

WHAT THE EARLY CHURCH CAN TEACH US ABOUT COVID-19:
WORSHIP PRACTICES, ADAPTABILITY, AND CONCERN FOR THE OTHER

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Introduction

Easter of the year 2020 will likely be remembered as the year of a ‘prolonged Holy Saturday’, a time in which the Church felt the weight of the absence of Jesus more than the joy of celebrating Resurrection Sunday. Churches around the world found themselves unable to gather on Easter Sunday in their church buildings. Guidance by the Church of England to parish churches reflected on the theme of a ‘prolonged Holy Saturday’ in an article published in April 2020. It began by saying, ‘We have already become “a different sort of church” in unprecedented ways. The very place in which the body of Christ finds its identity, offers prayer, and receives solace in time of crisis—that is, the church building—is not available to us, and, as in the early days of our faith, public gatherings of Christians outside the home are forbidden.’¹ The article then proceeded to offer suggestions of ways in which parishioners could celebrate Holy Week in their homes. The suggestions are then followed by this statement: ‘Holy Week, in these unprecedented circumstances, may offer us some clues to how we will resume our worshipping life together, and how it will be completely different from the one we paused.’²

This guidance, offered by the Church of England, is representative of the many ways in which churches in the United Kingdom have responded to the seriousness of COVID-19. Every church in the UK has had to wrestle with the fact that meeting, as a gathered community in a building, was no longer an option since March 2020. As hopeful as this guidance attempts to be, there are a few phrases employed, which seem to indicate a particular view of the Church and her worshipping life. More than once, the article claims we are living in ‘unprecedented circumstances’, and ‘the very place in which the body of Christ finds its identity...is, the church building’.³ These phrases are concerning, particularly for those who understand the complex and varied history of the Church. Claiming that the inability to worship in public buildings is unprecedented, with the two-thousand-year history of the Church in view, is simply not true. And suggesting that one’s identity as the Body of Christ is ontologically connected to a church building, raises significant theological and ecclesiological questions.

In fairness to the guidance provided, there are glimpses of a different view, which allude to a different reading of history and theology. In the first quote provided above, the writer recognized that church buildings were not available to the Church ‘in the early days of our faith’. As a historian, this recognition of the circumstances surrounding the Early Church led me to consider: What can the Early Church teach us about COVID-19? In order to do this, the

¹ ‘Holy Week and Easter 2020’, Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance for Parishes, Church of England (April 2020), <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-parishes/holy-week-and-easter-2020> (Accessed 15 July 2020), n.p.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

following essay will examine one early Christian document, the *Didache*, as a set of guidance notes for church communities in the ancient world. It will consider *Didache*'s guidance on worship practices, and analyze the ways in which this guidance promotes adaptability and concern for the other. Finally, these considerations will then be placed within a Wesleyan-holiness theological framework, in an effort to provide direction for thriving as the Church in a global pandemic.

Didache as a Window into the Early Church

Although the writings of New Testament, particularly the epistles of Paul, address many issues in the Church, most of the issues Paul highlights are local issues. He talks about food sacrificed to idols to the Corinthians, unity to the Ephesians, the Gospel-for-all to the Galatians, and the end times to the Thessalonians. These letters were written to specific congregations, but they began to be shared with other congregations as the Church found itself being planted in more and more places. It is not until later in the first century, or early in the second century, that we find a document which provides general guidance to all churches about core beliefs and practices of Christianity.

Didache, or *The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, is a collection of teachings/guidance for these early Christian communities who were meeting in each others' homes.⁴ According to Thomas O'Loughlin, 'There are sections that deal with what Christians should and should not do, guidance on prayer and fasting, information on baptism and on what should be said when Christians gather to eat together; there are rules and regulations on how the community should relate to other groups of Christians; and there is a little homily on the return of Christ. It seems more like an album of bits than a single literary creation.'⁵ A cursory look at the document confirms the assumption that this document reads like a guidebook for Christian living. It begins by asserting there are two ways of living: the way of life and the way of death. Following the teachings of Jesus leads to the way of life. As one reads through the document, one finds that its teachings are to be inhabited, or practiced, by the community. As Alan Kreider noted, 'The habitus of the *Didache*'s community was what they did, and the *Didache* is insistent on the importance of practice... The community's members who taught the candidates (new Christians) "all these points" – the community's habitus – and the candidates learned the habitus primarily by living it.'⁶

Didache is by no means the only document we may look to for insight into early Christianity, but it does offer a 'window' through which we may investigate our question. O'Loughlin argued, 'It gives insight into how those communities came into being, how they viewed themselves, and their practice as disciples. To study it is to look afresh at the very core of

⁴ For more on the dating of the *Didache*, see Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Didache: A window on the earliest Christians* (London: SPCK, 2010), 24-27.

