Thomas O'Loughlin is Professor of Historical Theology in the University of Nottingham. His research explores how our understanding of Christian belief can be enriched by seeing how individual expressions of that faith, such as the *Didache*, can be located within the dynamic life of the communities that produced them. 'Tradition' is not, therefore, a weight from the past that pulls a community backwards, but rather is the life of that community, constantly seeking to reinterpret its inheritance in the light of its current experience and hopes. The historical theologian's task is, consequently, that of uncovering how a community inherited, lived, shaped and handed on its vision. O'Loughlin has pursued this study in numerous books and articles over the past 20 years, covering topics relating to the early Church and the early Middle Ages; his passion is training graduate students in this often neglected field of research. He is the editor of the series *Studia Traditionis Theologiae* (Brepols), which is dedicated to the study of theology through the lens of tradition.

THE *DIDACHE*

A window on the earliest Christians

THOMAS O'LOUGHLIN

SPCK

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For
Anca and Andreas
τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο μέγα ἐστίν

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Preface

It is now 25 years since I first used this little work, the *Didache*, as a core text in teaching. Over the years I have used it in almost every conceivable context where the teaching of theology takes place. I have used it with university undergraduates, in seminaries and convents, supervised dissertations devoted to it, used it at gatherings of ministers of various denominations and read it with groups of ordinary Christians in real communities. I have taken it into the pulpit, and most recently prepared a course upon it that will be delivered over the internet! Yet I am still fascinated by it and, more importantly, every group with whom I have worked through this text has found it fascinating. The *Didache* has an ability to change a leisurely class quietly studying Christian texts into a group eager to ask basic questions about Christianity and about its structures and practices, to spur them on to investigate what we know about early Christianity, and to empower them to look afresh at long-familiar texts and assumptions. I think this ability to make people sit up and start looking with a new energy at Christian origins comes from the text's unique combination of familiarity – people recognize so much of its contents from reading the Gospels or just from the practices they see in their churches – and unfamiliarity – this teaching is not presented in the way that it is found in the New Testament's texts nor do the practices conform with the deeply held assumptions of many churches. This mix of the well known with the startlingly different makes people sit up and look with new eyes both at the past and the present. It is this sense of the *Didache* as a text that can excite us that I have tried to convey in this book.

Over the years I have often been asked for a 'guide book' to the *Didache* that would be more than a summary introduction,

yet not a full-blown academic commentary (and there are several excellent ones), that would allow its reader to reread the *Didache* and draw more out of its text. I told many of those groups that I would write such a book but kept delaying putting pen to paper. Now, at last, here it is. If any of those many people with whom I have read the *Didache* over the years picks up this book, that person will find much that is familiar, but may also find a question they remember someone raising in class, or a comment first heard in a seminar. I have learned more about the text each time I have gone through it with a group; and I am thankful for all the discussions, questions, comments but, especially, my students' enthusiasm.

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Over the years I have incurred numerous debts for help in understanding and appreciating the *Didache*, not just among my academic colleagues, but, more significantly, among students with whom I have read this text.

I would like to single out two students for special mention, Valerie Warren and Joy Powell, because they were the first to force me to search out how looking at the earliest churches could be a valuable part of the theological enterprise today. Over the years I can also recall very many conversations with colleagues on either the text as a whole or specific aspects of it. I hope they have as pleasant a recollection of the meal or the meeting in the pub when they suggested something, now incorporated here, as I have. I would also like to single out a few of my colleagues whose conversation over many years has helped me to clarify my views, especially Professors Robert Jewett, Seán Freyne, Justin Taylor and D. P. Davies, and Drs Kieran O'Mahony and the late Michael Maher, *requiescat in pace Domini*. I would also like to express my gratitude to Drs Frances Knight and Francisca Rumsey for acting as sounding boards for the book as it stands, and particularly to the latter for proofreading the text and saving me from more than one blunder! The positions taken, and the remaining imperfections, are, however, my own.

Working with SPCK has been a most pleasant experience: its staff were enthusiastic from the start, and have been the very model of generosity in their patience for the completed text. As ever, I have built up debts among many librarians, but Kathy Miles and Neil Smyth have been unfailing in their ready help.

Introduction

Why the *Didache*? Why bother to write a book about such a text, and why bother to read such a book? Let me try to answer these questions by way of an introduction to this book.

One might expand the question and ask why should a Christian read any ancient text, be it a Gospel, a letter from an early Christian leader, or the *Didache*? My answer is in three overlapping parts. First, members of every religious community – big or small – are always engaged in a process of forgetting some aspects of their past while simultaneously remembering and giving new life to other aspects of their past. The forgetting is sometimes the necessary jettisoning of attitudes that they recognize as no longer appropriate. Take slavery as an example. Christianity emerged in a culture where slavery was an accepted part of the social structures and the only concern was that owners treat their slaves 'as brothers in the Lord'. The very notion that one could be a 'brother' Christian and a slave seems ludicrous to us; yet Christians defended slavery as an institution until well into the nineteenth century!

