

Tony Jones

**The Teaching of the Twelve: Believing and Practicing the
Primitive Christianity of the Ancient Didache Community**

Brewster, Massachusetts, Paraclete Press, 2009, 125 p.

Ever since its rediscovery almost 140 years ago, the Didache – the early Christian manual to life – was mostly studied only by scholars. Paraclete Press and Tony Jones, in their new book on the Didache, attempt to change that trend and bring its message down to the conversational level of “regular” Christians and church life. So far, the author has written many books in the areas of the emerging church, postmodernism, and Christian spirituality. The Publisher, Paraclete Press, has published titles in Christian spirituality for years.

The purpose of this book is to invite the reader to dive into this ancient document, get to know the community behind it, and listen for what they might have wanted to tell the church and Christians today. In addition to the complete modern translation of the Didache that the book includes, Jones aids the reader in this process by inviting a small Christian community from rural Missouri – the Cymbrogi - to read the Didache with him. The group, who has attempted to apply the Didache to its own community life, serves as the postmodern voice of the church. The thoughts from Jones’ conversations about the Didache with one of the members of the Cymbrogi – Trucker Frank – are included at the end of each chapter.

For Jones, the Didache and the community behind it, represent a lost version of Christianity that many Christians today long to get back to. This simple and ordinary handbook on living the Jesus Way is packed with essentials for an authentic and healthy life for a disciple and his/her community. In seven chapters of the book, Jones introduces the Didache and describes how these early followers of Jesus organized and lived their personal and community lives in a world that was similar to ours in many respects. The hope of the author is that the contemporary Christian world will look back to this handbook of organic Christianity and draw some conclusions as to how to live out Christianity in today’s world.

In chapter one, Jones introduces the Didache by describing it as “the most important book one never heard of.” Although written about the same time as the synoptic gospels, the Didache unfairly receives much less attention than any New Testament book simply because it is not considered sacred by the church (3). Jones goes on to describe the story of its amazing rediscovery in Turkey in 1873, and the who’s, what’s, when’s and why’s of its writing. The introduction also

includes a short summary of each section of the Didache and very helpful notes for reading the book. Then, in chapter two, the complete text of the Didache is given.

Chapter three, titled “Didache Community – Then and Now,” contrasts the “pre-church” community behind the Didache and the “post-church” Cymbrogi community. The author describes how the early Christians developed the Didache in an attempt to understand and pass on the Way of Jesus to the world around them. They were all new converts in a new religion trying to figure out what it all meant. In contrast, 2000 years down the rich road of the history of the church, a small community made up of Christians from various, mostly old, Christian denominations, and disillusioned by conventional church life, is finding all that they were looking for in their walk with Jesus in this testament of primitive Christianity .

The remaining four chapters follow the text of the Didache. Thus, in chapter four, Jones explores the “Two Ways” teaching. Here he goes to great lengths to describe its background. He attributes the first sentence that speaks of the two ways – one of life and one of death – to an older Jewish document. He links the following first commandment, “to love God who made you,” with the Jewish “Shema”. However, the most interesting connection Jones makes here is that the first part, which is very similar to Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount, comes from the Q document. In the rest of the chapter, he describes the mentor-apprentice style of life of the Didache community, and the focus they had on how to live their lives with Jesus.

Chapter five, titled “Sex, Money, and Other Means of Getting Along,” deals with the Didache’s approach to these continuously relevant topics. Jones describes the cultural clash over sexual ethics the Didache community probably experienced in their Greco-Roman surroundings. The text clearly emphasizes that the Jewish ethics needs to be practiced. As for money, it is emphasized that giving was central to the way they lived their Christian lives. It is precisely this concern for others that is also a mark of how they treated each other. The author stresses that the Didache, unlike the New Testament, is concerned exclusively with the horizontal, the relationships between human beings. Jones’ friend, Trucker Frank concludes, “In the Didache, there is no difference between the Gospel and the social gospel. There is not a word about preaching the gospel. It’s all about living the gospel” (86).

Chapter six is concerned with the life of the Didache community. The author here explores their rules for food, baptisms, prayers and fasting, the Eucharist and receiving visitors. The Didache’s message to do one’s best on issues like baptism and food stands out as particularly instructive for the church. Jones believes that if the church had paid attention to this advice, there would be less schisms in

church history over these and similar matters.

The last chapter deals with the apocalyptic teaching of the Didache. The author shares that the Didache community expectantly waited for Jesus' return, yet did not obsess about it.

Tony Jones is well prepared for a discussion on the Didache. He has combined his theological skills and interest in the emerging church movement to bring this ancient and often overlooked document back into the spotlight of Christian spirituality. The topic is more than timely as there are many lessons that modern Christians need to learn from their early brothers and sisters. The book will surely attract and inspire all those yearning to peek into, experience and practice Christianity as done by Jesus' earliest followers.

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