

“O, sweet exchange”

Week 6: Introduction to *The Epistle to Diognetus*

This week we encounter an ancient Christian letter that continues to inspire, even though it was written many centuries ago. This writing, *The Epistle to Diognetus*, helps us realize that the Christian faith has been passed on to us by others who made a defense for the hope that was in them so that we, too, might also know Christ Jesus in our lives. Peter described this with the words, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet. 3:15).

The Epistle to Diognetus is part of the genre of Christian writing known as Apologetics, which is a defense and presentation of Christianity to a world that does not know or has not heard the gospel. *The Epistle to Diognetus* is the only example of apologetic writing in the *Apostolic Fathers*, sharing much in common with early Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria.

One of the earliest Christian apologies is Paul’s sermon recorded in the Book of Acts in which he presented the hope of the gospel on the Areopagus to Athenian listeners schooled in the classics (Acts 17:22-34). As Christianity spread, Christians began to write to an educated Greek and Latin audience at a time when Christians were still widely misunderstood, reviled and persecuted within the Roman world. *The Epistle to Diognetus* is a brief presentation of the Christian message, not to “insiders,” but to Roman readers seeking to learn more about the Christian faith. It is one of the gems of early Christian literature, one that has the power to lead and inspire even today, two millennia later.

The Epistle to Diognetus is only known from copies made of a single late medieval manuscript that perished by fire in August 1870 during the shelling of Strasbourg in the Franco-Prussian War. Until its chance discovery in 1436 by a young priest among packing paper in a fish shop in Constantinople, *the Epistle to Diognetus* was unknown to ancient writers. First published in 1592, *Diognetus* has come to us through this and other copies transcribed before fire destroyed the oldest existing copy. Though the author and its intended recipient are unknown, modern scholarship sets the possible date of its writing from 150 to 225.

Though Christians of today live in a highly scientific, technological and secular, post-Christendom world, the apologetic task of presenting the Christian faith and hope is not simply an ancient page in the history of the church. Rather, it is a crucial part of the ongoing task of Christian mission toward the contemporary world. We have much to learn from ancient Christians who, with “gentleness and reverence,” tirelessly defended the hope that was in them of new life in Christ Jesus.

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Excerpts from *The Epistle to Diognetus*:

[2] Consider the true nature and form of those you call and consider to be gods, not only with your own eyes but also with your mind. Is not one of them a stone, like that which we walk on? And another copper, no better than utensils forged for our use? And another wood, already rotted? And another silver, needing someone to guard it, to keep it from being stolen? And another iron, being eaten away by rust? And another pottery, no more attractive than that which

is fashioned for the most disreputable purposes? Are not all of these formed of destructible matter? Are they not forged with iron and fire? Were they each not made by the sculptor, coppersmith, silversmith, and potter? Before they were shaped by these crafts into the form that each of them now has, could they not have been made into other forms – indeed, could they not be remade even now?...Are they not all deaf? And blind? And lifeless? And unable to perceive? And unable to move? Are they not all rotting? Are they not all decaying? These are what you call gods. These are what you serve. These are what you worship. And in the end, these are what you become like. Is this why you hate the Christians, because they do not consider these to be gods?

[5] For Christians are no different from other people in terms of the country, language, or customs. Nowhere do they inhabit cities of their own, use a strange dialect, or live life out of the ordinary. They have not discovered this teaching of theirs through reflection or through the thought of meddling people, nor do they set forth any human doctrine, as do some. They inhabit both Greek and barbarian cities, according to the lot assigned to each. And they show forth the character of their own citizenship in a marvelous and admittedly paradoxical way by following local customs in what they wear and what they eat in the rest of their lives. They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign territory is a homeland for them, every homeland foreign territory. They marry like everyone else and have children, but they do not expose them once they are born. They share their meals but not their spouses. They are found in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth but participate in the life of heaven. They are obedient to the laws that have been made, but by their own lives they supersede the laws. They love everyone and are persecuted by all. They are not understood and they are condemned. They are put to death and made alive. They are impoverished and make many rich. They lack all things and abound in everything...

[6] To put the matter simply, what the soul is in the body, this is what Christians are in the world. The soul is spread throughout all the limbs of the body; Christians are spread throughout the cities of the world. The soul lives in the body, but does not belong to the body; Christians live in the world but do not belong to the world. The soul, which is invisible, is put under guard in the visible body; Christians are known to be in the world, but their worship of God remains invisible. The flesh hates the soul and attacks it, even though it has suffered no harm, because it is hindered from indulging in its pleasures. And the world hates the Christians, even though it has suffered no harm, because they are opposed to its pleasures. The soul loves the flesh that hates it, along with its limbs; Christians love those who hate them. The soul is imprisoned in the body, but it sustains the body; Christians are detained in the prison of the world, but they sustain the world. The soul, which is immortal, dwells in a mortal tent; Christians temporarily dwell in perishable surroundings but await that which is imperishable in the heavens...

[8] For what person formerly had any idea what God was like, before he came?...And he revealed himself through faith, through which alone is one permitted to see God. For God, the Master and Creator of all, the one who created all things and set them in order, was not only benevolent but also patient. Indeed, he was always this way, and is and will be: kind and good and without anger and true. He alone is good. And when he had a great and inexpressible thought, he communicated it to his child alone. And so, as long as he enshrouded it in a mystery and kept his wise plan to himself, he seemed not to care for us or give us any heed. But when he revealed it through his beloved child and showed the things prepared from the beginning, he

shared all things with us at once, that we might participate in and see and understand his kindly acts. Who among us would have ever expected these things?

