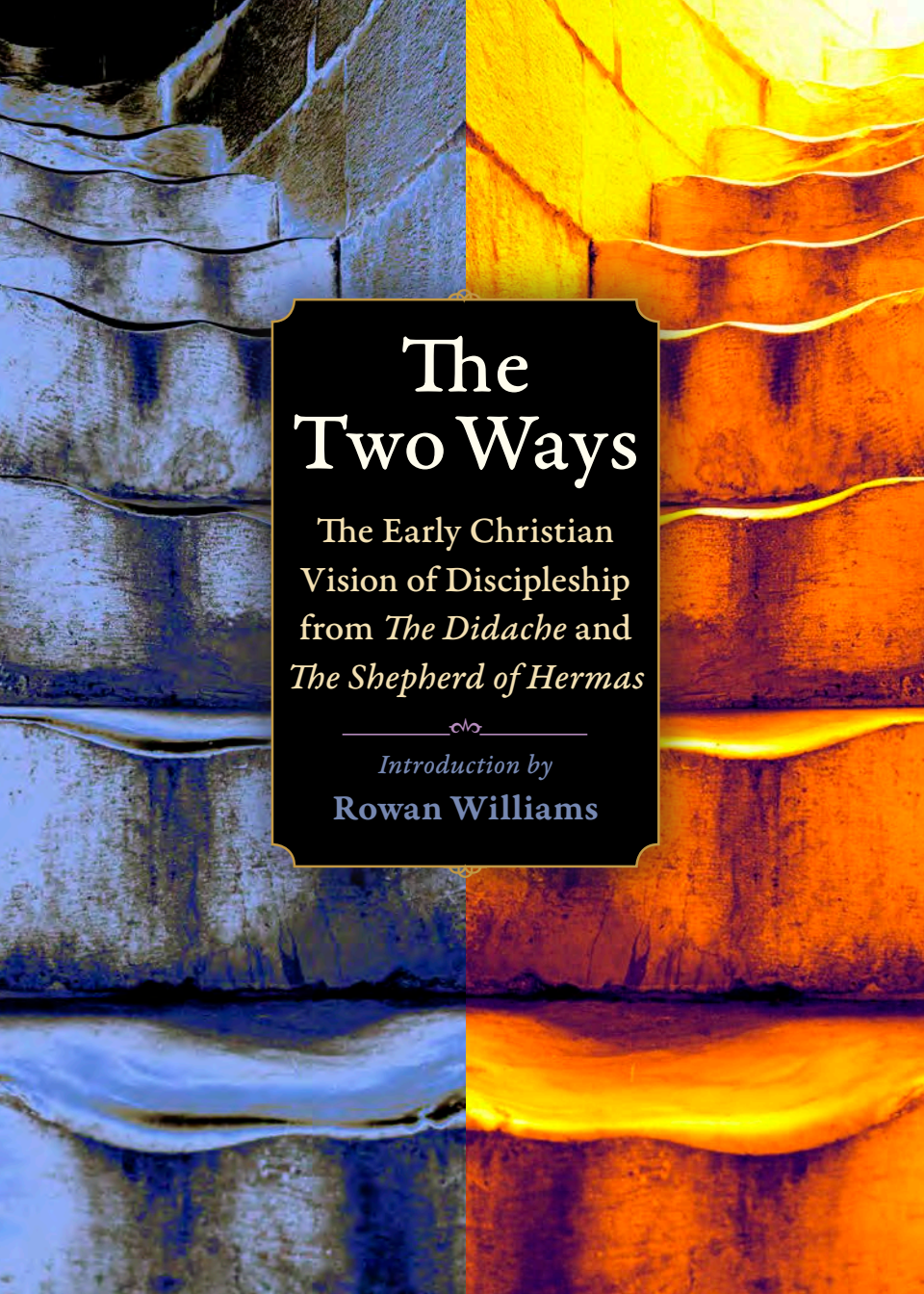

# The Two Ways

The Early Christian Vision of Discipleship from *The Didache* and *The Shepherd of Hermas*

*Introduction by*

**Rowan Williams**

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## The Early Christian Vision of Discipleship from *The Didache* and *The Shepherd of Hermas*

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*Translations by Michael W. Holmes*
*Edited by Veery Huleatt*

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PLOUGH PUBLISHING HOUSE

Published by Plough Publishing House
Walden, New York
Robertsbridge, England
Elsmore, Australia
www.plough.com



PRINT ISBN 978-0-87486-739-8
PDF ISBN 978-0-87486-742-8
EPUB ISBN 978-0-87486-740-4
MOBI ISBN 978-0-87486-741-1

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*The Didache* and excerpts from *The Shepherd of Hermas* are reprinted from Michael W. Holmes, editor and translator, *The Apostolic Fathers,* third edition, Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2007. Used by permission.

