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**The Didache 1:1, Thomas O’Loughlin, translator, Baker Academic.**

*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.*

**The Way of Life and the Way of Death.**

The Didache (did-ah-kay) is the short name for an ancient Greek manuscript called “*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,*” with a subtitle “*The Teaching of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles to the Gentiles.*” It is not in the Bible. The word Didache (did-ah-kay) is the Greek word for “Teaching”. You might recognize a common Greek root with our English word “didactic”, which means “intended to teach”. It is a very famous document among Christian scholars because it is extremely ancient, written perhaps as early as the year 50 A.D., but more likely around the year 70 A.D. Either way, it predates many of the books of the New Testament. We do not know who wrote it. Despite the title, it does not purport to have been written by any of the Apostles: it simply claims to summarize their teachings. It was long thought to be a lost document. There are multiple references to it by ancient people, in particular by writers in the 300’s A.D. When the canon, the official version of the New Testament was formed in the late 300’s,

the Didache (did-ah-kay) was considered, but rejected, partly because it was seen as redundant with the Gospels and partly because it was seen as too “Jewish”, in that it reflects the basic moral teachings of the Torah – but of course, so do the teachings of Jesus. Not long after the New Testament canon was formed, the Didache (did-ah-kay) was lost. It was not rediscovered for many hundreds of years. In 1873, an Eastern Orthodox theologian named Philotheos Bryennios came across it in the bowels of a library in a monastery in Constantinople, now Istanbul. It was a truly phenomenal find. Since 1873, scholars have been putting earlier and earlier dates on when they think it was written – thus suggesting that the folks who created the New Testament made a huge blunder by not including it.

The Didache (did-ah-kay) is a truly amazing document for two reasons: first, it clearly describes the very, very early Christian church, before much of the organizational structure of the Church had developed, and second, because it contains a very tight, very clear statement of just what it means to be a Christian. It lays out a standard that we still strive for today. It is very relevant to us today.

There are two very different parts to the Didache (did-ah-kay). The first begins with: *“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.”* The second part tells early believers how to carry out various church rituals, like performing

baptisms and celebrating communion, and it explains how to receive traveling prophets. There is an intriguing concluding section that talks about the Apocalypse, the End Times. It warns us that in the last days, false prophets will rise up - and sheep will turn to wolves. This section is very reminiscent of the Book of Revelation.

What I would like to do is give a quick overview of the Didache (did-ah-kay), so we can get a feel for it. It starts out in a way that is quite reflective of the Gospels.

The Didache (did-ah-kay), as a whole, is very sound theologically:

- 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 neighbour 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.*

Notice that the Way of Life involves following those two great commandments of Jesus. Now – if the Didache (did-ah-kay) is truly ancient, there is a chance that this is the original source of the two commandments offered by Jesus, and perhaps one or more of the Gospels used the Didache (did-ah-kay) as a source reference. This first section of the Didache (did-ah-kay) continues in this

vein, telling us many things that all of us have learned from the Gospels. The difference is that here, the lessons are compact, instead of being spread out in narrative documents like Gospel stories. There seems to be no question that either the Didache (did-ah-kay) is an extremely well-honed summary of the moral lessons taken from the Gospels – or it was written before the Gospels. We are told here that we should fast for those persecute us. This is a very powerful statement about the dedication of the early believers to truly living by that second commandment.

Here is how the Way of Death begins in the Didache (did-ah-kay):

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.*

Note the very poetic statement that those who live selfish, mean spirited, harmful lives “*do not know who was their Maker*”. The early believers made a firm distinction between those who followed the teachings of Jesus and those who were

members of that surrounding Greek/Roman culture. Also remember that this document is subtitled *The Teaching of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles to the Gentiles*. The people reading this are being told to abandon the very core of who they used to be as people. They are not Jews. They do not have a history of living by the Torah, which already taught these principles. Even Jesus' Two Great Commandments originated in the Torah. The point is that these people, these Gentiles, are radically altering their lifestyles. This document does not reinforce what they have been taught since childhood: it challenges all they used to believe.

Next, the Didache (did-ah-kay) gives us rules about carrying out baptisms:

*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.*

We see something here that has been greatly softened in modern baptisms, but in ancient times was a core part of Christian baptisms, and used to be true in the Methodist tradition. Before someone could be baptized, they were to show that they understood the basic tenets of our faith, what it means to follow the Way of Life and how to avoid the Way of Death. This is why historically, some Christian denominations and sects only baptized mature adults who are already educated in the principles of our faith – because they had to attest to them at baptism.

