

CHRISTIAN ETHICS 101: THE TWO WAYS

Jesus said: *Enter through the narrow gate;
for the gate is wide and the road is easy
that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it.
For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life,
and there are few who find it.* (Matthew 7:13-14)

*There are two ways, one of life, the other of death,
and between the two ways there is a great difference.
(The Didache 1:1)*

INTRODUCTION

Christian ethics – how a Christian person acts - is multi-layered. The base is formed by the practical teachings of Jesus and his Jewish tradition on how to live a good life. Upon this base rest many practices of later churches, prophets, philosophers and mystics, renewal movements, families, and the countless millions of individual Christians over the past two millennia.

There is little in the ancient base of Christian ethics that would surprise a modern Christian. Most cradle Christians learned these rules for living well while growing up at home, kindergarten, Sunday school, church and community life. Yet everyone knows how hard some of it can prove in daily life, primarily because human nature in all its splendour and frailty is the first given of every moment. It could be useful to have a refresher of the basics at hand on our website as a guide to the way of Jesus.

Christianity is not first about beliefs. First, it is a Way of Life. The Book of the *Acts of the Apostles* (11:26) tells that the disciples

were first called “Christians” by their enemies in the ancient Syrian city of Antioch. The Jewish followers of Jesus simply called it the “Way.” The Acts records the apostle Paul defending himself before the Roman governor Felix¹ as follows:

But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets (24:14).²

The little Jewish-Christian communities, who viewed themselves as followers of the “Way,” spread out from Jerusalem, north through Samaria, Galilee, and Syria, east across the trans-Jordan, and south through the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. They created church manuals to govern their communal life. These used the Jewish tradition and the teachings of Jesus as basis. A number of them have survived. The manuals all share a common basis of ethical teaching on how to live a good life. This was called the teaching of the “Two Ways” – the way of life and the way of death.

One of these church manuals is called the *Didache*. The Greek word *didache* means teaching or training, as in the technical training given by a master craftsman to an apprentice. Many scholars date it as very early, possibly around 50 CE, before even the gospels were written down in their final forms. Its longer title is “The Teaching of the Lord brought to the Nations by the Twelve Apostles.”

That’s quite a mouthful, so it is known simply as the *Didache*, i.e., the *Teaching*. Nothing is known about the *Didache*’s community, except that it was a 1st century Jewish-Christian community somewhere in the arc from Syria to Egypt, which needed a training manual for new converts, some of whom may have been gentiles.

1 Felix held office 52 to 60 C.E.

2 NRSV translation, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. The New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized Edition, 1989, 1995.

See also Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22.

Most of the works of Jewish Christianity has been lost to history. This was a result of the destruction of Jewish Palestine and Jerusalem by the Romans in 66-70 CE during the unsuccessful first Jewish revolt against Roman occupation. Few of the Palestinian Christian communities survived the war's destruction. The churches that did survive were mostly those founded by Paul in modern Greece, Macedonia, and Turkey, and these lost their Jewish roots very quickly. Not surprisingly, under the circumstances, the *Didache* was lost, though it did not disappear, for many centuries.

In 1873, a Greek Orthodox bishop, Philotheos Bryennios, rediscovered the *Didache* in a manuscript in Constantinople, now known as Istanbul. The *Didache* shows continuity with the first communities of the gospel, such as those who followed Matthew's gospel and those of the letters of James and Jude, which also draw on common Jewish tradition combined with the teachings of Jesus.

The *Didache* was used to instruct newcomers to the community of families and householders. It contains four parts:

1. the first part concerns the ethics of communal life;
2. the second part explains how to baptize newcomers after their ethical training;
3. the third part describes how to celebrate holy communion at the shared Sunday meal gathering; and
4. the fourth part contains the rules for those in authority and for dealing with Christian visitors.

This primer is concerned only with the first part; the six chapters on the training for ethical living in the Way of Jesus.

Kindly note the following points on the translation:

It is based on a number of translations³ and the Greek text in Milavec.

The headings are not in the Greek text; they serve as handrails for the modern reader. I have adapted them from Milavec.

The Greek text runs on consecutively because of their space limitations. This primer uses lots of white space to cluster related concepts and let the patterns of thought flow more visually.

The text is meant to be read without hurry and in a reflective mode, allowing for the recognition of personal history, human nature, the tradition, and the vision of the good life of human flourishing and divine blessing.

The text of the *Didache* – the code of conduct of the first Christians - follows on the next page.

³ Those of: Kirsopp Lake in *The Apostolic Fathers, Vol. 1: I Clement. II Clement. Ignatius. Polycarp. Didache. Barnabas*. The Loeb Classical Library, Vol. 24. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912.

Cyril Richardson in *Early Christian Fathers*. Library of Christian Classics, Vol. 1. The Westminster Press, 1953, reprinted New York, NY: Touchstone, 1995.

Huib van de Sandt and David Flusser in *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and Its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity*. Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum Ad Novum Testamentum, Vol. 5. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002.

Aaron Milavec in *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Michael Glazier, 2003.

