

THE DIDACHE CONTINUES TO TEACH: THE RELEVANT AND TIMELESS PRACTICES
IN THE DIDACHE FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION TODAY

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Introduction

My first exposure to the *Didache* was from a YouTube video.¹ This particular episode on the channel used the text of the *Didache* to cast doubt essential Christian doctrines such as the deity of Christ and His resurrection by claiming since they are not mentioned specifically in the text is why the “church” (que conspiracy movie music) did not allow the *Didache* to be canonized as if it were scandalous in a Dan Brownesque, Da Vinci Code sort of way. After the video, my immediate impulse was to relegate the *Didache* to status of gnostic writings and that of pseudepigraphic books such as the Gospel of Thomas, etc. I will be the first to admit that my response was not a scholarly one, but probably typical as an evangelical confronted with a non-canonical text in such a way to prove a point that is contra orthodoxy. It wasn’t until I took an Apostolic Fathers class at Dallas Theological Seminary did I see that the *Didache* had a specific context and purpose – most likely as a guide for church leaders to train other church leaders in order to plant churches².

¹ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_aih0Nf7fUjbmzfqB2ozaQ. Accessed April 14, 2018.

² Michael J. Svigel, “Apostolic Fathers,” (Unpublished class notes for HT217, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 2015), 21-22. It should also be noted that others, such as Aaron Milavec, hold to the theory that the *Didache* was meant as a manual for a “master/apprentice” relationship (see Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2004), 47.). Michelle Slee contends that the *Didache* was written a corrective catechesis to settle conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Antioch namely around the eating of meat sacrificed to pagan gods (6:3) (see Michelle Slee, *The Church in Antioch in the First Century CE: Communion and Conflict* (London ; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 158-61. The purpose of this paper is not to prove the audience but will assume that the *Didache* was used by church leaders in the middle of the first century to plant churches as the faith outpaced the capacity of the fixed number of those in

In that light, I believe that the *Didache* is an important and helpful ancient text, albeit not authoritative. I believe that it still teaches today. It teaches what was important to the first century church and that important practices and values are timeless and are important today.

Thesis Statement

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the *Didache* can still teach us that certain timeless spiritually formative practices from the first century church are just as relevant to the Church today. Some of these practices, we will discover, we may tend to undervalue or even ignore altogether in many protestant evangelical circles. I will demonstrate this by discussing the various practices intended for the spiritual formation of first century Christians and the different criterion for church community found in the *Didache*, then compare these practices and criteria to those found in contemporary evangelicalism and discern what, if anything, there is to learn from the first century usage of the *Didache*. In short, the aim of this paper is to examine the practices in the *Didache* that are relative to spiritual formation and hopefully glean a helpful perspective with how we should approach spiritual formation and how we approach formative practices in our contemporary evangelical churches today.

Background

Certain background presuppositions are necessary to identify in order to frame my argument for this paper. I am not going to defend the presuppositions, but ask the reader, for the sake of argument, grant these as given as we interact with the subject matter. These

Apostolic authority. The *Didache* served as a church planting tool for church leaders to fill the gap providing instruction on catechesis, employment of the sacraments, and practical instruction of believers (Svigel, "Apostolic Fathers," 22.). See also Michael J. Svigel, "Didache as a Practical Enchiridion for Early Church Plants," 174 (2017).

presuppositions are: 1) a dating of the *Didache* as a 50 to 75 CE³; 2) the *Didache* depends on the authority of the Gospel According to Matthew (or some early form of Matthew)⁴; and 3) the purpose of the *Didache* was an early form of a church planting manual for church leaders⁵.

Why Raise the Question?

Why even take a document like the *Didache* and spend the energy to make an argument for its helpfulness in contemporary spiritual formation of Christians today? After all, the early church was a different time, different culture and different context. And of course, we now have access to (and quite confident in the translations of) the full counsel of God's revealed word – the canon of Scripture. What could this little work of 16 short chapters offer us?

While I do not in any way find the *Didache* authoritative⁶, I will give two reasons why contemporary evangelicals should see the *Didache* as a helpful work that can inform matters of faith and practice – as long as it is held under the authority of Scripture. First, there is great benefit in taking an inventory of practices and church government criteria that were evidently important to those who were contemporaries of the apostles and early church fathers. The way the early church organized itself, based on what the early church leaders saw as important, is of great value⁷. The second reason is the *Didache* is a part of Christian history. Christianity is, of

³ Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (London: SPCK ; Grand Rapids), 26. See also William C. Varner, *The Way of the Didache: The First Christian Handbook* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2007), 4-5. And also Svigel, "Apostolic Fathers," 21. And also Slee, *The Church in Antioch in the First Century CE: Communion and Conflict*, 158.

⁴ Varner, *The Way of the Didache: The First Christian Handbook*, 44-51.

⁵ Svigel, "Didache as a Practical Enchiridion for Early Church Plants."

⁶ I find Varner to be helpful here, although I would quibble with calling the *Didache* "post-Apostolic" in that it could be early enough to be at the time of at least some of the Apostles. See Varner, *The Way of the Didache: The First Christian Handbook*, 103.

⁷ O'Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians*, 14.

course, a faith set in history and the object of our faith is a historical Jesus. Therefore, a historical document that instructs churches how to replicate themselves in faithfulness to this historical Jesus deserves our attention and is worthy of our study. We will often times spend \$19.95 on a book that outlines the newest fad on spiritual formation or how to organize our churches, but we might well ignore a historical document that was written only a few decades after the resurrection of our Lord. We do so to our disadvantage.