But we also forget 'by accident' and usually this happens when we take a familiar form of any practice and imagine that either it was 'always like this' or that 'it cannot be other than like this'. Take, for instance, the arguments that go on interminably between Christian denominations about the Eucharist – very often the most minor details of practice are considered 'essentials'. Yet often, all sides in the dispute have forgotten that this gathering is a meal, and a meal in which Christ is present among the disciples gathering in his name. But this fundamental aspect has been forgotten because a real meal was socially awkward in the highly stratified society of the second century: they had forgotten that part of the message

of the meal was that the Christian community was to cut through such social divisions. Recalling these forgotten aspects can teach us humility before the past, the dangers of just repeating practice, and that there are aspects of Christian practice that we need to recover. But remembering can also be dangerous: when we remember bits and pieces at random, we sometimes can get the wrong end of the stick! Take the notion, very common among some churches (mainly in north America) that suddenly, sometime soon, some Christians are going to be whisked away into the clouds to be with Jesus – this is referred to as 'the rapture' and presented as Paul's teaching in 1 Thessalonians 4.14–18. But this bit of remembering also forgets that Paul later abandoned this notion; and so it just remained in the memory as a curiosity. Another piece of remembering is that which has rediscovered that sin is not just an individual's personal crimes, but that there is a social dimension to sin as it is portrayed in the Scriptures and our early texts: Christians have to work to build just societies and their own society as 'the Church' must reflect this. But both forgetting and remembering – important keys for Christian tradition – need to be done with conscious interaction with the past and the best way to so interact with earlier Christians is through careful and critical examination of the texts of those Christians. The texts are windows allowing us to see their imaginations of faith.

A second reason for reading early texts is that we are all aware that history does not stand still. Even the most conservative person – who loves to imagine that nothing has changed until now and who hopes that nothing will change in the future – knows that they are getting older (inevitable change) and their younger disciples see things differently (yet more change)! Churches and communities change in their questions, their practices, their ways of presenting faith – and in what worries them. Sometimes change is swift, even dramatic, and then it is very easy to provide pictures of the situation 'before' and 'after'

so that the change is clearly visible – although we should note that providing an explanation of why the change came about may be very complex and keep historians busy for centuries. Such moments as the legalization of Christianity by Constantine in AD 313 and the Reformation in the sixteenth century are examples of very clear, major developments – even though we may be unclear as to why they came about then and in that form. But most change in Christian practices and understanding is so gradual as to be invisible. Each generation tries to preserve the past, but makes tiny incremental changes, once here and another time there, so that the final state may have the same name as the first, but be different from its origins in every other respect! Explaining how this present state occurs is best done by looking at its past and seeing how practices have grown and changed over decades and centuries. This is explaining the present, and Christian belief in the present, as the outcome of generations of activity. This explanation is neither a justification of the present nor an approbation of the process: it simply explains and allows for a more informed judgement about the present and the past. Some evolution is wholly necessary and needs to be affirmed; some is corrosive and needs to be corrected, and some is just what happened and studying it can explain some of the strange nooks and crannies of practice that appeal to some, but make others want to go off 'spring cleaning'. In such a study of the present as the outcome of its past, looking at a guide to practice that is as old as the *Didache* has very clear advantages.

The third reason for reading the *Didache* is that Christianity is an explicitly historical religion: it is based on a historical individual, Jesus, and what he did and taught. Christianity is also the community descended from the community that Jesus formed around himself: it treasures its past and its memories. Whenever Christians gather they almost invariably look backwards to that time by reading the stories (our four Gospels) produced by and for the second generation of Christians so

that they could look back to Jesus. It was that second generation of Christians that used the *Didache*. So looking backwards as a valuable activity in discipleship is a mainstay of Christianity, and the *Didache* is a book about the details of discipleship in that generation. This historical dimension of Christianity, which lies at the heart of the attention given by Christians to the Scriptures in both liturgy and study, is all too often ignored in our intense quest to know what those scriptural books 'mean' as if they were books of wisdom written by philosophers rather than books produced in the churches to help us in the task of historical remembering. It is worth recalling these words by the great French historian Marc Bloch (1992, p. 4):

> Christianity is a religion of historians. Other religious systems have been able to found their beliefs and their rites on a mythology nearly outside human time. For sacred books, the Christians have books of history, and their liturgies commemorate, together with episodes from the terrestrial life of a God, the annals of the church and the lives of the saints.

Because Christians are always recalling those first churches and their memories, this text, the *Didache*, is precious. It gives us 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 our Christian memory.

Two final notes. First, the *Didache* came to the attention of scholars almost a century and a half ago, and since then there has been no shortage of scholarly books upon it. This book does not seek to compete with them, but to introduce the text. Because of its introductory nature I have not put in footnotes and have kept references to a minimum. At the end of the book is a guide to further reading, and on particular points that readers might want to follow up I have placed references in brackets with this sign, >, followed by a name, which means: if you want to know more about this point, go to that book/article whose details are listed under 'Further reading'. Second,

the Greek word *didache* means 'teaching'/'training' – an activity (often distinguished from 'proclamation': *kerugma*) – but it is also the title of this text: 'The Teaching' or 'The Training'. When it is the activity that I am referring to, I spell it '*didache*' (lowercase initial letter), and when I am referring to the ancient text, I spell it '*Didache*'.

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