The Didache and Traditioned Innovation:
Shaping Christian Community in the First Century and the Twenty-First Century

by

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Abstract

Church leaders, both lay and clergy, shape Christian community. Among their central tasks are: building communal identity, nurturing Christian practices, and developing faithful structures. When it comes to understanding the approach of the earliest Christian communities to these tasks, the Didache might well be the most important text most twenty-first century church leaders have never read. The Didache innovated on tradition, shaping the second generation of Christians to meet the crises and challenges of a changing world.

Most likely composed in the second half of the first century, the Didache served as a training manual for gentile converts to Christianity, preparing them for life in Christian community. This brief document, roughly one third the length of Mark’s gospel, developed within early Jewish-Christian communities. It soon found wide usage throughout the Mediterranean region, and its influence endured throughout the patristic and into the medieval period.

The Didache outlines emerging Christian practices that were rooted in both Jewish tradition and early Jesus material, yet were reaching forward in innovative ways. The Didache *adopts* historical teachings and practices and then *adapts* them for an evolving context. In this respect, the writers of the Didache, as well as the community shaped by its message, exemplify the pattern of thinking described by Greg Jones as “traditioned innovation.”

The Didache invites reflection on the shape and content of Christian community and Christian leadership in the twenty-first century. As churches and church leaders engage a rapidly changing world, the Didache is an unlikely and yet important conversation partner from
two millennia ago. A quick read through its pages – a task accomplished in less than half an hour – brings the reader face to face with a brand of Christianity both very familiar and strikingly dissimilar to modern Christianity. Such dissonance challenges current assumptions about the church and creates a space in which to re-imagine our situation in light of this ancient Christian tradition. The Didache provides a window through which we might re-examine current conceptualizations of Christian life, liturgy, and leadership.

This thesis begins with an exploration of the form and function of the Didache and an examination of a number of important background issues for the informed study of the Didache. The central chapters of this thesis exegete and explore select passages in each of the three primary sections of the Didache – the Two Ways (Didache 1-6), the liturgical section (Didache 7-10), and the church order (Didache 11-15). In each instance, the composers of the Didache reach back into a cherished and life-giving aspect of the community’s heritage and shape it anew into a fresh and faithful approach to living the Christian life in a drastically different context.

The thesis concludes with three suggestions of ways the Didache may inform how church leaders in the present think about training disciples, shaping community, and developing leadership structures. These conversation starters offer beginning points for a richer, fuller discussion of traditioned innovation in our current church context. The Didache provides a source of wisdom from our spiritual forebears that modern Christian leaders would do well not to ignore. With a look through the first century window of the Didache, twenty-first century Christians can discover fresh insights for shaping Christian community in the present.
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Introduction: The Didache and Traditioned Innovation

On Tuesday, June 11, 1056, Leon, “the scribe and sinner,” completed a copy of a codex that contained a number of important and early Christian documents. The parchment manuscript of 120 pages found its way to a shelf in the library of the monastery of the Holy Sepulchre in Constantinople. There, it remained, collecting dust for eight centuries.

In 1873, Philotheos Bryennios, a Greek Orthodox bishop, sat at a wooden desk in the same monastery library. He had come, as was his custom, to explore its vast collection. At least two scholars in the early 1800s had catalogued the library’s contents, and Bryennios himself had spent many hours perusing the manuscripts housed there. On this occasion his eye fell on a small, thick black volume which had always escaped his notice. As he listlessly thumbed through the two hundred pages in that volume, he suddenly realized that he had stumbled across a treasure! The volume contained complete copies of the Epistle of Barnabas and the Epistles of Clement to the Corinthians. On a mere five leaves, front and back, buried in the middle of the volume, was the complete Didache, an ancient manual well known to the early church but lost to history.

Bryennios worked first on the Epistles of Clement, not fully realizing the significance of the Didache until he happened to read over it again, seven years later, in 1880. In that moment, lightning struck. “This must be the Didache, the book that so many ancient fathers quote, the book that was lost, that the church mourns over to this day, the foundation of part of the

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Apostolic Constitutions. Eureka! Eureka! Eureka!” he shouted. For the next three years, Bryennios pored over the document, diligently working to prepare a volume on the Didache for publication. Every spare moment was spent with the treasured text until Bryennios’ translation and commentary went to press in 1883.

Jackson Carroll describes church leaders as those who shape Christian community; they are “primary agents in constructing and forming their congregation’s culture.”² Building communal identity, nurturing Christian practices, and developing faithful structures: these acts of shaping Christian community remain central tasks for church leaders, both clergy and laity. When it comes to understanding the approach of the earliest Christian communities to these tasks, the Didache might well be the most important text most twenty-first century church leaders have never read. The Didache innovates on tradition, shaping the second generation of Christians to meet the crises and challenges of the late first century. Perhaps we, like Bryennios might exclaim “Eureka!” as we re-discover the Didache and consider the fresh perspective it might provide to faith communities in the twenty-first century.

Most likely composed in the second half of the first century, the Didache provides what Thomas O’Loughlin has called a “window on the earliest Christians.”³ The Didache served as a

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² Carroll, Jackson W., God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 2.
³ These words comprise the subtitle (and primary thesis) of O’Loughlin’s commentary on Didache: O’Loughlin, Thomas, The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).
training manual⁴ for gentile converts to Christianity, preparing them for life in Christian community. This brief document, roughly one third the length of Mark’s gospel, developed within an early Jewish-Christian community. It soon found wide usage throughout the Mediterranean region, and its influence endured throughout the patristic and into the medieval period.

The Didache outlines emerging Christian practices that were rooted in both Jewish tradition and early Jesus material yet were reaching forward in innovative ways. The new ways of orienting life in Christian community are inseparable from the rich Jewish traditions into which the early church was born. These early Christian communities were experiencing a dramatic separation from both the Jewish communities that birthed them at the same time that many non-Jews were beginning to engage with and eventually convert to Christianity. Kurt Niederwimmer observes that the Didache adopts historical teachings and practices and then adapts them for an evolving context, “clearly making an effort to harmonize ancient and revered traditions...with new ecclesial necessities.”⁵ In this respect, the writers of the Didache,⁶

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⁴ Historically, scholars have placed the Didache within the genre of church orders, often suggesting that it was the first document of this genre. Over the past several decades, this categorization has come under significant challenge. The case for understanding the Didache as a training manual, as put forth most fully by Aaron Milavec, will be made in greater detail below.


⁶ The Didache likely was written in community – a collaborative effort over time of a collection of master trainers who coached novice converts. It was a working document that had the flexibility of being changed and adapted over time. For the purposes of this thesis, the phrase “writers of the Didache” will be preferred, rather than “the Didachist” or “the writer,” both of which are customarily used in other literature on the Didache.
as well as the community shaped by its message, exemplify the pattern of thinking described by Greg Jones as “traditioned innovation.”

The Didache invites reflection on the shape and content of Christian community and Christian leadership in the twenty-first century. As churches and church leaders engage a rapidly changing world, the Didache is an unlikely and yet important conversation partner from two millennia ago. A quick read through its pages – a task accomplished in less than half an hour – brings the reader face to face with a brand of Christianity both very familiar and strikingly dissimilar to modern Christianity. Such dissonance can function to break open current assumptions about the church and to create a space in which to re-imagine our situation in light of this ancient Christian tradition. To expand on O’Loughlin, the Didache provides a window through which we might re-examine current conceptualizations of Christian life, liturgy, and leadership.

The writers of the Didache were familiar with and relied upon streams of Jewish tradition and early – either oral or written – collections of Jesus material. Rather than a church manual or guidebook primarily intended for standardizing church leadership, the Didache was

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7 L. Gregory Jones articulates his understanding of “traditioned innovation” in a series of articles which were published on the Faith and Leadership website. This “pattern of thinking” requires leaders to avoid the false choice between preserving tradition and leading change, but rather to hold the two polarities together.

8 O’Loughlin writes: “This ability to make people sit up and start looking with a new energy at Christian origins comes from the text’s unique combination of familiarity - people recognize so much of its contents from reading the Gospels or just from the practices they see in their churches - and unfamiliarity - this teaching is not presented in the way that it is found in the New Testament’s texts nor do the practices conform with the deeply held assumptions of many churches. This mix of the well known with the startlingly different makes people sit up and look with new eyes both at the past and the present,” ix.
actually used as an apprenticeship manual, or catechesis of sort. It outlines a number of specific practices, both individual and communal, and their theological underpinnings.

The Didache nurtured within potential converts a particular way of life, shaping and forming them into new creations ready for full inclusion in the Christian community. Some have even suggested that the Didache was memorized by gentile converts as part of an apprenticeship process. An oral teaching and training tradition in the Didache communities likely preceded the writing of the Didache, which formalized the training process. The Didache’s contents, particularly the “Two Ways” material, Eucharistic prayers, and guidelines for leadership, reach backward into Jewish traditions, building on familiar source material and reframing it for use in shaping the early Christian community.

Once a widely known document in early Christianity, the Didache was lost to history for nearly a millennium. Both Eusebius and Athanasius include the Didache by name, not in their lists of canonical writings, but in additional lists of recommended reading for fourth century Christians. Quotes from the Didache can be found in the second and third century writings of Clement and Pseudo-Cyprian, and some scholars suggest that even Justin or Ignatius of

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9 Many scholars, from its rediscovery in the late 19th century to the present, have proposed that the entire Didache, or at least the Two Ways section, was memorized as a part of the new convert’s preparation for baptism. O’Loughlin and Milavec outline a more robust one-on-one apprenticeship process that might have taken place in the Didache communities. In this scenario, the mentor would have used the training manual as an outline or guide for a series of conversations and teaching sessions through which, over a period of time, the mentor would have instructed the potential convert in all areas of community life and practice. See below for a more developed discussion of this notion of apprenticeship.

10 Niederwimmer, 4.

11 Niederwimmer, 6-10.
Antioch, in the late first and early second centuries, might have known of the Didache. In his *Exposition on the Psalms*, Augustine cites the sentence from Didache 1:6 about “alms sweating in the hands” on four separate occasions, once explicitly referring to the quotation from Didache as scripture.

The Didache appears to be the most prominent document of its kind in the early Christian world. It served as a prototype for later writings that became known as church orders. By nature, these texts functioned as working documents for their communities and were constantly edited, supplemented, rewritten, or discarded in order to best address the evolving needs of their communities. The whole of the Didache was appropriated by the writers of the Apostolic Constitutions as book 7 of that work. Quotations from the Didache also found their way into the Rule of Benedict and the Rule of the Master. Fragments of the Didache

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13 Augustine references Didache 1:6 in his comments on Psalm 102, 103, and 146. In the comments on Psalm 146, he writes: “Just now has been read, ‘Give to every one that asketh of thee;’ and in another place Scripture saith, ‘Let alms sweat in thy hand, till thou findest a righteous man to whom to give it.’” (emphasis mine)

14 Though the Didache has been considered the prototype for a genre of early Christian writings commonly referred to as church orders, the Didache should not itself be classified as a church order. See the discussion chapter 1 below regarding the genre of the Didache as well as Mueller, Joseph G., “The Ancient Church Order Literature: Genre or Tradition?” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Volume 15, Number 3, Fall 2007, pp. 337-380.

have been discovered in numerous languages scattered throughout the Mediterranean region.\textsuperscript{16}

So, how did the Didache fall so far out of favor and usage that it was lost to history for nearly a millennium? Perhaps its journey into obsolescence was inevitable – the nature of a document focused on the practical behaviors and disciplines of a community in a particular time. As the proto-type for what would later become the literary genre known as church orders, the Didache was borrowed from, embedded in, absorbed by, and redacted into new foundational documents for emerging and evolving Christian communities. Gradually the Didache itself fell out of use as circumstances changed and other, more formalized and expansive church manuals developed.

Nearly a millennium passed, with the full text copy of the Didache collection dust on the shelf of the Constantinople monastery, before Bryennios happened upon the volume. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries then witnessed an explosion of scholarship focused on the newly re-discovered text. In the almost century and a half since Bryennios published his translation, the Didache's importance as a foundational Christian document has been widely affirmed. After a brief lull, the second half of the twentieth century experienced a renewed interest in Didache scholarship, partially due to its resonance with the newly discovered Dead Sea Scrolls.

A vast majority of what has been published on the Didache through the years has been confined to the arena of academia. Technical articles and voluminous commentaries have

\textsuperscript{16} Niederwimmer, 21-27.
examined the Didache, initially through the eyes of form and source criticism, and more recently through the lens of social science and orality studies approaches. Few writers have produced accessible studies,\textsuperscript{17} useful to the ongoing work of Christian communities and their leaders. This gap in the literature is unfortunate, particularly given the pastoral sensibilities of the Didache. Unlike much of what has been written about it, the Didache itself “is unpretentious as literature, nourished by praxis, and intended for immediate application.”\textsuperscript{18}

The Didache defines and depicts the practices that shaped the identity of early Christian communities. At least three specific aspects of Christian community-shaping in Didache deserve attention: building communal identity, nurturing Christian practices, and developing faithful leaders. The first three major sections of the Didache — the “Two Ways” material (Didache 1-6), the liturgy (Didache 7-10), and the church order (Didache 11-15)\textsuperscript{19} — provide insight into these three aspects of Christian life in community. Each facet finds its roots in shared tradition, and each pushes forward to shape a distinctive, emerging way to live as Christian community. In this way, the Didache exemplifies the sort of traditioned innovation to which Greg Jones invites the leaders of the twenty-first century church.

**Building a Bridge to the Twenty-First Century**

\textsuperscript{17} O’Loughlin and Varner attempt this sort of helpful analysis and application as does Milavec in his shorter volume. Tony Jones writes an introduction to the Didache focused on making scholarly research accessible to laypeople. None of these more accessible commentaries or introductions to the Didache, however, focus in particular on leadership in the congregation and its role in shaping Christian community.

\textsuperscript{18} Niederwimmer, 3.

\textsuperscript{19} Niederwimmer, 1. The author, in this seminal commentary for the *Hermeneia* series, lays out the three basic divisions of the Didache’s subject matter using these descriptive section titles.
In a time of significant transition, the Didache exhibited a practical, flexible approach to leadership that was both spirit-led and street smart. The Didache recognized the importance of charismatic leaders who emerged to instruct and exhort the community, while at the same time it put forth safeguards to protect the community against abuses of leadership. The Didache focused its instruction on the central teachings of Jesus – to love God and neighbor – and simultaneously allowed for significant freedom in peripheral areas, such as the prayers offered at Eucharist or the acceptable modes of baptism. Varner calls the Didache's baptismal instructions “compassionate pastoral genius” for their focus on the underlying significance of baptism while retaining flexibility regarding the mechanics of the ritual. His phrase could accurately describe the complete project of the Didache: a compassionate and pastorally sensitive, even genius, reimagining of valued tradition in light of changing circumstances.

The Church of the twenty-first century faces significant, rapid change, in some respects unlike any other moment in Christian history. As current church leaders consider the need to innovate on tradition in the face of major change, what can be learned from the Didache? Can the Didache be brought into conversation with modern research across the fields of theology and leadership? The following pages suggest that we might look through the window of the Didache in the hopes of discovering a framework for twenty-first century church leaders to adopt and adapt the received tradition of the Didache, along with two thousand years of other Christian reflection, writing, and practice.

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Before delving into the next movement of this thesis, a disclaimer is necessary. The Didache does not offer a template for recreating the nascent church in the twenty-first century. Church leaders must proceed cautiously, avoiding the tendency to read back into the first-century concepts that we find helpful or descriptive in the twenty-first century. Just as the concepts of the first century are not directly applicable to ours, neither can modern theology or leadership theory be inserted into the context of centuries past. As O’Loughlin reminds us: “the focus is not on the bits in the past that we find interesting or charming, but on how we can learn more about ourselves by looking at relatives, but very foreign relatives.”

Hosting a conversation between “foreign relatives” holds great promise and great challenge. Hopefully, the proper conversation partners can guide church leaders toward questions and resources that will help us reflect on and learn from the past – and to do our own adopting and adapting in the present. How can twenty-first century church leaders exhibit “compassionate pastoral genius” as they guide the church into the unknown future? Two complementary schools of thought in modern theology and ethics can help build a bridge from the first-century context of the Didache to the twenty-first-century context of current church leadership.

**Traditioned Innovation and Improvisation in the Didache**

In a series of articles for the online publication *Faith and Leadership*, Greg Jones and Kavin Rowe outline an approach to leadership that they call “traditioned innovation.” Jones

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21 O’Loughlin, 146.

writes, “Christian leaders are called to a particular type of social entrepreneurship – one that does not force us to choose preserving tradition or leading change, but thinking about them together.” This way of thinking is grounded in the understanding that God, through the Holy Spirit, continually renews and transforms the creation that God made in the first place and has nurtured up to the present moment. The creative work of God is both the beginning and the end (or telos) of our life as individuals and as the corporate church. An extended quote from Jones more fully articulates this concept:

“Transformative change, rooted in tradition and the preservation of wisdom, cultivates the adaptive work that is crucial to the ongoing vitality and growth of any organism, Christian institutions included... Sometimes that will mean we innovate within existing institutions; at other times we will allow some forms to die so that other ones can rise up in their place. And at still other times we will give birth to new forms to address challenges and opportunities. But even our most dramatic transformations ought to be tethered to our most life-giving past.”

Kavin Rowe develops an understanding of the Christian scriptures as an exercise in this type of traditioned innovation. He maps out the arc of redemption history as narrated in scripture, claiming that “traditioned innovation names an inner-biblical way of thinking theologically about the texture of human life in the context of God’s gracious and redemptive self-disclosure.” The continuous movement that includes creation, fall, election, redemption,
and consummation demonstrates God’s constant work to redeem and renew without throwing out the old and starting over.

The teaching of Jesus “innovatively and faithfully extends Jewish tradition to accord with the change of the times – the advent of the kingdom of heaven.”25 In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus provides the ultimate example of fulfilling the old tradition in ways that completely transform it for a new day. Rowe then demonstrates how the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost also draws on Jewish tradition, fulfilling promises made by God long ago and launching the church into a new age.

The Didache, in the same way that Rowe ascribes to New Testament scripture, appropriates the best of the existing tradition while at the same time adapting it to address an emerging new context. Examples abound of such traditioned innovation, throughout the pages of the Didache. The following chapters will explore specific texts from each of the three major sections of the Didache – the Two Ways (Didache 1-6), the liturgical section (Didache 7-10), and the so-called church order (Didache 11-15). In each instance, the composers of the Didache reach back into a cherished and life-giving aspect of the community’s heritage and shape it anew into a fresh and faithful approach to living the Christian life in a drastically different context.

The community of the Didache epitomize the words Greg Jones: “People who bear a tradition are called to be relentlessly innovative in ways that preserve the life-giving character

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25 Rowe (October 2009).
of the tradition.”26 Their testimony to the power of traditioned innovation in the midst of
disequilibrium and transition invites us to consider how we might echo their work in our own
contexts. In other words, the key question for current leaders is not “How can we say what the
Didache says or practice what the Didache practices?” but rather “How can we do what the
Didache does?” That is, how can we faithfully engage in traditioned innovation, in the same
way that the Didache community did?

Samuel Wells articulates a model for Christian ethics based on the dramatic process of
improvisation, which provides a helpful corollary to Jones’ work on traditioned innovation.
Wells, in his book Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics, suggests that improvisation is a
practice through which “the church may become a community of trust in order that it may
faithfully encounter the unknown of the future without fear.”27 When actors are trained in
improvisation, they develop a sense of trust in each other and an ability to react to unforeseen
circumstances in appropriate and faithful ways. “Improvisation is the only term that adequately
describes the desire to cherish a tradition without being locked in the past.”28 Wells draws the
parallel that “Christian ethics and theatrical improvisation are both about years of steeping in a

26 Jones, “Traditioned Innovation.”
27 Wells, Samuel, Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 11.
28 Wells, 66. He also suggests that improvisation provides a faithful lens for Christian practice because it is
inevitable, scriptural, and ecclesial. Improvisation is inevitable because whenever the people of God come together
to wrestle with what God is doing in their midst, they are improvising, whether they know it or not. They are
striving to enact a faithful drama on the stage that is set by Scripture, experience, and tradition. Improvisation is
scriptural in the sense that it accurately describes the practices of the earliest Christians, particularly as depicted in
the book of Acts, which Jeremy Begbie describes as “a stream of new, unpredictable, improvisations.” Finally,
improvisation is ecclesial, since it concerns itself with the group’s efforts to respond, act, and reflect faithfully
together. Improvisation “is concerned with how a text and tradition are realized by a community in new
circumstances.” See Wells, 66ff.
tradition so that the body is so soaked in practices and perceptions that it trusts itself in community to do the obvious thing.”

Wells questions the assumption that “the Bible is a script that the church performs” and suggests instead that “it is more like a training manual that forms what Christians take for granted.” The Didache certainly functioned in this way for its original audience. In Milavec’s understanding, the mentors would have known the Didache document so well that they could have adapted it – by slowing the pace or emphasizing a particular aspect – based on the individual needs and situation of the one they were mentoring. As they moved a cohort of novices through the training process, each one at their own speed and with their own unique emphasis, would have been grounded in the common tradition and practice of the community.

“Improvisation depends on and assumes,” writes Wells, “an active community conducting regularly the practices of the church and discerning an appropriate (or “obvious”) engagement in the light of the habits formed from those practices.” The Didache grounds its community in such practices, equipping them to change and adapt with their circumstances. When a community of people knows the texts and traditions – the stories and sayings of Jesus, the traditions of the Jewish people – so well, then the group can more easily and comfortably “go off script” and embody the traditions in a new context. This sort of “traditioning” happens in each act of transmission. In the case of the Didache, new contexts give rise to shifts in

29 Wells, 17.
30 Wells, 214.
31 Wells, 217.
teaching; new converts internalize the teaching and become fully included in the community; eventually these converts themselves take on the role as trainer-coaches for a new generation.