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# PREFACE

How did the early Christians receive and understand the teachings of Jesus and the apostles? The writings of these believers reveal a vibrant way of discipleship concerned with all aspects of daily life: family, vocation, morality, justice, religious practice, citizenship, and leadership.

Yet despite their immediacy, these writings have for the most part remained buried in scholarly tomes, analyzed by academics but seldom used for building up the church community. Now, at a time when Christians of every persuasion are seeking clarity by returning to the roots of their faith, these simple, direct teachings can shed light on what it means to be a follower of Christ in any time or place.

This little book includes two of the earliest Christian writings outside of the New Testament: the complete text of *The Didache,* also known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,* and excerpts from *The Shepherd of Hermas,* in which the "angel of repentance" appears to Hermas, a Christian living in Rome, in the form of a shepherd. Both

works were included in early lists of canonical books. They have been included here for their witness to the singular and demanding way of Jesus, reinforcing and amplifying his Sermon on the Mount with their insistence on a repentance that affects every corner of our lives.

*The Didache,* an anonymous work composed in the late first century AD, was lost for centuries. In 1873 Philotheos Bryennios, the metropolitan of Nicomedia, rediscovered it in an eleventh-century Greek codex at Constantinople.

*The Shepherd of Hermas* was written in the second century AD or possibly even earlier. The selections included here loosely follow those made by Eberhard Arnold in his 1926 omnibus of early Christian texts, which is available in English as *The Early Christians: In Their Own Words.* For Arnold, these texts were formative; they spurred him and others to start living in community after the example of these first Christians. Arnold writes: "For my own life, a clearly defined way of life and faith arises from the early Christian witness. In spite of rigidity in later centuries and changes which affected Christianity then, this way continues to be a living force today. It comes from the wellspring of living truth."

In the following introduction, Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, echoes Arnold, showing how unconventional and uncompromising the Christian way was in Roman times, and what it will take for Christians to reclaim this witness today: "There is all the more need

for communities of believers trying to live out the radical imperatives. . . . We can't do any of this as isolated individuals with an interior piety. We need the concrete reality of Christ's corporate Body."

The English translations of the Greek are by Michael W. Holmes, a preeminent scholar of early Christianity, based on the earlier work of J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer. Those wishing to study these writings more closely – along with other significant documents of this period, notably those of Clement of Rome and Ignatius – should read Holmes's *The Apostolic Fathers,* third edition.

*Veery Huleatt*
*Editor*

# INTRODUCTION

*Rowan Williams*

Most of the writings that survive from the first three centuries of Christianity are what one twentieth-century scholar of religion called "death-cell philosophy"; that is, they represent the kind of thinking that is done under extreme pressure, when what you say or think has a genuine life-or-death importance. Gregory Dix, an Anglican monk writing eighty or so years ago about the worship of the early church, imagined what it would be like to attend the Lord's Supper in second-century Rome by recreating the experience in terms of twentieth-century London. He takes the descriptions of worship from texts like the so-called "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," *The Didache,* probably the most ancient account of worship outside the New Testament, and the *Apostolic Tradition* from the third century, and translates them into the landscape of modern England. A grocer from

the unfashionable suburbs slips through the back door of a wealthy brother's house in Kensington at the crack of dawn to share in the breaking of bread in the drawing room – a brief, quiet event, overshadowed by the knowledge that if they would be discovered they would face at least penal servitude for life, and very likely worse. Any Christian in this period knew that, even if things were relatively peaceful, it was always possible that a suspicious government would crack down. Dix describes how the "deacons," the ministers who looked after the doors, were charged with scrutinizing everyone who came in very carefully; you'd need to know who your companions were if your life depended on them.

The suspicions were well-founded in one sense. If you look at the eyewitness accounts of martyrdom in these early centuries – documents like the wonderful record of the martyrs of Scilli in North Africa in AD 180 – you can see what the real issue was. These Christians, most of them probably domestic slaves, had to explain to the magistrate that they were quite happy to pray for the imperial state, and even to pay taxes, but that they could not grant the state their absolute allegiance. They had another loyalty – which did not mean that they wished to overthrow the administration, but that they would not comply with the state's demands in certain respects. They would not worship the emperor, and, as we know from some other texts, refused to serve in the Roman army. They asked from the state what had been very

reluctantly conceded to the Jews as an ethnic group – exemption from the religious requirements of the empire. What made their demand new and shocking was that it was not made on the basis of ethnic identity, but on the bare fact of conviction and conscience. For the first time in human history, individuals claimed the liberty to define the limits of their political loyalty, and to test that loyalty by spiritual and ethical standards.