⁵ O'Loughlin, *Didache*, 6.

⁶ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 140-141.

our Christian memory.’⁷ Because of limited space, our investigation of this document will focus on one element of worship: baptism. Focusing on this one section will help us seek to answer the question: What can the Early Church teach us about COVID-19?

Baptism – Adaptability for local contexts and emphasis on Love for all

Didache covers a wide variety of topics, but it focuses on the elements of the Christian faith and practice that would be considered, the basics. One of the most fundamental practices of the Church, from the very beginning, is baptism. Those who sought to be included in the Christian community were initiated through baptism. This was the beginning of the Christian life, entrance into the Church, and a recognition of the fact that the baptised person is someone on ‘the way of life.’ Rowan Williams echoes the *Didache* when he said, ‘So the beginning of Christian life is a new beginning of God’s creative work. And just as Jesus came up out of the water, receiving the Spirit and hearing the voice of the Father, so for the newly baptized Christian the voice of God says, ‘You are my son/daughter’, as that individual begins his or her new life in association with Jesus.’⁸

What follows is the full text from *Didache*’s section on baptism:

And concerning baptism, baptise this way: Having first said all these things, baptise into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Matthew 28:19 in living water. But if you have not living water, baptise into other water; and if you cannot in cold, in warm. But if you have not either, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let the baptiser fast, and the baptised, and whatever others can; but you shall order the baptised to fast one or two days before.⁹

At first reading it may seem that *Didache* says very little about baptism, and in terms of word count, that would be true. What is said, albeit brief, speaks volumes about the Christian community and its adaptability and concern for the other.

What we find in this piece of guidance is something we do not find in the New Testament. Stories of baptism may be found dotted through the Acts of the Apostles and some teaching about the nature of baptism may be found in the letters of Paul or the Gospel of John. What cannot be found, however, is any clear direction on the actual mechanics of the practice of baptism. It may be inferred that baptism should be performed in a river, based on the model of John the Baptist or Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. But there are other stories, like the house of Cornelius, who most likely would have used the baths of their home to baptise. The Greek word, *baptismo*, may be translated, to immerse, which seems to indicate a large amount of water must

⁷ O’Loughlin, *Didache*, Introduction.

⁸ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (London: SPCK, 2014), 2.

⁹ ‘Chapter 7. Concerning Baptism’ in *Didache*, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0714.htm> (Accessed: 15 July 2020), n.p.

be used, and most likely would mean that one would be laid fully under the water. To immerse, however, does not prescribe how one is immersed. A person may be immersed in water by the pouring of water over someone's head, drenching their whole body. Ancient icons of Jesus' baptism suggest that this is the way in which Jesus was baptized (the pouring of water over the head). The point of these stories in the New Testament, I would argue, was not to prescribe a set practice of baptism, rather, the point of these stories was to recognize the common practice of baptism in the life and teachings of the first generation of Christians. In other words, the New Testament accounts of baptism are descriptive, not prescriptive.

What we find in *Didache* is an attempt to offer more of a prescription of baptism. It is not so much about what baptism is, but how one carries out the practice. In typical *Didache* fashion, it gets straight to the point: baptize in 'living water, But if you have not living water, baptize into other water; and if you cannot in cold, in warm. But if you have not either, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit.'¹⁰ Here we see the practical side of the *Didache*. These are the types of water and means by which you should baptize. This is important, and helpful, as it outlines what the New Testament does not. But I would suggest, this tells us something even more important about the nature of the Christian community.

Why is it that *Didache* gives multiple options for the means of baptism? Why does *Didache* outline a list of different means, while clearly prioritizing them? It seems to me that there are two reasons for this. First, the reason it outlines different means of baptism is simple pragmatism. If you have living water (a river), use it, but if you do not, use other water, if not cold, then warm, etc. Let us not forget the world into which *Didache* was received and shared. From Jerusalem to Rome, one finds a diverse geography. Some Christian communities lived in areas where water was abundant, and others lived in areas where water was more precious than gold. Some places received cold water from the mountains, and others had to use aqueducts to pipe the water in from many miles away. By the time it reached these places, it was warm. *Didache* recognizes this very practical issue and gives guidelines for best practice.

Second, the reason it outlines different means of baptism is out of compassion for all. It seems that an allowance for varied practice not only addresses the pragmatic challenges, but it also highlights diversity within the Christian community. In areas where water was an expensive commodity, *Didache* did not put them in a position where they had to choose baptismal water over food for the day. For persons who genuinely had a phobia of water, or whose weak immune system would be compromised by being submerged in cold water, *Didache* prescribed options suitable for them. For Christian communities who lived in fear of persecution, allowance for baptism indoors by sprinkling or pouring meant they did not have to risk the possibility of torture or death because of a public gathering at a river.