The Argument of This Thesis

The first chapter of this thesis explores the form and function of the Didache. While introducing the reader to a document from which we are separated by two millennia, this chapter also examines a number of important background issues for the informed study of the Didache. Because of significant disagreements within the scholarly writings about the Didache with regard to date, provenance, and genre, any author joining the conversation must lay out a position on each of these matters as a starting point upon which to build a larger thesis.

The central chapters of this thesis exegete and explore select passages in each of the three primary sections of the Didache in order to demonstrate how it used an approach of traditioned innovation to shape the earliest Christian communities. Chapter two considers the Two Ways section of the document (Didache 1-6), exploring how the Didache sets forth a common rule of life that shaped the everyday interactions and attitudes of its community. Focal passages in this section point to the Didache’s use as a baptismal catechism or training plan that prepared people for integration into the community. The third chapter focuses on the Didache’s liturgical instructions (Didache 7-10), which describe times of gathered worship but also recount and encourage everyday Christian practices. Baptizing, fasting, praying, and sharing meals exemplify Christian practices that the Didache encourages in the presence of the entire gathered community, in small groups of co-workers or families, and in the life of the
individual. The Didache’s approach to the liturgical life of the community encourages movement beyond the context of gathered worship and into everyday life. Chapter four examines the Didache’s instruction for ensuring appropriate leadership for the community (Didache 11-15). The Didache mentions a variety of leadership roles within the community: apostles, teachers, prophets, and overseers. These leadership roles were undoubtedly in transition as the early church grew and evolved. The Didache brings together theology and common sense as it outlines practices for identifying and empowering solid leadership for the community now establishing itself within and over against the larger Greco-Roman world.

A final chapter peers through the window of the Didache to gain a different perspective on the church in the twenty-first century. Emerging concepts from the exegetical chapters invite conversation about shaping Christian community: building communal identity, nurturing Christian practices, and developing faithful structures. The first section of the Didache raises questions of and offers challenges to the approach of modern churches – particularly in the West – regarding the integration and discipleship of new converts. “New monastic” communities, some of which have taken the Didache as an organizing document, have given fresh life to the ancient concept of communal rules of life and the coaching movement has provided tools for developing disciples. The twenty-first century revival of Christian practices provides a rich conversation partner for the liturgical section of the Didache. How might our churches develop traditioned innovations in liturgy and practice, both in the gathered worship setting and beyond? Finally, the chief method for evaluating leaders in the Didache community is the embodiment of the gospel in the lives of the leader. How might our churches find insight
into and models for effective church leadership at the intersection of the Didache and current leadership theory? This concluding section hopes to start conversations that might build a bridge between the content and purpose of that section of the Didache and the task of shaping Christian community in our current context.

Looking through the first century window of the Didache, twenty-first century Christians might reimagine the ways we define Christian community, engage in Christian practice, and nurture Christian leadership. Certainly our current context bears striking dissimilarities to the early Christian context in which the Didache came into being. The instructions found in the Didache should not be understood as prescriptions for the twenty-first century leader but rather invitations to a conversation about traditioned innovation in the current context. Parallels between the practices outlined in the Didache and current Christian practice cannot be drawn in a straight line. However, the Didache has great potential to invigorate conversation about how, intentionally or not, laypeople and clergy shape the community, practices, and leadership of the church in our present time.

In order to draw responsible conclusions for the church of the twenty-first century, this thesis will attempt to create dialogue between the context of the Didache and our own context. It will seek to answer the questions: What issues and needs did the Didache address in its own time? How did it address these issues? Are these issues and needs still present in some form in the twenty-first century context? If so, how might the Didache inform our approach as Christian leaders to these issues? As these questions are considered, this thesis aims to bring the Didache into conversation with voices and schools of thought in current theology and leadership theory.
This proposal does not intend to summarize the existing commentaries and scholarly studies on the Didache or to survey the entire contents of the document. Instead, it will identify significant aspects of how the Didache came into being, how it was used, and why it was effective. The Didache outlines an alternative vision of early Christian community and leadership, different from but complementary to that of the Gospels and the Pauline epistles.

**Why the Didache?**

Potentially, some readers may doubt the relevance of the Didache to leadership in the twenty-first century or wonder whether it deserves to be considered alongside the New Testament as a guide for Christian practice. *Why should a document written in the first century matter to twenty-first century Christians? Doesn’t the New Testament have enough to say about leadership and Christian community? If the Didache is so important to early Christian life, why did it disappear completely for more than a thousand years?*

In response, I would argue that the Didache provides a window into one the earliest Christian communities described in a non-canonical work. In fact, recent scholarship suggests that the Didache may have arisen alongside the Gospel of Matthew, potentially in the same first century communities. While the Gospels give us insight into Jesus’ leadership and ethics and Paul’s letters provide a window into the development of early churches, no New Testament work provides as detailed a window into the practices of early Christian communities as the
Didache. Aaron Milavec writes that the Didache “reveals more about how Christians saw themselves and lived their everyday lives than any book in the Christians scriptures.”32

The Didache was once lost to history, but now found and made available to the modern Church. Bryennios’ chance discovery is a gift to us. The work of scholars over the past century and half provide us with a wealth of information and commentary on the Didache’s place in church history. The pastoral sensibilities of the Didache are evident in its pages. The way in which the Didache helped to shape its communities was an exercise in traditioned innovation. Now, the Didache invites modern readers to peer through its window and see possibilities for adopting the deep traditions of two millennia of Christian history and adapting them to shape new and vibrant communities in our time.

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Chapter One: Form and Function of the Didache

The Didache took shape in an age of rapid change for the fledgling Christian communities. The first followers of Jesus struggled to faithfully “adapt the way of Jesus to the exigencies of family, occupation, home – the very things that Jesus and his wandering apostles left behind.”¹ Their initial converts, all Jewish, proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah, but remained firmly planted in the synagogue system of first century Judaism. They continued to practice the Sabbath, observe dietary law, and generally interact as part of the larger Jewish community. As time moved on, however, these early Jewish Christians began to distance themselves from the synagogue community. At the same time, they realized that the Holy Spirit was moving beyond the boundaries of their Jewish Christian community. Gentiles, too, were coming to experience and understand Jesus as Savior. All of these changes, within the first decades after Jesus’ resurrection, made apparent the need for a shift in theology and practice that would reimagine what it meant to follow Jesus and would facilitate the full inclusion of gentile believers into the community of faith.

During the first century, forms of nascent Christianity began to develop out of forms of Judaism, but scholars debate how these groups emerged and separated from their Jewish forebears. Karen King’s article, “Which Early Christianity?” describes the great diversity characterized the Christian movement throughout the first two centuries and beyond. King

suggests “the analytical shift from essence to practice in considering early Christian
‘identities.’”² It is most appropriate to speak of early “Christianities” emerging from first
century “Judaisms.” In King’s typology, Jewish Christianity might refer to one of eight
approaches or practices of Christian faith, rather than a monolithic whole.³ In this sense, the
Didache would have helped define the practice of one stream of many early Christianities.

As these particular emerging Jewish Christian communities were defining themselves
over against the synagogue, and as they were opening the doors to gentile converts, a third
phenomenon also brought significant change. The communities began to shift from first
generation Christian community to second generation communities. By the second half of the
first century, fewer people who had firsthand experience of Jesus were still alive. Meanwhile,
the Jesus movement was steadily spreading, and with that growth came the need for a more
organized system of belief and practice that would preserve institutional memory and ground
the community in its received tradition.

The Christian communities of the mid-first century, emerged amidst radical change and
even crisis, both internally and externally. The internal impetus for change was the advent of
Jesus as Messiah who called these Jewish Christians into a community that would embody the
kingdom of God. An external impetus for change was the Jewish Christian community’s growing
interface with the Greco-Roman world, made more pronounced by the inclusion of non-Jewish
converts into their own ranks. In response to the internal pressure, Jewish rituals and practices

³ Ibid., 74.
had to be reconfigured in light of the community’s belief in Jesus as the Messiah. In response to the external pressure, the community had to determine what a gentile convert needed to know, believe, and embody in order to be welcomed into the community with full standing. These new ways of believing and practicing their faith needed to be formalized and preserved as Christianity entered its second generation.

Within this cultural context and in the midst of rapid change, a training system emerged that would lay out in clear terms what was expected from a member of the community. In the written document, known as the Didache, the collected wisdom of a group of master discipleship teachers provided a directed training regimen for those wishing to enter into the Christian community. In the early decades of the Jesus movement, apostles and prophets – traveling, itinerant preachers of the good news – wandered from community to community, telling the stories of Jesus and relying on the hospitality of strangers to meet their daily needs. Evidence from within the Didache, as well as from the Pauline epistles, suggests that during this stage in the church’s development, teachers also emerged from within communities, mentoring and nurturing believers in faith and practice.⁴

So, how did this class of teachers arise, and how did they develop and use the document that has come to be known as the Didache? In other words, how did the Didache take form and in what ways did it function within the communities that used it. The following section explores

⁴ The emergence of this teaching office exhibits great affinity with Jewish rabbinical models for teaching, and the teacher may have functioned like the Sages of early Judaism. Van de Sandt and Flusser explore these affinities between the teachers of the Didache and the rabbis and Sages of early Judaism. See Sandt, Hubertus Waltherus Maria van de and David Flusser, *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and Its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 356-357.
the lively scholarly conversations about these matters of date, provenance, genre, and composition of the Didache.

**Date and Provenance**

The scholarly quest to determine the date of the Didache follows a long and winding path, where competing hypotheses have placed the document anywhere from the mid-first century to as late as the fourth century. The rediscovery of the Didache by Bryennios led to a torrent of research and writing on the document. Scholars quickly noticed connections and similarities between the Didache and the Gospel of Matthew, the Shepherd of Hermas, and Barnabas and began to hypothesize about their relationship to one another. By 1920, scholarly consensus on the date of the Didache’s composition hinged around the turn of the first century. The Didache’s strong connections to Jewish tradition and its depiction of church structures that were still in their infancy, suggested an early date. The apparent reliance on material from Matthew led the emerging consensus to settle on the late first century to mid-second century.\(^5\)

Just as the dating of the Didache seemed to have reached a point of consensus, J.A. Robinson’s 1920 lectures on Barnabas, Hermas, and the Didache offered a counterpoint that would shift scholarly opinion for the next several decades. Robinson argued for the dependence of the Didache on the Epistle of Barnabas, from which the Didachist borrowed the Two Ways.

\(^5\) Because of the great disparity within the scholarly writings about the Didache with regard to date, provenance, and genre, any author joining the conversation must lay out a position on each of these matters as a starting point upon which to build a larger thesis. On the one hand, this project does not attempt a comprehensive analysis of the existing scholarship on Didache. On the other hand, certain informed decisions about provenance, genre, and composition undergird the central arguments of this thesis.

material. He dismissed the use of the Didache by Clement and viewed it instead as third century
creation, a poorly disguised attempt by an author seeking to claim apostolic status. A group of
early twentieth century scholars moved Robinson’s theory forward, even suggesting that the
Didache was a Montanist text. These scholars, concerned about the doctrinal and liturgical
unorthodoxies of the Didache, labeled it a “pious fiction” and cast such significant doubt on its
historical reliability that the Didache “dropped off the scholarly agenda” for several decades.

The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in 1948, sparked a renewed interest in the Didache
and a renewed confidence in its significance as an early Christian document. Jean-Paul Audet, in
a ground-breaking 1952 essay, established the Didache’s independence from Barnabas,
suggesting instead that the two documents relied on a common Two Ways source. Audet
reclaims an early pre-70 CE apostolic authorship for the Didache, which was then likely
redacted twice during the next century. With the Didache’s dependence on Barnabas
essentially ruled out, Koster, Rordorf, Draper, and others began the task of reevaluating the
Didache’s relationship to the Gospel of Matthew.

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7 For a summary of the influence of Robinson, Muilenburg, Connolly, and Vokes, who pressed for this later dating
of the Didache, see Draper, 10-13.
8 Draper, 13.
9 Audet, Jean-Paul, “Literary and Doctrinal Affinities of the “Manual of Discipline,“ The Didache in Modern
found in scrolls of Qumran made use of a Duae viae (“Two Ways”) source that was at least as old as the first half of
the first century. Thus he dismantled Robinson’s thesis that the writer of Barnabas was the originator of the Two
Ways material and that Didache was reliant of Barnabas as a source. Though few scholars would link the Manual
and the Didache as closely as Audet, his argument for an early date for the Didache was convincing. Audet writes
that the “literary problem of the Didache is not settled by all this, but the least that one could say is that it comes
close to solving the impasse in which it was locked up by attributing the primitive Duae viae to Barnabas,” 147.
10 For a summary of the movement in modern Didache studies up to the mid-1990s, see Draper, 13ff.
Rordorf clearly makes the case against the Didache’s dependence on Matthew, opening up the possibility of an even earlier composition date. Draper suggests that the Didache and Matthew evolved “together in the same community, the former as the manual of discipline of the community and the latter as a record of the Jesus tradition.”\textsuperscript{11} Niederwimmer supposes a primary editor at the turn of the century compiling and editing earlier extant texts. Since the document still speaks to a developing and unsettled “church” that cannot be far into the second century, he finds no compelling reasons to suggest an earlier date.\textsuperscript{12} Milavec and Varner both push for the compositional unity of the Didache, rather than an editor piecing together diverse early sources in a piecemeal fashion with minimal original commentary. Milavec postulates an early date, between 50 and 70 CE, while Varner settles on a more conservative late first century date, allowing for the possibility that the writer was familiar with the written Gospel of Matthew.\textsuperscript{13}

Nearly all current articles and commentaries on the Didache argue for a composition date somewhere between 50 and 90 CE. Certainly by mid-century an early (oral) tradition existed which was taught to potential converts by the mentors who trained them for life in the Christian community.\textsuperscript{14} This thesis will take the position that the oral tradition was being shaped into the written document that would become known as the Didache by 70 CE. As will be shown below, the Didache by nature was a document in transition, likely composed and

\textsuperscript{11} Draper, 18.
\textsuperscript{12} Niederwimmer, 52-54.
\textsuperscript{13} Varner, 46. The author writes, “the sheer number of possible parallels confirms to the casual reader that at least the shadow of the first gospel is evident in the Didache.”
\textsuperscript{14} On this notion of mentoring and apprenticeship, see the section below on genre and also chapter 3.
refined by a group of people over a period of time, reflecting the thoughts and practices of second-generation Christians.\textsuperscript{15}

Exactly where the Didache was first composed is the also the subject of much scholarly debate, though it is of less significance for the argument of this thesis. The primary manuscript of the Didache hails from eleventh century Constantinople.\textsuperscript{16} Other fragments have been discovered throughout the Mediterranean region, translated into a variety of languages. Testimony from the early church fathers suggests that the Didache was known from Egypt to Antioch. Nearly all scholarship points toward the Didache’s development within a Jewish-Christian context, but that fact hardly narrows the scope of its purported provenance. Whether the Didache originally hailed from Syria, Palestine, or Egypt matters little to the argument of this thesis. Of great importance is the Didache’s wide acceptance and use throughout the early Christian world.

\textbf{Genre and Oral Tradition}

“Church order” has been the genre most often assigned to the Didache, although the category does not adequate describe the form and function of the Didache. In his \textit{Hermeneia} commentary, Niederwimmer grants that there were no existing literary models for what the writer of the Didache was attempting. Niederwimmer and other Didache scholars of the second half of the twentieth century focused their studies on form critical approaches to the text. They

\textsuperscript{15} Whether or not the Didache relied on a version of Matthew’s gospel – either common source, prototype, or a final version – is less important to this argument than asserting its role in the development of second-generation Christians as the emerging churches and communities took shape.  

\textsuperscript{16} Niederwimmer, 21. The author suggests that the archetype of the Bryennios text originated in Egypt.
assumed that the document was a collection of previous sources woven together for some purpose, with only bits and pieces of the redactor’s original comments. Niederwimmer writes that it is “immediately apparent that the document is a generically mixed composition...composed by a compiler or redactor using very diverse extant materials.”

Niederwimmer settles on describing the Didache as a “rule for ecclesiastical praxis, a handbook of church morals, ritual and discipline.” These three aspects – church morals, ritual, and discipline – relate directly to the major sections of the Didache itself as described by Niederwimmer. Still, he calls the Didache the first installment of what would later become known as “church orders.” Categorizing the Didache using a label for a genre that was not yet established seems unfair and misleading. If the Didache was the “first church order,” then it was a document patently unlike any other in its time and context.

Modern era attempts to define the church orders genre, such as those by Faile, Metzger and Steimer, often failed to describe the variety of works within a framework of common features. Joseph Mueller discourages the use of “church order” as a genre. Mueller opts for labelling these early church documents as “a tradition of ecclesiological exegesis,” suggesting that these early church documents are tradition-bearing documents that reframe Old Testament tradition in light of unfolding understanding of Jesus as Messiah. “The authors of the patristic church orders,” according to Mueller, “wanted, in the tradition of biblical-rabbinical legal development, to represent under the aspect of continuity their adaptations of the biblical

17 Niederwimmer, 1.
heritage to current church needs.”¹⁹ Mueller’s reclassification of the Didache and other similar early church documents in terms of tradition rather than genre opens the discussion to focus more on their function than their form.

Varner works toward an origination hypothesis of the Didache from the angle of effective history: how the document came to be used in later church history. He points to the text of Didache 7:1 – instructing the reader to baptize “after you have said all these things beforehand” – and to references to the Didache by patristic writers as evidence of its use in catechetical training. For instance, in his famous Festal Letter, Athanasius places the Didache among the books “appointed by the fathers to be read by those who are now coming to us and desire to be instructed in the doctrine of godliness.”²⁰ In addition, Varner references the discovery in Egypt of a leaf from a miniature papyrus codex that dates from the fourth century. This codex, only five by six centimeters in size, could have easily fit in the hand of an aspiring disciple, making it a literal “handbook” of the faith.²¹

Milavec builds upon this understanding of the Didache as a training manual. Rather than being used primarily a guide that would have been placed into the hands of the novice, Milavec suggests that the Didache was a document for use by a group of mentors. These mentors were likely the group of leaders the Didache identifies as teachers. Multiple mentors, both male and female, would have lived within a given community, fulfilling the expressed role of guiding potential converts into an understanding of how to live faithfully in the community. The

¹⁹ Mueller, 343.
Didache in written form, would have guided the one-on-one conversations between the mentor and apprentice. Over time, through these conversations, a mentor would lead an apprentice from having little to no knowledge of the way of Jesus into an intimate understanding of what it meant to follow Jesus and to live in Christian community.

Recent scholarly work in the field of orality studies also sheds light on early Christian traditions and documents. In the study of the Gospels, James D. G. Dunn has argued for a turn away from form critical endeavors to isolate an original text and a turn towards affirming the oral tradition that lies behind the written texts. An approach sensitive to oral tradition does not “look behind the variations for some original (and therefore more authentic) version or source,” According to Dunn. “Rather, [it] recognizes the character of the Jesus tradition as oral tradition, where appropriateness of performance to context is not a departure from authenticity but integral to the tradition’s living character.”

Dunn then extends his critique beyond the Gospels to the New Testament epistles, the Apostolic Fathers, and the Nag Hammadi texts, saying: “In my judgment, discussion of the possible allusions to and use of the Jesus tradition...has been seriously flawed by overdependence on the literary paradigm.” The high illiteracy level of the first century population, particularly within the working class that comprised a significant percentage of these early Christian communities, requires an approach

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22 Dunn, James D. G., *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 3rd ed. (London: Canterbury, 2006), 73. The author also asserts that such approach takes significant discipline from those who read and analyze texts from the perspective of a culture so permeated by the written word. The oral culture that provides the context for the New Testament writings “requires us *consciously to resist* the involuntary predisposition to conceive that process in literary terms and consciously to re-envision that process in oral terms” (Dunn, 58, italics mine).

23 Dunn, 73.
to the Didache that is sensitive to its oral culture. If the primary function of the Didache was to prepare potential converts for life in the community of faith, then this preparation likely took place through oral communication.\textsuperscript{24}

In his 2003 landmark study of the Didache numbering nearly a thousand pages, Aaron Milavec lays out a framework for understanding the Didache as a training manual for Gentile converts. Response to Milavec’s proposal has been mixed, with some critics pushing back against the liberties he takes in producing a gender inclusive translation of the Didache, in outlining the socio-political consequences of joining the early Christian community, or in suggesting modern applications of the Didache that seem overly political. Few have taken issue, however, with the depth of Milavec’s analysis of the Didache or his compelling argument that it functioned a training manual for apprenticeship in the new Christian community.

Prior to Milavec’s study, there was already widespread support for the notion that the Didache was a sort of catechism used with potential converts, who might have even memorized its contents, leading up to their baptism. Milavec expanded this line of thinking, suggesting that the training manual was first an oral tradition and later a written document that was used by personal discipleship coaches, who trained potential converts in the Christian faith. In his words, “The Didache is a practical guide for spiritual mentors who undertake the progressive reorientation of gentiles... Once one was called, the Didache understood that face-to-face

\textsuperscript{24} O’Loughlin continues this line of thinking: “Note that teaching is not something you read, but something to which you listen. There is always a real community of a teacher speaking and a disciple or disciples listening... Moreover, it should remind us not to push our assumptions about reading, which is essentially a private activity, and books back into this period. The Didache was a document that was memorized and heard and also had its sounds recorded on papyrus for safekeeping” (O’Loughlin, 114).
mentoring was the divinely ordained process whereby human transformation took place.”

The written Didache likely developed as a means of standardizing and preserving the oral tradition of one-on-one discipleship training in the earliest churches.

Within the text of the Didache, numerous words, phrases, and passages point to an understanding of the document as an oral training manual. Early on, the Didache introduces the Two Ways material with: “concerning these words” (Didache 1:3). Whenever the Didache cites material from the Hebrew Scriptures or refers to the gospel traditions, the emphasis is on what has been “said” rather than what has been “written.” In addition, the novice disciple trembles “at the words you have heard” (Didache 3:8), honors “the one speaking to you the word of God” (Didache 4:1), and is baptized after “having said all of these things beforehand” (Didache 7:1). The language of the Didache points toward its oral transmission and its function as a guide by which a mentor trained a novice disciple.