CHAPTER ONE: THE TWO WAYS AND ITS EXPLANATION

1:1 There are two ways,
one of life,
the other of death,
and between the two ways there is a great difference.

1.2 The Way of Life is this:

first, love God who made you;
second, love your neighbour as yourself,
and do not do to another what you would not want
done to you.

1:3 The Teaching of these commandments is this:

Speak well of those who speak badly of you,⁴
Pray for your enemies, and
Fast for those who persecute you.
For, what does it matter if you love those who love you?
Doesn't everyone do that?
Just love those who hate you and you will not have an
enemy.

1:4 Abstain from bodily passions.

If someone should strike you on the right cheek,
turn to him also the other, and you will be perfect.
If someone should press you into service for one mile,
go with him two.
If someone should take away your cloak,
give him also the clothes you're wearing.

⁴ The umlaut in "you" indicates the plural, as in the Milavec translation. In Greek the plural is obvious, but in English it is indicated by context alone, which can be confusing at times.

If someone should take from you what is yours,
do not ask for it back;
since you cannot get it back anyway.

1.5 Give to everyone what she⁵ asks of you,
and do not ask for it back,
for the Father wants people to share with everyone
the gifts that have been freely granted to them.

Happy is the person who gives according to this rule;
for he is without blemish.

If someone takes something because she is in need,
she is blameless.

Alas for the person who takes if he is not in need:
he shall have to stand trial
for his reason for taking it
and for what purpose;
and in prison, he shall be interrogated about
what he has done,
and he shall not go free until
he has paid back the last penny.

1.6 But then, concerning this rule, it has been said:
“Let your charitable gift sweat in your hands,
until you know to whom you are giving it.”

⁵ The Didache was written in a patriarchal context and used male pronouns, whereas the present context is one of transitioning from patriarchy towards more equality. Therefore, this translation tries to offer some balance between male and female pronouns.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SECOND PART OF THE TEACHING

2.1 And the Teaching of the second commandment is this:

2.2 Do not

murder,
commit adultery,
commit pedophilia,
have illicit sex,
steal,
practice sorcery,⁶
make or use drugs to gain advantage,
abort a child,⁷
murder a child once it is born,
desire the things of your neighbour.

2.3

swear falsely,
bear false witness,
speak badly of anyone,
hold grudges.

2.4

Do not be

double-minded,⁸
nor double-tongued,
for being double-tongued is a deadly snare.

2.5

In sum, your words will not be false nor empty,
but shall be fulfilled in what you do.

⁶ In the sense of casting spells; despite the charm of the idea of wizards' schools like Hogwarts.

⁷ Judaism differed from most of Hellenic culture in that Judeans abhorred abortion and infanticide. Jewish-Christianity inherited this position, which was unchallenged until the 20th century and is still a cultural flashpoint. Most modern Christians accept a woman's right to choose with some differences on its limits.

To accommodate the modern Christian position, the phrase could be read as "do not abort a fetus without conscience." It would be surprising if this was uncontroversial.

⁸ In modern English it would read "hypocritical," but that would spoil the alliteration.

2.6 Do not be
greedy,
a swindler,
hypocritical,
malicious,
or arrogant.

In sum, do not plot evil against your neighbour.

2.7 Do not hate any person,
but some you shall reprove,
for others you shall pray,
and others you shall love more than yourself.

CHAPTER THREE: FURTHER ELABORATION

3.1 Flee from all evil and from everything like it.

3.2 Do not be
an angry person,
for anger is the path to murder,
a zealot,
quarrelsome,
hot-tempered;
for all of these character traits produce murder.

3.3 Do not
be a lustful person,
for lust leads to illicit sex,
use obscene speech,
leer;
for all of these character traits produce adultery.

- 3.4 Do not regard fortune telling,
since this is the path leading to idolatry,
be an enchanter,
nor an astrologer,
nor a sorcerer:
do not even wish to see or hear these things;
for all these activities produce idolatry.
- 3.5 Do not be
a liar,
avaricious,
narcissistic;
for all these character traits produce theft.
- 3.6 Do not
be a grumbler,
since this is the path to slander,
be stubbornly willful,
or disposed to think evil of people;
for all these attitudes produce slanderous behaviour.
- 3.7 But be gentle,
since the gentle will inherit the earth.
- 3:8 And be
patient,
merciful,
harmless,
calm,
and good,
holding constantly in awe the words
of the teachings you have heard.

3:9 Do not put on airs,
or let yourself be arrogant.

Do not attach yourself to those who are highly placed,
but be with those who are just and humble.

3:10 Accept what happens to you as good,
knowing that nothing happens without God.

CHAPTER FOUR: DUTIES TO COMMUNITY AND FAMILY

4.1 Be mindful day and night of
the one who speaks the word of God to you,
and honour her as you do the Lord;
for where the Lord's nature is discussed, there the Lord is.

4.2 Seek the presence of the holy ones every day
to find comfort in their discussions.

4.3 Do not cause division;
instead, reconcile those who quarrel.
Judge justly; do not take into account social status
when reproofing transgressions.