Spiritually Formative Practices in the *Didache* in a Contemporary Context

The following is an interaction with the Spiritually formative practices, corporate and individual, outlined in the *Didache* alongside the approach generally taken in a contemporary, evangelical context.

Catechesis in the *Didache*

Catechesis is the primary method of initiation of new believers (catechumens) into the church. This initiation is undertaken by means of a teacher/learner relationship and continues until the candidate is baptized and at which time is eligible to take the Eucharist. The duration of this initiation period is not specifically articulated in the *Didache*, but throughout the early church history, there are indications that this initiation stage could be quite long even up to three years by the third century⁸.

The “Two Ways” as presented in the *Didache* is that there are two ways – one leads to life and the other leads to death. Do these passages intend to present a works righteousness path that leads to eternal life? Is it a warning that you can step on to the path that leads to death

⁸ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity. Volume 1, The Early Church to the Reformation*, Rev. and updated ed. , 2nd ed. (New York: Harper One, 2010), 112.

and lose your salvation? Or is this a catechesis of what an embodied faith looks like? I want to think it is more of the latter⁹, but the great question facing the first century church was not the finer points of justification and atonement. Instead the mission at hand was to grow the church in the first century (Matt 28:16-20; Acts 1:8) and the method was to present people with not only a better way, but “The Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9; 19:23; 24:14, 22).

The Two Ways catechesis put forth in the *Didache* (1:1-6:2) seems to be a summary of what is learned by the catechumen throughout the initiation process, and this summary catechism is reproduced at baptism. Perhaps “these things” in 7:1 is in reference to the Two Ways catechesis¹⁰. But what was the content of this catechesis? It focused on the distinctiveness of the Christian in a pagan world. The “Way of Life” puts forth four teachings¹¹ in the first four chapters.

The first teaching we encounter is to instruct the catechumen to think like Jesus and love others – even those who wrong you (1:3-6). These are reminiscent of Jesus’ teachings from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5) with some additional discussion regarding alms giving.

The second teaching (2:1-7) expands upon the Decalogue bringing more detail in order to instruct Christians in the way of an external ethic¹² that would make them distinct in their culture.

⁹ There is a good argument to be made for a greater understanding of both Two Way catechesis and Hebrews 6:1-6 Matthew Larson’s and Michael Svigel’s article in Jonathan A. Draper and Clayton N. Jefford, *The Didache: A Missing Piece of the Puzzle in Early Christianity*, Society of Biblical Literature early Christianity and its literature, vol. number 14 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 477-96.

¹⁰ Varner, *The Way of the Didache: The First Christian Handbook*, 59.

¹¹ Svigel, “Apostolic Fathers,” 26-31.

¹² Ibid., 28.

The third teaching (3:1-10) provides a series of parental-sounding admonitions and warnings to flee from all kinds of evil. The instructions here aren't merely "do not do..." but they provide a gentle but direct warning about the logical trajectory of sin. Such as "Do not become angry, because anger leads to murder (3:2; cf. Matt 5:21-22) and grumbling and arrogance lead to blasphemy (3:6) The Didachist then moves from prohibitive language to a positive exhortation to instead be humble (3:7) and to accept the things that happen as good, because nothing happens apart from God (3:10). In sum, the third teaching is demonstrating the dichotomy of evil leading to blasphemy and humility leading to a content faith in God. Again – this is a stark distinction from what would be seen in the broader culture.

The fourth teaching in the way of life (4:1-14) revolves around living in love and unity with others, namely other believers. The issues deal specifically with generosity, kindness, and faithful stewardship of family and others whom are under their charge. The Way of Life teaching ends with the exhortation to keep the Lord's commandments, guarding what you have learned – without adding or taking away from it – and to keep close accounts on yourself through confessing your sins (4:13-14).

As you look at these four teachings it is apparent that at the locus¹³ is "Now this is the way of life: First, you shall love God, who made you. Second, you shall love your neighbor as yourself; but whatever you do not wish to happen to you, do not do to another" (1:2; cf. Matt 7:12; 22:40; Luke 6:31).

The Two Ways ends, of course, with an articulation of the Way of Death. This is a list (not intended to be exhaustive) of characteristics and actions that are not in line with the

¹³ Ibid., 26-27.

Christian walk and these examples are set against the plan and purpose of God. It would seem that a person who is unrepentantly engaging in these things are on a path that leads to death.

The Didachist then implores the catechumen to beware anyone that would lead them away from this teaching (6:1) because that false teacher has no regard for them or for God. And then there's this interesting little verse that encourages the learner, "For if you are able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect. But if you are not able, then do what you can." It is in this verse the focus is on progressive sanctification with an idea of being distinct in a pagan culture. It seems to me the Didachist is not adding law in these first 6 chapters but is exhorting the catechumen to be transformed by their new faith in such a way that they look different than the anti-God world around them. This Two-Way catechesis is a practical means to an evangelistic end of being attractively different, even peculiar, and embodying a different way – embodying "The Way".

I think it is important to note that there appears to be an intentional and intimate process of discipleship and training here¹⁴. We see this in the rules about baptism in that the one baptizing fasts along with the one being baptized (7:4). This suggests a mentor/catechumen relationship that has existed throughout the initiation process. Milavec insists that the purpose of this work for individual training to the point that he translates διδασκαλία as "training" rather than teaching, but for his part, I think he does a fair work in describing the assumed mentor/catechumen relationship in his work¹⁵.

