

## INTRODUCTION

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Welcome to *Didache: Faithful Teaching* volume 10:2 (February 2011). This edition includes an interesting array of essays, research articles and student submissions. The first half of this edition addresses a key theme that has shaped a number of recent conflicts, primarily in the United States, yet contains the potential of guiding our responses to a number of controversies in the future. While the controversies have continued for some time now, it seemed appropriate to offer this series of resources, particularly for those in academic settings that still face these confrontations on a regular basis.

I want to begin with a brief review of the second half of the edition, the section that reflects the particular research strengths of this journal alongside a desire to nurture young, emerging, scholars. We are privileged to have research submissions from the faculty and students of Africa Nazarene University and Nazarene Theological Seminary. The first offering by Chinyama Joe Lilema and Rodney L. Reed of Africa Nazarene University introduce us to a key theological problem that shapes the African landscape, polygamy. It seemed appropriate to allow this struggle, which challenge our global friends, introduce the research section of this edition. We need to be listening to our colleagues and pay close attention to theological discourse that proves both African and Christian in its tenor. The second article brings us to another key theological theme in *Didache*, John Wesley's thought and practice in the use of the covenant service. Roger L. Hahn, Douglas S. Hardy, and Jason D. Lewis of Nazarene Theological Seminary provide a historical and biblical framework for this formative practice.

Finally we conclude the edition with two solid student submissions. The first paper, by Hank Spaulding, investigates how aesthetics might reshape our understanding of the doctrine of holiness. Hank wrote the initial draft as a senior at Trevecca Nazarene University and continued to improve it during his first year at Duke Divinity School. My thanks to Dr. Nathan Kerr as the faculty sponsor of this intriguing paper. The second submission comes from Ryan Stroud, a graduate of Mid America Nazarene University and graduating senior at Nazarene Theological Seminary. Ryan offers a stimulating approach to re-conceptualizing youth through the lens of vocation, a much needed corrective for many in ministry with youth. My thanks to Dr. Roger Hahn, who served as faculty sponsor and endorsed this submission. I will again encourage other faculty to consider submitting student work, serving as faculty sponsors for those publications.

Now we return to the opening section of the edition. Many of the recent problems in the United States reflect a basic flaw in the way we communicate in the midst of conflicting perspectives. In a sense I am not advocating one perspective over the other (though some perspectives accentuate the problem). The problem actually surfaces in the communication strategies we encounter, and sometimes employ, in the middle of our disagreements. In a nutshell, many people have forgotten how, or simply ignore, substantive, verifiable, information in the midst of the conflict. I remember receiving a very public "private" email correspondence reflecting recent displeasure over actions by a number of educational leaders in the U.S. Framed as a personal appeal, the very means of circulation made the conversation all too public. This strategy reflects our current technical ethos. Email, blogs, websites and social networks reflect new mediums reminiscent of the penny presses and back office publishers of Wesley's day. Many of our current

“publications” take on the same tenor as these earlier publicly printed disputes, some of which were aimed at the Wesleys as well.

Unfortunately, today’s circulations reflect a slightly different tenor. Armed with almost instant access to the internet, these electronic correspondences and web publications take on an air of undisputed authority, false intimacy (how “private” can an intentionally broadcasted email be?), and sometimes mean-spirited assertions with almost no editorial oversight. Even blogs (weblogs), which were intended to foster interactive engagement online, often revert to private publishing by refusing access to others who visit the site. At other times we embrace online writing without considering the source, often embracing the writings (gleaned from online searches) without considering the intent or authority of the author. The problem “came home” when the same person mentioned earlier forwarded a second email, ostensibly as evidence that the first correspondence proved valid. Yet the second posting contained many additional, but unverified assertions by those sympathetic with the first posting. To be frank, as a researcher and former news journalist, I was amazed and deeply troubled. Even if I suspended my own Christian sensibilities I could hear the voice of a former news editor in my ear: “Have you verified your sources? Did you get confirmation? Why should I believe you?” The mantra, in broadcast television news could have easily been applied: be fast, be accurate, be fair... but, most of all, get it RIGHT before you report it! These admonitions could easily serve our speaking the “truth” as reasonably as possible in our technological environment. Yet we have an additional responsibility, to also speak in love.

The difficulty of speaking the truth in a loving manner reflects another troubling aspect of our recent communication practice in the midst of conflict. In a nutshell our society has fallen victim to “sound-bite” mentalities. We live for the controversial, the provocative, the incomplete sound-bite that often gestures toward but rarely offers the full “story.” In a sense the audio sound bite, those short, pithy, audio/video interview segments, now encompass the story, the narrative, which governs our attention. People live their lives shaped by narratives. No matter how reasonable the argument, communication expert Walter Fisher has long ago taught us that it is the overall narrative that communicates more than rationally aligned arguments, often speaking to audiences who share a similar narrative.<sup>1</sup> We live out our narrative lives through narrative discourses that tell us how the world “works.” And it appears the world “works” through sound bites. We live in a culture of fascination, sensationalism, innuendo, and fear. In the United States, what was once considered the normal news outlets find themselves conflated with talk radio pundits (of all political perspectives), celebrity notoriety, and media “personalities” who prove more adept at posturing than reporting. Small wonder these modes of discourse now permeate the church, infiltrating our disagreements with sound bite theology, conspiracy theory, and a real lack of charity. What was once a clarion cry and cause for alarm often devolves into shrill posturing; vexing at best and outright viscous in its worse manifestations. What I fear is that these modes of disagreement, often considered almost sport in North American contexts, can spawn incredibly painful consequences when they spill over to other global areas. We have to learn, once more, on all sides, to speak the truth in love.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987, 1989), 105-39.

Now, I do not feel like the sage in this issue. Instead I have asked a few friends to offer seasoned, researched, and reasonable reflections over the issue of communication and conflict. Each of the essays revolve around this same theme and surface from people long accustomed to exploring and expressing clear communication. I indebted to David Felter who guides editorial policy for the Church of the Nazarene, Dean Nelson, director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University and Scott Turcott, Vice President for Institutional Advancement at Eastern Nazarene University. The section concludes with two chapters from a new volume by Dan Boone, President of Trevecca Nazarene University. The book, *A Charitable Discourse*, is currently available through Beacon Hill Books of Kansas City. Collectively these essays reflect the shared wisdom of people who have judiciously thought and wrote in the past, and hopefully will help to guide us toward a more gracious future. In one sense these essays will serve our readership as they help others discern how to overcome a sound-bite theology and speak the truth in love. In another sense they should serve as a reminder to any of “us” tempted to succumb to these communication errors when we find ourselves in conflict with other people.

Just recently, during a workshop, I was confronted by someone who I could tell quite quickly seemed determined to reduce my current activities into a cloud of suspicion. The conversation was civil but conflicting. Neither of us was willing to give up our perspectives though we listened...and argued... those perspectives and positions. At the end of the conversation we agreed we would pray for each other, though we also acknowledged we might disagree with the content of our prayers for each other. To be honest this agreement was the best we could accomplish at that moment, trusting God to serve as the final arbiter of our appeals. Perhaps this approach might be a beginning for us all.

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