That is why the early Christian movement was so threatening – and so simply baffling – to the Roman authorities. It was not revolutionary in the sense that it was trying to change the government. Its challenge was more serious: it was the claim to hold any and every government to account, to test its integrity, and to give and withhold compliance accordingly. But it would be wrong to think of this, as we are tempted to do in our era, in terms of individual conscience. It was about the right of a community to set its own standards and to form its members in the light of what had been given to them by an authority higher than the empire. The early Christians believed that if Jesus of Nazareth was "Lord," no one else could be lord over him, and therefore no one could overrule his authority. We use the word "Lord" these days mostly in a rather unthinking religious context, as a sort of devotional flourish; for a Roman, it meant the person who made the decisions you had to abide by, from the master of a slave in the household to the emperor himself. To speak of

Jesus as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" was to say that his decisions could not be overridden by anyone. You might have to disobey a "lord" in our society in order to obey the one true Master of all – the one who used no violence in enforcing his decisions but was all the more unanswerable an authority because of that. He alone needed no reinforcement, no temporal power, to overcome external threats or rivals.

Early Christianity was on the one hand a deeply political community, posing a very specific challenge to the state by saying that the state was a provisional reality – deserving of respect and routine compliance in the ordinary affairs of social life, but having no ultimate claim. On the other hand, it was a movement fascinated by the intellectual implications of what this meant. Because if Jesus is "Lord," and if God needs no force to defend his authority against rivals, then Jesus' "policy" is God's, and Jesus shares without qualification the wisdom and self-sufficiency of God. As early as the beginning of the second century we find the martyred bishop Ignatius from Antioch calling Jesus "God"; Jesus needed no defense against rivals, and so was free to take on himself the burden of human suffering without being crushed or destroyed by it. And because of his own freedom in the face of appalling suffering, he could make it possible for his disciples to face their own suffering with the same resolution and steadiness. What Ignatius called "the passion of my God" was a gift to believers confronting those terrible

risks that Gregory Dix brought alive so vividly in his study of early worshiping life.

The theology of the early centuries thus comes very directly out of this one great central conviction about political authority: if Jesus is Lord, no one else ultimately is, and so those who belong with Jesus, who share his life through the common life of the worshiping community, have a solidarity and a loyalty that goes beyond the chance identity of national or political life. The first claim on their loyalty is to live out the life of Jesus, which is also the life of God – a life that needs no defense and so has no place for violence and coercion. God, says Clement of Alexandria in the late second century, shows his love supremely in the fact that he loves people who have no "natural" claim on him. Humans love largely because of fellow-feeling, but God's love is such that it never depends on having something in common. The creator has in one sense nothing in common with his creation – how could he? But he is completely free to exercise his essential being, which is love, wherever he wills. And this teaches us that we too must learn to love beyond the boundaries of common interest and natural sympathy and, like God, love those who don't seem to have anything in common with us.

This is one of the paradoxes of early Christian thought. It's really deeply rooted in intense, mutual, disciplined community life, but at the same time insists on universal compassion and universal sympathy. The theology of the

early church was not an eccentric diversion from the real business of mutual love and generous service. The doctrines of God's eternity and unchangeable consistency, the doctrine of Jesus' full participation in the divine life, ultimately the doctrine that Christians came to call the divine Trinity, and much more, derive directly from saying that Jesus is truly the supreme authority and that he exhibits exactly the same liberty to love indiscriminately as does God himself. Jesus is the earthly face of an eternal love between Father, Son, and Spirit. And when the early theologians write, as they often do, about how Christians are given a share in the divine life or the divine nature – language that can sound a bit shocking to modern believers – what they mean is simply that being in the body of Christ, in the community of baptized believers, gives us the freedom to love God the Father as Jesus loves him, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, and so too to love the world with the unquestioning generosity of God, never restricting ourselves to loving those who are familiar to us and are like us.

Writers on the life of prayer in this period – above all, the great Origen of Alexandria, who taught and wrote in the first half of the third century – associated Christian identity with freedom, the freedom to call God "Father" and Jesus "Lord," as Origen puts it; which is also, for him, a freedom from what he calls (confusingly to our ears) "passion." This doesn't mean that Christians should have no emotions; but that they

should be free from reactive, unthinking feelings that dictate their response to people and things. Our response to the world around us must be rooted in a renewal of our minds, seeing through superficial differences to recognize God's presence and purpose in all persons and things.

