

DIDACHE AS EARLY CHRISTIAN EDUCATION STRATEGY

“The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” or as it is commonly referred to today, the Didache, is perhaps the earliest extant example of an attempt at Christian education outside the New Testament. As such, it is important for understanding early Christian education. The text of the Didache was composed by an anonymous author or compiler in the first century AD, with modern scholars estimating that it was composed sometime between the middle of the first century and the beginning of the second century.³⁵ It was cited quite favorably by a number of church fathers and excerpted in several documents in the first few centuries, after which, it fell out of use and was largely unknown throughout the medieval period, until a chance rediscovery by Philotheos Bryennios in Constantinople in 1873.³⁶ While much has been written on the Didache in the last century, getting a precise read on the particulars of the text has been more difficult. Though a few scholars believe the text is a unified whole originating with one author, more scholars view it as a composite document compiled from several (perhaps oral) sources.³⁷ Another major point of contention is identifying the purpose and role of the Didache; most scholars agree it is to some degree a catechetical document,³⁸ but this is where the agreement ends. Part of the problem is the opening lines of the text, “The teaching of the Lord through the twelve apostles to the nations (Gentiles),” does not seem to line up with the later intent of the text (e.g., Did. 7.1). This has led several scholars to argue that the text has in mind a general audience, but a more plausible case may be made that the Didache has a much more focused intent.³⁹

The Didache is unlike the texts that comprise the Old and New Testaments. Its stated goal is to inform and educate (Did. 1.1, 7.1). The text covers four major areas: an opening explanation of the “way of life” contrasted with the “way of death,” instructions on baptism and

the Eucharist, principles for the order of churches, and a concluding eschatological warning.⁴⁰ With limited theological development and many obvious references to and echoes of the New Testament, we can deduce that the creator of the Didache assumed the readership would already know (and probably embrace) the Gospel fully. Adding to this, the sections on baptism, the Eucharist, and church order imply that the primary readers will, for example, be those *doing* the baptizing, rather than *receiving* baptism (Did. 7.4).⁴¹ As a result, the text is most likely intended as a training tool for early church leaders (or their apprentices).⁴² Among the church fathers, Athanasius recognized the instructional value of the text in AD 367.⁴³ However, the importance of the Didache in the educational formation of early Christianity is often overlooked today.⁴⁴ We may conclude that the Didache was highly successful in accomplishing its educational strategy, as many of its guidelines have become the norm for Christian practice for many segments of the church, even into the modern era.

References and Resources

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35. Ranging from the arguments of Milavec to Niederwimmer, respectively, see Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), ix; and Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 53.

36. Huub van de Sandt and David Flusser, *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and Its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity*, CRINT (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2002), 3.

37. See, e.g., Milavec, *The Didache*, xiii; and van de Sandt and Flusser, *The Didache*, 1, respectively.

38. William Varner, “The Didache as a Christian Enchiridion,” in *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, TENT 9, ECHC 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 651.

39. See, e.g., Varner, “Didache as a Christian Enchiridion,” 651; and Thomas O’Loughlin, “The Missionary Strategy of the *Didache*,” *Transformation* 28, no. 2 (2011): 77–79, respectively.

40. Cf. Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, 1.

41. Thomas O’Loughlin, “The Missionary Strategy of the *Didache*,” *Transformation* 28, no. 2 (2011): 78.

42. Contra William Varner, who argues the Didache was meant for new Christians; see Varner, “Didache as a Christian Enchiridion,” 651.

43. Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39.

44. Jonathan A. Draper, “Torah and Troublesome Apostles in the Didache Community,” *NovT* 33, no. 4 (1991): 347; and cf. Jonathan Schwiebert, *Knowledge and the Coming Kingdom: The Didache’s Meal Ritual and its Place in Early Christianity*, LNTS 373 (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 11.