Though a neglected fact, the New Testament was not handed down to the church by God. What is in the canon is certainly not the extent to which people wrote of Jesus and Christianity. There was a plethora available to the new church. It was not until the second century that the term canon became popular, and it at first connoted the church’s “regulative authority for its faith and life.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The canon did not describe the body of *writings* used by the church, but rather its “ecclesiastical rule.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It was not until the fourth century that the term “canon” referred to the writings of the church. The New Testament canon, as we today know it in the West, was not established until 367. But the process of forming the canon was not simple. For centuries, the list of writings progressed to what it is today. Using the criteria of apostolicity, catholicity, traditional usage and orthodoxy, the church declared what should be kept and what should be forgotten or set aside. A fascinating exclusion from the canon is a small book by an unknown author, called the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, or the *Didache*. Though it meets each of the criteria of canonization and therefore seems to deserve a place in the canon, further analysis reveals that the church may have made the right decision.

Though included in the title, the Didache does not have a proven connection to the twelve disciples.[[3]](#footnote-3) The authorship of this document is unknown, and scholars have only estimations of when it was produced. Almost every article about the Didache begins not with its author, but with its founder. Until 1883, ten years after Bryennios found it in a monastery in Constantinople, the Didache was lost and largely forgotte.[[4]](#footnote-4) It was referenced by Clement of Alexandria in his Miscellanies, written around 180 to 190.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the third century, Origen of Alexandria used the Didache,[[6]](#footnote-6) and, perhaps most importantly, Eusebius classified it in the category of “disputed books.”[[7]](#footnote-7) These books were accepted by some churches “as being written by the apostles or apostolic men, but most did not.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Eusebius’s other categories were “acknowledged books” and “heretical works.”[[9]](#footnote-9) That the Didache did not fall into either of these categories reflects its questionable authorship and yet its relevancy to the church. The status of the Didache progressed over time. Many early churches perceived the text as scriptural. But while the Didache never received negative attention from theologians, it gradually faded out of history.

Static & Dynamic Criteria

The criteria of the canon cannot tell the whole story of how the New Testament came to be. If they did, the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles would certainly have made it into the canon. Gamble writes that even some writings “which explicitly claimed apostolic authorship … failed to gain canonical standing altogether,” i.e. the Didache.[[10]](#footnote-10) Although the author of the the Didache is unknown, it has been designated as a product of the “Apostolic Fathers,” a name that means the authors “are supposed to have known the Apostles and also because their works represent a teaching derived immediately, or almost immediately, from the Apostles.”[[11]](#footnote-11) These documents are dated at the end of the first century or at the first half of the second century. Scholars believe the Didache was written between 50 and 160, and most likely between 80 and 110. One source even suggested a date as early as 60. This designation in itself reflects the document’s apostolicity.

Furthermore, the Didache’s relatively high status within the church is evidence of its catholicity. From the second century onward, the document was referred to as authoritative – even if left out of the canon. Indeed, Athanasius “not only accepts the Didache but also encourages its use for training new believers in the ‘fundamentals’ of the faith.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Several authors quote the Didache in their writings, including the Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Eusebius. The text held ground until the 800s, after which it was lost. The Pseudo-Cyprian church literature, composed around 300, references verses in the Didache, and “the quoted text probably is considered to have the status of (sacred) Scripture as it is listed among citations from Paul.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Further, AUTHOR claims that Augustine also came in contact with a Latin version of the Didache in the fourth or fifth century: In his discussion of Psalms he references the Didache and “he even introduces the sentence by explicitly referring to ‘Scripture.’”[[14]](#footnote-14) The reach of the Didache’s influence extended into Syria in the Apostolic Constitutions, “the Oxyrhynchus papyrus fragments, the Coptic remnant, and the parts retained from the Ethiopic version.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Clearly, the Didache was widely circulated and well-known to the early churches.