Milavec’s larger argument may take some amount of liberty in reconstructing the socio-political implications of a gentile convert joining the emerging Christian community. However, his depiction of the apprenticeship system that might have been the backdrop to the Didache remains compelling. In such a case, the genre of training manual holds well with the effective history of the document.

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25 Milavec (2003), 845, 854.
26 For an in depth treatment, see Milavec (2003), 70-99.
27 See Didache 1:6, 9:5, 14:3, and 16:7 regarding Hebrew Scripture citations and Didache 8:2, 11:3, and 15:3-4 regarding references to the gospel.
28 In fact, William Varner, who disagrees with Milavec on a host of interpretive matters, suggests that all Didache scholarship going forward must begin with the field-changing work of Milavec. See Varner (2007), 58.
Taking into account the preceding comments, the following statement provides in summary the position taken on date, location, and genre for the purposes of this thesis:

*The Didache is rooted in an oral tradition within the first century Jewish Christian context. It served as a guide for the one-on-one training of gentile converts to Christianity, introducing them to and preparing them for life in Christian community. It took written form during the second half of the first century, gained a wide audience, was considered to have near-scriptural authority, and was actively used in Christian communities around the Mediterranean region.*

The practices developed by the teachers of the Didache and the communities they served were rooted in both Jewish tradition and early Jesus material. At the same time, they also responded to the specific social needs and circumstances of the emerging Christian community, particularly the potential gentile converts. The way of life expressed in the Didache cannot be separated from the Jewish traditions that had long been revered by the community. Neither could it have endured without an infusion of the good news and the eschatological expectations that these believers had encountered in Jesus. So, as a new era emerged, these early Christian communities responded with great flexibility, shaping the rules and practices of their changing community in ways that echoed and built upon tradition. Niederwimmer captures the essence of this phenomenon when he writes that the Didache “adopted the tradition and adapted it.”

So, how did the Didache appropriate scripture and other sources? Is there some amount of compositional unity to the document or is it just a rudimentary collection of rules and rituals? To which previous traditions, written and oral, did it turn? To what is the Didache

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29 Niederwimmer, 63.
referring when it speaks of the “commandments of the Lord” or the “gospel of the Lord?”

These questions and others will be addressed in the following section on the Didache and its sources.

The Didache’s Compositional Unity and Use of Sources

Over the past century, the vast majority of Didache scholarship has focused on source critical analysis of the Bryennios manuscript, various Didache fragments, and the proposed written and oral sources behind the text. Scholars debate the number of editors who redacted the document, how many disparate pieces the editors patched together, and whether the Didache relied on extant copies of any of the canonical gospels. Often, they present the Didache as a collection of marginally connected sources, pieced together haphazardly, with little editorial acumen or originality.

The Didache, like any work of literature, is the product of a specific time and place and draws inspiration from the surrounding culture, long-standing customs, and of course other written and oral material. In the end, the final product of the Didache had to “make sense” to its original audience. It needed to be stitched together and shaped in such a way that it did have compositional unity for the communities who used it. That it gained such widespread usage in the early Christian world suggests that the audience of these early Christian communities found it a compelling and useful resource.

Niederwimmer makes his “adopt and adapt” observation specifically with respect to the Two Ways material in Didache 1-6, but this process of adopting and adapting accurately
characterizes many aspects of the Didache, including elements in each of the major segments of the training manual. Niederwimmer hypothesizes four separate pre-existing traditions\(^{30}\) that an editor compiles, Christianizes and/or adapts for the context of the Roman world, and spatters with occasional commentary. Milavec and Varner suppose much more original material (or at least originality in the use of existing material) in the Didache, with an author or multiple authors drawing on existing tradition, but adapting it throughout for their new context.

Milavec identifies what he terms an “organizational thread” within the Didache which lays out this comprehensive training plan with a “marvelous unity hidden below the surface from the beginning to the end.”\(^ {31}\) He argues for a gradual, natural progression throughout the sections of the Didache, which intentionally guided a mentor’s training sessions with a new convert. Setting the Didache within the social context of the first century, Milavec argues that the transition for a gentile into the Christian faith and community would have been a difficult one. Leaving behind the gods of her family for a strange and marginalized cult, a convert would have faced estrangement from parents, the loss of status in the wider community, and possibly the loss of employment. Thus, becoming completely engaged in the Christian community was essential, as fellow Christians would function as a support system and de facto family for the new convert.

\(^{30}\) Niederwimmer proposes four documents that a “Didachist” pieces together, adding only minimal original commentary. The four pre-existing source documents to which he refers are: “a superficially Christianized, originally Jewish document \textit{de duabus viis}; a (written or oral) archaic liturgical tradition concerning baptism and Eucharist, a (probably written) also archaic tradition concerning the reception of itinerant charismatics; and finally: a brief apocalyptic description of the events of the end time,” (Niederwimmer, 43-44).

\(^{31}\) Milavec, x.
Milavec understands the Didache to be the mechanism by which seasoned mentors helped novice converts to successful navigate that difficult transition into the community. In Milavec’s natural progression, the Two Ways material leads the novice into an understanding of the requirements for Christian living. This section of the teaching culminates with baptism and being welcomed into the community. Then later sections of the Didache would have guided a continuing apprenticeship as the new convert continued to learn and grow as a part of the community.\footnote{Milavec’s summary statement about the unifying, comprehensive training plan which mentors used “to train gentiles for full and active inclusion within the Didache communities of the mid-first century” is as follows: One overhears a candidate being trained from scratch by a mentor who becomes his beloved “father” or “mother.” One witnesses the fasting and the solemn rite of baptism, preferably by immersion in flowing water. One overhears the daily prayers and the weekly Eucharist – both of which are sketched out in full detail. One learns how visiting prophets were a blessing and a danger at the same time. One comes to understand how manual work, the sharing of resources, and the cultivation of gratitude worked together to provide a mainstay for individual well being within a community. One learns how the confession of failings, the correction of backsliders, and the shunning of recalcitrant members worked to maintain the community’s standards of excellence. Finally, one discovers how a community poised on the threshold of the Kingdom of God could fashion its daily life sharing the same passionate expectation of God’s future that Jesus have formerly preached to the Jewish peasants and fishermen of Galilee. (Milavec, 2003, ix)} Certain aspects of the Didache’s teachings would not have been appropriate for pre-baptismal understanding.\footnote{See, for example Milavec (2004), 61-62 for a discussion of the teachings on food prohibitions.} Other rituals and behavior patterns were more properly taught once the convert had entered fully into the community. In this way, suggests Milavec, the Didache moves the potential convert along with great pastoral sensitivity to the broader context of the novice’s personal life journey.

Varner cites specific examples of the Didache quoting Old Testament sources, Jewish traditions and liturgy, and potential New Testament sources in either oral or early written forms. He supports the theories of the Didache’s dependence on or at least knowledge of the
Gospel of Matthew. Milavec, on the other hand, does not accept the claims that Didache relies on a written gospel of Matthew. He does, however, suggest that the Didache may have known an early collection of Jesus sayings that served as a foundational source for both the Didache and the gospel of Matthew. In addition, the Didache clearly builds upon first century Jewish practices, like table prayers and baptismal preferences, as it shapes new practices for the early Christian communities.

The first six chapters of the Didache build upon a Two Ways tradition (oral or written) already evident in first century Judaism. Though an extant text exist of the Two Ways tractate that might have been a source to the Didache does not exist, similar texts have been discovered from the time period, notably, the Manual of Discipline found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Niederwimmer suggests that the original form of the Jewish Two Ways was lost to history, although a Christian recension had been created from it. The writers of the Didache, says Niederwimmer, utilized this already-Christianized version of the Two Ways document. Its contents delineate two paths between which human beings must choose: one that leads toward life, and the other toward death. The Didache frames the Two Ways material with content from the Sermon on the Mount, reinterpreting a Jewish ethical treatise in light of the teachings of Jesus.

The Didache also references the Hebrew Bible on a number of instances, throughout each section of the document. In Didache 1-6, quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures may have
already been embedded within a written Two Ways tractate that preceded the Didache. The writers of the Didache clearly reference the Ten Commandments in Didache 2:2-3, but six of the original commandments are left out while six context-specific new ones are added. In the liturgical section, Didache 7-10, Isaiah’s image of the messiah as servant echoes through the communion prayers of the Didache. The Didache community assigns Isaiah’s servant imagery to Jesus. A citation from Malachi about confession and sacrifice is set within the context of the communion instructions of the Didache. The apocalyptic material in Didache 16 includes a citation of Zechariah 14:5 and an allusion to the Lord “coming atop the clouds of heaven,” which echoes and reinterprets Daniel 7 in the context of the community’s understanding of Jesus.

In addition to quoting and echoing the Hebrew Scriptures and a Two Ways source, the Didache also draws from sources of Jesus sayings. This source might have been the finished version of Matthew and/or Luke, some early form of the gospels, or oral traditions that were preserving and retelling the Jesus story. Most of these Jesus-material references occur in the baptismal catechesis, specifically the part of the Didache known as the “sectio evangelica” (Didache 1:3b-2:1), and the apocalyptic material (Didache 16). Passages that also appear in the gospel of Matthew are quoted, though not in order. Instead, they are freely adapted to suit the didactic purposes of the Didache. Almost all of the instances in the baptismal catechesis

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34 Scholars differ as to whether a written Two Ways source might have been “Christianized” before the compilation of the Didache or whether the adaptations were original to the writer of the Didache.
35 A more detailed discussion of the Didache’s adaptation of the Ten Commandments will be offered in the next chapter.
36 Specifically, Didache 9:2-3.
(Didache 1-6) are excerpts from the Sermon on the Mount. In a similar way, almost all of the references in the apocalyptic material resonate with Jesus’ words in Matthew 24. That the primary quotations from a “gospel” source can be found in Matthew 5-7 or Matthew 24 lend credence to the theory that the Didache and Matthew shared common sources.

If the Didache were privy to an extant copy of Matthew’s complete gospel, then quotations from throughout the gospel would likely have made their way into the training manual. That being said, it is not difficult to imagine that the Gospel of Matthew and the Didache grew up together, both documents shaping and being shaped by the same (network of) communities. Jefford suggests that, rather than the Didache depending upon Matthew's gospel or vice versa, perhaps “Matthew and the Didache share the same exegetical tradition.”

Jesus commissioned his followers, in Matthew 28, to go into all the world and make disciples; the Didache was the training manual Matthew's communities used to undertake the task of disciple-making.

The Didache also draws inspiration from Jewish practices and liturgy. The prayers of Didache 9-10 have their roots in Jewish table prayers – with specific forms used for opening and closing a ritual meal. The doxological portion added to the Lord’s Prayer (Didache 8:2) as well as the table prayers may have roots in a unison response by those gathered around the Jewish dinner table. The thanksgiving prayer over the cup has direct parallels with traditional Jewish wine blessings. The prayer for the bread is an extended riff on the theme of dispersal and

\[37\] Jefford, 339.
\[38\] Niederwimmer, 145.
gathering in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the prayer that concludes the ritual meal (Didache 10) is based on the Jewish prayer known as the Birkat Ha-Mazon. Even the act of baptism as depicted in the Didache bears strong similarities to Jewish proselyte baptism.

Two other potential sources for the Didache deserve mention: the Pauline epistles and Sirach. The types of leaders identified in the Didache community – apostles, prophets, and teachers – echo the types of leadership outlined in Paul’s epistles. That the Didache shows no other apparent awareness of the Pauline material suggests that this configuration of leadership must have been prevalent in the first century Jewish Christian world, known both to the Pauline and Didache communities. A strange saying concerning “alms sweating in the hand” (Didache 1:6) also raises questions about additional source material. The phrase echoes a passage in Sirach, but a quotation of this line by Augustine seems to originate with the Didache text.

With regard to each of these diverse sources, the Didache reaches back into the existing tradition and then innovates with it in unique ways that address the circumstances of its evolving community. The chapters that follow will explore in greater detail a number of specific instances in which the Didache adopts and adapts prior Jewish traditions and Jesus material. In each case, the Didache builds its arguments for proper Christian living on truths that were central to the Jewish traditions of its community as reinterpreted in light of Jesus. Though the

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39 Van de Sandt and Flusser, 311.
40 Niederwimmer, 155ff.
41 Van de Sandt and Flusser, 331-364, offers a superb treatment of the leadership categories in the Didache and early Judaism.
42 Varner explains this phrase as a misquotation of Sirach 12:1, used by the authors of the Didache an example of a behavior antithetical to the generosity taught in the preceding verses. Niederwimmer, however, suggests that “Latin writers from Augustin onward know the saying in a form closely related to the Didache version; moreover, they frequently quote it as Scripture,” Niederwimmer, 84.
Didache does rely heavily on established sources from the Jewish tradition and from the emerging Jesus movement, the manner in which it uses those sources to reshape the community for a new day reveals significant creativity and innovation. In other words, the Didache was so steeped in Jewish tradition and so situated in its first century Greco-Roman culture that it excelled at innovation, but from a starting point of deep and rich tradition.
Chapter Two: Life – The Two Ways (Didache 1-6)

In a small Christian enclave in fourth century Egypt, two tradesmen walk home from their shop side-by-side. As they journey down the road together, the older of the two begins to elaborate on the Way of Life that he has been following for some time. The younger man, an apprentice in the Way, had been intrigued with his coworker’s faithful living and, as he learned more, sought to enter into the process of becoming part of this Christian community. Over the coming months, through an intense apprenticeship program, he hopes to learn more of what it means to follow Jesus and then to join the community of people who have committed together to live out the Way of Life.

Arriving at the mentor’s home, the apprentice is invited in, and the two men sit down to share a cup of tea. The master teacher pulls from his pocket a small notebook – a training guide – and reads: “On the one hand, the way of life is this: first, you will love the God who made you; second, your neighbor as yourself.” A lively discussion commences with questions from the apprentice about the gods of his family and who qualifies as neighbor. The mentor’s response soon leaves the pages of the training manual and delves into the stories of Jesus and the mentor’s own faith experience. The road ahead will not be easy for the young disciple. He will be required to leave behind much of what he has known in life. With the help of the community and of his mentor, who has gradually become like a spiritual father to him, he will have the resources he needs to make the transition.

Several years earlier, another master teacher bent over a simple desk, and focused his attention on the tiny papyrus in front of him. The words he copied onto the page were no more
than a quarter of an inch in height but they held great significance for his community. This scribe preserved for his community the teaching that had been handed down to him. As the tiny community struggled to live out the Way of Life, they developed a dynamic method for teaching coverts what it meant to follow Jesus. This scribe knew that a mentor teacher would receive this copy, upon its completion. It would be used to guide a generation of new converts through the apprenticeship process that would bring new believers into full participation in the Christian community. So, carefully and with great joy, he put reed pen to papyrus: “There are Two Ways: one of life and one of death! And there is a great difference between the Two Ways...”

The First Christian “Handbook”

The imaginative rendering of the mentor and apprentice relationship, presented above, engages in some amount of conjecture regarding the origin and use of the Didache. However, the oldest intact fragment of the Didache, a tiny papyrus codex discovered in Egypt, provides insight into one way the Didache might have been used in early Christian communities. This Didache fragment known as Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1782, or in Didache studies simply as “P,” is a miniature codex consisting of two folio dating from the fourth century. Archaeologists Bernard Grenfeld and Arthur Hunt uncovered “P” along with thousands of other ancient documents during excavations in 1897 and 1903 in the vicinity of Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. In 1922, Grenfeld and Hunt released an edited collection of these papyri, which included full texts and pictures.

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1 Niederwimmer, 21.
The ragged remnant “P” contains the beginning chapters of the Didache. On the front and back of the single intact leaf, a page measuring just five by six centimeters, are written the words of Didache 1-3. According to William Varner, this miniature codex hints at the way in which the Didache was being used by early Christians. A scribe had copied these verses, and likely a longer segment of the Didache, onto a papyrus folio that would have easily fit into a person’s hands. A potential convert or a master teacher might have carried it with them as they went about their daily business or tucked it into a pocket as they worked or traveled. In this form, the Didache was literally the first “handbook” for the early Christian community.

Scholarly consensus affirms the notion that at least the first six chapters of the Didache, if not the entire document, likely functioned as an early catechetical training document that particularly addressed Gentile converts who sought to become part of the Christian community. One of the strongest internal clues supporting this understanding of the Didache comes in the first line of the seventh chapter. Didache 7:1 reads: “And concerning baptism, baptize in this way: after you have said all these things beforehand…” The chapters preceding almost certainly served as a manual for prospective converts, instructing them in the central tenets of living a Christian life.

As mentioned in the introduction, much of the scholarship of the past two centuries assigned the Didache to a literary category called “church orders.” Actually, the Didache serves

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4 Niederwimmer summarizes this consensus by saying: “In the overall context of the Didache, the Two Ways schema acquires an additional and concrete specification. The educational lecture is directed to the catechumens, and the decision before which they are placed is now whether to become Christians,” 59.
as a prototype for later so-called church orders. Later church orders documents, like *Apostolic Constitutions*, as well as early monastic orders, such as *Rule of the Master*, absorbed or adapted content from the Didache. These church orders were addressed specifically to church leaders or those who had taken monastic vows. The Didache, on the other hand, seemingly addresses the community of faith at large – men and women, lay and clergy, all who would choose to follow in the Way of Life.

In one of the most compelling offerings of recent Didache scholarship, *The Didache: Faith, Hope and Life of the Earliest Christian Communities*, Aaron Milavec envisions the Didache as the focal document for a system of spiritual apprenticeship. Apprenticeship would have been a familiar process in the ancient world, where a person seeking to become a professional craftsperson – a potter, weaver, or smith, for example – would have studied under a recognized master practitioner. In an apprenticeship system, “novices gradually and progressively assimilate the performance skills of a master-trainer.”5 Milavec suggests that the sort of training needed for a disciple to develop the capacity to “love those who hate you” (1:3) or to “judge with justice” (4:3) must involve intentional mentoring over a period of time.

As a manual for training or apprenticeship, the Didache certainly would have fit within the model of Jesus’ own teaching or training of the twelve disciples.6 The Greek word *didache* most often is translated “teaching” rather than “training.” The modern connotation of the English word teaching, however, emphasizes the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student

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5 Milavec (2003), 71.
6 Niederwimmer writes: “It appears that in the communities of the Didache the offshoots of the Jesus-disciple movement are still alive” (Niederwimmer, 54).
rather than the nurture of the student toward a deep and lasting transformation in identity, belief, and behavior. On the other hand, the gospel narratives show Jesus calling disciples to follow him, to take his yoke, and to learn from him.

In practice, following Jesus requires leaving behind a former way of life and taking on another, internalizing Jesus’ teaching, emulating his way of life, and becoming agents of God’s expanding kingdom. Matthew particularly uses the Greek verb didasko to describe the sort of embodied, ongoing teaching or training that Jesus provides to his disciples as well as the sort of teaching or training that they were then to provide to “all nations” in fulfilment of Jesus’ Great Commission. The Didache communities sought to emulate the same sort of intense, transformative apprenticeship the disciples experienced under Jesus himself as they prepared potential converts for baptism. In the context of Christian discipleship, then and now, “training” might be a more descriptive and accurate translation of the Greek word didache.

The Two Ways Material

The first six chapters of the Didache form a pre-baptismal training guide that prepared Gentile converts for full inclusion in the Christian community. The content of this training finds roots in and builds upon a motif familiar in both the ancient Jewish and Greek cultures: the Two Ways. The Didache uses the Two Ways motif to develop and define a common rule of life that would shape the identity of the whole Christian community and every individual of which it was comprised. The first six chapters of the Didache set before its audience a clear choice between
two pathways in life. The Way of Life is presented first and in greater detail (Didache 1-4), followed by a catalogue of destructive behaviors that comprise the Way of Death (Didache 5).

Source critical scholarship of the twentieth century, assumed that there was an extant Two Ways document, now lost to history, available to the writers of the Didache. Studies sought to reconstruct the Two Ways documents that predated the Didache and to demonstrate the reliance of the Didache on one or more pre-existing documents. The writers of the Didache, according to this way of thinking, then copied, spliced and amended existing writings with various layers of their own original commentary. Often, the writers of the Didache are presented as piecing together older documents in a patchwork manner, with little or no cohesiveness carrying through the whole document.

Niederwimmer, in the *Hermeneia* commentary, provides a classic example of this approach. In the introductory chapter, Niederwimmer lays out the case for an independent Two Ways tractate that predates the formation of the Didache. “This model of interpretation,” he writes, “sometimes called the ‘basic document hypothesis,’ appeared early in the history of Didache research, was presented in the widest variety of versions, and dominates research today.”

