

Epistle to Diognetus

Modern English version · SermonIndex

Anonymous · c. AD 130-200

An anonymous letter that answers a pagan inquirer named Diognetus: why Christians reject the gods and Jewish customs, why they love one another, and why Christ came only now. It is one of the most admired early Christian writings. Its only manuscript was destroyed in 1870, and the last two chapters may come from a different writer.

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Chapter 1

1.1 Most excellent Diognetus, I see that you are extremely eager to learn how Christians worship God, and that you are asking very clear and careful questions about them. You want to know what God they trust and how they worship him, so that all of them look down on the world and make light of death. You ask why they do not regard as gods those whom the Greeks consider gods, and why they do not keep the superstition of the Jews. You ask what this tender love is that they have for one another, and why this new race, or way of life, has come into the world now and not before. I welcome this eagerness of yours. I ask God, who gives us the power both to speak and to hear, to grant that I may speak in a way that will do you the most good as you listen. I also ask that you may listen in a way that will not leave me grieved for having spoken.

Translator's note. "Superstition" translates deisidaimonia, a word that could also mean "reverence for the divine." Here it is plainly meant as a criticism. "Tender love" translates philostorgia, the affection of family members.

Chapter 2

2.1 Come, then. Clear yourself of every idea that already has hold of your mind, and shake off the habit that deceives you. Become, as it were, a new man from the beginning, since you are going to hear a new message, as you yourself admitted. Look, not only with your

eyes but also with your understanding, and see what substance or form those things have that you call gods and take to be gods.

2.2 Is not one of them stone, like what we walk on? Is not another bronze, no better than the utensils hammered out for our use? Is not another wood, already rotting? Another silver, needing a man to guard it so that it will not be stolen? Another iron, eaten away by rust? Another clay, no more handsome than what is made for the lowest kind of service?

2.3 Are not all these things made of perishable material? Were they not forged with iron and fire? Did not a stonecutter shape one, a bronzesmith another, a silversmith another, and a potter another? Before they were shaped by these men's skills into their present form, was it not possible for each of them to be given a different form, as it still is now? And could not the vessels now made of the same material become just like these gods, if they came into the hands of the same craftsmen?

Translator's note. The Greek of the fourth question is obscure and may be damaged. The translation gives the sense most editors accept.

2.4 Again, could not these things that you now worship be made by men into vessels like any others? Are they not all deaf? Are they not blind? Are they not lifeless? Without feeling? Without motion? Are they not all rotting? Are they not all decaying?

2.5 Do you call these things gods? Do you serve these? Do you worship these? And in the end you become just like them.

Translator's note. The last line echoes [Psalm 115:8](#) and [Psalm 135:18](#): "Those who make them become like them."

2.6 Is this why you hate the Christians, because they do not consider these things to be gods?

2.7 You who think you are praising them, do you not despise them far more? Do you not mock and insult them far more? You worship the ones of stone and clay without guarding them, but the silver and gold ones you lock up at night, and by day you set guards beside them so they will not be stolen.

2.8 As for the honors you think you are offering them: if they have feeling, you are punishing them instead; if they have none, you are proving them senseless by serving them with blood and the smoke of fat.

2.9 Let one of you endure this. Let one of you put up with having it done to himself. But no man will willingly put up with such punishment, for he has feeling and reason. A stone puts up with it, because it has no feeling. So are you not proving that it has no feeling?

2.10 I could say much more about why Christians are not enslaved

to such gods. But if someone does not find even this enough, I think it pointless to say more.

Chapter 3

3.1 Next, I think you are most eager to hear why the Christians do not worship God in the same way as the Jews.

3.2 The Jews, then, are right to abstain from the kind of worship I have just described, and to claim that they revere one God, the Master of all. But they are mistaken if they offer him worship in the same manner as those people.

3.3 The Greeks offer things to senseless and deaf idols and so give proof of their folly. In the same way, when the Jews offer these things to God as though he needed them, they ought to see this as foolishness, not reverence.

3.4 For he who made heaven and earth and everything in them, and who supplies all of us with what we need, would himself need none of these things which he supplies to those who imagine they are giving them.

Translator's note. Compare [Acts 17:24-25](#), where Paul says that God, who made the world, is not served by human hands "as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything."

3.5 Those who think they are offering him sacrifices by blood, the smoke of fat, and whole burnt offerings, and that they honor him with these tributes, seem to me no different from those who show the same zeal toward deaf idols. The latter offer to things that cannot receive the honor; the former think they are giving to one who needs nothing.