[9] ...For what else could hide our sins but the righteousness of that one? How could we who were lawless and impious be made upright except by the Son of God alone? Oh, sweet exchange! Oh, the inexpressible creation! Oh, the unexpected acts of beneficence! That the lawless deeds of many should be hidden by the one who was upright, and the righteousness of one should make upright the many who were lawless!

[11] I am neither saying anything strange or engaging in an irrational investigation, but as a disciple of the apostles I am becoming a teacher of the nations...The Word appeared to [the disciples] and revealed these things, speaking to them openly. Even though he was not understood by unbelievers, he told these things to his disciples, who after being considered faithful by him came to know the mysteries of the Father. For this reason he sent his Word, that it might be manifest to the world. This Word was dishonored by the people but proclaimed by the apostles and believed by the nations. This is the one who was from the beginning, who appeared to be recent but was discovered to be ancient, who is always being born anew into the hearts of the saints. This is the eternal one who “today” is considered to be the Son, through whom the church is enriched and unfolding grace is multiplied among the saints. This grace provides understanding, manifests mysteries, proclaims the seasons, rejoices in the faithful, and is given to those who seek, among whom pledges of faith are not broken and the boundaries of the fathers are not transgressed...If you do not bring this grace to grief you will understand what the Word says, through whom it wishes and when it wants. For we have become partners with you through our love of all things that have been revealed to us, which we have been driven to address painfully, by the will of the Word that gives us our orders.

[12] ...For the one who thinks he knows anything apart from the knowledge that is true and attested by life does not know; he is deceived by the serpent and does not love life. But the one who has come to know with reverential fear, and who seeks life, plants in hope and expects to receive fruit. Let your heart be knowledgeable and your life be the true, comprehensible Word. If you bear this tree and pluck its fruit, you will always harvest what God desires. The serpent cannot touch such things nor can deceit defile them. And salvation is shown, and the apostles are given understanding, and the Passover of the Lord moves onward, and the seasons are gathered and made harmonious with the world, and the Word rejoices by teaching the saints. Through the Word is the Father glorified. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (from *The Apostolic Fathers*. Loeb Classical Library No. 25, Translated by Bart D. Ehrman, Harvard University Press, 2003).

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Meditation

The Epistle to Diognetus challenges modern readers of today. For example, across two millennia the notion that human beings worship gods made of perishable materials strikes a chord today, as we are surrounded by material goods of unprecedented scope, which often function as substitutes for God’s presence in our lives. *Diognetus* reads, “Are they not all decaying? These are what you call gods. These are what you serve. These are what you worship. And in the end, these are what you become like.” Like the phrase “you are what you eat,” we become no different from those things we treasure when they are as perishable as our own lives. Though we know this, at times we also live as if this were the only life we expect to have.

Through faith, we also share a sisterhood and brotherhood with Christians around the world, who see themselves as new creations in Christ. The words of *Diognetus* lift us to the truth that Christians “live on earth but participate in the life of heaven.” As Paul writes, “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20), and so we also participate in a paradox of citizenship in heaven, even as we sojourn in this world. In Christ, the entire world and all nations, are sisters and brothers. *Diognetus* expresses the wonderful Christian paradox: “Every foreign territory is a homeland...every homeland, foreign territory.” Early Christians grasped the dual global and cosmic nature of their new life in Christ.

One challenge today for those of us who grew up thinking in terms of the old model of “Christendom,” is we may feel threatened by the non-religious nature of modern secular life. *Diognetus* encourages us to see that Christians are the “soul” of the world, even in our weakness in modern life. *Diognetus* was written at a time when Christianity was also weak, yet Christians understood themselves as sharing the divinity of Christ in the world. In this way, Christians continue to be the “soul” of the world, sustaining it with the presence of Christ.

This realization leads us to the startling centerpiece of *Diognetus* in which the writer proclaims that the Son of God exchanges his righteousness with the sinfulness of humanity, calling it a “sweet exchange” and “unexpected beneficence.” For *Diognetus* the sinfulness of humanity is “hidden by the one who was upright,” and this one makes many upright and righteous. *Diognetus* echoes the words of Paul: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (1 Cor. 5:21).

For both Lutherans and Roman Catholics the phrase, “sweet exchange,” should remind us of Luther’s phrase “joyful exchange” (*fröhlicher Wechsel*), and the language of the Roman Catholic Christmas liturgy “that through the wonderful exchange we may be made like your Son.” Early Christians grasped with certainty the truth that in Christ God has visibly become one of us in order that we might share in the righteousness of Christ, thereby living as God intends for us.

In Luther’s *Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness*, he wrote, “Through faith in Christ therefore, Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours.” For Luther, this basic truth of the Incarnation and work of Christ becomes the point of departure for the Christian life, the love of neighbor and love of God.

The purpose of Christ’s sharing in our humanity is that we too might share in the burdens, cares, sins and dying of our neighbor, becoming Christ’s righteousness to others. Our becoming Christ-like is for the purpose of sharing in the forgiveness, mercy, compassion and love of Christ with others. This “sweet exchange,” as *Diognetus* so boldly declared, helps Christians throughout the world in all nations, become the “soul” of the world, sustaining it with the love of Christ. Amen.

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For further reading:

Encyclopedia of Early Christianity. Edited by Everett Ferguson, New York & London: Garland Publishers, second edition, 1999.

The Apostolic Fathers. Loeb Classical Library No. 24 & 25, Translated by Bart D. Ehrman, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003. (There is also an earlier Loeb edition translated by Kirsopp Lake, 1912, 1913).