

THE EPISTLE TO DIOGNETUS

Your Excellency:

I see, Diognetus, that you are very much in earnest about investigating the religion of the Christians and make very exact and careful inquiries concerning them. Who is the God in whom they trust—you wonder—and what kind of cult is theirs, because one and all, they disdain the world and despise death? They neither recognize the gods believed in by the Greeks nor practice the superstition of the Jews!² And what is the secret of the strong affection they have for one another? And why, you wonder, has this new blood and spirit come into the world we live in now, and not before? I certainly welcome this eagerness of yours and beg two gifts of God, who bestows upon us speech as well as hearing: may I so speak that you will derive the greatest possible benefit from hearing, and may you so hear that the speaker will have no regrets!

2. Well, then, purge yourself of all the prejudices clinging to you and put away your old, habitual fallacies. Make as it were a fresh start and become a *new man*, since you may yet become a hearer also of what by your own admission is a new message. Use not only your eyes, but also your judgment, to see of what stuff and nature those beings are whom you call and consider to be gods. 2 This is stone, like the pavement under the feet; that one, metal, no better than the utensils forged for our use; this one, wood, and perhaps rotten wood by now; that one, silver, which needs a watchman to keep it from being stolen; another, iron, subject to corrosion by rust; still another, earthenware, no better to look at than anything fashioned for the most ignoble service. Is it not so? 3 Are they not all of perishable material? Have they not been forged by iron and fire? On this one, a stonecutter has plied his craft, on that, a coppersmith, on a third, a silversmith, and on a fourth, a potter. Is it not so? And before they were shaped by the skill of these men to represent those several objects, did not every craftsman see in every one of them—and, in fact, does see in them even now—an object of different shape? And might not utensils of the same material be made to resemble objects like these, if they happened to be handled by the same craftsmen? 4 And conversely, might not these objects, now worshipped by you, be made by human hands into utensils resembling other utensils? Are they not all deaf and blind and lifeless and senseless and motionless? Are they not all rotting away, not all doomed to perish? 5 These things you call gods; these you serve; these you worship; and in the end you become like them! 6 And here is the reason why you hate the Christians—they do not believe these objects to be gods. 7 You, of course, are firmly convinced you are glorifying them; yet do you not show all the more contempt for them? Do you not much rather make perfect laughingstocks of

them if you leave unguarded the gods you worship, when they are made of stone or clay, while you lock up for the night those made of silver or gold, and post guards beside them in the day, to prevent their being stolen? 8 And as for the honors you imagine you pay them—well, if they are aware of them, you are actually punishing them; and if they lack sensation, you are showing them up by worshipping them with blood and victims' fat! 9 Just let one of you submit to such treatment; let one of you permit such things to happen to him! No, there is no human being that would voluntarily submit to such a punishment; for a human being feels and reasons. A stone, of course, submits; for it has no feeling. Therefore, you really disprove its sensibility, do you not? 10 And so I might go on and on showing that Christians are not enslaved to gods like these. But if anyone should think even the little I have said to be inadequate, I consider it superfluous to say more.

3. Next I suppose you most desire to hear about the difference between their worship and that of the Jews. 2 Well, the Jews hold aloof from the worship just described, and in so far they are right in claiming to honor one God and Lord of the universe; but in so far as they offer Him this worship in a manner resembling the one just explained, they are altogether mistaken. 3 The Greeks, it is plain, make offerings to things insensible and deaf, and, by doing so, give proof of want of intelligence; the Jews, if they but realized that they are making offerings to God exactly as if He needed them, might rightly consider this an act of folly rather than religion. 4 Surely, He *who made heaven and earth and all that is in them* and supplies us with all we need, cannot Himself need any of the things He Himself provides to those who fancy they are giving them. 5 At any rate, people who believe they are performing sacrifices to Him by means of blood and victims' fat and whole burnt offerings, and honoring Him by such tokens of respect, do not seem to me to differ in the least from people who display the same reverence toward insensible objects. Both fancy they are making real offerings, the latter to objects unable to appreciate the honor, the former to Him who stands in need of nothing!¹²