Translator's note. The Old Testament itself teaches that God does not need sacrifices ([Psalm 50:9-13](#)). But it presents Israel's sacrifices as commanded by God, and Hebrews treats them as a "shadow" pointing to Christ ([Hebrews 10:1](#)). The author goes further than Scripture when he puts them on the same level as offerings to idols.

Chapter 4

4.1 As for their fussiness over foods, their superstition about the Sabbath, their boasting about circumcision, and their pretense in fasting and new moons, these are ridiculous and not worth discussing. I do not think you need to learn this from me.

Translator's note. The food laws, the Sabbath, circumcision and the new moons were all commanded in the Law of Moses. Paul tells Christians not to let anyone judge them over food, festivals, new moons or Sabbaths, calling these "a shadow of the things to come" ([Colossians 2:16-17](#)). The author goes beyond Scripture in calling them ridiculous.

4.2 Take the things God created for human use. To accept some of them as well made, and to reject others as useless and superfluous: how is that not lawless?

Translator's note. Compare [1 Timothy 4:4](#): "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving."

4.3 And to tell lies about God, as though he forbade doing anything good on the Sabbath day: how is that not impious?

Translator's note. Compare Jesus' words in [Matthew 12:12](#): "It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

4.4 And to boast that the cutting of the flesh is a witness of election, as though they were specially loved by God for this reason: how is that not worthy of mockery?

4.5 They sit watching the stars and the moon, observing months and days. They divide up God's ordering of things and the changing of the seasons to suit their own impulses, making some times into feasts and others into mourning. Who could regard this as a mark of true devotion to God, and not far more as a mark of folly?

4.6 I think you have now learned enough about why Christians rightly keep away from the foolishness and deceit common to everyone, and from the meddling and boasting of the Jews. But do not expect to learn from a human being the mystery of their own devotion to God.

Chapter 5

5.1 Christians are not set apart from the rest of humanity by country, by language, or by customs.

5.2 They do not live in cities of their own, or use some unusual dialect, or practice a strange way of life.

5.3 This teaching of theirs was not discovered by the cleverness or speculation of restless, inquisitive men, and they do not champion a human doctrine, as some do.

5.4 They live in Greek and barbarian cities, wherever each one's lot has fallen. They follow the local customs in clothing, food and the rest of daily life. Yet they show the remarkable and, by everyone's admission, astonishing character of their own commonwealth.

5.5 They live in their own homelands, but as resident aliens. They take part in everything as citizens, and they endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is a homeland to them, and every homeland is a foreign land.

5.6 They marry like everyone else, and they have children, but they do not throw away their newborn.

Translator's note. This refers to “exposure,” the common Greek and Roman practice of abandoning unwanted newborns to die or to be taken by strangers.

5.7 They set a common table, but not a common bed.

5.8 They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh.

Translator's note. Compare [2 Corinthians 10:3](#) and [Romans 8:4](#).

5.9 They spend their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven.

Translator's note. Compare [Philippians 3:20](#), “our citizenship is in heaven.”

5.10 They obey the established laws, and in their own lives they go beyond the laws.

5.11 They love everyone, and are persecuted by everyone.

5.12 They are not known, and yet they are condemned. They are put to death, and yet they are made alive.

Translator's note. This series of paradoxes (5.12–16) echoes Paul in [2 Corinthians 6:8–10](#) and [1 Corinthians 4:12–13](#).

5.13 They are poor, and make many rich. They lack everything, and abound in everything.

5.14 They are dishonored, and in their dishonors they are glorified. They are slandered, and they are vindicated.

5.15 They are cursed, and they bless. They are insulted, and they give honor.

5.16 When they do good, they are punished as evildoers. When they are punished, they rejoice as people being given life.

5.17 They are attacked by Jews as foreigners, and persecuted by Greeks. And those who hate them cannot state the reason for their hostility.

Chapter 6

6.1 To put it simply: what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world.

6.2 The soul is spread through all the parts of the body, and Christians through the cities of the world.

6.3 The soul lives in the body but is not from the body. Christians live in the world but are not from the world.

Translator's note. Compare [John 17:11–16](#), where Jesus says his followers are in the world but not of the world.

6.4 The soul is invisible, kept under guard in a visible body.

Christians are known to be in the world, but their devotion to God stays unseen.

6.5 The flesh hates the soul and fights against it, though it has suffered no wrong, because the soul keeps it from indulging its pleasures. The world hates Christians, though it has suffered no wrong, because they set themselves against its pleasures.

| Scripture: [John 15:18-19](#)

6.6 The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and the body's limbs. Christians love those who hate them.

6.7 The soul is shut up in the body, yet it holds the body together. Christians are held in the world as in a prison, yet they hold the world together.