Niederwimmer’s distilled version of the basic document hypothesis begins with a pre-Christian, Jewish Two Ways tractate that existed before the time of Jesus. This hypothesized tractate was then modified by early Christian writers and served as a foundational document for Barnabas. A second Christian revision of the tractate, more strongly Christianized and

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7 Niederwimmer, 35.
8 Even this primitive Jewish form, suggests Niederwimmer, was a compilation of other hypothesized, earlier writings
expanded, became the basis for the Two Ways section of the Didache and the Doctrina Apostolorum.⁹

Then, claims Niederwimmer, following a number of twentieth-century studies, an editor who he calls the Didachist: 1) reinterprets the tractate as a baptismal catechesis, 2) more strongly Christianizes the tractate by inserting an evangelical section, 3) makes other revisions that clumsily divide the teachings into first command and second command sections, and 4) adds an epilogue to the original tractate to interpret its significance and to address additional problems not covered by the source document.¹⁰ These significant editorial changes by the Didachist win no praise from Niederwimmer who concludes: “It remains obvious that the instruction provided in chaps. 1-6 is incomplete (in spite of the additions by the Didachist). Still, it appears that the Didachist, to whom systematic theological reflection is something foreign, did not give any particular thought to this limitation.”¹¹

More recent scholarly treatments suggest that the writers of the Didache were working with a pre-existing Two Ways tradition or motif, though not necessarily with a formal written Two Ways document. In addition, these studies tend to assume that the entirety of the Didache must have displayed an internal cohesion evident to its original communities. William Varner writes about the Two Ways as a Jewish literary motif, highlighting the overall unity of the Didache’s version of the Two Ways.¹² Thomas O’Loughlin makes connections between the

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⁹ See the diagram in Niederwimmer, 40.
¹⁰ This list summarizes Niederwimmer’s discussion on pp. 44-45.
¹¹ Niederwimmer, 59.
¹² See Varner (2007), 61. The author argues for a Christian unity in the Two Ways material – particularly in a number of phrases and verses that do not seem to have a Jewish character: 2:7, 3:10, 4:1,2,8,10,14.
material in this section and that of the both the Deuteronomic covenant and the words of Jesus.\textsuperscript{13} David Flusser traces the Two Ways motif through ancient Greek philosophical writings contemporary to the Didache. Aaron Milavec chooses the terminology “Two Ways mentality” to describe an ethical mindset that permeated the ancient world, familiar to Jews and Greeks and claimed as their own by early Christians.\textsuperscript{14}

The Two Ways metaphor was deeply ingrained in Jewish literature and life. From Deuteronomy to the wisdom literature to the prophets, the Hebrew Scriptures consistently returned to the metaphor of Two Ways as an ethical framework for life.\textsuperscript{15} Early Christians embraced the image of life as a pathway or journey, even becoming known as people “of the Way.” Flusser makes the case that the mentality of the Two Ways also permeated the Greek philosophical world. He writes: “The Two Ways device was widespread in the early Mediterranean world. The usages of the metaphor are quite common in classical antiquity.”\textsuperscript{16} Van de Sandt and Flusser point to the myth “The Choice of Heracles,” in which Heracles must choose between the way of virtue and the way of vice, as the best known example of this metaphor. “In light of this evidence and other data suggesting the wide popularity of the Two

\textsuperscript{13} O’Loughlin contrasts the narratives of the Gospels with the teaching of the Didache. Much of Two Ways material can also be found in the gospels - woven into narrative. Here in Didache it is simply laid out as the rule of life for a disciple of Jesus. See O’Loughlin, 38-39.
\textsuperscript{14} Milavec (2003), 61ff.
\textsuperscript{15} For example, Deuteronomy 30, Psalm 1, Proverbs 1-9, and Jeremiah 21:8. From Varner (2004), 57: “It should be noted that the ‘Two Ways’ ethical pattern is very Jewish and has deep roots in Jewish Scripture... a literary pattern ingrained in pre-Christian Jewish thinking and expression.”
\textsuperscript{16} Van de Sandt and Flusser, 58.
Ways metaphor,” they argue, “it would seem reasonable to think that the instruction in Did 1-6 is just another witness to the flourishing of this type of teaching in Greek antiquity.”¹⁷

If the Two Ways motif was indeed ubiquitous in Judaism, early Christianity, and throughout the Mediterranean, then the complexities of source theory may not offer the clearest understanding of the development of the Didache. Instead of relying on a hypothetical Two Ways document, of which we have no record, perhaps the writers of the Didache simply made use of a widely known pedagogical form present in both their Jewish heritage and in their contemporary Greek philosophical milieu. In this way of thinking, the writers of the Didache drew on a rich Jewish tradition, regardless of whether there existed a prior, written Jewish Two Ways document. They adopted a rich metaphor from their shared tradition and then shifted and built upon it, adapting it for their context. The Didache’s writers reached back into the Jewish tradition and scriptures, reshaped their message in light of Jesus’ teachings, and created the core of a training program. That program was then put into practice in the context of a relationship between a master teacher and a novice student.

In its first main section, the exposition of the Two Ways (Didache 1-6), the Didache reshapes the commands of the Hebrew Scriptures in light of the community’s understanding of Jesus and in view of engaging potential gentile converts within the context of Greek society. What defined membership in the Christian community was a shared commitment to follow in the Way of Life, which was the Way of Jesus. The first six chapters of the Didache articulate for prospective converts exactly what the Way of Life entails. Milavec outlines the progression of

¹⁷ Ibid.
the Two Ways teaching in what he identifies as a “pragmatic, pastoral progression” by which 
the novice is prepared for the difficulties of taking on this new way of life, equipped with a 
reconfigured Decalogue as the basis for right living, and then schooled in the house rules of the 
new community.¹⁸ A passage from each of these three movements within the Two Ways 
material will be considered below.

**Framing the Two Ways Instruction – Didache 1:1-3a and 6:1-2¹⁹**

1:1 There are Two Ways: one of life and one of death!  
And there is a great difference between the Two Ways.

1:2 [A] On the one hand, then, the way of life is this:  
[1] first: you will love the God who made you;  
[B] On the other hand:  
as many things as you wish not to happen to you,  
likewise do not do to another.

1:3 And concerning these words, the teaching is this:

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6:1 See to it that no one leads you astray from this way of teaching,  
Since he is teaching you apart from God.

6:2 [1] For, on the one hand, if you are able to bear  
the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect;  
[2] but if, on the other hand, you are not able,  
that which you are able, do this.

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¹⁸ Milavec (2003), 103.
¹⁹ All extended quotes from the Didache are from William Varner’s translation in *The Way of the Didache*, 28-39.
These two passages frame the primary teachings of the Two Ways section of the Didache, which prepare a candidate to be baptized and fully integrated into the Didache community. These verses create an inclusio that grounds the six chapters of instruction in the commands of Jesus to his followers. All of the Two Ways material should be read in light of these bracketing statements, which are employed by the writers of the Didache to set the context for their reworking of the Two Ways tradition.

Chapter one offers a simple, straight-forward introduction to the training material. “There are Two Ways: one of life, and one of death.” Human beings are confronted with an existential choice between two ways of living. The verses from chapter one offer little room for compromise. The initiate to whom the training is offered stands at a fork in the road and must choose. As Niederwimmer suggests, “Accepting baptism is connected with the acceptance of a certain way of life, the end of which is eschatological life.”20 Making an informed, deliberate choice would have been of utmost importance given the social and cultural setting of the Didache. A convert would likely have faced alienation from family, friends, and perhaps from other arenas of public life. The first stage of the apprenticeship process would have made clear the expectations of following Jesus and becoming a part of the Christian community.

The Didache’s expression of the Two Ways mentality differs markedly from other first century expressions, particularly those of the Qumran community and the Epistle of Barnabas. The Didache avoids the dualism of the Manual of Discipline, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the

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20 Niederwimmer, 63.
*Didascalia Apostolorum*, which invoke angels, demons, dark and light. Instead, the Didache retains a continuity with Hebrew Scriptures with regard to the Two Ways. For the Didache community, the Two Ways material provides instruction in wisdom, not a call to cosmic warfare. The apocalyptic struggle between cosmic powers and the eschatological motivation for ethical action, so apparent in the articulation of the Two Ways motif in Barnabas and Qumran, do not appear whatsoever in the Didache’s rendering. “Each particular shape of the Two Ways tradition in the later recensions represents an independent witness to this ancient tradition.”

The shape of the Didache’s recension is grounded in the practical ethics of Jesus.

One of the Didache’s first significant innovations on Jewish scripture comes in Didache 1:2. The writers revise the Shema, a central passage that shaped the identity and the daily ritual life of the faithful Jew. Rather than directly quoting the great command from Deuteronomy 6:5, “you shall love the Lord your God,” the Didache reframes the command saying, “love the God that made you.” The Didache shifts from the covenantal language of the Shema to a more open formulation that would have been accessible and applicable to a Gentile convert. This reformulation of a core Jewish scripture demonstrates a missionary impulse in the Didache community, made manifest in the language chosen to speak of God.

Immediately following Didache 1:3b comes instruction on what comprises the Way of Life from the perspective of the Didache community. This part of the Didache, often referred to as the *sectio evangelica*, exhibits many similarities to the message of the Sermon on the Mount.

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21 Van de Sandt and Flusser, 59-63.
22 Van de Sandt and Flusser, 70.
These exhortations firmly ground the moral teachings of the Didache community in the Jewish tradition, which was both embraced and transformed by Jesus. “The early church embraced a Jesus who was both Jewish and original at the same time. Hence the entire content of the Way of Life can be thought of as both Jewish and original at the same time.”

As the writers of the Didache lay out the contents of the Way of Life, the commandments or teachings of Jesus are central. Jesus’ sayings and stories would have been transmitted orally for a number of years, compiled into written documents, and later fashioned into the Gospel narratives. The Didache’s heavy use of sayings from the Sermon on the Mount along with its resonance with Matthew’s vocabulary, give credence to notion that the Didache and the Gospel of Matthew were taking shape in the same communities. The Didache’s explication of the Way of Life begins with and gives great prominence to speaking well of those who insult, praying for enemies, and fasting for those who persecute – each of which is also addressed in the Sermon on the Mount. Milavec offers a pastoral explanation for why the Didache begins with these instructions: “The abusive treatment suggested in Didache 1:4 is expressly directed toward new members, who, it might be surmised, would ordinarily be expected to meet resistance to their new religious commitments on the part of family and friends.”

O’Loughlin puts it this way: “This teaching about loving and forgiving enemies... is presented as the ordinary teaching that every Christian had to take as part and parcel of following the Way of Life.”

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23 Milavec (2003), 111.
24 Milavec (2003), 113.
25 O’Loughlin, 35.
After four chapters delineating the specifics of the Way of Life and one chapter concerning the Way of Death, the writers provide summary comments in Didache 6:1-2. The first verse functions conservatively – to protect the teachings recorded in the training manual as a sacred text. The second verse refers to the entire teaching as “the whole yoke of the Lord.” This phrase has spurred much scholarly debate. Draper argues that the writers of the Didache intended observance of the whole Torah. He points to connections with Matthew’s gospel, and Jesus as the fulfilment of Torah to bolster this argument.26 Internal logic, however, would suggest that “the whole yoke of the Lord” means either: the new law of Jesus or the “Way of Life” defined in Didache 1:2 and the commentary that elaborates on the way of life Didache 1:3-4:14. Niederwimmer affirms this position: “The words of Jesus provide...the normative values and behaviors for the community; the ‘regula Christi’ and ‘the gospel’ are interchangeable as [the writer] speaks of the ‘commands of the Lord’ as the foundation for the community’s way of life.”27 The “whole yoke of the Lord,” then, likely refers to the Didache’s restructured commandments, which are rooted in the Decalogue and the great commandments and reinterpreted through the lens of Jesus. In this reconfiguration, the Didache practices traditioned innovation.

After a lengthy exposition of the Two Ways, grounded in the moral imperatives of Jesus’ teachings, the writers of the Didache conclude this section with a puzzling phrase: “if you are not able [to bear the whole yoke of the Lord], that which you are able, do this” (Didache 6:2).

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26 Draper, 356-357.
27 Niederwimmer, 50-51.
These verses seem to concede that a person unable to bear the entire yoke of the Lord ought to focus on the aspects of the commandments that he or she is able to bear. Niederwimmer interprets this passage as an acknowledgement by the writers of the Didache, and implicitly by the Didache community, of “the radical nature of the Lord’s commandments.” The Didache, in the Two Ways section, issues a radical call to discipleship, with little room for compromise when it comes to what is required to follow Jesus.

Yet, with a pragmatic bent, the writers of the Didache seem to understand that individual believers progress toward the fulfillment of that call gradually and at differing paces. Milavec captures the essence of these final verses in the Two Ways section:

> It would seem doubtful, therefore, that the Way of Life presented to novices can be anything less than the whole way of perfection to which their entire life will be dedicated... Those who are able to bear it will be perfected while those who are unable to bear it begin by doing what they can and, by and by, they gradually become capable of bearing the whole yoke... When it comes to defining what constitutes ‘the rules of the Lord’ (4:13) and ‘the way of training’ (6:1), there is no room for half measures. When it comes to applying these things to individual persons, however, allowance is made for failure and for gradualism.”

### The Ten Commandments, Revised – Didache 2:1-2

2:1 And the second command of the teaching:
2:2 [A1] You will not murder,
 [A2] you will not commit adultery,
 [A3] you will not corrupt children,
 [A4] you will not have illicit sex,
 [A5] you will not steal,
 [A6] you will not practice magic,
 [A7] you will not make potions,
 [A8] you will not murder a child by means of abortion,

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28 Niederwimmer, 123.
29 Milavec (2003), 777-779.
[A9] you will not kill one that has been born,  
[A10] you will not desire the things of your neighbor.

With these two verses, set in the heart of the Two Ways material, the writers of the Didache redefine the Decalogue, the central commandments of the Mosaic Law, to better address the context of their first century Greco-Roman world. This reconfiguration of the Ten Commandments must have reflected the developed practice of the community as they sought to create space for Gentiles to enter into life-changing community. The writers begin with the community’s Jewish tradition – which was central and revered – and then expand it with an understanding that reaches beyond the received tradition and speaks to a new era in the emerging community.

During the Second Temple period, the Decalogue, particularly the second five commandments “served as a matrix and fundamental essence of Jewish teachings.”

The second table of the Decalogue encapsulated the moral behavior required of a faithful Jew. Jesus’ own teachings reflect this understanding. For example, in Matthew 19:18-19 Jesus defines “keeping the commandments” by quoting the second half of the Decalogue and adding the love commandment. As such, “Jesus regarded the socio-ethical commandments of the second half of the Decalogue as a recapitulation of the Torah.” Paul also, as is evident in Romans 13:8-10, acknowledged the second table of the Decalogue as representative of Torah fulfilment.

30 Van de Sandt and Flusser, 162.
31 The Didache paraphrases and uses the love commandment at the opening of the Two Ways material (Didache 1:2).
32 Van de Sandt and Flusser, 163.
For the Didache community, the authority of the Torah is self-evident to those within the community who come from a Jewish background, and is grounded within the teachings of Jesus. Thus, the Didache does not “argue to the Decalogue but from it.” The writers of the Didache build upon the authority of the Decalogue, using its second table as a starting point for ethical instruction. The Ten Commandments would have been central to the faith of those members of the community who were Jewish, and became the basis of the teaching they would pass along to Gentile converts. The Didache, however, drops certain commandments while adding others that reflect the specific needs and context of the community.

The writers of the Didache omit the first four commandments of the Decalogue, which address the believer’s relationship with God and Sabbath observance. Instead, the Didache focuses on the second table commandments, which were already understood as foundational to ethical behavior. Additionally, the Didache omits the Decalogue command to obey one’s parents. Milavec offers a pastoral explanation for this omission: if converts were receiving strong opposition from family members, as suggested by Didache 1:3, then it would have been nearly impossible to both honor parents and obey the God to which they were now claiming allegiance. Unless an entire household converted to Christianity, the familial system would have created significant barriers for an individual who wished to follow the Way of Life.35 “The

34 In addition to the first five commandments of the Decalogue, the writers of the Didache also omit the second table commandment against bearing false witness. A quick look to the following verses, however, reveals that this command is actually included, and in fact expanded into list form, in Didache 2:3-4.
35 Milavec (2003), 128.
omission of [these] commandments was not accidental,” argues Milavec. “The framers of the Didache deliberately modified the Jewish Decalogue in order to enable gentiles to walk in the Way of Life while continuing to live in Roman society.”³⁶ Thus, pastoral sensibilities provide the impetus for omitting several of the original commands of the Decalogue.

The Didache also adds six commandments, all addressing specific practices common in the Greco-Roman world that would have been anathema to a faithful Jew (Didache 2:2). Organized into three pairs, these commands instruct Gentile converts regarding practices that, based on their cultural context, would have been largely acceptable to them prior to conversion. The first pair of new commandments follow and elaborate on the commandment against adultery: “You will not corrupt children; You will not have illicit sex.” The second pair of added commandments relate to occult practices and magic: “You will not practice magic; You will not make potions.” The final pair of commandments added into the Didache’s Decalogue outlaw abortion and infanticide: “You will not murder a child by means of abortion; You will not kill one that has been born.” The Didache offers firm and explicit opposition to each of these practices. “For the early community, making the choice for the Way was a choice for a life of moral responsibility where many of the actions they were to see as sinful – such as divination or seeking to get magical spells to ward off evil – would have been taken for granted in the larger culture.”³⁷

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³⁶ Milavec (2003), 128.
³⁷ O’Loughlin, 36.
At the core of the ethical teachings of the Two Ways section, the writers of the Didache adapt the Ten Commandments. Leaving out commandments that would be untenable for Gentile converts, they open the door for full participation in the community. The six additional commandments address the particularities of ethical living within the Greco-Roman context. In their reimagining of the Decalogue, the writers of the Didache once again exhibit a willingness to preserve what was best – most effective and most context-appropriate – from a rich tradition and then to adjust and reframe in ways that were both faithful and flexible. In the words of O’Loughlin: “The Way of Life required in following the Messiah follows on from the Way of Life that the covenant with Israel demanded.”

The Individual and the Community – Didache 4:1-4

4:1  [A] My child, the one speaking to you the word of God,  
     [1] you will remember night and day,  
     [2] and you will honor him as the Lord,  
        for where the dominion of the Lord is spoken of,  
        there is the Lord.  
4:2  [3] And you will seek every day the presence of the saints in order that you may find support in their words.  
4:3  [B] You will not cause division,  
     [1] and you will reconcile those who quarrel;  
     [2] and you will judge justly,  
     [3] you will not show favoritism when you reprove others for their failings.  
4:4  [C] You will not be double-minded whether it will be or not.

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38 O’Loughlin, 40.
This passage, which lies near the end of the Way of Life exposition, gives insight into the communal nature of the Didache and supports the hypothesis that the training plan was presented orally and in a one-on-one mentorship format. The teachings in the early portion of chapter four underscore the singular significance of the “one speaking to you the word of the Lord,” while at the same time encouraging the apprentice to daily seek out “the presence of the saints” (Didache 4:1-2). Though the delivery method for the training of the Didache likely occurred in a one-on-one relationship, the entire community provides the constant context and support system for the living out of the teachings. The individual teacher, as well as the community as a whole, should be respected and honored by the new convert.

Throughout chapter three and again in the opening of chapter four, the Didache uses the formula “my child” to introduce sequential teaching points. This formula has roots in Jesus’ own language and teaching, but also more broadly in the wisdom teachings of Proverbs and other paraenetic writing, such as the Pauline epistles. O’Loughlin calls the use of this language “a typical expression in master-disciple training manuals.” In addition, all of the “yous” in this section are singular pronouns, suggesting that the instruction was possibly meant to be conveyed in direct, one-on-one teaching.

As an intimate form of address, “my child” highlights the profound relationship developed between mentor and apprentice. In fact, the mentor may have functioned as spiritual parent at a time in life when the biological parents of a convert were at odds with the

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39 For example, Proverbs 1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 12, 21, etc. Although the Septuagint uses the word “pais” (son) rather than “teknon” (child), the wisdom tradition and the Didache both portray a system of one-on-one mentorship and instruction.
40 O’Loughlin, 36.
life direction of their child. In the words of Milavec, “novices were being fathered and
mothered by their mentors... [who were] doing for the novice what their own parents were
unable to do, namely, nurturing them into the life of the world to come.” Such one-on-one
training of disciples must have required the involvement of a number of skilled mentors, both
male and female. These master teachers were likely recognized, or set apart, by the community
for this significant ministry.

The opening two verses of the fourth chapter emphasize the importance of the
relationship between teacher and student, mentor and apprentice. According to the Didache,
one should not simply trust the content of the training – which certainly is to be revered (see
Didache 6:1) – but also the mentor doing the training. While the written Didache served as a
template for the training process, the master teacher likely expanded on its themes. She would
have adjusted the tempo or framing of the message for the individual apprentice, as well as
elaborating on the teaching by means of storytelling or personal experience.

The Didache instructs the novice to honor the mentor “as the Lord.” In fact, it claims
that the words of the mentor make manifest the Lord (Didache 4:1); that is, Jesus is present in
the words of the teacher. “There, in the mouth of the teacher and in his teaching, the Kyrios
himself is present,” explains Niederwimmer. O’Loughlin rightly identifies the Didache’s “high”
view of the learning process: “The very act of learning to be a Christian, and learning the
teaching, is a holy activity that brings student and teacher into the divine presence.”

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42 See Milavec (2003), 49ff. for an extended discussion of the apprenticeship program.
43 Niederwimmer, 105.
44 O’Loughlin, 36-37.
Cues throughout the Didache suggest that the transmission of the teaching from mentor to apprentice would largely have been accomplished through face-to-face, conversational sessions, with the written Didache serving as a guide or outline for the training. The oral character of the Didache has been broadly acknowledged and documented. Milavec points to parallel comparisons of Decalogue versions in the Didache and other related documents to support the argument for the oral nature of the tradition. In addition, the Didache’s resonance with, but not verbatim quotation of, the Sermon on the Mount and other Matthean material supports the argument for the Didache’s oral nature.

Nowhere does the Didache point the apprentice toward what is written in the scriptures or the gospel of the Lord, but rather what has been “said.” In all instances that refer to the transmission of the training, the Didache uses the language of orality – for example, the novice in the current passage is to honor “the one speaking to you the word of God” (Didache 4:1), and in the previous chapter the novice trembles “at the words you have heard” (Didache 3:8). In no case are the “literary actions of seeing, reading, writing, and editing” highlighted as ways of receiving or passing on the teachings of the Didache. Likely this method of training new converts was handed down and honed orally for some time before the training document that would become known as the Didache was written.

45 Milavec (2003), 719. The author develops a case for “a one sided-preference for orality” in the Didache and the oral characteristics of the New Testament writings.
46 Ibid., 143-144.
47 Milavec delves more fully into his argument about the oral nature of the Didache in Milavec (2003), 719ff.
The Two Ways teaching model follows a logical, pastoral sequence in unveiling to the new convert the appropriate content for each stage in the training process. Early in the Two Ways material, the apprentice discovers and practices the commands to love enemies, just as he is confronting the difficult transition away from a family of origin and into a family of fellow believers. Then, additional moral expectations, grounded in the traditions of the Jewish faith are passed along to the new believer. Finally, toward the end of the Two Ways material, the mentor begins to instruct the potential convert in the community’s rules for life together.