4. Furthermore, there is that fussiness of theirs in the matter of foods, their superstition about the Sabbath, their bragging about their circumcision, and the show they make of the fast days and new moons.¹⁴ These things are ridiculous and undeserving of consideration, and I do not suppose you wish me to instruct you about them. 2 In fact, is it not obviously wrong to accept some of the things created by God for the use of men as created for a useful purpose, and reject others as useless and superfluous? 3 And is it not impious to misrepresent God as forbidding an act of kindness on the Sabbath? 4 And is it not ridiculous to vaunt the mutilation of the flesh as a mark of election, as though men were in a singular manner beloved by God on its account? 5 Again, they closely watch the stars and the moon to regulate the scrupulous

observance of months and days, and by a distinction between the seasons which is due to God's arrangement, set aside some for festivals, others for times of sorrow—merely to suit their own inclinations! Who can consider this a proof of religion, and not, rather, of lack of understanding? 6 Now, then, I think you have learned enough to realize that the Christians are right in holding aloof from the thoughtless aberrations common to both groups, and, in particular, from the boastful officiousness of the Jews. But as regards the mystery of their own religion, do not expect to be able to learn it from human lips.¹⁹

5. Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by either country, speech, or customs; 2 the fact is, they nowhere settle in cities of their own; they use no peculiar language; they cultivate no eccentric mode of life. 3 Certainly, this creed of theirs is no discovery due to some fancy or speculation of inquisitive men; nor do they, as some do, champion a doctrine of human origin. 4 Yet while they dwell in both Greek and non-Greek cities, as each one's lot was cast, and conform to the customs of the country in dress, food, and mode of life in general, the whole tenor of their way of living stamps it as worthy of admiration and admittedly extraordinary. 5 They reside in their respective countries, but only as aliens. They take part in everything as citizens and put up with everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their home, and every home a foreign land. 6 They marry like all others and beget children; but they do not expose their offspring. 7 Their board they spread for all, but not their bed. 8 They find themselves *in the flesh*, but do not live *according to the flesh*. 9 They spend their days on earth, but hold citizenship in heaven. 10 They obey the established laws, but in their private lives they rise above the laws. 11 They love all men, but are persecuted by all. 12 They are unknown, yet are condemned; they are put to death, but it is life that they receive. 13 *They are poor, and enrich many*; destitute of everything, they abound in everything. 14 They are dishonored, and in their dishonor find their glory. They are calumniated, and are vindicated. 15 *They are reviled, and they bless*; they are insulted and render honor. 16 Doing good, they are penalized as evildoers; when penalized, they rejoice because they are quickened into life. 17 The Jews make war on them as foreigners; the Greeks persecute them; and those who hate them are at a loss to explain their hatred.

6. In a word: what the soul is in the body, that the Christians are in the world. 2 The soul is spread through all the members of the body, and the Christians throughout the cities of the world. 3 The soul dwells in the body, but is not part and parcel of the body; so Christians dwell in the world, but are not part and parcel of the world. 4 Itself invisible, the soul is kept shut up in the visible body; so Christians are known as such in the world, but their religion remains invisible. 5 The flesh, though suffering no wrong from the soul, yet

hates and makes war on it, because it is hindered from indulging its passions; so, too, the world, though suffering no wrong from Christians, hates them because they oppose its pleasures. 6 The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and its members; so, too, Christians love those that hate them. 7 The soul is locked up in the body, yet is the very thing that holds the body together; so, too, Christians are shut up in the world as in a prison, yet it is precisely they that hold the world together. 8 Immortal, the soul is lodged in a mortal tenement; so, too, Christians, though residing as strangers among corruptible things, look forward to the incorruptibility that awaits them in heaven. 9 The soul, when stinting itself in food and drink, fares the better for it; so, too, Christians, when penalized, show a daily increase in numbers on that account. 10 Such is the important post to which God has assigned them, and they are not at liberty to desert it.