6.8 The soul is immortal and lives in a mortal tent. Christians live as foreigners among perishable things, while they wait for the imperishable life that is in heaven.

6.9 The soul, when it is ill-treated in food and drink, grows better. Christians, when punished day by day, increase all the more.

6.10 God has appointed them to so great a post that it is not right for them to refuse it.

Chapter 7

7.1 For, as I said, what was handed down to them is not an earthly discovery. What they guard so carefully is not some mortal idea, and they have not been entrusted with the stewardship of merely human mysteries.

7.2 But in truth it was the almighty, all-creating and invisible God himself who from heaven planted the truth among human beings. He set the holy and unfathomable Word firmly in their hearts. He did not do this, as someone might imagine, by sending to people some servant, or an angel, or a ruler, or one of those who govern earthly affairs, or one of those entrusted with the administration of heaven. He sent the very Designer and Maker of the universe himself. By him God built the heavens; by him he shut the sea within its own limits. All the elements faithfully guard his mysteries. From him the sun received the measure of its daily courses to keep. The moon obeys him when he commands it to shine by night, and the stars obey him as they follow the moon's course. By him all things have been arranged, defined and made subject: the heavens and what is in the heavens, the earth and what is on the earth, the sea and what is in the sea, fire, air, the abyss, what is in the heights, what is in the depths, and what is in between. This is the one he sent to them.

| Translator's note. Shutting the sea within its limits echoes [Job 38:8-11](#)

and [Proverbs 8:29](#).

7.3 Did he send him, as a human being might reckon, to rule as a tyrant, to inspire fear and terror?

7.4 Certainly not! He sent him in gentleness and meekness. As a king sends a son who is himself a king, so he sent him. He sent him as God. He sent him as a man to men. He sent him as one who saves, as one who persuades and does not force, for force is not part of God's nature.

7.5 He sent him as one who calls, not as one who hunts people down. He sent him as one who loves, not as one who judges.

7.6 For he will send him as judge, and who will endure his coming?
...

Translator's note. The manuscript has a gap after this verse, so the thought continued in a passage that is now lost. The ellipsis marks the gap.

7.7 ... thrown to wild beasts to make them deny the Lord, and yet not defeated?

Translator's note. The Greek begins mid-sentence after a gap, and the opening words are lost. From verse 8 the sense was probably something like "Do you not see Christians...?", but the exact words cannot be recovered.

7.8 Do you not see that the more of them are punished, the more the others grow in number?

7.9 These do not look like the works of a man. This is the power of God. These are proofs of his coming.

Chapter 8

8.1 For before he came, who among men had any understanding at all of what God is?

8.2 Or do you accept the empty and nonsensical talk of those supposedly reliable philosophers? Some of them said God is fire (they call "God" the thing they themselves are going to end up in). Others said he is water, and others said he is one of the other elements created by God.

Translator's note. Heraclitus and the Stoics gave fire a divine role, and Thales made water the first principle of all things. The remark in parentheses probably mocks the Stoic teaching that the world, and we with it, will finally be dissolved into fire.

8.3 Yet if any of these accounts is acceptable, then each of the other created things could just as well be declared to be God.

8.4 But these are fantastic tales and the deceit of charlatans.

8.5 No human being has either seen God or known him, but he has shown himself.

| *Translator's note.* Compare [John 1:18](#): "No one has ever seen God."

8.6 And he showed himself through faith, by which alone it is permitted to see God.

8.7 For God, the Master and Maker of the universe, who made all things and arranged them in order, was not only a lover of mankind but also patient.

8.8 Indeed, he always was this way, and is, and will be: kind, good, free from anger, and true. He alone is good.

| *Translator's note.* "He alone is good" recalls Jesus' words in [Mark 10:18](#): "No one is good except God alone."

8.9 And having conceived a great and inexpressible plan, he shared it with his Child alone.

| *Translator's note.* "Child" translates *pais*, which can mean either "child" or "servant." Acts uses the same word of Jesus ([Acts 3:13](#); 4:27, 30).

8.10 So as long as he kept it in mystery and guarded his wise purpose, he seemed to neglect us and not care about us.

8.11 But when he uncovered it through his beloved Child and made plain what had been prepared from the beginning, he gave us everything at once: to share in his benefits, and to see and understand things that none of us would ever have expected.