And for all these great figures, there were blindingly obvious practical implications – to treat each other with forgiveness and respect, to address poverty and suffering, and to step back from the institutions of the state, especially the army. None of this was fully encoded in rules, but the church expected people to be able to draw the obvious conclusions from the simple starting point of living under a new authority. We know that there were Christian soldiers in those centuries, but we know too that the community in general never settled happily with the idea that Christians should bear arms. Origen is one of the many who could not be reconciled to that idea. And even when things were beginning to change drastically in the fourth century, with a Christian emperor who sounded increasingly like his non-Christian predecessors, there were figures like Martin of Tours in France who discovered, when they converted, that they couldn't carry on as soldiers. Even the formidable Augustine of Hippo at the beginning of the fifth century – famous as the man who first outlined the conditions for a "just war" – is crystal clear that, while he thinks Christians may take part in defensive war to protect the weak, we should never try to defend the gospel by war.

It's a pity that this side of Augustine's thought was largely overlooked by people eager to make him an ally of just those imperial military myths that he was so regularly scathing about.

We have to admit that, by the fifth century, the church *was* looking different. Having become legal at the beginning of the fourth century, it steadily became more and more involved with the power of the state and was seen as giving legitimacy to the emperor. Those who argued for this were neither wicked nor hypnotized by power and influence (though no doubt some had their temptations). They thought that divine providence had at last put an end to their cruel sufferings and provided them with an ally in the Christian emperor. Augustine is one of those who disagreed strongly with this, but not many took up his approach. For most, it was easier to believe that God had brought human history nearer its fulfillment by converting the power of the state. And it was when all this was going on that some serious Christians started moving away from cities and towns to become monks in the deserts of Egypt and Syria – so that they could reconstruct the life of the first believers in Jerusalem, sharing their property and living in simplicity. For many centuries, indeed, the life of the monks was described as the "apostolic" life. And originally it was a life for laypeople, not clergy; those who became monks were as eager to escape from the hierarchy of the church as from

the hierarchy of the state. In the sermons and stories that were developed in this setting, we find the same themes that appear in earlier writing: the common life of Christians must display the characteristics of the life of the Lord, in unquestioning compassion and mercy, in generosity and simplicity, and in refusing to defend oneself or compare oneself with others.

In this period, the great central theme of Christian existence was how to live in such a way that it was clear where one's loyalty lay – because this was the best way of witnessing to a God whose eternal life was utterly free from competition and conflict. The experience of a new way of living in community prompted theological questioning; the theological clarifications reinforced and deepened the sense of the priorities and imperatives for the community. One of the lasting legacies of the early church, then, is the recognition that doctrine, prayer, and ethics don't exist in tidy separate compartments: each one shapes the others. And in the church in any age, we should not be surprised if we become hazy about our doctrine at a time when we are less clear about our priorities as a community, or if we become less passionate about service, forgiveness, and peace when we have stopped thinking clearly about the true and eternal character of God.

We don't have to be uncritical of the Christians in that early period. But what they offer us is a clear message about

how Christian identity is always a claim to a "citizenship" that is deeper and more universal than any human society can provide. Christians are always going to be living at an angle to the mainstream – not claiming a glib moral superiority, yet insisting that they "march to a different drum" since they recognize final and unsurpassable authority in the living and dying of Jesus of Nazareth. He, they insisted, is the only one who has the right and the liberty to tell us what is real and true in the universe. This does not mean that the church is locked in a violent contest with state or society, that it is struggling for supremacy. If Christ is who we believe him to be, there is never any need for struggle; nothing will make him less real or true. Insofar as there is a struggle, it is against our own willingness to let other authorities overrule Christ. In the early church, that was a life-and-death matter – and it still is for Christians in some parts of the world today.

For most of us the consequences are less dramatic, but the challenge is still there. Our faith is still a "death-cell philosophy," certainly in a world that confuses "life" with victory, prosperity, or security at the expense of others. We know better what life really is – what must be let go of in order for it to flourish, what astonishing gifts are opened up for those who find the courage to step beyond what is conventionally and religiously taken for granted. And if the struggle is hard – as it is, even if we are not threatened with

martyrdom – there is all the more need for communities of believers trying to live out the radical imperatives: communities of monastic discipline in the old way, new communities focused on peace and the disciplines of nonviolence. We can't do any of this as isolated individuals with an interior piety. We need the concrete reality of Christ's corporate Body, nourished by his Supper.