For these reasons, it seems to me that *Didache*'s teaching on baptism indicates these early Christian communities were adaptable. O'Loughlin summed it this way: 'Wherever the

¹⁰ Ibid.

community was located, there it could baptize: there was no specific sacred place to which they had to track off.’¹¹ Adaptability was crucial to the flourishing of these early Christians.¹² Alongside their adaptability was their focus on compassion for all, or, concern for the other. Again, O’Loughlin commented, ‘We still have much to learn from the *Didache* with its insistence on setting out the way of love, alongside a balanced practicality about ritual forms.’¹³ If nothing else, *Didache*, as a manual/guidebook for early Christian living, supports the notion that a flourishing Christian community is both adaptable and concerned for the other.

Worship Practices in the time of COVID-19 – Wesleyan-holiness Reflections

Having investigated what *Didache* says about early Christianity, we are now in a position to critically reflect on what it might teach us today. When places of worship were recently instructed by governments around the world to close their doors because of COVID-19, reaction by some in the Church was negative. As highlighted above, when one’s ecclesiology is inextricably linked to bricks and mortar, news of closing the building would be devastating. But this was never the case for early Christians. For reasons outlined above, the first few generations of Christians found themselves in a variety of places: homes, Temple, outdoors, and mingling amongst the public. News of closing church buildings would not have been news for them, as they did not have public buildings to lose. I would suggest that their ability to adapt and thrive in varying social, political, and geographical settings was key to their proliferation in the Roman Empire.¹⁴ In addition, their adaptability was driven by concern for the other. It was driven by love. Rodney Stark, in his study of the rise of early Christianity, said,

This was the moral climate in which Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues – that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful. Moreover, the corollary that because God loves humanity, Christians may not please God unless they love one another was something entirely new. Perhaps even more revolutionary was the principle that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and tribe, that it must extend to “all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2). Indeed, love and charity must even extend beyond the Christian community.¹⁵

These two pillars of early Christianity, adaptability and concern for the other, should feature prominently in the Church’s response to COVID-19 today. It may be true that the Church today is living in unprecedented times, as in, we have never experienced this before, but by no means has the Church never experienced times of crisis. As *Didache* has highlighted, the Church’s ability to adapt, driven by love the other, has been a part of our DNA from the beginning. And

¹¹ O’Loughlin, *Didache*, 61.

¹² For more on this see, Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 73-90.

¹³ O’Loughlin, *Didache*, 62.

¹⁴ This is just one of many reasons. For more on this see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 1997).

¹⁵ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 212.

through the centuries these two pillars have featured (although not always) in times of crisis and change.

From a Wesleyan-holiness perspective, the COVID-19 crisis, if anything, should remind us of our Wesleyan DNA. Adaptability, driven by concern for the other, is what should define churches in the Wesleyan-holiness tradition. In line with the vision of the Wesley brothers, who exemplified the pillars of adaptability and love, attempted to re-capture the boldness of early Christianity in the midst of crisis and changing circumstances. It was their reading of ‘primitive Christianity’ which compelled them to live a life of adaptability, driven by concern for the other.¹⁶ This emphasis was perpetuated in some of the iterations of Methodism in the 19th century, including holiness revivalism and camp meetings. Out of these things was birthed the Church of the Nazarene. Adaptability, driven by concern for the other, is in our DNA.

Conclusion

What can the early Church teach us about COVID-19? It is my hope that this essay has provided some reflections on early Christianity and offered a framework within which the Church today may be inspired to navigate the COVID-19 crisis with confidence. The Church has existed for nearly 2,000 years, not because she has the right mode of being, but precisely because of her ability to change her mode of being. Empowered by the Holy Spirit and modelled on the life of Jesus, the Church, as a living thing, has grown, adapted, changed, responded, increased public presence, decreased public presence, created new forms of public presence, survived wars, pandemics, changes in leadership and government. She has the incredible ability to adapt. But most importantly, it should be noted that her adaptation, rightly enacted, is not driven by pragmatism. It is driven by concern for the other. Williams’ explanation of baptism reminds us,

If we ask the question, “Where might you expect to find the baptized?” one answer is, “In the neighbourhood of chaos!” It means you might expect to find Christian people near to those places where humanity is most at risk, where humanity is most disordered, disfigured and needy. Christians will be found in the neighbourhood of Jesus – but Jesus is found in the neighbourhood of human confusion and suffering, defencelessly alongside those in need.¹⁷

As we continue to seek to be faithful in the midst of a global pandemic, may the teaching of *Didache* continue to echo in our ears. Whatever decisions we make and whatever practices we adopt must reflect these two pillars of our identity: adaptability driven by concern for the other.

¹⁶ Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991).

¹⁷ Williams, *Being Christian*, 4.

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