¹⁴ Varner, *The Way of the Didache: The First Christian Handbook*, 103.

¹⁵ Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary*, 3; 48-49; 107-8.

Catechesis in a Contemporary Evangelical Context

Unless you are from a confessional Presbyterian or Baptist tradition, the idea of catechism as an evangelical may be completely foreign to you. If it isn't foreign, then it probably bears the weight of all kinds of unfortunate baggage because it smells too "Catholic". We have tried to change our terms to something more palpable such as "Sunday school" or "Adult Bible Fellowship", or small groups, etc. And even in evangelical circles where the term catechism is accepted, the questions in a Heidelberg or Westminster Catechism or even the more contemporary New City Catechism¹⁶ are more theological and doctrinal. They deal more with orthodoxy rather than orthopraxy and how to live a distinctly Christian life. Does theology and doctrine inform our living? Absolutely. It is very important, but we may well be missing an opportunity to teach and be taught "The Way of Life" as the first century catechumens were.

The major takeaway here is, the early church using the *Didache* spent considerable time catechizing their new converts into the faith than we do in evangelical circles today¹⁷. For the catechumen, they were taught how to look different from the world. Today our emphasis may be more how to look like the world so we can relate. There's room for both, but I think the *Didache* shows us the former deserves to be revisited in contemporary evangelicalism. To that end, it is essential for the spiritual formation of all believers and for the sake of the church, to be more involved in this process of catechesis – whatever it may look like.

¹⁶ <http://newcitycatechism.com> is the website of The New City Catechism produced by The Gospel Coalition and Tim Keller and Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, (accessed April 8, 2018).

¹⁷ Varner, *The Way of the Didache: The First Christian Handbook*, 104.

Baptism in the *Didache*

The idea of baptism in the early church had a more simple purpose that revolved around the idea of washing away sin and emerging from the water clean by Christ.¹⁸ The Epistle of Barnabas says it like this, "...while we descend into the water laden with sins and dirt, we rise up bearing fruit in our heart and with fear and hope in Jesus in our spirits" (Brn 11:11; translated by Holmes).

Baptism in the early church was different that other types of washing rituals of other religions. Non-Christian washing rituals were done before they could enter their holy places or participate in certain activities, whereas Christian baptism was a one-time rite that was never to be repeated¹⁹. The early church wasn't faced with the theological implication of washing away sin from a salvation perspective, but instead likely just followed an intuitive notion. Even so, it doesn't seem to me the text of the *Didache* implies that at all. The *Didache* is highlighting identity. However, I feel it is fair to say that baptism is a means of grace and I would even say that it does save in a certain way. Not in a way that saves eternally but saves daily in that a believer becomes a part of a body of believers that care, provide for and protect those in the ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia). When Paul instructed to put an unrepentant member out of the church and to hand him over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh (1 Cor 5:5), this was a matter of discipline to expose the individual to life outside the care and protection of the church as well as to protect the church from the influence of his sin.

¹⁸ Michael J. Kruger, "Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church," (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 104.

¹⁹ Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016).

The *Didache* seems to embrace a “believer’s baptism” and also clearly shows that the means of baptism isn’t as important as the action (7:2-3). The point is this, the early church saw baptism as a necessary part of obedience and a clear marker of forsaking the world and setting one’s self apart as a follower of Jesus Christ²⁰ to be baptized in front of the body of believers in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit (cf. Matt 28:19; also Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61). The celebration of baptism welcomed a new believer, after a long initiation/training period, into a family that looks distinctly different than that of the world around them.

Baptism in a Contemporary Evangelical Context

We may (and should) quibble with the theological implications of baptism “washing away sin” which would infer that baptism has some inherent salvific function thus making baptism necessary for salvation. However, let’s not lose sight of the main point in that baptism marked a time where the catechumen was deciding to turn from the world and turn to Christ in a one-time act of identity *in Christ with* a body of believers. Induction into the church is an important event, but in today’s consumer-driven evangelical smorgasbord, we are free to church hop stuffing our spiritual faces with whatever cravings we may have in the moment. In this “have it your way” view of church, baptism has become a “look at me” moment of individualism where we are proclaiming a faith that many times is disembodied from a local church. The *Didache* can speak to our spiritual formation with respect to baptism in that we would do well to remember that we are baptized to identify in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ (Rom 6:3-4), but we are also baptized into a community of Christians as a kind of means of grace that

²⁰ Gerald Lawson Sittser, *Water From A Deep Well: Christian Spirituality From Early Martyrs To Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2007), 68.

is sanctifying as we repent of sin (1 Cor 6:11) and we publicly promise to lead a life evident of growing holiness (1 Pe 3:21) or as the *Didache* calls it “The Way of Life”.

The Eucharist in the *Didache*

According to the *Didache*, one cannot participate in the Eucharist until he or she has been baptized (9:5). The Eucharist was observed each Lord’s Day when the church gathered (14:1) and there were prescribed prayers (9:1-4; 10:1-6) that were to be used when there was no one who held the office of prophet in their midst (10:7; cf. Justin, 1 Apology 67:3-5). This indicates the prominence of the Lord’s Table at the weekly meeting of the saints and the liturgical seriousness of the sacrament (9:5; cf. 1 Cor 11:27). It doesn’t seem the Didachist is interested in providing a procedure or words of institution, but rather clarity on who was eligible to receive the sacrament and the prescribed prayers (discussed later) in the absence of a prophet²¹. While there’s speculation that the procedure for the Eucharist may have looked different from community to community,²² this much is clear – the Eucharist held a prominent place in the gathered church weekly meeting.