The thinking of the Christians of those first few centuries – their letters, their sermons, their forms of worship, and even sometimes their fierce arguments about doctrine – shows us how theology and discipleship are closely interwoven. For them, theology was not a luxury or an academic affair, it was their way of discerning more clearly what their way of life demanded. That integrated sense of mind, will, and heart exploring together is something we can still learn from these great figures who often at the greatest personal risk discovered with joy what Christ asked of them and discovered with surprise what they were capable of in response. Reason enough for reading them again with eagerness and enthusiasm.

# THE DIDACHE

*The Teaching of the Lord*
*to the Gentiles by the Twelve Apostles*

## The Two Ways

There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways.

## The First Commandment of the Way of Life

Now this is the way of life: First, you shall love God, who made you. Second, you shall love your neighbor as yourself; but whatever you do not wish to happen to you, do not do to another. The teaching of these words is this: Bless those who curse you, and pray for your enemies, and fast for those who persecute you. For what credit is it if you love those who love you? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? But you must love those who hate you, and you will not have an enemy. Abstain from fleshly and bodily cravings. If someone gives you a blow on your right cheek, turn to him the other as well and you will be perfect. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles; if someone takes your cloak, give him your tunic also; if someone takes from you what belongs to you, do not demand it back, for you cannot do so. Give to everyone who asks you, and do not demand it back, for the Father wants something from his own gifts to

be given to everyone. Blessed is the one who gives according to the command, for such a person is innocent. Woe to the one who receives: if, on the one hand, someone who is in need receives, this person is innocent, but the one who does not have need will have to explain why and for what purpose he received, and upon being imprisoned will be interrogated about what he has done, and will not be released from there until he has repaid every last cent. But it has also been said concerning this: "Let your gift sweat in your hands until you know to whom to give it."

### The Second Commandment of the Way of Life

The second commandment of the teaching is: You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not corrupt children; you shall not be sexually immoral; you shall not steal; you shall not practice magic; you shall not engage in sorcery; you shall not abort a child or commit infanticide. You shall not covet your neighbor's possessions; you shall not commit perjury; you shall not give false testimony; you shall not speak evil; you shall not hold a grudge. You shall not be double-minded or double-tongued, for the double tongue is a deadly snare. Your word must not be false or meaningless, but confirmed by action. You shall not be greedy or avaricious, or a hypocrite or malicious or arrogant. You shall not hatch evil plots against your neighbor. You shall not hate any

one; instead you shall reprove some, and pray for some, and some you shall love more than your own life.

## To Do and Not Do

My child, flee from evil of every kind and from everything resembling it. Do not become angry, for anger leads to murder. Do not be jealous or quarrelsome or hot-tempered, for all these things breed murders. My child, do not be lustful, for lust leads to sexual immorality. Do not be foulmouthed or let your eyes roam, for all these things breed adultery. My child, do not be an augur, since it leads to idolatry. Do not be an enchanter or an astrologer or a magician, or even desire to see them, for all these things breed idolatry. My child, do not be a liar, since lying leads to theft. Do not be avaricious or conceited, for all these things breed thefts. My child, do not be a grumbler, since it leads to blasphemy. Do not be arrogant or evil-minded, for all these things breed blasphemies.

Instead, be humble, for the humble shall inherit the earth. Be patient and merciful and innocent and quiet and good, and revere always the words that you have heard. Do not exalt yourself or permit your soul to become arrogant. Your soul shall not associate with the lofty, but live with the righteous and the humble. Accept as good the things that happen to you, knowing that nothing transpires apart from God.

My child, remember night and day the one who preaches God's word to you, and honor him as though he were the Lord. For wherever the Lord's nature is preached, there the Lord is. Moreover, you shall seek out daily the presence of the saints, so that you may find support in their words. You shall not cause division, but shall make peace between those who quarrel. You shall judge righteously; you shall not show partiality when reproving transgressions. You shall not waver with regard to your decisions.

Do not be one who stretches out the hands to receive but withdraws them when it comes to giving. If you earn something by working with your hands, you shall give a ransom for your sins. You shall not hesitate to give, nor shall you grumble when giving, for you will know who is the good paymaster of the reward. You shall not turn away from someone in need, but shall share everything with your brother or sister, and do not claim that anything is your own. For if you are sharers in what is imperishable, how much more so in perishable things!

You shall not withhold your hand from your son or your daughter, but from their youth you shall teach them the fear of God. You shall not give orders to your male slave or female servant (who hope in the same God as you) when you are angry, lest they cease to fear the God who is over you both. For he comes to call not with regard to reputation but those whom the Spirit has prepared. And you slaves shall be submissive to your masters in respect and fear, as to a symbol of God.

**Shucks.**

You have reached the end of this preview. But don't worry, you can get the complete book at

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