4.4 Do not be wishy-washy⁹ about it either.

4.5 Do not be the sort of person
who holds out his hands to receive,
but draws them back when it comes to giving.

4.6 If you have gained something through the work of your hands,
give something for the redemption of your sins.

⁹ Phrased as "double-minded" in the original, in the sense of the notion of "being of two minds."

- 4.7 Do not hesitate to give,
and when you give do not grumble;
for you know who is the good Paymaster of the just reward.
- 4.8 Dö not turn away anyone who is in need,
but shäre everything with your brothers and sisters,
and call nothing your own,
for, if yöu share in the immortal things,
by how much more do you share in the mortal things.
- 4.9 Do not be remiss in guiding¹⁰ your son or your daughter,
but from their youth teach them reverence for God.
- 4.10 Do not harshly command your male or female subordinates,¹¹
the ones hoping in the same God as you,
lest they stop revering the God who is over both of yöu,
for God does not
come to call anyone according to their social status,
but to call those whom the Spirit has made ready.
- 4.11 And yöu who are subordinates, be subject to your superiors,
with respect and reverence,
as if they are representatives of God.
- 4.12 Hate every hypocrisy,
and everything that is not pleasing to the Lord.
- 4.13 Do not forsake the commandments of the Lord,
but guard the ones you have received,
“without adding or subtracting anything.”¹²

¹⁰ The Greek is literal, as was customary in antiquity, “Do not withhold your hand...”

¹¹ “Subordinates” in the original was, of course, “slaves.”

¹² Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32 (NRSV) The phrase was a standard Near Eastern scribal formula usually placed at the end of a treaty. In this context, the treaty is between this Jewish-Christian community and the commandments of Yahweh through their Jewish tradition.

4.14 In church, confess your failings,
and do not approach prayer with a bad conscience.

This is the Way of Life!

CHAPTER FIVE: THE WAY OF DEATH

5:1 The Way of Death is this:

First of all, it is evil and thoroughly blasphemous:

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| [1] murders, | [12] duplicity, |
| [2] adulteries, | [13] deceit, |
| [3] lusts, | [14] arrogance, |
| [4] illicit sex, | [15] malice, |
| [5] thefts, | [16] stubbornness, |
| [6] idolatries, | [17] greed, |
| [7] sorceries, | [18] obscene speech, |
| [8] drug use, | [19] jealousy, |
| [9] robberies, | [20] insolence, |
| [10] perjuries, | [21] haughtiness, |
| [11] hypocrisies, | [22] boastfulness. |

5.2 And those who:

- [1] persecute good people,
- [2] hate truth,
- [3] love lies,
- [4] do not know money earned justly,
- [5] do not associate with the good,
- [6] nor act with just judgement,
- [7] lie awake at night not for good,
but for wicked things,
- [8] are far from being gentle and patient,
- [9] love frivolous things,
- [10] pursue recompense for everything they do,

[11] do not show mercy to the poor,
[12] do not exert themselves for the oppressed,
[13] do not know their Maker,
[14] murder children,
[15] abort what God has formed in the womb,
[16] turn their backs on the needy,
[17] oppress the afflicted,
[18] defend the rich,
[19] unjustly judge the poor,
[20] are thoroughly wicked.
May you be saved from all of these!

CHAPTER SIX: FINAL EXHORTATION

- 6.1 See that no one leads you astray from this Way of the Teaching,
since such a person's teaching is godless.
- 6.2 If you can bear the entire yoke of the Lord,
you will be perfect, but if you cannot, do what you can.
- 6.3 As for food, eat as is healthy for you,
but be very much on your guard against contaminated food,
for it is connected to death.¹³

¹³ The original reading is: "...against food offered to idols, for it is the worship of dead gods."

This practice distinguished Jews and Jewish Christians from the rest of the polytheistic ancient world. In the Hellenic world, temples were the chief butcheries: they provided meat to those of lesser means after the gods' portion has been burnt on the altar during the sacrificial ritual during a religious festival.

In the modern context, the teaching applies in the sense of being very careful of contaminated food. The modern industrial farming process is run by corporations. The old family farm nowadays only operates at the margins of agriculture to offer organic, healthy food.

Corporations provide food that, while being more plentiful, is less safe, less nutritious, and in many cases even detrimental to human, animal, and environmental health.

Today, ethical eating means eating nutritious, healthy foods, and avoiding contaminated food. Your mileage may vary.

SUMMARY

This primer presented the text of the code of conduct for the first Christians. It teaches one how to act as a Christian; how one should behave in person and in community with one another. It was the training manual for newcomers and is a very good guide for today.

In future primers, I hope to also discuss how the first Christians baptized, ate their communion meal, dealt with visitors, and awaited the end of days. It is an ever-present need for Christians to remember the teachings of Jesus and of the first Christians.

Thank you for reading.¹⁴

¹⁴ Compiled for the Anglican Parish of St. Mary's, Russell, Gerrit Botha, 2020.