The Eucharist in a Contemporary Evangelical Context

Evangelicalism would do well to remember that the early church, evident in the *Didache*, saw the Eucharist as a primary purpose in the gathering of the saints in remembering the work of Christ, uniting the local and universal church. Surely if Christ is present when 2 or 3 are gathered in His name in the context of church discipline (Matt 18:20) then it must be so when

²¹ Sviel, “Apostolic Fathers,” 49.

²² Paul F. Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship: A Basic Introduction to Ideas and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2010), 45-6.

we obey His command to come to His table²³ (cf. Matt 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor 11:25-28, also Did 4:1).

The embodied act of gathering together, taking the elements – the chewing and the swallowing engages our physical senses as well as our spirit. It is a spiritual meal (Did 10:3) that feeds our souls. It is individual in that it involves introspection, confession, repentance and the asking of forgiveness – but is necessarily corporate in that all are doing this together and ideally helping one another along in holiness, thus the command to not participate in the Lord’s Supper when there is division and sin. Not for the purposes of condemnation and isolation, but for the motivation of love, unity, forbearance and forgiveness.

John Wesley said Christians should participate in the Lord’s Supper as “often as he can” as a “duty of constant communion” because he saw the sacrament as a sanctifying process that helps one grow in holiness in life and of heart²⁴. Calvin also agreed that the Lord’s Supper should be observed whenever the church gathered to remember Christ’s Passion in worship and feed on spiritual food to nourish mutual love in unity. Calvin then makes the point that whenever we participate in this sacrament, it is not only nourishing us as individuals but corporately as we are bound to the duty of love to our brothers and sisters in Christ. In other words, it was Calvin’s view that we should take communion as often as possible as a reminder that we are bound to Christ and to one another.²⁵

²³ Michael J. Svigel, *RetroChristianity: Reclaiming The Forgotten Faith* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012), 240.

²⁴ John Wesley and Albert Cook Outler, *The works of John Wesley*, vol. 3, The Bicentennial edition of the works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 428-39.

²⁵ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., The Library of Christian Classics, (Philadelphia,: Westminster Press, 1960), IV, xvii, 43. page 1422.

My church (rightfully, in my opinion²⁶) observes the Lord's Supper every week. One Sunday, my seven-year-old son asked me if he could sit with us rather than going to his class. I was happy to oblige as long as he promised to sit quietly and if he had any questions, we would talk after church. When it came time to take communion, he observed what was happening and when it came time for our row to go forward he, naturally, stood up to go with us. It didn't occur to me that I needed to prepare him for what he was about to witness. So, I instructed him to sit and stay with me while my wife went up and then I went up after she got back. Later, I explained the concept of the Lord's Table and showed him the passages in scripture relating to the sacrament. I told him that he could partake once he was baptized and better understood what it all meant. He was quite upset and really thought that he was missing out on something important. Indeed he was missing out, and I'm looking forward to the day when all my children are baptized (Lord willing) and can participate in the Lord's Supper with me. If only broader evangelicalism had this feeling they were "missing out on something". It seems most of our churches see the weekly observance as "too Catholic" or relegate the Lord's Supper to an occasional requirement or (even worse) see it as hindrance to worship programming (heaven forbid we cut a song, shorten the sermon or ****gasp**** go a few minutes longer). It would seem that the Table was a focal point for the early church, and I think we would do well to learn from our ancient brothers and sisters and reclaim this commanded practice of regular observance of the Eucharist for the spiritual formation of the congregation – individually and corporately.

²⁶ For a good argument for the practice of the Lord's Table each week see Michael Svigel's article "Should We Celebrate the Lord's Supper Every Sunday in Church?" at <http://www.retrochristianity.org/2012/04/20/should-we-celebrate-the-lords-supper-every-sunday-in-church/>, accessed April 10, 2018.

Prayer in the *Didache*

The discipline of prayer, both for the individual and the church corporate, is a means of fostering unity and spiritual formation.²⁷ The spiritually formative practices of praying and fasting coincide in the *Didache* as they do in the authoritative Scriptures²⁸. While they are different practices and disciplines, they are inextricably linked, informing and supporting one another. In the *Didache* we see four discussions concerning prayer – pray for your enemies, pray the way Jesus commanded, pray the Lord’s Prayer three times per day and prescribed prayers for the Eucharist.

Pray for Your Enemies, Not Just People You Like

In tandem with fasting for those who persecute, the Didachist instructs the catechumen to pray for their enemies (1:3; cf. Matt 5:44). Under the command to love your enemies (Matt 5:44) and to not hate anyone (Did 2:7) a proper response would be to “reprove some, pray for some, and some you shall love more than your own life (2:7). Certainly, we see this theme in the NT of loving and praying for our enemies in order that Christians would be distinct from the rest of the world – even being a light to the rest of the world by being peculiarly attractive people and for the believer’s own conformation to the image of the Son. The second century church father Polycarp (d. 155) articulated this concept beautifully:

Pray for all the saints. Pray also for kings and powers and rulers, and for those who persecute and hate you, and for the enemies of the cross, *in order that your fruit may be evident among all people*, that you may be perfect in him (Epistle to the Philippians 12:3, emphasis added).

²⁷ Svigel, *RetroChristianity: Reclaiming The Forgotten Faith*, 209-10.