Chapter four sounds a call to community that will shape the individual, even as the individual lives out her life on behalf of the community. Didache 4:1-2 highlights the positive aspects of life in the context of Christian community, pointing to the special role of the mentor as spiritual parent as well as the importance of seeking the broader support of the entire community of saints. If the mentor functions as a spiritual parent, then the larger community functions as a reconfigured family to the one who may have left family behind to follow Jesus.

Didache 4:3-4 outlines for the novice harmful behaviors that lead to the breakdown of community. “Being a realistic program,” writes Milavec, “the Didache no sooner holds out the future promise of finding ‘rest’ among the ‘saints’ (4:2) than it turns to the darker side: ‘dissension’ and ‘fighting’ (4:3).”

This brief discussion gives the convert a glimpse of the realities of communal life. Additional, more elaborate, instructions in chapter fourteen address the deeper challenges of living in community, once the apprentice has been baptized and welcomed into the group. In both instances, the teachings found in this training manual are to

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50 Milavec (2003), 161.
be applied to the lives of every community member, not just to those particularly called out for leadership. O’Loughlin puts it this way: “This teaching about loving and forgiving enemies... is presented as the ordinary teaching that every Christian had to take as part and parcel of following the Way of Life.”

This section of the Two Ways ends with the curious phrase: “You will not be double-minded whether it will be or not” (Didache 4:4). These words hearken back to Didache 3:10 and foreshadow Didache 6:2. In each of these instances, the Didache casts the newly-introduced Way of Life within the eschatological framework of this early Christian community. Here, the writers essentially say, “Do all that you can to live according to the Way of Life, and then trust that God is at work in and around you, leading you forward, and ultimately perfecting you.”

As evident in the three passages treated above, the Two Ways section of the Didache innovates on existing tradition in both the form and content of its pre-baptismal training for new converts. In three movements – initial instructions regarding the shift to the new community, moral expectations grounded in the Decalogue, and rules for living in community – this Two Ways section gradually introduces the apprentice to key themes and instructions that will be essential to the Christian life. All three of these movements require a grounding in and reimagining of Jewish tradition and scripture, with the goal of ushering prospective Gentile converts toward integration to the Christian community in a meaningful, faithful, and effective manner.

51 O’Loughlin, 35.
Chapter Three: Liturgy – Baptism, Prayer, and Eucharist (Didache 6:3-10:7)

Diantha awoke with a start, before sunrise on the first day of the week.¹ She noticed the twinge of hunger in the pit of her stomach, and she smiled. This day would mark the culmination of the most exciting journey of Diantha’s life. After having spent months under the tutelage of her spiritual mentor, Sofia, she would enter the waters of baptism, profess her allegiance to Jesus and his Way of Life, and be welcomed into the community of believers. In the same act, she would officially and permanently break away from the religion of her family and upbringing. The anxiety and the anticipation seemed to fill every empty space within her.

Already, Diantha had been fasting for almost forty hours, devoting herself to prayer as she approached the time of baptism. Throughout her workday, the novice stopped periodically to whisper a prayer of thanksgiving and to contemplate the evening that lay ahead of her. After work, she went quickly to the riverside, where members of the community were already gathering. Her sense of anticipation heightened, as she was greeted by Sofia and together they talked through the details of the ritual to come.

Before long, Diantha found herself wading out into the water, guided by Sofia, the wise woman who had faithfully and patiently led her to explore the Way of Jesus. This community saw women as equal participants in the Way, and embraced the leadership of women in a

¹ There is some debate as to whether gathered times of worship, which would have included the celebrations of baptism and eucharist, would have occurred on Sunday nights or on Saturday nights. Clearly, the first day of the week, that is Sunday, had already become the preferred day of worship for the community. However, the eucharist would likely have occurred as an evening meal, taking into account those who were working. Milavec argues for the likelihood of a Saturday night baptismal and eucharist practice in Milavec (2003), 238.
number of ways, including mentoring other women, just as men mentored their novice brothers in the faith. Diantha breathed deeply as she heard Sofia’s voice recite the calling of God to live according to the Way of Life. A deep feeling of joy overwhelmed her fear as she heard the gathered Christians answer in a chorus: “This is the Way of Life!” Then Sofia immersed Diantha, and as she burst forth from the water, she knew she would forever be changed.

Dripping wet, Diantha made her way to the riverbank. Embraced by her new spiritual brothers and sisters, she felt the warmth of their fellowship and support. Around tables at a nearby home, she broke the fast with her Christian family. Now, Diantha would be fully integrated into the life of a community in which she will pray together, worship together, fast together, eat together, learn together, follow Jesus together. 

The Liturgy of the Didache

The English word liturgy comes from the Greek *leitourgia*, which means “the work of the people.” More specifically, the ancient Greek word connoted a public work undertaken for the greater good of the community. For Christians, liturgy came to mean both “the public service of worship” and the community “sharing in [Christ’s] life as members of the body of Christ.” So, Christian liturgy consists of the community’s work toward becoming the embodied presence of Christ in the world. Understood in this way, liturgy may take the form of rites and rituals, gathered worship, or individual and communal Christian practices.

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2 This imaginative reconstruction draws from Milavec’s discussion of the ritual surrounding baptism in the Didache communities. See Milavec (2003), 231ff.
The central section of the Didache lays out the liturgical elements of the community’s life together. Having fully described the Two Ways, the Didache moves into instructions for baptism, the rite of passage that initiates a new believer into the community (7:1-4). The following verses (8:1-3) focus on fasting and prayer, central practices of the community that occur within the rhythms of daily and weekly routine. The final two chapters of this section of the Didache (9:1-10:7) lay out a framework for the eucharist, or love feast, which contains ritual elements that would have been consistently repeated along with model prayers that likely were adaptable given the particularities of context or leader.

Reading and making sense of the descriptions of rituals that are more than two millennia old poses significant challenges. The modern reader tends to view the liturgy of the past through the lens of their own experience of baptism, prayer, or eucharist. In reality, the liturgy of the Didache represents one of the earliest attempts of the Christian community to enact the transformation they experienced in Jesus. These practices were still developing, still in flux. Descriptions of rituals from another era, written on the pages of a document, rarely convey to the reader the transformative power that the ritual had for those who were experiencing it firsthand. O’Loughlin compares reading the Didache, or any other early Christian document, to catching a glimpse into the lives of very distant relatives, who are similar in some ways to us but are completely immersed in a wholly different world.⁴

Without a doubt, the Didache describes liturgical practices that held great weight for its community. After all, in a mysterious and powerful way, liturgy links believers to one another,

⁴ O’Loughlin, 146.
to God, and to God’s purposes in the world. Milavec articulates the transformative power of liturgy:

“Any community that wishes not only to survive but to thrive must have soulful rites that address the deepest desires of the human heart. Effective community rites do not spring from nowhere. They must be publicly authorized and deeply rooted in the experience of the community. Otherwise, they cannot be relied upon to have a well-defined effect that promotes the identity and well-being of those participating. Furthermore, such rites must be sufficiently uncluttered and sufficiently transparent to evoke soulful forms of feeling and of judging on the part of those who experience them for the first time.”

Liturgy happens at the intersection of theology and practice. The theology a person or group develops around fasting, or any other ritual, is shaped by their experience of that practice. In turn, the experience of fasting is informed by the theological constructs that a community has received and fashioned around that practice. Milavec captures this dialectic, writing: “Theology grows out of graced experience... Changes in experience serve to exert pressure for redefining theology. On the other hand, changes in theology serve to exert pressure in terms of redefining the lived experience evoked by the rite.” The transformative power of a ritual comes from its rootedness in a deep tradition and common experience, while simultaneously reaching forward with an eschatological anticipation that calls the community to action in the present. The rituals of the Didache find their roots in Jewish liturgical tradition, reshaped by a forward-looking vision of God’s future as articulated by Jesus and embraced by his early followers.

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5 Milavec (2003), 232.
6 Ibid., 274.
The central section of the Didache describes four primary liturgical practices of the community: baptism, fasting, prayer, and the eucharist. Each of these elements of Christian liturgy were practiced by the community when it gathered for times of worship, fellowship, and prayer. In addition, when individuals or small groups within the community engaged in practices of prayer, fasting, or sharing a meal, these liturgical acts united them with other followers across time and space.

The liturgical practices of the Didache community permeated life – sharing meals, fasting together, praying three times a day alongside other disciples in the workplace or home. These practices are communal but not confined to the context of gathered worship. The “work of the people” did not end when participants departed from worship. O’Loughlin suggests that the Didache offers a peek into the “kitchen-end” of first century Christianity. The “domestic side of religion,” he writes, “shows us the disciples living out their Christianity when they were not listening to the Gospels and not hearing great teachers.”7 By the second century, as attested by the writings of Justin Martyr and others, baptisms had moved from rushing rivers to indoor pools and the eucharist had been separated from the agape feast, possibly because of Roman curfews or restrictions.8 For the liturgy of the Didache, however, the “kitchen” and the “temple” were integrally connected.

In this second main section of the Didache (6:3-10:7), the community reshapes Jewish liturgical practices in light of the community’s understanding of Jesus and with respect to life in

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7 O’Loughlin, 18-19.
8 Milavec (2003), 239ff.
a mixed community of Jewish and gentile Christians living within the context of Greek society. Baptismal practice, fasting, prayer and eucharist all find roots in Jewish tradition, but also reach forward into the context of the emerging Christian community. Characteristic of the shift is an emphasis on a faith lived out through daily, communal rituals – around tables, in workshops, and in homes. Each of these liturgical practices bind together the individuals engaging in them and each practice also reaches forward into the eschatological future that the community believed God was bringing into reality.

**Baptismal Instructions – Didache 7:1-2**

7:1 And concerning baptism, baptize this way: after you have said all these things beforehand, immerse in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit In flowing water.

7:2 [1] but if you do not have flowing water, immerse in other water [2] and if you are not able to do so in cold, [immerse] in warm [water]; [3] and if you should not have either, pour out water onto the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

For the Didache community, baptism was “a defining and awe-inspiring transition that permanently and irreversibly transformed the public identity of the candidate.”⁹ In a masterful

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⁹ Milavec (2003), 232.
display of pastoral sensibility, the Didache emphasizes the meaning and function of baptism rather than the form or mode that baptism takes. While drawing on the baptismal traditions of first century Judaism and John the Baptist, the Didache reinterprets baptism as the initiation rite for the people committed to the Way of Life. Immersion in the waters of baptism marked the new believer as a follower of Jesus and a fully-embraced member of the community. The enacted ritual of baptism ushered the new believer, who would likely have been experiencing disruption in their family and other relationships, into a new social reality. Baptism highlighted the tight-knit bonds of the community, which united around a common commitment to living in the way of Jesus.

The description of baptism in the Didache begins by looking back toward the previous section – the training manual that elaborates on the Two Ways. “After you have said all of these things beforehand,” the mentor is instructed to immerse the candidate “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living (flowing) water” (7:1). This first verse contains the preferred baptismal practice of the Didache community. The use of the word *baptisate* should be understood as immersion, in contrast to the alternative option listed in 7:2, which allows for a three-fold aspersion, or pouring of water over the head of the convert. The preference for immersion in running water finds roots not only in the practice of John, who baptized Jesus, but also in the Jewish *mikvah* practice. Niederwimmer explains that rabbinic sources classify as many as six different grades of water types or sources that are more or less
acceptable for purification rituals.\textsuperscript{10} The Didache community has left these purification requirements behind, but the remnants of this Jewish tradition still flavor its baptismal practice.

A second tradition that likely informed the baptismal practice of the Didache communities was that of John the Baptist and the community of followers who gathered around his ministry and teaching. John baptized in the living water of the Jordan River those seekers within Judaism who were answering his call to repentance and seeking out the kingdom of God. In the first two centuries, proselyte baptism emerged as a practice within some streams of rabbinical Judaism. This practice of baptizing gentile converts also required living water. Milavec notes that “even if proselyte baptism was not practiced within the Judaism that gave rise to the Didache,” the debate about how to handle gentile conversion makes it possible to understand “how and why ‘flowing water’ would have been preferred for Christian baptisms.”\textsuperscript{11}

In addition, Hellenistic culture would have held a significant preference for the use living water. Natural, flowing water would have been more appealing in Hellenistic culture for both practical tasks and for recreational or ritual use – bathing, drinking, washing, etc.\textsuperscript{12} Once again, as with the Two Ways material, the Didache’s approach to baptism reaches back to adopt aspects of shared tradition, but also adapts to current practices that would be understood by its Gentile audience. For the writers of the Didache: "The point is that one should use the most appropriate water available for baptism [that is, living water]. Still, the effect of baptism is

\textsuperscript{10} Niederwimmer, 128.
\textsuperscript{11} Milavec (2003), 262.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 262.
unquestioned even if the water is less suitable and even if baptism consists solely of pouring water on the head.”

Given the exceptions provided by the Didache, all of which seem to hold equal validity, Varner infers that “at the end of the first century there was no rigid uniformity in regard to the mode of baptism and no scruple about the validity of the aspersion or pouring, provided only the head was baptized into the triune name with the intention of baptizing.” The intention and meaning of the ritual proves to be central to the instruction of the Didache. A great amount of fluidity remained regarding the mode of baptism, the primary aspect over which many churches and denominations have argued and divided, throughout history and up to the present day. Though the Didache declares its preference for flowing water, it immediately provides exceptions for occasions when flowing water is not available. Thus, the rite of baptism, critical for an individual’s assimilation into the group, can be made available in all sorts of scenarios, climates, and locations. The writers of the Didache leave little room for disputes about what mode of baptism is most effective. They preempt any controversy that might shift attention away from the intention of this rite of passage and the transformation it effects on an individual and the group at large.

Regardless of the mode by which it was administered, the early Christian baptism of the Didache signified the radical reorientation of a disciple’s life in accordance with the Way of Life as made known through Jesus and as learned through the course of the apprenticeship period.

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13 Niederwimmer, 128-129.
15 In addition, the accommodation for various scenarios and climates where living water might not be readily available is an indication of the widespread use of the Didache across the Mediterranean region.
The ritual itself retained similarities in form to prior baptismal and purification traditions, but the theological significance connected with the act of baptism shifted dramatically.

In this sense, the Didache describes baptism as being “in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (7:1). Though this phrase did not yet constitute a baptismal formula, as it will in later church orders, the Didache clearly uses it to contextualize the act of baptism as a transformative act that identifies the candidate with God in a new and meaningful way. To be baptized “in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit” signifies taking on the identity of and commission of the triune God, just as disciples in the New Testament writings are said to heal, cast out demons, make disciples, and baptize (in the case of Matthew 28:19) “in the name of Jesus.” Thus, the baptizer is baptizing according to the mandate that he or she received from the Lord, and the one being baptized is also taking on that same mandate to live his or her life in the way of the Lord.

Baptism marked the new convert’s completion of apprenticeship in the Way and their entry into the life of the community. As such, baptism in the Didache expresses a posture of openness to the outsider. Any person who determined to devote themselves to the Way could have entered the apprenticeship and progressed toward baptism. At the same time, baptism represented a clear and intentional commitment to a transformed way of living. The period of apprenticeship ensured that a potential convert counted the cost of conversion. The text of the Didache hints that perhaps the whole Way of Life discourse would have been recited while the

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16 Had the writers of the Didache intended this to be used as a set formula within the baptismal rite, they likely would have captured that instruction with specific language. See Milavec (2004), 62.
17 Milavec (2003), 266.
candidate was in the water awaiting baptism.\textsuperscript{18} After having completed the training and having
been baptized, people of diverse backgrounds would have been welcomed in to the fellowship
of believers. Baptism was indeed a boundary marker, but it served as a "boundary that cut
across the most ingrained divisions of religion, gender, race, and class."\textsuperscript{19}

"Those who were undergoing baptism in the Didache communities," writes Milavec,
"were adults who were in the throes of redefining their identity, their associates, their
orientation to life."\textsuperscript{20} Candidates must have been anxious about the conflict that was likely to
occur in their families of origin even as they anticipated life in their new Christian community.
Post-baptism, the community would provide an alternative set of kinship bonds for the one
who had just broken ties with family, friends, and the religious orientation of his or her
upbringing. An effective baptism ritual, then, must have functioned in a way that addressed the
anxiety present in the moment and allowed the novice to declare their newfound faith within
the context of a supportive community.

Milavec reconstructs the Didache’s baptismal ritual with attention given to these factors
and to the flow and order of the Didache itself. He suggests that the mentor who had guided a
candidate through the apprenticeship process would have performed the baptism,\textsuperscript{21} entering
the water with the candidate, leading the community to remember and reflect on the Two

\textsuperscript{18} Milavec (2004), 62-63. The author imagines a liturgy for early Christian baptism, based on the descriptions and
language of the Didache.
\textsuperscript{19} O’Loughlin, 59.
\textsuperscript{20} Milavec (2003), 274.
\textsuperscript{21} The view that the mentor would have been the baptizer is not unique to Milavec. Varner, following 19\textsuperscript{th} century
church historian Schaff notes that “baptism is not represented as a clerical function but the directions are
addressed to all members of the congregation.” See Varner (2007), 74. The role of baptizer was open to a number
of people in the he community, made clear by the writers’ use of "you all" plural in the instructions.
Ways, and then immersing the new convert in the water. At this climactic moment that joined the candidate forever into the full life of the community, the mentor both represented the community to the newcomer and testified to the community on behalf of the newcomer as to their readiness and commitment to make this change. Led into the water by the spiritual mentor, who had become like a mother or father to the candidate, the newly baptized would rise from the water to be embraced by the gathered community. They would have been immediately ushered in to a community gathering where they would, for the first time, participate in the Eucharist with their newfound family. 22

Milavec’s reconstruction of the baptismal event underscores the direction and purpose of the written structure of the Didache. The Two Ways section lays the foundation for baptism; the baptism section describes the transitional moment between the old life and the new; the instructions on prayer and “the thanksgiving” welcome the new convert into the community; and the balance of the Didache offers extended guidelines for community living. The order of the Didache, then, reflects the practical, pastoral goal of shepherding the candidate from inquisitive novice to well-informed, faithful community member.

Fasting and Praying – Didache 8:1-3

22 Milavec (2004), 64. The author suggests that the rite of baptism likely occurred in this way:
1. Community gathers in the place of baptism (most have been fasting for two days).
2. Candidates are led in by their spiritual mentors.
3. Mentors recite the Way of Life and Way of Death with the appropriate refrains.
4. Each candidate is immersed, dried off, and reclothed in a dry tunic.
5. New members are warmly embraced and kissed (same sex only) by their new family.
6. Lord’s Prayer is prayed together for the first time.
7. All retire to a home for a fast-breaking feast (the Eucharist).
8:1 And let your fasts
Not be with the hypocrites,
For they fast on the second
And on the fifth days of the week;
But you should fast during the fourth day
And the preparation day.

8:2 And do not pray like the hypocrites,
But like the Lord commanded in his gospel.
Pray this way:

Our Father, who is in heaven,
May your name be kept holy,
May your kingdom come,
May your will be done on earth as in heaven;
Give us today our daily bread,
And forgive us our debt,
As we also forgive our debtors,
And do not lead us into trial,
But deliver us from the evil one;
Because yours is the power and the glory forever.

8:3 Three times daily pray this way.

In the life of the Didache community, fasting and praying were deeply connected to one another. They were complementary Christian practices that had roots in and, at the same time, deviated significantly from Jewish practice. In fact, the writers of the Didache made clear that the community’s practice should stand in stark contrast to that of the “hypocrites,” likely referencing the pious Jews who lived in the same cities and towns. The Didache assumes that times of fasting and prayer will mark the regular rhythm of community life, just as these practices had done for their Jewish forebears. The Didache’s adapted practice shifts the timing of the fast – that is, the fast days – in order to create distance from the Jewish community.

Though not explicitly defined in the words of the Didache, consistent prayer times likely were well known among the members of the community. The Didache community was not to give up
fasting and prayer but to fast and pray differently, and this section of the Didache would instruct them in how to do so.

The Didache’s first mention of fasting occurs in chapter 7, in the instructions surrounding baptism. The word pronesteuein ("to fast beforehand") is a rare word, found only in this verse in all of early Christian literature. Baptistm in the Didache was accompanied by fasting, undertaken by the candidate, the mentor, and as many among the full community as were able. No such prescription exists in the New Testament nor is their evidence of this practice in the patristic writings. Yet, this act of communal support and encouragement for the newcomer beautifully depicts the solidarity and love of these early believers. Apparently this particular fasting practice faded early in Christian history. The ongoing practice of the community was to fast together twice a week. Along with regular times of communal prayer, fasting provided a sense of deep communion, as the members of the community prepared themselves to be God’s people and walk in God’s way.

The familiar words of the Lord’s Prayer provide the basis for the Didache community’s practice of common prayer. Whereas faithful fasting was distinguished by an alternative timing to its Jewish predecessor, faithful prayer was distinguished by an alternative form and content. The timing or rhythm of prayer times likely echoed the times at which Jewish members of the community were used to praying, particularly given the fact that the times are not specified in the text of the Didache. Observing three prayer times daily is attested in several places in the

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23 Niederwimmer, 129.
24 From Milavec (2003), 308: “Here again, one can presume that the rhythms of prayer were taken over from Judaism.”
Hebrew Scriptures, and this practice developed into ritualized communal prayer in first-century Judaism. The Didache’s instructions on prayer “reveals a Jewish-Christian community in the process of setting itself apart from its surrounding Jewish environment,” specifically by replacing Jewish communal prayers with the Lord’s Prayer.