Though the first two canon criteria are static determinants, the next two criteria – orthodoxy and traditional usage – are dynamic. The early church was a period of slow metamorphosis -- and, indeed, churches are transformed by each generation. The changes that the church underwent and undergoes today are the products of Christians’ ever-changing needs and circumstances. Especially in the first centuries of church formation, changes were gradual but drastic. Indeed, this was the period during which the structure and theology of the church were structured. To understand why the Didache should have been part of the canon and yet why it has remained out of the canon, we must acknowledge Gamble’s statement that “scripture helped to mold the tradition of faith, and the tradition of faith helped to shape the canon of scripture.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The message of the Didache was in no way contrary to the message of ecclesiastical teaching. In fact, it is a rather neutral document because of its lack of theological themes, which can be divided into four parts: “a moral catechesis, a liturgical instruction, a disciplinary instruction, and a conclusion of an eschatological nature.[[17]](#footnote-17) It is primarily instructional rather than intellectual. Owing to its wide dispersal and high status, albeit outside the classification as “scripture,” the Didache was itself a reflection of Christian practices in the first centuries. The lack of “theological concerns” perhaps both hinders and helps the Didache’s case for admittance into the canon. Church dogma penetrates Christian writings composed further from the 100 year mark; earlier writings lack this theological development.[[18]](#footnote-18) The Didache’s apostolicity can hardly be in doubt. However, orthodoxy and thus usage fluctuate throughout time as the context changes. That the document slowly recedes from the picture is evidence that

“after the fifth century the Didache was no longer part of church tradition and fell into obscurity. What the manual had to say was not the sort of material which later generations wanted to preserve; the moral teaching, the liturgical part, and the church order proper were no longer relevant to their needs.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

So as the structure of the church morphed and became more settled and permanent, the Didache lost relevance. Its reference to “itinerant teachers and prophets” and the selection of bishops and deacons is evidence of a “transition period when the ministry of traveling apostles, teachers and prophets was dwindling, being replaced by resident bishops and deacons.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This “primitive” church structure was obsolete and therefore the Didache began to lose its authority and usage. It could not survive the changes of time the way the books chosen for the canon had (and have).

It should not come as a surprise that the Didache fell out of use. It was written when the church was an infant, used as a reference during its adolescence, and, inevitably, became irrelevant by the church’s adulthood – just a memory of what the church once was, what it began as. Furthermore, the teachings in the Didache are often verbatim those of Gospels. They lack the maturity, however, of the Gospels that have infused the story of Jesus. The Didache pays little attention to Jesus. The idea of Jesus’ divinity is absent from the text, as is evidenced by several lines throughout the texts: in Chapter 4, the author writes, “My child, remember night and day and him who speaks *of God* to you, and honor him as you do the Lord.” In Chapter 6, the writer flirts with the idea that people should try to bear the “entire yoke of the Lord,” i.e. the law, but to do what one is able in any case. In Chapter 9, Jesus is addressed as “Thy [God’s] Servant.” And in the last chapter, the eschatological message is heavily Jewish as it describes the Son of God delivering the world from the evils that have overtaken it (warrior messiah). Then, he writes, “shall the world see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven” (Didache, Ch. 16). The Jewish imagery is heavy, which further reflects its early composition, and, for later churches, its out-datedness. The content is focused rather than universal, with a specific purpose of training converts to become Christians of the early church. It was meant to be didactic. It was not a document from which to glean theological messages; it was something to be studied and memorized – a kind of outline, or “Christianity for Dummies.” This is certainly why it did not receive the attention the books chosen for the canon received, but this is also why it was not forgotten altogether in the first few centuries of the church.

An analysis of the canon criteria

The criteria are largely inadequate in determining what texts belong in the canon. First, *because* the Didache passes the criterion of apostolicity, it does not belong in the canon. Its apostolic dating renders it outdated by the fourth century, when the structure and dogma of the church was beginning to mature. Even today, the criterion of apostolicity has been obsolete in some aspects. The authors of the gospels are unknown and the gospels themselves are contradictory to each other and to history. Furthermore, access to different sources outside the canon has grown since it was created.