Chapter 9

9.1 So, having already planned everything within himself together with his Child, God allowed us, until the recent past, to be swept along by disorderly impulses as we chose, carried away by pleasures and desires. This was not at all because he took delight in our sins, but because he bore with them. He did not approve of that former season of wrongdoing; he was preparing the present season of righteousness. His purpose was this: in that earlier time our own deeds proved us unworthy of life, so that now, by God's goodness, we might be counted worthy of it. We showed that by ourselves we could not enter the kingdom of God, so that by the power of God we might be made able to.

| *Scripture:* [Romans 3:21-26](#)

9.2 Our wrongdoing reached its full measure and was completely exposed, and it was clear that its wages, punishment and death, were to be expected. Then the time came that God had set beforehand to reveal his kindness and power from then on. Oh, the surpassing kindness and love of God! He did not hate us, or push us away, or hold our wrongs against us. He was patient and put up

with us. In mercy he himself took our sins upon himself. He himself gave his own Son as a ransom for us: the holy one for the lawless, the innocent for the evil, the righteous for the unrighteous, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal.

Translator's note. Several phrases echo the New Testament: “wages” and death ([Romans 6:23](#)), Christ as a “ransom” ([Mark 10:45](#)), and “the righteous for the unrighteous” ([1 Peter 3:18](#)). “Took our sins upon himself” recalls [Isaiah 53](#) and [1 Peter 2:24](#), though the Greek verb here (anedexato) differs from the one Peter uses.

Scripture: [1 Timothy 2:6](#)

9.3 For what else could cover our sins except his righteousness?

9.4 In whom could we, lawless and godless as we were, be made righteous, if not in the Son of God alone?

9.5 O sweet exchange! O unsearchable working of God! O blessings beyond all expectation! The lawlessness of many is hidden in one righteous man, and the righteousness of one makes many lawless people righteous.

Translator's note. “Makes righteous” and “righteousness” translate words from the same Greek root (dikaioō, dikaiosynē) that Paul uses, often rendered “justify” and “justification.” The contrast of “the one” and “the many” recalls [Romans 5:19](#).

9.6 In the earlier time, then, God showed that our nature was unable to obtain life. Now he has shown a Savior who is able to save even what could not be saved. By both means he wanted us to trust his goodness, and to look on him as our provider, father, teacher, counselor, physician, mind, light, honor, glory, strength and life, and not to worry about clothing and food.

Translator's note. “Not to worry about clothing and food” echoes Jesus’ teaching in [Matthew 6:25-31](#).

Scripture: [Matthew 6:25-31](#)

Chapter 10

10.1 If you too long for this faith, and receive first of all full knowledge of the Father ...

Translator's note. The sentence seems to break off here, and most editors think some words have dropped out of the text at this point.

10.2 For God loved human beings. For their sake he made the world, and he put everything on the earth under their rule. He gave them reason and mind. Only them did he allow to look up to him. He formed them after his own image. To them he sent his only-begotten Son. To them he promised the kingdom in heaven, and he will give it to those who have loved him.

Translator's note. Compare [Genesis 1:26-28](#) (made in God’s image and

given rule over the earth) and [John 3:16](#) (God's love and the sending of his only Son).

10.3 And when you have come to know him, what joy do you think will fill you? And how greatly will you love him who first loved you so?

Translator's note. "Who first loved you" recalls [1 John 4:19](#): "We love because he first loved us."

10.4 And when you love him, you will be an imitator of his goodness. Do not be surprised that a human being can become an imitator of God. He can, if God wills it.

Translator's note. On imitating God, compare [Ephesians 5:1](#): "Be imitators of God, as beloved children."

10.5 For happiness does not lie in lording it over one's neighbors, or in wanting to have more than weaker people, or in being rich and oppressing those who have less. No one can imitate God in these things; they lie outside his greatness.

10.6 But whoever takes on his neighbor's burden, whoever is willing to do good to someone who is worse off in the very thing in which he himself is better off, and whoever gives to those in need what he has received from God, and so becomes a god to those who receive it, this man is an imitator of God.

Translator's note. "Becomes a god to those who receive it" is a bold phrase. It seems to mean that he acts toward them as God does, as the one who provides for them.

10.7 Then, while you are still on earth, you will see that God rules in heaven. Then you will begin to speak the mysteries of God. Then you will love and admire those who are being punished because they refuse to deny God. Then you will condemn the deceit and error of the world. This will happen when you come to know what it is to truly live in heaven, when you despise the death that only seems to be death here, and when you fear the real death. That death is kept for those who will be condemned to the eternal fire, which will punish to the very end those handed over to it.

10.8 Then you will marvel at those who, for the sake of righteousness, endure the fire that lasts only for a time, and you will call them blessed, when you come to know that other fire.

