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Ever since its discovery in 1873, the Early Christian Greek text known as the *Didache* has stirred controversy on numerous points. Is this an authentic document from the earliest times of Christianity or a later forger? Does it confirm modern theological views, whether Catholic or Protestant, or threaten to undermine them? Does the text represent early Christians at large or merely a minority limited in time and place?

Some of these issues seem to have been settled by now: scholars generally agree that the text is authentic and must be considered very early. Doctrinal debates, however, remain very much alive.

In the opening chapter of his interesting monograph on the *Didache*, Thomas O'Loughlin, paints a fascinating and highly readable picture of the early modern reception of the text. The instructions given in the *Didache* were initially taken by many as a set of guidelines for clerics, a manual of church discipline, a 'church order'. This view, as O'Loughlin convincingly argues, reflects late nineteenth century thinking. In a later phase, the text was seen as a folder of useful instructions for early local churches to help them getting organized. In such a view, the *Didache* was most relevant 'in the background of the New Testament', and thus as a text studied in relation to other texts rather than taken by itself.

With a nice sense of humor O'Loughlin describes how the *Didache* was sometimes rejected by fervent Catholics (on account of the passages dealing with the common 'meal', which seemed so shockingly different from the Catholic Eucharist ministered by an ordained priest) or by radical Protestants (because of the instructions concerning fixed days of fasting). As O'Loughlin convincingly argues throughout his book, contemporary concerns have too often determined the scholarly approach to the *Didache*, which accordingly was often taken for what it is not, or criticized for what it actually has to offer.

What then is the *Didache* according to O'Loughlin? In his view, the text was not intended for Christian leaders, but was, on the contrary, some sort of introductory guide for those who were new to the Christian community. It may even have been composed so as to be learned by heart, at least partly (e.g. the teaching about the Two Ways, or the Lord's Prayer). As a whole, the *Didache*, provides basic information about the lifestyle and activities of the Christian group. Those who had mastered its contents were ready to enter fully into the body of Christ.

The notion of the *Didache* as a 'guide for beginners', so to speak, can even help to explain why it disappeared for so many centuries. In antiquity, this practical text for daily use may have undergone changes, according to the shifting needs in consecutive new situations, but as the church with its liturgy and organization gradually developed, this early and simple training manual was at some stage left aside and abandoned.
Some remarks on the date and the region of provenance conclude the opening chapter. O'Loughlin clearly does not wish to enter detailed discussion here, and takes a fairly neutral stand. The Didache, he argues, was compiled at some place in the Greco-Roman world where the separation of Christians and Jews was actually taking place, and it was being committed to memory by followers of Jesus by the middle of the 1st century.

The next six chapters deal with important aspects of the Didache, such as the teaching of the Two Ways, the process of joining the Christian group, its practices of prayer and fasting, of gathering and enjoying meals together. In these chapters, O'Loughlin operates within the general framework established in the initial chapter. That is, he strives to shed light on various issues in the Didache, while also constantly pleading for an open-minded approach to the text, and a willingness to take it for what it actually says and to learn from it.

Again and again, O'Loughlin argues that modern conceptions and ideas should not predetermine our view of the Didache. If the ancient text goes at length in discussing topics that seem immaterial to us (such as the treatment of passing 'prophets') or seems to avoid discussing matters which to many would appear crucial (e.g. does the common meal require an official leader? Are the prayer formulas in the Didache related in some way to the [unmentioned] Last Supper of Christ?), we must realize that the Christians of the Didache 'did not write for us but for themselves' (p.93). Of course, 21th century readers may very well learn from the text, but rarely in a simple, direct way. The text, with all its points of recognition and of strangeness, may help modern readers to see more clearly modern practices in their own community and to question which elements they might wish to see changed. For instance, O'Loughlin makes an interesting case for considering the modern usage of having coffee and biscuits after mass as, somehow, a 'sacred event' which can even be seen as no less 'Eucharistic' than what happened during mass (pp.157-8).

It seems fair to say that O'Loughlin's approach is, in essence, contemporary and pastoral. His basic question seems to be: what does the Didache have to offer for us, even if it has not been written directly for us?

This is, I think, a valid and honorable approach, and the study O'Loughlin has produced is interesting to read and will be inspiring and convincing to many readers. O'Loughlin is a reliable guide, who has spent many years teaching the Didache to many groups of students, and who is thoroughly familiar with key studies on the Didache. But pastoral issues may not be the main thing for every reader. Some will regret the absence of notes and of detailed philological, historical, and theological discussions of various details in the text. Of course, they can find all that in abundance in the numerous papers and books devoted to the Didache in recent decades. O'Loughlin's list of titles 'for further reading' can offer a first help here.

Finally, the volume includes a new, plain translation of the Didache (one does miss a Greek text, however). Here the Didache is simply given as a text to be read. O'Loughlin has deliberately left out all forms of explanation or discussion. As he elegantly puts it: 'to let the text simply ring bells in the memory, this translation is without notes' (p.161). Again, this will be regretted by some, but it is entirely consistent with the approach taken throughout the volume.

This sympathetic study to stimulate contemporary interest in the Early Christian Didache deserves a large readership, both academic and non academic. The issues discussed by
O'Loughlin seem most relevant for theologians, but they are also of interest to readers of classical literature in general.