for yours is the glory
and the power through Jesus Christ forever.

But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized into the name
of the Lord...

[14] On the Lord's own day gather together and break bread and give thanks, having first
confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one who has a quarrel with a
companion join you until they have been reconciled, so that your sacrifice may not be defiled.
For this is the sacrifice concerning which the Lord said, "In every place and time offer me a
pure sacrifice, for I am a great king, says the Lord, and my name is marvelous among the
nations." ...

[15] Therefore appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are
humble and not avaricious and true and approved, for they too carry out for you the ministry of
the prophets and teachers. You must not, therefore, despise them, for they are your honored men,
along with the prophets and teachers. Furthermore, correct one another, not in anger but in
peace, as you find in the Gospel; and if anyone wrongs his neighbor, let no one speak to him,
nor let him hear a word from you, until he repents. As for your prayers and acts of charity and
all your actions, do them all just as you find it in the Gospel of the Lord.

[16] "Watch" over your life: "do not let your lamps go out, and do not be unprepared, but be
ready, for you do not know the hour when our Lord is coming." Gather together frequently,
seeking the things that benefit your souls, for all the time you have believed will be of no use to
you if you are not found perfect in the last time. For in the last days the false prophets and
corrupters will abound, and the sheep will be turned into wolves, and love will be turned into
hate. For as lawlessness increases, they will hate and persecute and betray one another... And
"then there will appear the signs" of the truth: first the sign of an opening in heaven, then the
sign of the sound of a trumpet, and third, the resurrection the dead – but not of all; rather, as it
has been said, "The Lord will come, and all his saints with him." Then the world "will see the
Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven." (from *The Apostolic Fathers*. Trans. Lightfoot &
Harmer, Ed. by Michael W. Holmes, 2nd edition, 1989).

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Meditation

Early Christians called themselves "the Way," a name that evokes the Jewish "*halakhah*" the
"way of life" contained in the Torah, a name that also reminds us of Jesus' words, "*I am the way,
the truth and the life*" (John 14:6). Early Christian thought and practice was close to this "way of
life," close to the Jewishness of Jesus and his disciples.

Therefore, it is natural that the *Didache* should begin with the words, "There are two ways,
one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways."
Reminiscent of Psalm 1, this description of two ways continues to resonate amidst today's
postmodern world and people seeking a way of navigating the world with its noise, competing

voices and brokenness. The way of Jesus leads to life. This simple but profound view of the human journey has not changed since the time of the *Didache* and ancient Christians who experienced new life and creation in Jesus risen and alive.

Over our journey of the past fourteen months, it seems we have traveled, or been forced to travel, on a way we were ill-prepared to travel upon. The pandemic has scattered us from one another, from families and communal bonds that have given meaning to our lives. Though we speak of “reopening,” we also know that we have not yet returned to a familiarity reminiscent of the past, nor arrived at a future destination with its emerging newness. If anything, our insistence that we are “getting past this” highlights our continued distance from one another, our ongoing transition toward something new, and our great need of one another each day.

The early church, too, was scattered upon the Middle Eastern hillsides, from Jerusalem to Antioch, and further west into Egypt and North Africa. Though they were buffeted by winds of change and persecuted by the world, our Christian forbears walked with faith and hope because they knew that Jesus Christ also journeyed with them. The words of their Eucharistic prayer have come down to us, reflecting the Way upon which they walked and hoped:

Just as the broken bread was scattered upon the mountains
and then was gathered together and became one,
so may your church be gathered together from the
ends of the earth into your kingdom.

The church is continually gathered out of the scattered disunity of human life into one, into the new creation that is Christ’s body the church.

Baptism gathers and names us as children of the Triune God, forgiving and sustaining us with the water of life. In a brief chapter about baptism, the *Didache* mentions water five times along with the word and command of Jesus to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Eucharist were as defining for early Christians as they are for us today. They are the way that leads to life; they are the way that gathers a scattered humanity into one body where God’s grace transforms us into a new creation, the church, living for Christ and for neighbor today.

As gathering for worship defined ancient Christian sisters and brothers, so too, gathering defines who we are as the church today. The concluding chapter of this ancient text reads, “Gather together frequently, seeking the things that benefit your souls.” From the very beginning, the church has been a pilgrim people on the way that leads to life. We live in tension with grace for today, while also hoping for the “not yet” of God’s kingdom to come.

May we continue to walk with hope during our own “in between times,” knowing that we do not walk alone. As Christians we are always “in between” the grace of today and the hope of tomorrow. “May your church be gathered together” becomes both our song and prayer as we follow the way that leads to life in Jesus Christ, both today and for the rest of our lives. Amen.

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For further reading:

The Apostolic Fathers. Translated by J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, Edited by Michael W. Holmes, Grand Rapids: Baker, (1891; second edition, 1989), third edition, 2006.

Rordorf, Willy and others, *The Eucharist of the Early Christians*. Trans. Michael J. O’Connell, New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1978.