Chapter 11

11.1 I am not speaking of strange things, nor is my search unreasonable. Having become a disciple of apostles, I am now becoming a teacher of the nations. To those who are becoming disciples of the truth, I faithfully pass on what has been handed down.

Translator's note. "A disciple of apostles" may mean personal contact with

apostles, or simply that the writer follows their teaching.

11.2 For who that has been rightly taught and has come to love the Word does not seek to learn plainly what the Word openly showed to the disciples? The Word appeared and made it known to them, speaking boldly. Unbelievers did not understand him, but he explained it to the disciples. He counted them faithful, and they came to know the mysteries of the Father.

11.3 For this reason he sent the Word, to appear to the world. He was dishonored by his people, preached by the apostles, and believed by the nations.

Translator's note. "His people" means Israel. The pattern of the last three phrases recalls the early hymn in [1 Timothy 3:16](#) ("preached among the nations, believed on in the world").

11.4 This is the one who was from the beginning, who appeared new yet was found to be old, and who is always young, born ever anew in the hearts of the saints.

11.5 This is the one who is forever, who today is counted a Son. Through him the Church is enriched, and grace is spread out and multiplied among the saints. This grace gives understanding, reveals mysteries, proclaims the times, rejoices over the faithful, and gives gifts to those who seek, that is, to those who do not break the pledges of faith or overstep the boundaries set by the fathers.

Translator's note. "Today... a Son" likely echoes [Psalm 2:7](#) ("You are my Son; today I have begotten you"). "Boundaries set by the fathers" echoes [Proverbs 22:28](#) ("Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers set").

11.6 Then the fear of the Law is sung, the grace of the Prophets is recognized, the faith of the Gospels is established, the tradition of the apostles is kept, and the grace of the Church leaps for joy.

11.7 If you do not grieve this grace, you will understand what the Word speaks, through those he chooses, whenever he wishes.

Translator's note. "Grieve this grace" may echo [Ephesians 4:30](#) ("Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God").

11.8 For whatever we were moved to say, with effort, by the will of the Word who commands, we share with you out of love for the things revealed to us.

Chapter 12

12.1 When you read and listen to these things with eagerness, you will know what God gives to those who love him rightly. They become a paradise of delight. They cause a fruitful, flourishing tree of every kind of fruit to grow up within themselves, and they are adorned with many kinds of fruit.

Translator's note. "Paradise of delight" is the Greek Old Testament's name for the garden of Eden (for example [Genesis 3:23](#)).

12.2 For in this garden a tree of knowledge and a tree of life have been planted. But it is not the tree of knowledge that destroys. Disobedience destroys.

Scripture: [Genesis 2:9](#)

12.3 For what is written is not without meaning: that from the beginning God planted a tree of knowledge and a tree of life in the middle of paradise, showing that life comes through knowledge. Those at the beginning did not use this knowledge purely, and they were stripped bare by the serpent's deceit.

Translator's note. "Stripped bare" alludes to Adam and Eve finding they were naked after the fall ([Genesis 3:7](#)).

12.4 For there is no life without knowledge, and no safe knowledge without true life. That is why the two trees were planted close together.

12.5 The apostle saw the force of this. So he found fault with knowledge that is pursued without the truth of the commandment that leads to life, and he says: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

Translator's note. The quotation is from [1 Corinthians 8:1](#). The Greek phrase before it is compressed. "That leads to life" may go with "the commandment" (as here) or with "knowledge pursued."

12.6 Anyone who thinks he knows something without true knowledge, knowledge that life bears witness to, does not really know. He is deceived by the serpent, because he has not loved life. But the one who has come to know with fear, and who seeks life, plants in hope and looks for fruit.

Translator's note. The first sentence echoes [1 Corinthians 8:2](#): "If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know."

12.7 Let your heart be knowledge, and let your life be the true Word, received into you.

Translator's note. The last Greek word (*chōroumenos*) means "being made room for," "taken in," or "grasped." The sense is slightly uncertain.

12.8 If you bear its tree and pick its fruit, you will always gather what is desired in God's presence. The serpent does not touch it, and deceit does not mingle with it. Eve is not corrupted, but a virgin is trusted.

Translator's note. The meaning is obscure. "A virgin" is set against Eve and may mean Mary or the Church. Compare [2 Corinthians 11:2-3](#), where Paul wants to present the church as a pure virgin and fears it may be deceived as the serpent deceived Eve.

12.9 Salvation is shown forth, the apostles are given understanding, and the Lord's Passover goes forward. The seasons are gathered together and set in harmony with the world. The Word rejoices as he teaches the saints, and through him the Father is glorified. To him be glory forever. Amen.

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