The Didache uses Jesus’ model prayer as just that – a form for developing and praying communal prayers of dependence on God and of hope in God’s future. What has come to be known as the Lord’s Prayer, was likely a part of a liturgical tradition, written or oral, that informed the practice of the earliest churches. For them, Jesus’ model prayer served as a guide or “abstract” for believers to shape their own like-minded prayers. Variations among the biblical renderings of the Lord’s Prayer and that of the Didache undergird this understanding. Thus, “praying like the Lord commanded in his gospel” meant using the themes of this model prayer as the rule for shaping the prayer life of the Christian community. In the words of Milavec, the Lord’s Prayer as it was used in the early Christian communities “invited innovative expansion.”

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26 Milavec (2003), 309. The prayer made standard by rabbinic teaching was the Shemoneh Esreh, or the Eighteen Benedictions. All faithful male Jews were required to recite the benedictions or an “abstract thereof” three times daily.
27 Niederwimmer, 138.
28 Milavec (2003), 333ff. This type of usage echoes the Jewish use of the Shemoneh Esreh as a guide for public and private prayer times. The six petitions of the Lord’s Prayer “invited expansion by gifted prayer leaders and may also have served as a synopsis for those who lacked the gift of being able to improvise” (Milavec, longer, 333ff).
29 While the Didache shares many similarities with Matthew’s version, there are significant differences which, rather than pointing toward reliance of one upon the other, probably suggest a common liturgical source. This would be the opinion of Niederwimmer (134ff.), Milavec (311ff.) and others.
30 Milavec (2003), 335.
The model prayer can be easily divided into six petitions, each of which offer a glimpse into the eschatological mindset of the community. Since the language of the Didache prayer closely resembles that of the Matthean version, Milavec draws on the scholarship of Raymond Brown, which interprets each of the six petitions through the lens of the eschatology of first century Christianity. The first three petitions focus on God’s action in establishing the coming kingdom. In the remaining three petitions, the accent is on the response of the faithful to the coming kingdom of God. Even the line traditionally translated as “Give us today our daily bread” might be better reinterpreted through the lens of eschatological longing and hope. The Didache provides the first attested occurrence of the doxology attached to the Lord's Prayer. This doxology can also be found in later chapters of Didache, particularly accompanying the meal prayers in chapters 9 and 10, where it anchors the prayer in the hope for God’s reign to come. Perhaps the doxology would have been used as a corporate response to a prayer modeled on the six petitions and voiced by an individual on behalf of the larger community.

The Didache’s use of the plural “you” throughout the prayer and the accompanying instructions suggests that all members of the community were expected to participate in the prayer times, gathering together in whatever ways were possible, amidst the daily rhythms of work and home life. The prayer’s second person language, “our Father” and “forgive us” among others, binds the community together linguistically as they pray. Perhaps Christians paused at the three set times each day in their homes or workplaces, joining in prayer with whichever other Christians were there with them. Even if prayed alone, the Lord’s Prayer virtually links the

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31 Milavec (2003), 328-329. Here, Milavec follows the scholarship of Raymond Brown.
one praying with the larger community across time and distance. Thus praying, like fasting, becomes a communal act by which the whole community participates in the life of God together.

In summary, chapter 8 of the Didache replaces and reframes Jewish ritual practices with Christian versions: fasting on alternative days and praying an alternative prayer. The Didache’s traditioned innovation with regard to fasting and praying takes on a more polemical character than other sections of the Didache. Here, hard and fast distinctions are required as a means for setting apart the Christian community over against the Jewish community. Even in attempting to distinguish itself, the Didache assumes traditional patterns of fasting and prayer that are grounded in Jewish tradition.

The Thanksgiving Meal – Didache 9:1-4 and 10:5

9:1 And concerning the thanksgiving meal, give thanks this way:
9:2 First, concerning the cup:
    We give you thanks, our Father,
    For the holy vine of your servant David
    Which you revealed to us through your servant Jesus.
    To you is the glory forever.
9:3 And concerning the broken bread:
    We give you thanks, our Father,
    For the life and knowledge,
    Which you revealed to us through your servant Jesus.
    To you is the glory forever.
9:4 Just as this broken bread was scattered over the mountains
    and was gathered together and became one,
    In this way, may your church be gathered together
    from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.
    Because yours is the glory and the power
    through Jesus Christ forever.
10:5 Remember, Lord, your church,
   To save her from every evil,
   And to perfect her in your love,
   And to gather her from the four winds,
   The sanctified into your kingdom which you prepared for her.
   Because yours is the power and glory forever.

The Didache’s treatment of what later developed into the Eucharist begins with the phrase: “And concerning the thanksgiving, give thanks this way…” (9:1). 32 O’Loughlin contributes the awkwardness of the phrase to the notion that the Didache communities, like all of the earliest followers of Jesus, “did not think of Eucharist as the title of a distinct event.”33 The Didache community had not developed an understanding of “the thanksgiving” apart from a full communal meal, or agape feast, shared by the fellowship of believers. Furthermore, an initial reading of the Didache’s instructions reveals a number of surprises for the modern reader: the sequence of elements is reversed from what is attested in the Pauline writings and what the church later practiced;34 the words of institution are absent altogether; and the passage contains no reference to the kerygma of Jesus’ passion.

So, what is this “thanksgiving” meal discussed in chapters 9 and 10 of the Didache? Is it an agape feast? Is it a ritual or ceremonial meal that functioned like a proto-Eucharist?

Scholarly proposals on how to interpret these chapters vary widely.35 One current in

32 Here, the Greek root word for eucharist is repeated: “concerning the thanksgiving, give thanks this way.”
33 O’Loughlin, 85.
34 Luke 22:17-19, however, describes Jesus blessing the cup before the bread.
35 Didache 14 seems to focus on confession as a community practice; Didache 9-10 seems to outline the ritual of the eucharist.
scholarship pushes against this being a “true Eucharist,” because it does not line up with later practice regarding order of bread and cup or theology of Christ’s death and resurrection. Other scholars suggest that this early practice of Eucharist emerged from Jewish meal ceremonies and was linked with the community’s love feast. Either way, chapter 9 shows the close connection of a Eucharist-type ritual which took place within the context of a shared community meal. Clearly, the Didache does not describe the ritualized Eucharist of the later Mass – a stand-alone, symbolic meal conducted at an altar rather than around a dinner table. Niederwimmer concludes that almost certainly the Eucharist and agape meal are still fused together in this early community’s practice.36

The meal described in the Didache has the feel of a reconfigured Jewish fellowship or Sabbath meal, infused with messianic meaning and in tune with the kingdom-focused eschatology of the Lord’s Prayer. In the Gospels, table fellowship was central to the ministry of Jesus. Meals and the ritual that took place around them were already significant aspects of Jewish social, familial, and religious life. O’Loughlin observes that Jesus “took over these [meal] practices, while also transforming them.”37 Around the table, Jesus introduced people to a new way of seeing God. When the members of the Didache communities gathered around the table, they remembered this aspect of Jesus’ ministry. The Didache, then, offers “a precious insight

36 Niederwimmer, 139-143. Niederwimmer attempts to solve some of the issues with the order of the elements by suggesting the possibility that 9:1-5 constitutes a blessing before a community (agape) meal and 10:1-7 is the prayer of thanksgiving leading into the “sacramental” Eucharist, 139-143.
37 O’Loughlin, 103.
into the meal in the earliest Christian communities and remind[s] us how it was a central event in shaping disciples.”

In the Didache’s “thanksgiving meal,” the words of blessing over the bread and cup set them apart from other food on the table and made them instruments of blessing and grace for those who received them. Here, as in the baptismal instructions, the Didache seems to focus on function and meaning above form. That the cup was blessed before the bread likely reflected the tradition received through the Jewish meal rituals as well as an early diversity of practice among Christians celebrating the agape or Eucharistic meal.

The prayers of blessing themselves draw inspiration from Jewish table prayers, known as the Kiddush and the Birkat Ha-Mazon. These prayers, though, were likely in flux during the first century. Rather than formulaic recitals of these prayers, patterns and forms for meal prayers would have guided the one offering the prayers. “The Eucharistic prayers had Jewish origins that were refined and defined due to the patterns of preferred usage that gradually emerged among freely improvised Eucharistic prayers used in the Didache communities. So, there was great diversity in these early Eucharistic prayers, though grounded in a form and style present in Jewish table prayers. Varner views the Didache’s Eucharistic practice as a “transitional link between the Jewish tradition represented in the table blessings (the Birkat Ha-Mazon) and the Eucharistic liturgies preserved in the later formularies for the Christian Mass.”

The prayers around the common table have as their backdrop the sort of table blessings well-

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38 O’Loughlin, 104.  
39 Niederwimmer, 145-147.  
40 Varner (2007), 75.
known to Jewish ceremonial meals. However, these prayers have been Christianized, interpreting the wine as the fruit of the vine of David and developing the notion of Jesus as the suffering servant of Isaiah’s prophecy. The blessings of the Didache, in contrast to their Jewish predecessors, bless a single cup and loaf, perhaps signifying the unity and common purpose celebrated around the table of these early Christian gatherings.

That the Eucharist takes place in the context of an agape meal underscores the sense of connection within the Didache community between worship and the rest of life, the sacred and the so-called secular. In fact, O’Loughlin even raises the question of whether this sort of meal took place more often than once a week. His argument, here presented in an extended quote, deserves consideration, since its underlying sentiment is at the heart of the character of the Didache community:

“So, the meal took place at least weekly, but it may have been more frequent than in that there is no hint in the Didache that every meal of Christians could not have been considered Eucharistic. If all knew the prayers of thanks then at each meal a cup could have been blessed and a loaf broken. Certainly we should not just think of elaborate banquets... We can imagine communities where the majority were slaves or poor people and a cup and loaf of the Eucharist were combined with a very ordinary meal indeed. Jesus had welcomed all to his table, so every table of Christians could have held the promise of the table.”

The promise of the table means that believers of diverse backgrounds are drawn together through this ritual meal and become the people of God, a proleptic foreshadowing of God’s kingdom. Milavec suggests that for the Didache community, the “eucharist was no ordinary

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41 O’Loughlin, 99-100.
meal... the mission of God and the role of Jesus were made present and celebrated as they affected the present and the future.” (Milavec, 232) Social barriers were broken down through baptism; the communion of believers as members of a unified body was celebrated and strengthened through the common meal.

The central image of this early Christian table prayer depicts broken bread, scattered over the mountains, now gathered together and made one. In the same way, the church is gathered together by God, as represented around the Christian table. The loaf - blessed, broken, and shared - comes “to represent the sustenance that comes with learning the Way of Life, and also to remind the eater that he or she is just one broken piece of a much bigger whole that will, someday, be put all together in God’s Kingdom.” The community of believers is drawn together to be God’s people and to live according to God’s ways in the present. The Eucharistic meal, though, also stretches toward the future horizon, where God will make the kingdom a reality on earth. Milavec writes:

“Above all, the Eucharist of the Didache was profoundly forward-looking... [It] perpetuated the proleptic foretaste of the Kingdom that marked the table fellowship of Jesus. Fed on the Eucharist, therefore, those who shared the Way of Life of the Father were nourished in their altered social reality. They were not of this world. Each day of the week they thought and acted in anticipation of the world to come.”

In summary, this second section of the Didache (7:1-10:7) contains instructions for the liturgical life of the community. The liturgical practices of the Didache: 1) have roots in Jewish practices

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42 Milavec (2003), 232.
43 Jones, Tony, The Teaching of the Twelve: Believing & Practicing the Primitive Christianity of the Ancient Didache Community (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009), Kindle location 1169.
transformed for the Jesus community living in a Greek culture, 2) focus on eschatological anticipation of God’s coming kingdom as the context for Christian living, 3) move beyond gathered times of worship to join the community together across time and space, and 4) provide soulful, meaningful rites and rituals open to spontaneity rather than bound by standardized form and practice. The liturgical instructions of the Didache point to a time early in the history of the church when rites and rituals varied greatly, and traditioned innovation occurred in the practice of baptism, fasting, prayer, and the Eucharistic meal.
A community of Christians in the Decapolis town of Pella gathered in a patron’s home for a Saturday evening meal and worship. The fifty-plus members of the community reclined around tables and enjoyed one another’s company. Represented among the group were craftsmen from the local guilds, merchants whose shops served the small city, community leaders who served in the government of the city, children happily chattering, and the aged retelling stories passed down from those who had been in the company Jesus. Special guests also joined the fellowship: wandering charismatics who came preaching and teaching, travelers on business who were passing through on the way to Jerusalem or Damascus, and curious neighbors who had been invited to share in the meal.

After the meal, those who had been baptized into the Way remained and joined in the celebration of the “thanksgiving.” Two of the local teachers offered prayers over the cup and then the loaf, passing them around the tables in an act of spiritual solidarity and commitment to the way of Jesus, the servant of God. In a time of public confession, members spoke honestly about their struggles and worked to bring resolution to the conflicts among them. Spontaneous prayers and words of testimony were offered by many who were present. A prophet who had recently settled in the community gathered the prayers of the people and voiced them beautifully in a great prayer of thanksgiving, that continued for more than half an hour. The group responded with shouts of praise: “Hosanna to the God of David! May grace come and
may this world pass away! Maranatha!"\(^1\) They sang a hymn and then went out into the night, nourished by the meal and their fellowship around the tables, renewed in their commitment to pursue God’s kingdom with all their heart.

For each person gathered, the Christian community had become like family for them. This community was a place where wandering prophets could find a home and settle down. It was a place where local overseers were called out to lead and serve the group, where gifted teachers took a prominent role in guiding the community into the Way of Life. Men and women, Jew and Greek, slave and free were welcomed as equals, and each person discovered opportunities to contribute to the good of the community. The engagement between fellow Christians continued throughout the week, as small groups joined together in daily prayer, as mentors led novices through a spiritual apprenticeship period, and as overseer-deacons responded to the physical and spiritual needs of the community members.

**Leadership in the Didache Community**

As referenced in chapter one, Christianity and Judaism in the later first century were both experiencing a period of development and flux. Emerging groups of Christians, who started out as synagogue attending Jews, began to self-differentiate from the Jewish community. The Didache depicts a community in the process of establishing itself alongside and consciously separating itself from the Jewish community, maintaining significant rituals and traditions but shifting and reforming them in light of an unfolding understanding of Jesus.

\(^1\) See Didache 10:6.
Baptism had become a boundary marker between the two communities; Jewish table prayers were transformed into early communion prayers; and the synagogue leadership structure was borrowed and reshaped, as the early churches called out their own teachers and overseers.

At the same time, the Greco-Roman world was becoming increasingly connected. Roman infrastructure and a robust economy led to increased mobility throughout the empire. Emerging communities of Jesus followers spread around the edges of the Greco-Roman world, circling the eastern end of the Mediterranean. The Jewish diaspora had already, before the time of Jesus, dislocated communities of Jews across this region. These Jews developed a network of synagogues throughout the region, which were frequented by Paul and likely by other traveling apostles and teachers.² As more people joined the Jesus movement, an alternative network of Christian communities emerged in these same cities and towns. Early Christians felt intimately connected to their small local churches, while at the same time developing a sense of connectedness to other Christians throughout the region. “On the one hand,” explains O’Loughlin, “they knew that they belonged to an actual community: into such a community they were baptized... On the other hand, they were a part of the new people of Jesus and as such were united with every other Christian.”³

In this context of connectedness and change, leadership within the Didache communities was critically important but also clearly in flux. A variety of different leaders, from

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² O’Loughlin, 109: “There were many others, not just Paul and his companions, whose existence we glimpse in passing references: moving from place to place, establishing communities, teaching those groups, providing links between them, and giving them the sense that they formed this new community that broke existing boundaries of race and class.”

³ O’Loughlin, 107-108.
inside and outside the community, sought to shape the fledgling communities as they developed their identity and theology. The writers of the Didache acknowledge the tension of extending hospitality to teachers and prophets who found their way to the community while at the same time protecting the integrity of the rule of life to which they had collectively committed. They ascribe significant authority to the discernment, or “insight” as described in Didache 12:1-4, of the community. At this early stage in the development of Christianity, leadership remained diverse and collaborative, not yet circumscribed by official, ecclesial roles like bishops and presbyters.

This final main section of the Didache, chapters 11 through 15, has been called the “church orders” section because it gives instructions for community life and leadership. The leadership roles in the Didache community, as described in this section, include prophets, apostles, teachers, overseers, and deacons. Some of these religious functionaries operated from outside the community, traveling about from place to place preaching and teaching. Others arose from within the community, their gifts and abilities having been identified and endorsed by their Christian brothers and sisters. The writers of the Didache acknowledge the diversity in leaders and seek to create an environment of openness and collaboration, within the context of following the Way of Jesus. “The community,” explains O’Loughlin, “wants to make sure that it is not led astray by false teachers, yet also that it treats teachers properly, and that it asks the right questions about those whom it calls to specific tasks within the
community.” This church orders section reveals the tension in the emerging Christian community between radical hospitality and wise stewardship of resources.

The Didache describes a number of different leaders and roles that were present in the early Christian communities. Early on, as these communities first heard the message about Jesus, they relied on traveling apostles, prophets, and teachers to provide them with an understanding of the basic doctrines and practices involved in following Jesus, they relied on travelling apostle, prophets, and teachers. Apostles, who were itinerant by definition, tended to demand an authority among the communities they visited based on their position or office. By the late first century, however, the age of the apostles was waning. Prophets and teachers took up the mantle of travelling religious functionaries. The wandering charismatics and sages were given the option to settle down among the Didache communities. Prophets and teachers, both those who were itinerant and those who had settled, participated in worship and prayed at the eucharistic meal.

From within the community arose another group of teachers, who were professional leaders supported by the communities themselves. These teachers led in worship, mentored spiritual apprentices, and perhaps even penned the Didache. In addition, overseers and deacons were appointed by the community to function in liturgical and administrative roles. Overseers likely gave their service to the community as a gift and were not compensated. Both men and women would have taken on the role of teacher in the community, training and baptizing disciples of their same sex. Given this broad array of leadership roles, van de Sant and

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4 O’Loughlin, 105.
Flusser conclude that “the Didache still represents a collective leadership, a stage preceding the process of increasing subordination to the authority of the monarchical bishop as the exclusive leader of a Christian community.”

In developing the central criteria for evaluating leadership, the Didache returns to the Two Ways teachings of the first six chapters. Leaders in the Didache community were expected to be exemplars of living in the way of Jesus. As Milavec observes, "in the moderate and delicate wisdom of the Didache, the unadorned attraction of ordinary holiness supplanted and tamed the excess of the wandering apostle-prophets.” The Didache encouraged support for leaders who arose from within or who made the intentional commitment to settle down in the community. Some of these leaders – at least the overseers, and possibly the teachers – were appointed; that is, their commitment to the Way and their giftedness to lead were noticed and affirmed by the community at large.

The initial verses of this section (Didache 11:1-2) underscore the community’s openness to growing in its understanding of the Lord. The fledgling church was still fleshing out its theology and engaged the message of teachers and prophets, as long as it maintained a continuity with the received tradition, often called “the gospel of the Lord.” The interaction between local leaders and traveling charismatics leads O’Loughlin to affirm that the same communities “that were inspired on hearing the narratives of the great preachers, the evangelists, were the same ones that were formed in discipleship by texts like Didache.”

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5 Van de Sandt and Flusser, 339.
6 Milavec (2003), 864.
7 O’Loughlin, 127.
Effective and faithful leaders were those that led the community to new depths in their understanding and commitment to the Way of Life.

Within this section, chapters 11-13 turn outward, focusing on wandering charismatics and other travelers who were passing through or who wished to settle down in the community. Chapters 14 and 15 return to the internal matters of healthy leadership and community life. The following four passages provide insight into the ways the Didache received, appointed, configured, and evaluated its leaders.

Traveling Teachers, Apostles, and Prophets – Didache 11:1-8

11:1 [A] Therefore, whoever teaches you all these things said previously, receive him.
11:2 [B] If, on the other hand, the one teaching, 
   If he has been turned, 
   And should teach another doctrine 
   [1] for the destroying [of those things], do not listen to him. 
   [2] But, if it is for the bringing of righteousness 
       and knowledge of the Lord, 
       receive him as the Lord!
11:3 And concerning the apostles and prophets in accord with the decree of the gospel, act thus:
11:4 [A] Every apostle coming to you, let him be received as the Lord.
11:5 [1] But he will not remain except for one day, 
   [2] and if there is a need, also another [day]. 
   [3] But if ever he should remain three [days], he is a false prophet.
11:6 [B] And, when he departs, 
   [1] let the apostle take nothing except bread [that he needs] 
       until he is lodged. 
   [2] If, however, he asks for money, he is a false prophet.
11:7 [A] And every prophet speaking in the Spirit 
   you should not test or judge, 
   for every sin will be forgiven, 
   but this sin will not be forgiven.
11:8 [B] But not everyone speaking in the Spirit is a prophet, 
   but only if he has the behavior of the Lord.
Therefore, from their behavior will be known the false prophet and the prophet.

This passage, and the next one discussed below, reveal how the Didache retained hospitality rules but also sought to protect the community from illegitimate wandering charismatics who otherwise might take advantage of the community’s generosity. Didache 11:1-8 begins with a declaration of the community’s openness to teachers, prophets, and apostles, each of which denote travelling religious persons. As a fledgling community, this body of Jesus-people gathered around and shaped by the Didache were still developing their identity and theology. The nascent community sought to welcome those who would deepen and expand their understanding of what it meant to be people of the Way. To that end, the first instruction of the Didache regarding these traveling spiritual leaders was: “receive them.” The Didache community responded immediately by extending hospitality, but then the community bore the responsibility of evaluating the authenticity of such persons.

The commands of 11:5 secure provision for the basic needs of the itinerant preacher. The Didache advocated a deference to the power of the Spirit; members are instructed not to judge a prophet speaking in the Spirit. This “unforgiveable” act is considered a judgment not of the proclaimer, but of the Spirit who speaks through the prophet. On the other hand, whether the person speaking in the Spirit is a true prophet can be discerned by observing their actions.