The criterion of catholicity is just as outdated. In a post-Enlightenment approach, scholars and students alike recognize that the context in which people live influences, and arguably dictates, the thoughts and messages those people think and proclaim. We know now that Mark’s, Matthew’s, Luke’s and John’s gospels were addressed to specific people, and they were written from a certain standpoint in history. Their intentions were different and their backgrounds were different. This affects the message. Paul’s letters were addressed to specific peoples. Of course, it is possible that his messages can be universalized, but what of the details we can’t be certain of? There is a cultural, linguistic and contextual barrier between historic figures and modern-day believers and scholars. Ganble addresses this problem well:

“each [writing] emerged in a particular historical setting, dealt with specific issues of the moment, and was directed to a limited and often strictly local readership. This recognition poses very sharply the questions of how, why, and with what results these writings were detached from their generative contexts, brought together in a collection, and ascribed a general relevance and timeless authority for Christianity as a whole.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Gamble and I are not the only ones that think applying the teachings of an ancient book can be problematic. Reformed Christian churches are on the rise. Mainline Protestantism, and even Catholicism, has addressed the issue of modernizing the teachings of the Bible. The debate about whether the Bible makes Christianity is a topic for another, weightier essay. But that church culture is undergoing a renovation in mainline Protestantism, especially, is proof that more people are acknowledging that the criteria are perhaps outdated.

Even if the criterion of orthodoxy were updated in some way, the canon could never change. There would never be agreement among all the denominations of Christianity as to what books should be taken out and what books should be added (if any). Already, after using the same book for well over a thousand years, different theologies have arisen. Orthodoxy has become an irrelevant criterion because there isn’t universal *orthodoxy* anymore. There is orthodoxy within each denomination or sect: fundamentalist, Catholic, mainline Protestant, reformed, Church of Christ, Evangelical, and the list goes on and on. Indeed, scripture has helped to “mold the tradition of faith,” by the tradition and context surrounding the faithful have shaped their interpretation of the scripture. This has resulted in disunity among Christians.

Traditional usage is perhaps the only criterion that keeps the canon from dissolving. It is the only criterion that has remained pertinent, and it is therefore the only one that keeps Christians coming to the same book. No matter how radically different Christians may be, they still have a common denominator. A two-thousand year old tradition would be a hard, and probably unnecessary, habit to break.

I agree with the church’s decision to leave the Didache out of the canon, despite its fulfilling, at least in some respect, each of the criteria. The Didache’s failure to make it into the canon is odd, but this is because the criteria are not sufficient to explain why something deserves a place and why something does not. There are several other aspects – less structured and ascertainable – that must be considered. In the case of the Didache, antiquated content hurt its case more than it helped. People had no use for it because the church was experiencing growth and transformation. Nonetheless, I do not believe that another criterion should be added to the list. It is not a feasible proposal because of the lack of unity among Christian churches. There should be, however, documents – much like the Talmud or the Hadith – that go along with the New Testament. These, however, should be unlike the Talmud and Hadith in that they should be frequently *updated.* They should address the historicity of the books and their relevancy to today. Too often, Bible verses are taken out of context and become weapons of bigotry and misunderstanding. If we are left with something that is outdated, we must learn to use it wisely. Ancient traditions are too deeply rooted to change. It is both impractical and sadistic. Traditions become embedded in souls of a people’s culture, passed down through the generations. The canon does not need to change; but we must work to better understand what we’ve been given from the past.

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1. Gamble, p. 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p. 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cooper, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sandt & Flusser, p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Didache, 2010, <http://thedidache.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gamble, p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Didache, 2010, <http://thedidache.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gamble, p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kirby, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cooper, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Sandt & Flusser, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Gamble, p. 69 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Peters, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The Didache, 2010, <http://thedidache.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sandt & Flusser, p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The Didache, 2010, <http://thedidache.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Gamble, p. 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)