²⁸ Cf. Ez 8:21; Neh 1:4; 9:1–2; Ps 35:13; 69:11–13; 109:24–26; Jer 14:12; Dan 9:3; Joel 1:14; 2:12; Matt 6:5–13 and 6:16–18; Luke 2:37; 18:10–14; Acts 13:2–3; 14:23.

Praying for people we love is intuitive and even pagans do as much (Matt 5:44-47; Did 1:3). Jesus' radical command to love and pray for your enemies is so counter intuitive, it is nearly impossible to put into continual practice without the abiding presence and work of the Holy Spirit. Honestly, I have to think long and hard to even name any enemies that I may have in my "Christianized" context, except for faceless ideologies that might oppose God and His plan. This was not the case in the context of the first century church. However, the commitment to being identified with Christ and frequently gathering together to worship was the priority of the early church rather than focusing on the widespread opposition they faced²⁹.

Pray the Way Jesus Commanded, Not Like the Hypocrites

As we see the positive exhortation to pray for your enemies, we also see negative imperative to not pray as the hypocrites do (8:1). This is in conjunction with a command for Christians to set themselves apart from the ὑποκριτής (hypokritēs: hypocrites; wicked; those who have deviated from the true faith). How would the ὑποκριτής have prayed? Since, I hold the opinion the *Didache* was designed to be used alongside Matthew's gospel account (or some early form of it)³⁰ we can answer this question from Matthew 6:5-7. Jesus uses the same word "ὑποκριτής" in the context of not practicing your righteousness before others. Instead Jesus offers a better way to pray. This prayer has rightfully become known as the "The Lord's Prayer". Praying the way Jesus commanded would guard the believer from praying empty phrases or praying in such a way that people would take notice of the one praying rather than the Object of the prayer. The simple elegance and clarity of the Lord's Prayer is such that it can be prayed

²⁹ Kruger, "Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church," 107.

³⁰ Sviel, "Apostolic Fathers," 23.

earnestly by a baby believer or a seasoned saint with great confidence that they are praying according to the will of God³¹.

Pray the Lord's Prayer Three Times a Day

The Didachist deemed it appropriate at this point to then add a fixed-hour instruction involving the Lord's Prayer. Why? Likely the early church continued the rhythm of stationary prayers in the morning, midday and evening as was customary in the Jewish tradition³² (cf. Dan 6:9, 11, 12). In doing so there was this sense that personal prayer at these times was still, in a sense, a time of prayer with the church. The church as a whole was still praying together in sacred rhythm, even though the people may not be gathered together³³.

Prescribed Prayers for the Eucharist

As the early church grew, it likely outpaced the number of Apostles and Prophets that were able to serve each assembly³⁴. Whatever orthodoxy was being developed during this time, needed to be preserved in the inevitable absence of one of these church leaders. The Didachist wished to preserve the prominence of the Eucharist and placed prescribed prayers that were to be recited/memorized and prayed as prayers of thanksgiving before and after the observance of the Eucharist. It's appropriate that these would be prayers of thanksgiving given that is the meaning

³¹ Svigel, *RetroChristianity: Reclaiming The Forgotten Faith*, 256.

³² Kurt Niederwimmer and Harold W. Attridge, *The Didache: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, trans. Linda M. Maloney, *Hermeneia - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 138.

³³ Scot McKnight, *Praying with the Church: Following Jesus Daily, Hourly, Today* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2006), 64.

³⁴ The text of the Didache itself tells us that Apostles and Prophets weren't always available (10:7; 11:3-13:7).

of the Greek word εὐχαριστέω (eucharisteō) which means to give thanks. These prayers are the oldest forms of Eucharistic literature known³⁵ and scholars have discussed the various issues (such as a lack of words of institution³⁶), translation problems, and context of these passages ad nauseam. I'm not going to get into the textual issue, but rather take a step back and look at the big picture. The church in her early beginnings saw the importance of prescribed prayers. Clearly the church felt it essential to have certain elements of corporate worship be standardized and uniform in order to provide sacred rhythms, maintain unity across the church universal and to preserve elements of doctrine. I think this argument is validated in the 10:7, "But permit the prophets to give thanks however they wish." The assumption is that if one who holds the authoritative office of prophet is present, he didn't need to follow the prescribed prayer. This causes me to conclude that this prescribed prayer is viewed as more authoritative than someone who may not hold appropriate credentials in the church gathering. To reiterate, the point of focus for this paper is that the *Didache* made usage of prescribed prayers as the churches were planted and there was no Apostle or Prophet present at some of the gatherings. As the church used prayer to fuel a culturally distinct and even peculiar identity, they maintained familial and doctrinal unity when they prayed together at fixed hours and prayed prescribed prayers around the Eucharist.

Prayer in a Contemporary Evangelical Context

Contemporary Evangelicalism, in general, seems to have an aversion to anything that smells liturgical. What we fail to realize is that we live in liturgy and in rhythm. Our hearts beat

³⁵ Niederwimmer and Attridge, *The Didache: A Commentary*, 139-40.

³⁶ The lack of Eucharistic words of institution is indeed curious and perplexing, but to me, it seems that if the church leader is concurrently using Matthew's Gospel, then the words of institution are present from the account of our Lord's Passion.

and lungs inflate and deflate to a rhythm. Our days generally function in a liturgy in that we get up, we go do a thing like work or school all day, we eat at certain times, fellowship with certain people, we relax with a certain form of entertainment and we go to bed.