The Didache sought to temper the influence of the travelling prophet, or “wandering charismatic,” on the established community. Alternatively, the writers of the Didache advocate for the increased honor and influence of those leaders who either settle down amongst the
people or are called out for leadership by the people. The Didache’s extended discussion about distinguishing true from false prophets suggests that abuses had already been taking place. In verse 11:8, the writers point back to the initial teachings of the Two Ways as criteria for distinguishing prophets from false prophets. The community has built its common life together around this way of living. In these verses, it protects itself from falling prey to a charismatic, but misguided, prophet by turning again to the beliefs and practices at the core of its communal identity. The ultimate test of a prophet’s authenticity, then, was his behavior relative to the community’s ethical teaching.

The Didache categorizes those spiritual leaders who approach the community from outside as teachers, apostles, and prophets. The apostles likely included the seventy who were sent out in Jesus’ time, along with other high profile teachers like Paul, Apollos, and others who claimed apostolic status. By the late first century, traveling apostles were fading in number and significance. At the same time, travelling prophets were becoming significant charismatic leaders in the network of early churches developing around the edges of the Roman Empire. The Didache treats these traveling spokespeople as honored guests, welcome to sojourn in its communities: “Every apostle coming to you, let him be received as the Lord” (Didache 11:4). At the same time, the Didache outlines specific rules designed to guard the community against those who might abuse their hospitality.

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8 See the section below on Didache 15:1-2.
9 Likewise, the emergence of rabbinical Judaism along with Greek philosophy, Cynics for example, led to a rise in traveling rabbis and teachers from those traditions within this same time period.
In all of the patristic writings, the words “prophet” or “prophetic” are used only sixty-two times. Of those, only the handful of references in Shepherd of Hermas and the twenty-one references in the Didache acknowledge the existence of contemporary prophets. All other patristic uses refer to the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures.\textsuperscript{10} This simple linguistic clue indicates the Didache community’s openness to ongoing revelation. Prophecy and teaching are still necessary for growth and development; God’s revelation has not ceased. In the words of Varner, “new teaching which proposes some development in the understanding of Christian faith and practice is acceptable, provided it is compatible with what has already been received… Further revelation was both needed and expected.”\textsuperscript{11} In addition, explains Niederwimmer, “The Kyrios himself appears in his messengers... when such a true messenger enters the house, it is the Lord himself who enters!”\textsuperscript{12} The writers of the Didache chart a middle course with respect to charismatic wanderers, encouraging the community to embrace the unfolding revelation of God, while at the same time to protect itself from religious swindlers.

\textbf{Others Coming to the Community – Didache 12:1-5}

12:1 And let everyone coming in the name of the Lord, let him be received; And then, having put him to the test, You will know, for you will have the understanding of right and left.

12:2 [A] If, on the one hand, the one coming is passing through, [1] help him as much as you are able. [2] He will not remain, however, among you Except for two or three days, If there should be a need.

\textsuperscript{10} Varner (2007), 85.
\textsuperscript{11} Varner (2007), 82, 85.
\textsuperscript{12} Niederwimmer, 172.
12:3  [B] If, on the other hand, he wishes to settle down among you,
And if he is a craftsman, let him work and let him eat.
12:4  [C] If, on the other hand, he does not have a craft,
According to your own understanding, plan beforehand
How he will live among you as a Christian, without being idle.
12:5  [D] If, on the other hand, he does not wish to behave this way,
He is a Christ-peddler.
Beware of such ones!

Teachers, apostles, and prophets were not the only people moving about the
Mediterranean world, traveling from town to town. Merchant, traveling business persons, and
pilgrims travelled from one community to another in the Greco-Roman world, utilizing the
developing road systems and trade routes. Many towns and cities along the way served as stop-
overs for such travelers. The early Christian community began to understand itself as a
“network for service”¹³ in this context. The church was a local network of believers who knew
each other and celebrated Eucharist together, and yet it was also linked to other Jesus
followers and their communities across the known world. Each local body bore responsibility
for taking care of the travelers who came their way. This particular section of the Didache
focused on the communities care for travelers who were not religious functionaries.

The Didache insists on a high burden and demand for hospitality. Members should
receive any Christian-identifying guest without question, before any kind of testing. Hospitality
was an identifying mark of the early Christian communities, and an integral aspect of their
witness to the larger culture. In this case, the members of the Didache community are
instructed to help the traveler “as much as you are able.” Generous care for those who are

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¹³ This is O’Loughlin’s phrase, 101ff.
passing through served as a witness to God’s provision and was an opportunity for the community to display their gratitude to God. Still, the Didache puts into place protective measures against abuse. The guest who is passing through should be allowed to stay only two or three days, enough time to prepare for and celebrate the Lord’s Day or to wait out bad weather.

Should “the one coming” desire to “settle down among you,” the Didache offers very specific instruction. These rules provide a framework for welcoming the stranger and settling the outsider, while at the same time protecting the integrity and health of the community itself. In this particular case, the ones seeking to settle down can be assumed to be professing followers of the Way, fellow believers who want to join the community but have already received training and been baptized elsewhere. These potential community members had already been vetted through whatever testing was required, which would likely have been based on the Two Ways material from the first six chapters.

Given that “the one coming” wants to settle down and has satisfactorily met the requirements of the testing, then the community would proceed to help that person settle in a way that is acceptable to and beneficial for both parties. In the first case, if the newcomer is a craftsperson, then he or she is expected to use that craft and to contribute to the community. A newcomer without a specific marketable skill must negotiate with the community some way forward that allows the individual to live out their life within the community while avoiding idleness. In this way, says the Didache, he or she can “live among you as a Christian” (12:4). This instance proves to be the one and only use of the word “Christian” in the Didache.
In contrast, the third scenario involves a newcomer who does not “wish to behave this way” (12:5). Those who are unwilling to live by the labor of their hands or to negotiate an arrangement that helps them avoid idleness, are labelled Christemporos. Found for the first time here in any attested ancient document, this neologism is often translated “Christ-peddler” and literally meant “one trading in Christ.” The “Christ-peddler” stands in sharp contrast with the “Christian,” and the community bears the burden of discerning one from the other, thereby ensuring that all members contribute to the health and mission of the collective group.

The Didache’s instructions on receiving and testing outsiders are addressed to the community as a whole. No particular leader is given authority to judge true from false prophets, or to be the sole arbiter of the authenticity of a newcomer’s commitment to the Way. “You (plural),” reads Didache 12:1, “will have understanding of left and right,” and Didache 12:4 echoes “according to your (plural) own understanding.” The writers of the Didache leave it to the “good sense of the community” to decide how to deal with specific cases – such as one who does not have a marketable trade or skill – but “in any case, no Christian is to be allowed to live in idleness.”

The Didache demands that the community embrace the outsider with hospitality and affirms the responsibility of community members to evaluate, with firmness and honesty, the one who wishes to settle among them. The guidance provided in this chapter ensures the common good of the group, which is seeking to embody God’s movement in the world and to be perfected in the coming day of the Lord.

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14 Varner (2007), 82.
Giving First Fruits to the Prophets – Didache 13:1-4

13:1  [A] And every genuine prophet wishing to settle down among you
       is worthy of his food.
13:2  [B] Likewise, a genuine teacher is worthy,
       just as the laborer, of his food.
13:3  [A] So, you (sing.) shall take every first fruits of the produce
       from the wine vat and threshing floor,
       of both cattle and sheep,
       [1] and you (sing.) will give the first fruits to the prophets,
       for they themselves are your (pl.) high priests.
13:4  [2] But if you (pl.) do not have a prophet,
       give it to the poor.
13:5  [B] If you (sing. through v.7) should make bread, take the first fruits
       and give according to the commandment.
13:6  [C] Similarly, when you open a jar of wine or of oil, take the first fruits,
       and give it to the prophets.
13:7  [D] And of silver and of clothing and of every possession, take the first fruits,
       as it seems good to you, and give according to the commandment.

Perhaps the most explicit connection to the Jewish tradition occurs in these verses about first fruits.\(^\text{15}\) For the faithful Jew, the first fruits were offered for the support of the high priests.\(^\text{16}\) The instructions of the Hebrew Scriptures regarding first fruits were adapted by the writers of the Didache, widening the scope of the offering to include gifts specific to the setting of the Greco-Roman city. “The Old Testament cultic law,” writes Niederwimmer, “is transferred, rather freely, to the new, ecclesiastical situation and is altered accordingly.”\(^\text{17}\) Those who make bread or clothing, who make use of wine or oil, or who have earned silver as a day laborer are

\(^{15}\) O’Loughlin, 123: “Perhaps nowhere is this closeness between the communities of the Didache and contemporary Jewish communities better seen than here.”


\(^{17}\) Niederwimmer, 192.
encouraged to give in accordance with the commandments. In other words, every community member has the ability to give a first fruits offering. In doing so, the Christian offered praise to God and at the same time material support to the settled prophets.

A second aspect of the Didache’s innovation on the first fruits tradition involved the recipients of the gifts. Continuing its endorsement of settled prophets and homegrown teachers, the Didache outlines a practice for supporting these leaders in their work. While the Jewish tradition directed the first fruit gifts to support the high priests, here the Didache instructs these offerings to be given to the prophets who had settled in the community. Additionally, the practice of offering first fruits would have resonated with the prior practice of pagans who were entering the Christian community.

As mentioned earlier, the Didache allows the prophet the right or option to settle within the community. Prophets who chose to do so would have been able to access the support directed toward them through the gifts of first fruits. No doubt, these prophets had once been homeless wanderers. Milavec seeks to contextualize this phenomenon, relying on the work of Crossan and Theissen. He suggests that the wandering prophets of the Didache “were largely drawn from the ranks of those who had been dispossessed of their homes, their livelihoods, and their families due to the crushing economic system of Roman commercialism.” The pain

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18 These additions to the first fruits practice of ancient Judaism, according to Milavec (2003), 509, “might serve to suggest that craftsmen and merchants had as much cause to thank God for their prosperity as did the farmer and the baker.”
19 Milavec (2003), 518.
20 Ibid., 423ff. Milavec lays out his full argument in a chapter entitled “How and Why the Didache Checked Meddling Prophets.”
21 Milavec (2004), 71.
that they had experienced through life circumstances provided a deep well of emotion from which they drew a fervent passion for the kingdom of God to appear.

Milavec’s hypothesizes that these itinerant prophets came to settle down in the Didache communities, where they were given a place to find support, encouragement, and rest. Essentially, the Didache communities offered a residential recovery program for wandering charismatics! At the same time, the Didache community’s “spirituality of everyday holiness was thereby secured against the excesses of apocalyptic fervor.”22 In this sense, the charismatic leadership of the wandering prophets was absorbed by the stabilizing community of the Didache.

Draper insists, alternatively, that prophets of the Didache were actually a renewal movement that challenged already established local leaders, rather than participants in a direct line of charismatic leadership following Jesus.23 Draper’s approach situates the Didache later in the process of the routinization of charisma and the establishment of a structured leadership in the early church. Either way, prophets functioned on the fringe of the community, deriving their authority from charismatic functioning. The Didache invites them to settle down, should they desire, and become participant-leaders in the community.

Regardless of whether Milavec’s or Draper’s hypothesis more accurately describes this leadership transition, the writers of the Didache clearly assert the obligation of the community to provide a livelihood for the prophets and teachers who settled down among them. The

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22 Milavec (2004), 73.
Didache points toward the ubiquity of these travelling charismatics, some of whom settled down into the early Christian communities. Interestingly, there is no mention in the Didache of its communities training up prophets or teachers for the purpose of sending them out to minister in other communities. The focus for the Didache was shifting toward a model where leaders arise and are appointed from within the community.

Appointing Overseers and Deacons — Didache 15:1-2


15:2  [B] Do not, then, look down upon them; for they themselves are your honored ones along with the prophets and teachers.

The appointment of overseers and deacons should not be read as describing a new practice, but an attempt by the writers to undergird the authority of ones who had already been chosen. These are the “local clergy” of the Didache communities, who have been identified and called into service by the will of the community. O’Loughlin argues that this

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24 See Niederwimmer, 200ff. Milavec cleverly adds: “This rule should not be read as having any more solemnity than if the framers had said, ’Keep up your good work at appointing worthy officers for yourselves.’” Milavec (2003), 583.

25 Niederwimmer, 190. The members of the Didache community who had been actively involved in the life of the Jewish synagogue would have been accustomed to selecting elders or overseers as leaders in their tradition.
group should be called “bishop-deacons.” He uses this “double-barreled designation” to “bring out the twin aspects of their task: to have a watchful eye over the community and to be its servants.” In the Didache’s own words, “they likewise conduct among you the leitourgia of the prophets and the teachers” (15:1). Niederwimmer points out that although the process for choosing these leaders “is not prescribed,” the connotation leans toward election or selection by the group at large.

Already, in chapter 14, the writers of the Didache have turned their attention away from the reception of outside guests and ministers to the internal workings and relationships of the community. Niederwimmer describes the situation in this way: “The local communities have begun (probably long since) to choose officials from their own ranks, so that the itinerant charismatics, or those who are now settling down, collide with the group of officeholders representing the local community.” The writers of the Didache affirmed their support for local clergy while at the same time encouraging cooperation among the different sorts of people who were ministering among the community. The rhetoric of the passage suggests a prior consensus within the community that authority and honor were due to prophets and teachers, the charismatic leaders that interacted with the community. The Didache clearly makes the case that local officials also perform a sacred service for the community and were worthy of the same honor and authority.

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26 O’Loughlin, 125.
27 Ibid.
28 Niederwimmer, 200.
29 Ibid.
The passage at hand clearly contrasts two groups of leaders: the prophets and teachers, who were perceived as called by God to ministry in a number of different communities, and the overseers and deacons, who were elected into ministry by and for a local manifestation of the church. Both sets of leaders share in the ongoing ministry of the congregation, and as such ought to work alongside and in cooperation with one another. Prophets and teachers already have status among the community members. Here, the writers emphatically urge their community to grant overseers the same honored status, elevating these leaders chosen by the community to the same level as their wandering charismatic counterparts. Tony Jones summarizes the thrust of these verses: “Appoint some among you to preside over the community and others to serve; And treat those you’ve appointed with respect.”

During the time of Ignatius, at the beginning of the second century, many church members had a single bishop who presided over the council of “elders” (presbyters) and was assisted by deacons. Van de Sandt and Flusser, write that the Didache definitively “represents a collective leadership, a stage preceding the process of increasing subordination to the authority of the monarchical bishop as the executive leader of a Christian community.” Though travelling apostles may have been fading out of the scene, the Didache clearly expects and endorses the leadership of itinerant prophets and teachers, prophets who settle within the community, teachers (perhaps the mentors who led spiritual apprenticeships were among this

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30 Tony Jones, Kindle location 1220.
31 Van de Sandt and Flusser, 339. Varner affirms this sentiment: “The definite impression is that this book is being written during the passing of a wandering charismatic leadership and the permanent arrival of a local and settled leadership. This is not meant to imply that the overseers and deacons were some new means of leading the flock. It is just that soon they would be the sole leaders on the local scene and the congregations need to recognize the importance of their permanent leadership roles.” Varner (2007), 87.
group), and overseer-deacons. A network of leaders, from within and outside, both charismatic and appointed, undergirded the worship and communal life of the Didache community.

O’Loughlin offers the helpful reminder that the earliest Christian churches were “human-sized communities” of 150 people or less, many of them likely consisting of fifty or fewer members. These human-sized communities were led by a variety of different acknowledged leaders, each taking on specific roles and meeting specific needs. Each small community may have had several overseer-deacons along with a settled prophet or two, have been visited by traveling teachers, and had developed a set of teachers and mentors who led in worship and trained new converts. The Didache’s approach to leadership was a community effort, where many people joined their gifts in service of the Lord and in service of the church. Such an approach to leadership would certainly have resonated with the Didache’s focus on Jesus as God’s servant, as evidenced in the language of the thanksgiving prayers.

This final major section of the Didache concludes with brief instructions about correction, repentance, and forgiveness within the community. Again, the writers of the Didache ground their call to action in the ethical imperative of the “gospel of the Lord.” The final sentence of chapter 15 reads: “And do your prayers and alms, and all your actions, as you have it in the gospel of our Lord.” Individual action, communal practices, and faithful leadership – all are set firmly in the context of the Way of Life, revealed in the gospel story and put into practice in the everyday life of the community.

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32 O’Loughlin, 107.
Conclusions: Doing What the Didache Does

Having come to recognize the significance of the Didache for shaping the earliest Christian communities and the insight it can provide modern readers into their belief and practice, should the twenty-first century church leader seek to say what the Didache says or to do what the Didache does? To say what the Didache says is impractical, since we are separated by thousands of years of history and change. As O’Loughlin articulated, in reading the Didache, we take a glimpse into the lives of and engage in conversation with very distant relatives. We cannot re-create the first century church in the twenty-first century world. On the other hand, to do what the Didache does invites us to innovate on tradition. Current churches and Christians might see themselves, their context, and their calling anew through the window of Didache and its community. Perhaps doing what the Didache does could enable and inspire twenty-first century church leaders to innovate on tradition in faithful ways, just as the writers of the Didache did two millennia ago.

The current cultural context, particularly in the United States, presents significant challenges to developing vibrant congregations. We live in an age of busy-ness and distraction, where discipleship is casual, biblical illiteracy is rampant, loyalty to the institutional church is fleeting, and much so-called Christianity is co-opted by civil religion. As leaders of the Church in this context, how might the Didache invite us to rethink the way we shape Christian community? What traditions from our own rich and varied history might be adopted and adapted for a new age? How can the church engage in traditioned innovation in our context –
gleaning from the riches of our faith tradition for the rites and rituals, theology and practice that will lead our communities into a new day?

This thesis has suggested that the Didache might be the most important book most Christian leaders have never read. It models an approach to Christian life and leadership that shapes Christian community by innovating on tradition in ways that promote deep theological grounding as well as meaningful cultural engagement. The Didache defines and depicts the practices that shaped the identity of early Christian communities. The structure of the Didache opens up three areas for conversation about shaping our current Christian communities: the life of Christian discipleship (Didache 1-6), the liturgy and practice of the Christian community (Didache 7-10), and the shape of effective, Christian leadership (Didache 11-15). For its original community, the Didache rooted each of these aspects of the Christian life in shared tradition, and then pushed them forward to shape a distinctive, emerging way to live as Christian community in a new context.

Perhaps followers of Jesus have been wrestling with some of the same basic questions in these same basic categories across the millennia. The Didache provides a source of wisdom from our spiritual forebears that modern Christians would do well not to ignore. As we look through the first century window of the Didache, twenty-first century Christians might discover fresh ways to define Christian community, engage in Christian practice, and nurture Christian leadership. In an article on traditioned innovation in scripture, Kavin Rowe writes that “to the extent that we both remain faithful to tradition and innovate – even radically – we will follow
the pattern of the creating and redeeming God of Scripture [and, we might add, the Didache], and will, therefore, flourish.”¹

Before imagining a conversation between the Didache community and our current Christian communities, one final section of the Didache deserves a brief but significant treatment. The Didache concludes with an eschatological ending which comprises chapter 16. In these final words, the writers of the Didache call the community to consider the ultimate goal, or *telos*, of their life together.

Start with the Ending

16:1  [A] Be watchful over your life;
     [1] do not let your lamps be quenched,
     [2] and do not let your waists be ungirded.
     [B] But be prepared,
     For you do not know the hour in which our Lord is coming.

16:2  [C] And frequently be gathered together,
     Seeking what is appropriate for your souls;
     For the whole time of your faith will not benefit you
     Unless you are perfected in the end time.

The Didache’s eschatological conclusion has consistently been linked to the Two Ways section with which the Didache begins.² One of the key linguistic connections between the two sections can be found in the Greek word *telos*. *Telos*, often translated “goal” or “end,” bears the

¹ Rowe (March 2009), my addition in brackets.
² Niederwimmer, 207ff. He observes that most source critical scholarship considers the eschatological section to have been the conclusion of a pre-existing Two Ways tractate, such that chapter 16 might have immediately followed the content of chapter 6 in a source document. A litany of other scholars (Harnack, Funk, et al) remark on this chapter’s resonance with the apocalyptic material in Matthew 24.
connotation of ultimate aim or fulfillment, the direction toward which a person or process is moving. Noun and verb forms of telos form bookends around the Way of Life teachings and also introduce the eschatological section:

- Among the first teachings in the Way of Life (Didache 1:4) – “If anyone should strike you on the right cheek, turn to him the other, and you will be perfect (teleios)”
- The conclusion of the Way of Life teachings (Didache 6:2) – “If you are able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect (teleios)”
- The framework for the eschatological teachings (Didache 16:2) – “For the whole time of your faith will not benefit you unless in the end time you are perfected (teleiothête)”

A forward-looking orientation on life contextualizes all of the ethical teaching that has come before.

In this final chapter, the writers of the Didache ground their comments about the end times in instructions of “gentle urgency and benevolent hope.” Their eschatological teachings underscore the belief that God’s coming is “not yet,” and they preserve the Didache community’s steadfast commitment to the Way of Life even when tempted toward apocalyptic frenzy. In the face of the end times, the members of the Didache community are instructed to continue in their lives of ordinary holiness: “be gathered together, seek what is appropriate for your souls” (Didache 16:2). Followers of Jesus orient their lives toward the ultimate goal of being perfected; neither the threat of persecution nor the apocalyptic fervor of a wandering prophet ought to stir the community to wild or frenetic behavior. A future telos – the ultimate goal of being perfected by God – stands as the primary source and motivation for all action in the present.

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3 Milavec (2003), 622.
This focus on *telos* guided the Didache community as it shaped Christian community through traditioned innovation. Each section of the Didache exhibits a belief in and a reliance on God’s work of perfecting the community in the end. In the first section (Didache 1-6), the writers rooted the Two Ways material, with its guidelines for personal and communal conduct, in God’s ongoing work of perfecting the believer. In the second section (Didache 7-10), instructions regarding baptism, prayer, and the eucharist all contained strong eschatological elements that pointed the community toward a future that was being foreshadowed in worship and devotional practice. Finally, in the church order section (Didache 11-15), the Didache community developed leadership and practiced communal living which was intended to prefigure the coming reign of God.

