

Three Lessons an Ancient Text Can Teach About Human Dignity

Modern society shouts for more handouts to the poor. Yet when it comes to actually giving to charity or helping those in need, less than [one-third](#) of Americans volunteered in 2017.

Modern society also demands better education for children, but secretly acts like it would rather have no children at all.

Finally, modern society idolizes white-collar office work while loathing any manual laborer.

In essence, we live in a culture that idolizes social activism, a culture not unlike that of first century Rome. Given this, it's interesting to examine what early Christians of the time taught about human dignity while living in the midst of an opulent society. The "[Didache](#)" sheds some light on their thoughts.

The "Didache" is an ancient Christian text composed around 96 AD in [Koine Greek](#) and can be likened to an early Christian catechism for the common man. Three of its points are particularly relevant to the modern age:

1. Judicious Charity to the Poor

"Let your alms sweat in your hands, until you know to whom you should give."

The "Didache" discourages spontaneously discarding of one's talents and financial means.

Amidst Western prosperity, the [abundance](#) of organized charities obscures the true identity of the needy. Though we hope beggars are authentically needy, swindlers have always tried to work the system. Thus, we must be discerning about

the recipients of donations.

It may be tedious to research a charity before supporting them through monetary donations or active volunteering. But the *Didache* strongly advocates for well-thought-out gifts over those hastily given.

2. Preservation of Human Life

“You shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is begotten.”

This statement was strikingly antithetical to the common practice of the Greeks and Romans in the time of the “*Didache*.” Roman wives would place their newborn children at the feet of their husbands. If the husbands ignored the children, then servants would toss the babies out with the garbage, with or without the mothers’ consent. The majority of these abandoned newborns were girls.

Christians would often rummage through garbage piles to rescue discarded babies and then raise them alongside their own biological children.

Today, the [United Nations Population Fund](#) reports that there have been 126 million sex-selective abortions on female babies as of July 2018. Does our culture really want this sexist correlation between the sophisticated modern world and outdated pagan Rome?

3. Respect and Dignity for the Individual

“You shall not enjoin anything in your bitterness upon your bondman or maidservant.”

This was not an entirely new concept. Writing in “[On Duties](#),” Marcus Tullius Cicero requires masters to treat slaves justly:

“[W]e must have regard for justice even towards the humblest. ... [T]hey must be required to work; they must be given their dues.”

But the “Didache” takes it a step farther. Christians must treat the least among their social subordinates with kindness.

Perhaps Americans can learn to respect the lower-class construction worker as they would an [influential actor](#) or social activist.

The author of this text lived in a society similar to our own, a society which fell shortly after due to its immoderate lavish life. The Christian society stood for much longer. Would we be wise to heed the message the “Didache” has for us today?

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