The author then moves on to prayer, and sure enough, we see the Lord's Prayer, in much the same form as we find it in the Gospel of Matthew. We are told that we must pray it three times a day. Today, we only pray it once a week.

Next comes Communion, with specific, powerful prayers that are to be offered up after the wine and the bread are taken. I won't repeat them here. Then we are given prayers to say after communion. We see that communion is a far more prayerful practice than we are used to in the modern church. After this comes a beautiful prayer that we offer up to God:

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.

The words are poetic: all people are given food and drink to maintain physical life. But we are also given food for eternal life, and this was celebrated each time the ancient believers met. For them, sharing bread and wine was a deeply spiritual practice, the heart of their service - not something done quickly once a month.

Next, we are given advice about receiving wandering prophets and teachers. We see that this was a primary way in which the early faithful learned their faith. They relied on these people – but they had to scrutinize their teachings carefully.

*if a teacher has himself wandered from the right path and has begun to teach 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.*

These teachers who brought the Word to people before the Gospels and the Epistles of the New Testament were available as teaching tools, were so valuable that they are to be as welcomed as Jesus would be welcomed – as long as their teachings are not corrupt. The early Christians were very careful about who they listened to. They were very aware that there was a society around them trying to teach them that the Way of Death was in truth the Way of Life.

Next, in the Didache (did-ah-kay) is evidence of the early organization of the Church. We are told what traits to look for in spiritual leaders:

*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.*

The believers are also told that it is critical that they maintain daily contact with fellow followers of Christ, so that they seek out only what will draw them closer to God. The Didache (did-ah-kay) begins to turn now to its final topic: the End Times.

Coming together as a church is seen as the best defense against ultimate evil:

*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.*

*16.3 For in the last days there are going to be many false prophets and those who would corrupt you, then the sheep will turn into wolves, and love will turn into hate.*

We are given a glimpse of what the world will look like when time comes to an end:

*16.4 Then when lawlessness is increasing, people will hate and persecute and be treacherous with one another. Then, indeed, the Deceiver of this world will appear as if a son of God and he will do signs and wonders and the earth will be delivered into his hands and he will commit lawless acts such as have never been seen since the world began.*

This reinforces something that we learn from letters in the New Testament: the early believers thought that the world would soon end. They saw nothing but corruption all around them. They gathered as faithful people, reinforcing in each other the Way of Life, helping each other avoid the Way of Death, seeking out the teachings of Christ, constantly on alert for the temptations of an evil society, and imagining that surely, given the horrific state of the world, everything would end. But while they waited, they focused on positive things, on treating others with grace, generosity, empathy, and love. They would die with Christ in their hearts.

In sum, there is an important theme that underlies the entire Didache (did-ah-kay). It has to do with how an individual church is defined and maintained. Baptism is the key entry ritual, where a new believer makes it clear that he or she knows what the Gospel teaches – and in this case, in the Didache (did-ah-kay), this simply means the Word of Christ, not a written Gospel document in a Bible – and is committing to living by this very high standard, one that is extremely different



from their surrounding pagan, commercial, corrupt, and greedy world. Communion is the maintenance ritual, a critical practice that keeps the church together, reminds them of their uniqueness as a community, and allows them to frequently celebrate the gift of spiritual food that God has given to them. All the while, the members of the church pray alone and together, and as a unit, they help each other ward off the old life to which they are determined to never return. The church was like a protective capsule that allowed them to live with love and kindness, unlike the multitudes who treated each other with cruelty and disdain.

The Didache (did-ah-kay) is a document well worth studying today. It is a tight, well-honed summary of our faith and our faith practices. There might seem to be things that are irrelevant to us today, like how to receive wandering prophets, but even this is something we should read with care. Do we scrutinize the ethics and morals of TV preachers, politicians, and celebrities? They are the prophets of today. If you want to read a relatively short document, one about the length of one of Paul's shorter letters – and in general, far easier to process – then try the Didache (did-ah-kay). It's a document that, I believe, if it had made its way into the Bible would be one of the most referenced books of our canon. Give it a try and imagine yourself as a follower of Christ, and a member of a church community working together in love to help each other live only the Way of Life.