Even the contemporary church services we tend to attend have a “liturgy”. We greet, listen to announcements, sing, collect the offering, listen to a sermon, maybe sing again, pray and leave (or some form of those elements). But to read out of a prayer book or recite the Lord’s Prayer or a creed smacks of tired old traditionalism that is not relatable to people these days. Our corporate and personal prayer lives also seem to have this aversion to intentional rhythm and liturgy – even though it should be as natural as breathing.

The Didachist told the new believers in and around Antioch that yes, we should keep praying three times a day, but don’t pray like those outside the faith – instead pray the way Jesus taught us. Recently I have taken up a fixed hour prayer life in an effort to bring some spiritual rhythm in my life. I use a prayer book that incorporates readings from the Psalms, New and Old Testament passages and the Lord’s Prayer every morning, mid-day and evening³⁷. This fixed-hour regiment has transformed my prayer life - not just at the stationary times I pray, but also my spontaneous prayer. The fixed-hour prayers have informed my spontaneous prayer life because it is molded by scripture.

It seems this would be beneficial as we pray corporately as well. I’m not suggesting that we do away with elders and worship leaders praying over the congregation (note Didachist didn’t prohibit spontaneous or individual prayers either). The point here is that the church from its inception saw the need and the power of a church praying in unity.

³⁷ The resource I use every day is: Phyllis Tickle, *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Springtime: A Manual for Prayer*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

The spiritually formative practice of personal prayer using prayer books, creeds, scripture isn't a restriction of religious liberty, laziness or boring. It is a means to allow ourselves to be open to the work of the Spirit in ways that saints long ago practiced. When we pray the Lord's Prayer for example, it's not only formative in the moment, we are participating in a miraculous event of praying with the universal Church now, in generations past and generations yet to come.

Fasting in the *Didache*

Since fasting is a fuel for prayer, we shouldn't be surprised to find fasting in tandem with prayer in the *Didache*³⁸. Fasting is mentioned in three passages in the *Didache*. In the Two Ways section it says that believers should fast for their persecutors (1:3). Regarding baptism, the catechumen and the one baptizing are encouraged to fast for "one or two days" prior to the fast (7:4). The last mention dealt with stationary fasts exhorting Christians to fast on Wednesday and Friday instead of Tuesday and Thursday as the hypocrites do (8:1)³⁹.

These encouragements to fast seem pretty straight forward and it would be simple to just say that a spiritual formative practice that we can learn from the *Didache* is Christians should fast. However, I think there is a bit more to this than that, albeit true, but cursory observation. Scot McKnight has an understanding of Biblical fasting that I think is helpful here.

³⁸ Niederwimmer and Attridge, *The Didache: A Commentary*, 74.

³⁹ Presumably the "hypocrites" (ὕποκριτής) are pious Jews and those who are deviants of true religion, which is "The Way" This is likely an effort of identification rather than legalism. Early Christians didn't want to be identified with the ὑποκριτής (deviants or the wicked). But why Wednesday and Friday? Some contend Wednesday corresponds to the day of the Lord's arrest and Friday as the day of His crucifixion. Niederwimmer says that these reasons were likely later explanations, but this was most likely a process of differentiation. Niederwimmer contends this is likely a clear indication that these early Christian communities were in the process of distinctly separating themselves from the religious communion of Israel. See *ibid.*, 131-34.

McKnight's operational definition of fasting as "the natural, inevitable response of a person to a grievous sacred moment in life."⁴⁰ With this definition in view, the author changes the paradigm of fasting – especially (from my view) distinct from a Western perspective. McKnight operates on a basis that fasting in the Bible (especially in the OT) is a response to a grievous/sacred moment (A) leading to fasting (B) which leads to a transformative desired result (C) demonstrating an A → B → C rubric⁴¹.

In the *Didache*, Christians are encouraged to fast for their persecutors (1:3) and when we have enemies, persecutors, people who mean us harm is a grievous moment that would warrant a fast. McKnight calls this an aspect of "Body Pleading"⁴² when we fast as a result of some kind of grievous or calamitous moment that comes to our attention in our life or in the lives of others. The pangs of grief in instances of disaster, persecution, sickness, etc. can prompt a fast as a form of body pleading. In *Didache* 1:3 we see that the command is to pray for enemies and fast for those who persecute you that communicates a heart's plea for another person who is on the Way of Death (5:2) and the fasting as a discipline (borne out of grief) produces a supernatural ability to endure suffering while praying for the salvation of an enemy of God for the ultimate glory of God.

The exhortation to fast prior to baptism (7:4) is most certainly a sacred moment that would be a natural place for a fast – not only for the catechumen, but also for the one baptizing⁴³. It would be difficult to overstate the sacredness of the public affirmation of conversion for the

⁴⁰ Scot McKnight, *Fasting*, The ancient practices series (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2009), xix.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xx.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 44-6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 34.

new believer and for the church welcoming him or her into their spiritual family. McKnight describes this as fasting as a form of “body turning”⁴⁴ – a turning from sin to repentance and faith.

Even the stationary fasts (8:1) should use this as an operational approach because we can regularly fast out of response to ongoing grief related to ongoing personal sin, death and sickness, a cry for justice, a rhythm of life, a lack of intimacy with God and even longing for the Lord’s return⁴⁵.