In order to begin doing what the Didache does, our Christian communities must clarify our *telos*, or mission. A well-articulated and embraced *telos* provides a framework for traditioned innovation, just as *telos* informed the Didache’s reshaping of each aspect of Christian life. Returning to Jack Carroll’s pottery image: a potter, before she sits down at the wheel to turn, “must decide what she is aiming to make.” Carroll suggests that pastors and other leaders, ought to be “shaping their congregational clay jars so that they reveal God’s extraordinary power.” Each congregation faces a unique context for ministry, so the means that lead toward the end will always necessarily be particular. However, the end – the underlying *telos* – of Christian community remains constant. For Rowe and Jones, a focus on

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4 Carroll, 28.
5 Ibid, 238.
telos means “to bear witness to God’s reign through Christ on earth, and our hope for the fulfillment Christ brings.” That mission (telos) must remain central to us – as individuals, as congregations, as denominations – if our work in shaping Christian community is to have appropriate and faithful direction.

Tony Jones suggests that “whether our church experience is at a coffee shop or a mega-church, the Didache’s vision of communal life in Christ is powerful and potentially transformative.” The following pages suggest some particular ways that the Didache message may be transformative when we bring it into conversation with ideas and movements shaping the twenty-first century Church, particularly in the North American context. The comments below are organized around three concepts for shaping Christian community: training, communion, and servanthood. The remainder of this chapter intends to spark a conversation that cannot be exhausted by nor fully contained in this brief treatment. Hopefully, these conversation starters will inspire twenty-first century Christian communities toward traditioned innovation in their own ministry contexts.

**Shaping Christian Community: Training**

Chapter two of this thesis, the discussion of the Two Ways material, outlined the scholarly debate on whether to translate the Greek word didache using the English word “teaching” or “training.” Clearly, the Didache describes a process of ongoing instruction in the

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6 Rowe, C. Kavin with Gregory Jones, *Thriving Communities: The Pattern of Church Life Then and Now* (Durham: Faith and Leadership, 2014), Kindle location 65.
7 Tony Jones, Kindle location 43.
Way of Life that would have taken place in preparation for baptism. This instruction occurred within a cultural context in which deciding to follow Jesus would have profound social and familial repercussions. Milavec puts forth a persuasive argument for training in the faith as a process resembling the “apprenticeship” known to exist in trade and crafts professions of the time period. The English word “training” seems to capture most fully the essence of what the Didache sets out to accomplish.8

Matthew records Jesus’ commission to his first followers to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching9 them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus’ embodied a rabbinic style of teaching in which he was personally invested in training his followers, over an extended period of time, in his way of faithful living. Naturally, this type of apprenticeship training would have been modeled in the early communities where Christianity first blossomed. In our current Christian context, “the vast majority of instruction classes in our church deal primarily with what we are to believe, not how we are to obey.”10 The Didache, however, underscores the importance of answering the “hows” of faith alongside the “whats” and “whys.” As we consider the charge of training disciples in our current context, two conversation partners emerge from the edges of twenty-first century Christian life: the new monastic movement and the coaching movement.

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8 In our context, the word teaching connotes cerebral learning rather than experiential and is too easily focused on internal, individualistic knowledge rather than the holistic, communal understanding of what it means to follow Jesus found in scripture and the Didache.
9 Or perhaps better understood, “training.”
10 Varner (2007), 32.
The Didache’s influence on the early monastic communities that would emerge over the next centuries of Christian history remains unquestioned. The Didache informed and inspired early monastic movements, particularly in their creation of holy orders, or rules of life. The introduction of this thesis described the ways that later church orders and monastic orders borrowed large segments of the Didache, weaving them into more elaborate rules of life for later communities. The Rule of the Master and the Rule of Benedict, among others, feature extended quotations attributable to the Didache. The apprenticeship program used by the Didache communities bears striking resemblance to the novitiate system of apprenticeship that would become a hallmark of monastic orders.

Two thousand years later, the emergence of a new monasticism echoes the form and content of the Didache. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, founder of Rutba House, has become a key thought leader for a movement that has become known as the New Monastics. His books, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World* and *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today’s Church*, introduced the concept of New Monasticism to much of mainstream Christianity. Over the past several decades, intentional communities formed to live out their faith together, as a witness to God’s work in the world. Though the individual groups do not have a formal affiliation with one another, they developed a list of shared commitments at a 2004 meeting in Durham, NC. The Twelve Marks of a New Monasticism\(^{11}\) function as a sort of rule of life for these communities.

\(^{11}\) Wilson-Hartgrove, Jonathan, *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008). Wilson-Hartgrove catalogs the 12 marks in *New Monasticism*, 40: “These ‘marks’ are: 1. Relocation to the ‘abandoned places of Empire’ [at the margins of society], 2. Sharing economic resources with fellow
Wilson-Hartgrove chronicles the twentieth century movements that New Monastics have looked to for inspiration. First among them was Finkenwalde, the illegal seminary for the Confessing Church that Dietrich Bonhoeffer directed from 1935 to 1937. Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*, which he wrote while at Finkenwalde, articulated a model for living a deeply communal and costly faith, committed to a rule of life with the Sermon on the Mount as its centerpiece. For Bonhoeffer, discipleship was an all-in, holistic proposition – in fact, the German title of his *The Cost of Discipleship*, also written at Finkewalde, translates simply as “Follow.” In a letter to his brother during his time at the seminary, Bonhoeffer wrote, “The restoration of the church will surely come from a sort of new monasticism which has in common with the old only the uncompromising attitude of a life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount.”

Other predecessors of and inspirations for the new monastic movement include the Bruderhof community, the Catholic Worker movement, and Koinonia Farms. Eberhard and Emmy Arnold founded the Bruderhof (“Brotherhood”) community outside Berlin during the rise of Nazism in Germany. It served as stalwart for the kingdom of God on the margins of a German community members and the needy among us, 3. Hospitality to the stranger, 4. Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation, 5. Humble submission to Christ’s body, the Church, 6. Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate, 7. Nurturing common life among members of an intentional community, 8. Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children, 9. Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life, 10. Care for the plot of God’s earth given to us along with support of our local economies, 11. Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18, 12. Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life”

12 The Sermon on the Mount, as shown above, also provides a central framework for the ethical instruction of the Didache.
13 Quoted in Wilson-Hartgrove, 25.
society enamored with Hitler and the rise of the Nazi party. Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin begin the Catholic Worker movement, opening hospitality houses in New York in the 1930s. Maurin described the Catholic Worker vision for society as being “so old it looked like new.” In the 1940s, Baptist preacher Clarence Jordan established Koinonia Farms in rural Georgia to provide an embodied context for racial reconciliation and for white Christians to learn from the Black church tradition. Jordan called the community “a demonstration plot for the kingdom of God.” Over the past two decades, a number of new monastic movements, both urban and rural, have been founded, across the country, including the Simple Way (Philadelphia), Rutba House (Durham, NC), Hyaets / Family Tree (Charlotte, NC), and others.

Wilson-Hartgrove discovered that the new manifestation of monasticism, lived out at Rutba House and elsewhere, “isn’t about achieving some sort of individual or communal piety. It’s about helping the church be the church.” Intentional communities can function as incubators for innovation within or alongside the institutional church. The Christians who band together in these communities demonstrate a radical form of discipleship from which many traditional churches could learn. So, what might the church learn about being the church –

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14 Interestingly, the Sermon on the Mount was also the centerpiece for the Bruderhof community. Eberhard Arnold wrote: “We do not need theories or idealistic goals or prophets or leaders. We need brotherhood and sisterhood. We need to *live* Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. We need to show that a life of justice and forgiveness and unity is possible today” (quoted in Wilson-Hartgrove, 26).

15 Wilson-Hartgrove, 41.

16 In recent years, several intentional communities have attempted to use the Didache directly as a rule of life. Tony Jones tells the story of the Cymbrogi, a community of disciples in Missouri, as does Phillip Harrold in “The ‘New Monasticism’ as Ancient-Future Belonging,” Theology Today 2010, 67: 182, as well as a third community that I heard from directly from a colleague in ministry. All either shifted from using the Didache as their rule or disbanded altogether – further evidence that we cannot simply say what the Didache says, across the distance of two millennia.

17 Wilson-Hartgrove, 22.
centrally, about training disciples – from the New Monastic movement? How can this movement help the church to more fully be the church?

One particular aspect of the monastic life that has been adopted and adapted by the new monastic movement, is the rule of life. A rule of life is a common set of commitments that guides and forms a group as they engage in the journey of faith together. Ancient monastic orders from Benedict onward had formal rules of life that governed their communal living. The Didache served as a “rule of life” for its community. Fundamentally practical, the Didache guided early Christian communities in the daily practice of their faith.

While functioning as an intentional community may not be possible or desirable for many established churches, developing a communal rule of life might be valuable in guiding individual disciples who have made a commitment to follow Jesus together, as part of a local congregation. Many present day churches approach discipleship as a program of the church rather than as a way of life to be nurtured. Developing a communal rule of life in the 21st century church, could provide an opportunity for churches to reconsider and reimagine what it means to be disciples in our age. Churches who already have mission statements or church covenants might use these documents as a starting point.18

On a different front, the rapidly-expanding coaching movement has already made a significant impact on American churches and ministers. Executive coaching, which has existed more than three decades, gave rise to leadership and life coaching. Training and certifying

18 The National Cathedral and the C.S. Lewis Institute, among others have online resources available to help groups or individuals create a rule of life. See https://www.cathedral.org/pdfs/cor_rule.pdf (accessed March 30, 2016) and http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/338 (accessed March 30, 2016) for more details.
organizations such as the International Coach Federation (ICF) seek to standardize and professionalize the coaching industry. In recent years, many people have sought ways to adapt coaching to the specific needs of clergy and also to the goal of training of disciples within the church context.

Mark Tidsworth and Ircel Harrison’s book *Discipleship Development Coaching* outlines an approach for adapting coaching practices to nurture discipleship in congregations. Discipleship Development Coaching, they write, consists of “a focused collaborative relationship resulting in Christian disciples living out their calling more fully.”

19 Pastors and other lay leaders are trained as discipleship coaches, who mentor individuals as they seek to take the next steps in their life of faith. Tidsworth and Harrison hope “to initiate a coaching movement in congregations” (27), “to assist people to become followers of Jesus at deeper, more significant levels” (9), and “to collaborate with God’s redemptive and renewing work within each disciple” (7). Coaches work one-on-one with disciples to develop goals for their spiritual life.

Discipleship Development Coaching offers a model, with great resonance with the Didache’s model of apprenticeship, for congregations seeking to help individuals grow in their faith. The coaching approach differs from the apprenticeship approach in that the coach does not function as a master teacher guiding an apprentice. Rather, the coaching model seeks collaboration, with the one being coached bearing responsibility for discerning growing edges in their faith and the coach helping to shape goals and support the one being coached along the

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path of implementing change. Tidsworth and Harrison do not intend to provide another program for churches to implement, but hope to create a coaching culture within congregations, where fellow disciples help and support one another as they make their faith an active part of their whole lives.

Recovering the practice of the rule of life along with adapting the coaching approach for discipleship provide two avenues for training those in our churches for the life of following Jesus. These approaches – which echo the wisdom found in the Didache – might, as Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove suggests, help the church to better be the church by refocusing on the central task of training disciples.

**Shaping Christian Community: Communion**

The believer baptized into the Didache community was immediately integrated into a new family of faith that shaped and formed almost every aspect of life from that moment forward. In our twenty-first century context, few American Christians are so connected to their church community. Many worship together on the weekend but maintain only marginal connection throughout the week. Church attendance shares a place as one of many significant commitments in life. Church becomes an event we attend or a building in which we gather on a Sunday morning, rather than something so woven into the fabric of our lives that we are connected to our brothers and sisters in Christ even when we are not physically together.\(^\text{20}\)

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\(^{20}\) Recall, from above, the way that individuals or small groups in the Didache communities, when praying the Lord’s Prayer or fasting at common times, were linked with one another even when not physically present in the same place.
Worship, liturgy, and Christian community happen throughout the week, in a variety of settings, not just during the gathered programming and organized events of the church.

Four times throughout the pages of the Didache, the writers refer to the group of believers at large as the ekklesia. The Greek word simply means “assembly” or “gathering.” The language of the Didache’s communion prayers highlight the belief that the ekklesia belongs to God and God alone – not to any particular band of believers. “To a Greek-speaker,” writes Tony Jones, “ekklesia was a happening, an event, and not a place or a discrete group of people.” The church doesn’t gather itself for times of worship; God gathers it together from the ends of the earth. Even when the church is scattered geographically, it is united in faith and practice by the One who holds it together.

The English word communion – particularly for Christian traditions who use this word to indicate the celebration of Eucharist – functions to bring together images of the church at worship and the church scattered in the world. The phrase from the Apostle’s Creed, “the communions of saints,” reminds us that Christians are united in Christ across time and space. In the first century, writes Milavec, “being a Christian meant, first and foremost, belonging to a community.” Liturgy, then, was focused on effecting a sense of belonging – entering or joining in the community and being bound in mission and purpose with the community. In these earliest Christian communities, communion began during gathered times of eating, praying, and worshiping together, and then extended into the rhythms of daily life.

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22 Note in both Didache 9:4 and 10:5 the phrase “your church.” See also the discussion in Milavec (2003), 367ff.  
23 Tony Jones, Kindle location 1003.  
24 Milavec (2003), 276.
The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen a renewed emphasis on Christian practices and liturgical studies. Renewed interest in Christian practice: Pohl, Bass/Dykstra; Pohl claims that “practices are at the heart of human communities... They are things people do together over time to address fundamental human needs.”

Christian practices take shape in response to the grace of God in the life of the individual and the community. “Our practices,” writes Pohl, “include hospitality, making and keeping promises, truthfulness, gratitude, Sabbath-keeping, testimony, discernment, forgiveness, worship, healing, and many others.”

Some practices are communal, while others are individual; some take place in a sacred space and time, while others are integrated into the ordinariness of everyday life. The Didache holds in tension the dialectic of individual and communal practices, while also acknowledging with brutal realism the challenges of building Christian community. Pohl writes, “We are not called to create ideal families, communities, or congregations. Building faithful communities of truth and hospitality, however, is at the heart of our grateful response to [God].”

Traditioned innovation within the field of liturgical studies seeks to recover and transform ancient of rites and rituals into meaningful, engaging liturgy for our times. Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, in their book *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals* (Foley/Anderson, 2012), 5.

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26 Ibid. In addition, *Practicing Our Faith*, edited by Dorothy Bass, offers a great introduction to Christian practices, and a book series on a number of these practices has been published by Jossey-Bass and can be found on the website [http://www.practicingourfaith.org/bookstore](http://www.practicingourfaith.org/bookstore), accessed March 30, 2016.
27 Ibid., 176 (emphasis mine).
see especially pp.36-54) – suggest that a vibrant liturgy and ritual depend on a congregation’s ability to hold in tension each of the following juxtaposed pairs: “story/ritual, myth/parable, human/divine, individual/communal, private/public, worship/pastoral care.” Narrative and ritual combine to help humans make sense of the world. Through ritual, we keep a rhythm to life and we mark significant, transformative events. Ronald Grimes, in *Deeply to the Bone*, attempts to understand and reclaim traditional rites of passage for times of birth, initiation, marriage, and death. In addition, Grimes also innovates on tradition, offering meaning-making rites and rituals for beginning school, retirement, abortion, divorce, and more.

Liturgy and ritual also have an eschatological reach. “Our liturgy,” writes Patricia Wilson-Kastner, “is the symbolic action expressing the intersection of what we are and what we hope to become... At the same time, liturgy also shows us the vision of the reign of God, in which the whole creation is united with God.” Thus, liturgy and ritual are deeply connected to our ultimate telos, reminding us of and proleptically enacting for us life in God’s kingdom. O’Loughlin sees the “breaching of the boundaries of Greco-Roman society” at the eucharistic meal as “one of the miracles of the early Church.” He continues, however, with a cautionary word:

Later, it would all seem too much and the meal would be replaced with a token eating and drinking, it would be obscured under competing explanations – and eventually we would end up with the irony that this meal that is intended to

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30 Wilson-Kastner, 117.
unite Christians has become one of their main points of argument and division.”

“Authentic Christian worship is a disturbing event,” suggest Anderson and Foley. Grimes adds, “All genuine ritual is transformative... Ritual that merely confirms the status quo rather than transforming it is called ceremony.” Do our efforts at ritual conform to the culture around us or do they transform us? Is our liturgy divisive or unifying? Are we too caught up on form rather than function? Do our rituals of baptism and communion have enough “soulfulness” to carry the meaning we intend for them to convey?

The Didache invites us, as twenty-first century Christians, to consider again what it means to be the church, the ekklesia of God. Living in communion with God and one another – gathering for times of shared worship and fellowship and practicing faith in the daily routines of life. In this way, followers of Jesus remain in communion, even when scattered to the ends of the earth! Recent renewal movements in the fields of Christian practices and liturgical studies offer vast resources for engaging the Didache from our twenty-first century vantage point. When brought into conversation with the Didache, these resources invite the church into renewed, innovative ways of practicing our faith in a changing context.

Shaping Christian Community: Servanthood

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31 O’Loughlin, 104.
32 Anderson and Foley, 52.
33 Grimes, 121.
What did leading look like in the Didache community? What does it look like for us?

What does it mean to “be a Christian leader?” The primary image for Jesus in the Didache is that of servant (paidos). Servant imagery permeates the prayers surrounding the eucharist, appearing in twice in Didache 9:2, and once each in 9:3, 10:2, and 10:3. Additionally, the central criteria for determining true or false prophecy, according to the Didache, can be found in the prophet’s posture of servanthood. Being a Christian leader means, at the most basic level, being a servant. “The Didache sets the actual walking of the Way as a test for anyone who acts as a prophet [or any leader],” writes O’Loughlin. “The correct teaching is not enough in itself, it must be backed up by the correct form of life.”

Robert Greenleaf introduced the concept of servant leadership in his 1977 book of the same name. His concept of servant leadership insisted that the “great leader is seen as servant first.” Followers choose who they will follow based on a sense of the leaders commitment to interests broader than the leader’s own. The servant leader practices listening, understanding, imagination, acceptance, empathy, intuition, and persuasion. Greenleaf’s approach, while certainly built upon a foundation of morality, is essentially a humanistic vision of leadership, not particularly Christian.

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34 O’Loughlin, 118.
36 Greenleaf lays out these practices in the first section of his thesis, “The Servant as Leader,” Kindle location 266ff.
37 Greenleaf, Kindle location 87-93. The “unchanging core” at the “soul of the organization” are “natural principles... the conscience – that inward moral sense of what is right and what is wrong.”
Efrain Agosto explores the concept of servant leadership directly through the scriptural witness to Jesus and Paul. Agosto frames his discussion in terms of social science approaches to the New Testament and the patronage system that dominated Greco-Roman life. He finds leadership models in the New Testament pressing toward radical commitment and sacrifice, attending to the most vulnerable in a society, remaining humble, proclaiming good news in the midst of crisis and change, and nurturing and affirming leadership in others. Each of these streams remained alive in the second generation Christianity of the Didache communities.

Given this discussion, then, one might ask: is “leadership” the best terminology for what is needed to shape Christian community? Or should we replace the word leadership with servanthood, and the word leader with servant? Greenleaf argues that the servant leader is always servant first, then leader. Agosto advocates, following Peter Block, “replacing ‘leadership’ with ‘stewardship,’ choosing partnership over patriarchy, and choosing service over self-interest.” Servant leaders must encourage and challenge followers toward meaningful goals, but also create opportunities for others to use their own gifts to lead and contribute to the community. Servant leaders require servant followers, and the roles remain fluid. All leaders are sometimes followers, and vice versa. In order to shape vibrant communities of faith, we need servants first.

In addition to servant leaders, vibrant communities of faith also require structure. Christianity “is a faith that makes demands within a real community and about how it lives in

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38 Agosto, Efrain, Servant Leadership: Jesus & Paul (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 2-6.
39 Greenleaf, Kindle location 346.
40 Agosto, 7.
the world as it bears witness to the Christ. From this need flow all those structures that we as human beings need: they are but a means to an end, and always somehow provisional relative to the end.” Do current church leaders put undue emphasis on the structure, such that it overwhelms or distracts from the purpose?

When it comes to institutional structures and leadership, some Christians are more focused on the means than the end they serve, while others feel they are only a distraction from the gospel. O’Loughlin rightly observes: “All human communities need structures. Structures are necessary both to enable a community to live in harmony and to ensure that it is not broken up by disputes.” Additionally, structures ought to serve the larger purpose of the church – guiding believers to more fully be disciples of Jesus, and facilitating ministry and mission in the world. Hierarchy, our institution-averse culture needs reminding, does literally mean “holy order.” The structures that the Didache community found holy are the ones that align with the gospel as proclaimed through the Two Ways teachings and that contribute to common good of the community.

Within those bounds, the Didache remains open to the participation of many diverse leaders in the task of shaping the community. A variety of leadership types guided the community in worship and practice, allowing individuals to put their gifts to work for the community. The Didache reveals a primitive lack of clear or uniform distinctions between clergy and laity, in which some leaders are supported by the community and others donate their time

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41 O’Loughlin, 128.
42 O’Loughlin, 105.
and energies as a public service. The Didache demanded hospitality and, at the same time, critical engagement with the other – outsiders who bring a message to them. What would it look like to hold these leadership dialectics in tension in our faith communities? How might we develop, choose and evaluate leaders differently, if we looked at our current practices through the lens of the Didache?

Certainly, these final thoughts about making the shift to the twenty-first century are only a beginning, and may leave us with more questions than answers. Perhaps, though, they might spur further conversations about traditioned innovation around the themes of training, communion, and servanthood. Just as the Didache adopts and adapts in order to bring previous tradition into new life for a new context, so we as current church leaders must innovate on tradition in order to live out the good news in the face of the challenges of our emerging context. If we start with the ending, shaping Christian community in light of a well-articulated telos, and engage with voices from the richness of Christian tradition past, then our present will hold great promise for following Jesus together.
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