McKnight’s reasoning is based on the fact that we are dichotomous beings – we are body and soul and fasting helps to unite body and soul in spiritual formation. Fasting in response to grief and need is a helpful method of engaging not only the spirit but the body. We don’t really have an ancient manual on fasting or even really clearly know the motives for fasting. What we do know is that Christians fasted in the first century and when presented with examples of fasting in the Old Testament, the New Testament and even ancient documents like the *Didache*, we can be certain that some grievous, sacred moment gave rise and purpose for the discipline of fasting in the early church and helped them look distinct in an anti-God context.⁴⁶

Fasting in a Contemporary Evangelical Context

I’m a terrible faster. Terrible. I don’t think I ever took the time to consider what fasting was intended to do in my spiritual formation. I tended to fast in order to get something. Maybe I fasted to see what God’s will might be. Or maybe I fasted just because I thought I needed to in order to be a good Christian – or worse yet – in order to look like a good Christian. I

⁴⁴ Ibid., 34-35.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 59.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 73.

think that most evangelicals tend fall into the same trap and have a $B \rightarrow C$ mindset of fasting in that fasting leads to a desired result. This makes sense to our western sensibilities. It's also worth noting that evangelicals tend to call things "fasts" when they aren't truly fasts at all. For example, I may say that I'm going to fast from social media or Netflix or sugar. These are actually abstentions. Sure, abstentions can be spiritually formative, but the Bible defines fasts as a fast from food and/or water, usually from sun up to sun down. Presumably the Didachist has this same perspective as well⁴⁷.

However, after interacting with McKnight I have a chance at doing a better job, because my motivation is different. McKnight's rubric is an $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$ beginning with fasting being a natural response to a grievous sacred moment moving to a natural desire to fast then seeing a result that is in line with the will of God. I immediately gravitated to this because I've experienced it – involuntarily. When my first wife suddenly passed away, leaving me a widower with an infant son, I was so overwhelmed with grief I couldn't eat, and I lost 50+ pounds in 5 months. Eating was the absolute last thing on mind (in spite of all the food the kind and loving people from my church brought me). So many things come with eating other than sustenance: community, relationship, sharing, joy. In my world all of those things shattered, and I didn't want to eat as a result of that very grievous **and** sacred moment in my life. This view that fasting is prompted by a grievous, sacred moment can help Christians become more honest and earnest in their fasting, rather than consumeristic and pragmatic. For me, as I become more honest with myself and allow myself to grieve the things that grieve my God, I presume fasting will become as natural for me as it did when my late wife passed away and trust it will be equally as spiritually formative.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Charity in the *Didache*

The *Didache* goes into some detail about sharing resources as each had need. Overall, it seems to teach that Christians shouldn't be attached to things. If someone takes something from you, then don't ask for it back (1:4; cf. Matt 5:40-41; Luke 6:29-30). Why? The next verse gives the answer: "Give to everyone who asks you, and do not demand it back, for the Father wants something from his own gifts to be given to everyone. Blessed is the one who gives according to the command, for such a person is innocent. Woe to the one who receives: if, on the one hand, someone who is in need receives, this person is innocent, but the one who does not have need will have to explain why and for what purpose he received, and upon being imprisoned will be interrogated about what he has done, and will not be released until he has paid back every last cent" (1:5). This is foundational to the imperative for charity in the *Didache* and sets up the tension between right to receive charity if you are in need and the obligation to give of your abundance. In other words, one should plan on giving a gift to the needy but let your gift "sweat in your hands" until you find a worthy person to receive your gift. The Didachist assumes a proper heart (innocence) in giving and receiving a woe to the one who doesn't give with the right heart and likewise woe to the one who receives deceitfully.

The *Didache* also instructs church leaders to direct gifts to Apostles and Prophets as they come into the area in planning to give of the first-fruits (13:1-7; cf. Matt 10:10; 1 Tim 5:18), but the Apostle or Prophet shouldn't ask for money (11:6, 12) or he is a false prophet.

Charity in a Contemporary Evangelical Context

When it comes to charity in a contemporary evangelical context, I think we do witness extraordinary generosity. I think many in the church today do plan their giving to their church, but there is a sense that giving seems to be reactionary rather than planned giving. But

when it comes to giving in order to care for the needy within the body, the church practically speaking, is too corporate for this. We also live in a nation of abundance with respect to social service provision where the government has taken much of the role and we seem content to let Caesar care for the poor in the church. When the day comes again when the church is marginalized, we will be forced to revisit the early church liturgy of gathering, the Lord's Table, preaching the word and sending out to care for our poor and to be salt and light in a dark, tasteless world.

Confession in the *Didache*

The *Didache* expressly makes confession a part of the weekly gathering (4:14; 14:1) as a means of preparation of worship, observing the Eucharist, for the sake of unity in the church and certainly for the believer's own sanctification. Sin in the midst of the body was and is the greatest threat to the church. The early church understood that dragging sin into the light was the best way to kill it. The process of killing sin begins with confession with a proper understanding of forgiveness. The process of confession → repentance → forgiveness produces holiness over time. The Didachist understood that the only kind of environment where this was even possible was in a Gospel practicing environment (15:3) that is described in the Two Ways section enveloped in love and charity. Truly this kind of environment is where a people, especially a marginalized people, can thrive spiritually and God will use for His glory and for His Kingdom.

Confession in a Contemporary Evangelical Context

Confession in a contemporary evangelical context seems to be mostly one that is between me and God. Confession to another person seems much too Roman Catholic, therefore we tend to throw the baby out with the bath. Real confession with an eye to holiness bears fruit

individually and corporately. When this is done in a context of honest love and charity, then confession and forgiveness come much more naturally. I'm not advocating setting up confessional booths with penance as a result. There's no indication they had anything like that in the early church. But instead we see mandate for a loving environment where we bore one another's burdens in the context of personal sin but in pursuit of holiness (Gal 6:1-10). We try this in small "accountability group" settings – and that's a good place to start, but it can't end there in our rush to be holy and to help others along – but be willing to be helped ourselves.

Gathering of the Saints in the *Didache*

The early church saw the importance of gathering together⁴⁸ and specifically on the Lord's Day (Did 14:1; 16:2 and cf. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67). In the *Didache*, we see this day as one that is set apart and a sacred time that calls for unity in the church. Niederwimmer asserts that this portion of the text is a redaction and doesn't really deal with the issue of the Lord's Day as much as it deals with issues of reconciliation, confession and preparation of one's heart before observing the Eucharist.⁴⁹ This may be true, but it proves the point that in this early document we see that the gathering of the saints every Sunday was a setting for the corporate spiritual formation practices we've been discussing.

We see a pattern of Christian Worship on the Lord's Day⁵⁰ in the *Didache*. We see a gathering of the saints (14:1), the word proclaimed (4:1; 11:1-2), participation in the Lord's Supper (9:1-10:7; 14:1-3), the caring for one another (1:5) and the sending out the saints to do

⁴⁸ cf. Acts 2:42-47; 5:42; 1 Cor 14:26; Heb 10:24-25.

⁴⁹ Niederwimmer and Attridge, *The Didache: A Commentary*, 194.

⁵⁰ See also Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67.

the Lord's work (15:3-16:8) as an act of worship⁵¹. The gathering of this kind is essential for Christian fellowship and spiritual formation in that as we are conformed to the image of Christ, then we are also being equipped to do the work of the ministry in our respective gifting (Eph 2:10; 1 Cor 12).

Gathering of the Saints in a Contemporary Evangelical Context

In comparison to the pattern of Christian worship described above, today the contemporary evangelical church has, in my view, "sacramentalized" the preaching of the word⁵² at the expense of the Lord's Table and baptism. Please understand, I'm not lamenting the priority of preaching, but I'm lamenting the neglect of what the Lord has instituted as sacraments. With that, we've verbalized the sacraments – in that by putting the words of institution in our native languages, we've made the sacraments ordinary. I'm not advocating going back to a Latin liturgical service, but rather taking special care to elevate the worship service as holy and sacred. Third, we have a hyper-Zwingli perspective in our contemporary mindset of "worship centers" and auditoriums. We've removed anything that smacks of tradition, liturgy, etc. in exchange for a "non-threatening" culturally appropriate context. The "smells and bells" actually had a formative effect on those worshipping. I'm not saying lights and a fog machine can't be spiritually formative, but there's little if any historical significance behind such things, only cultural pragmatism and appropriation.

⁵¹ Sten-Erik Armitage, "Spiritual Disciplines. The Discipline of Worship Lecture," (Unpublished class notes for EML750, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 2018), 4.

⁵² A discussion in EML750 led me to this thought. Sten-Erik Armitage presented the ideas of "Sacramentalizing the Word", "Verbalizing the Sacraments" and "The (Unfortunate) Legacy of Zwingli" See *ibid.*

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to identify the spiritually formative practices found in the *Didache* and demonstrate that this ancient church manual still teaches today. Not authoritatively, but informatively. The method was to examine these practices in the context of the *Didache* and compare these practices in a contemporary evangelical context of today. The practices examined were: catechesis, the Eucharist, baptism, prayer, fasting, charity, confession and the weekly gathering of the saints.

The *Didache* does provide a look into the faith and practice in the life of the early church and what was valued. I think we would do well to read the *Didache* and the early church fathers to see how one would survive in marginalized context. The opulence of Christian majority culture is declining. It is quite possible the Lord is about to purify His church, but a persecuted and marginalized church will not give us a pass on our mission. That wasn't the case in the first few centuries of the church. Therefore, we must look at what the church valued and how it functioned as those days possibly draw near.

From the *Didache* we learned: the early church highly valued catechesis as an initiation into Christian identity. The early church valued baptism as a mark of Christian identity. The early church valued the Eucharist as a reminder of the cost of our Christian identity. The early church valued the prayer and fasting disciplines of holiness that were borne out of sacred moments and spaces. The early church valued love, charity and confession to create an environment for sin to be vanquished in the pursuit of Christlikeness. Finally, the first century church valued the weekly gathering on the Lord's Day as a sacred space of love, sharing, teaching and embodied living in the pursuit of being conformed to the expressed image of their Savior they loved and gave up their lives.

I'm not sure how any Christian would come away from reading the *Didache* without at least a little twinge of grief in the realization that we are "missing out" (like my son as he watched my wife and I take communion) on what the people under the instruction of the *Didache* had. Evangelicalism today is indeed in a different context and a different time, but to say that the *Didache* cannot teach anymore today would be an unfortunate loss of a precious ancient resource, because when held under the authority of the Bible, I believe the *Didache* has much to teach us today and in the times ahead about how to we can and should be conformed to the image of the Son as we await His return.

Watch over your life: do not let your lamps go out, and do not be unprepared, but be ready, for you do not know the hour when our Lord is coming. Gather together frequently, seeking the things that benefit your souls, for all the time you have believed will be of no use to you if you are not found perfect in the last time (*Didache* 16:1-2).

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