7. And no wonder. It was not an earthly invention, as I have said, that was committed to their keeping; it was not a product of a mortal brain that they consider worth safeguarding so anxiously; nor have they been entrusted with the dispensing of merely human mysteries. 2 Quite the contrary! It was really the Lord of all, the Creator of all, the invisible God Himself, who, of His own free will, from heaven, lodged among men the truth and the holy incomprehensible Word, and firmly established it in their hearts. Nor did He do this, as one might conjecture, by sending to men some subordinate, whether angel, or principality, or one of those in charge of earthly things, or one entrusted with the administration of heavenly things. No, He sent the Designer and Architect of the universe in person⁴⁰—Him by whom He created the heavens, by whom He enclosed the sea within its proper bounds, whose inscrutable counsels⁴² all the elements of nature faithfully carry out, from whom <the sun> has received the schedule of the daily courses it is to keep, whom the moon obeys as He bids her give light at night, whom the stars obey in following the course of the moon, from whom all things have received their order, their bounds, and their due place in the universe—the heavens and the things in the heavens, the earth and the things in the earth, the sea and the things in the sea, the fire, the air, the underworld, the things in the heights above, the things in the deep below, the things in the intermediate space. Such was He whom He sent to them! 3 And did He do so, as a human brain might conceive, to tyrannize, to frighten, and to terrorize? 4 Certainly not! On the contrary, His mission was an act of gracious clemency, as when a king sends his son who is himself a king! He sent Him as God. He sent Him <as Man> to men. The wish to save, to persuade, and not to coerce, inspired His mission. Coercion is incompatible with God. 5 His mission was an invitation, not a vindictive measure; an act of love, not an act of justice. 6 Some day, of course, He will send Him as a Judge and—who will then endure His coming! ... 7 <Do you not see> how they are thrown before the wild beasts to make them disown

the Lord, and they refuse to be overcome? 8 Do you not see that the more of them are penalized, the more their numbers grow? 9 Such things do not point to a human agency. Here is the power of God, here the proofs of His abiding presence!

8. In fact, before He came, what man at all understood what God is? 2 Or do you accept the nonsense trumped up by those pretentious philosophers, some of whom maintained that God was fire—the very thing for which they are headed they call God!—while others said He was water, still others some other of the elements created by God? 3 And yet, if any one of these doctrines is acceptable, then every one of the rest of the creatures might just as well be proved to be God! 4 No, this is nothing but jugglery and imposture dished up by quacks. 5 No man has either seen or made known God; but He has revealed Himself. 6 And He did reveal Himself by faith, through which alone it has been vouchsafed us to see God. 7 For God, the Lord and Creator of the universe, who made all things and assigned to each its proper place, not only proved Himself man's friend, but long-suffering as well. 8 But He always was and is and will be such—kind and good and unimpassioned and true; in fact, He alone is good. 9 And after conceiving a great and unutterable purpose, He communicated it to His Son alone. 10 Now, as long as He kept His own wise counsel to Himself and guarded it as a secret, He was seemingly wholly unconcerned about us; 11 but once He revealed it through His beloved Son and made known what had been prepared from the beginning, He granted us all things at once. He made us partake of His benefits, and see and comprehend things which none of us could ever have expected.

9. After, then, He had already planned everything in His own counsels in union with the Son, He yet permitted us, all through the intervening time, to be carried away, just as we chose, by unruly passions—victims of *unbridled desires!* Not that He took at all delight in our transgressions; no, He merely exercised patience. Nor did He approve of that former era of wickedness, but, on the contrary, was all the time shaping the present era of holiness. It was His intention that we, after our own conduct in the past had proved us unworthy of life, should now be rendered worthy by the goodness of God, and that, after we had demonstrated our inability, as far as in us lay, *to enter the kingdom of God*, should be enabled to do so by the power of God. 2 And when the cup of our iniquities was filled, and it had become perfectly clear that their wages—the punishment of death—had to be expected, then the season arrived during which God had determined to reveal henceforth His goodness and power. O the surpassing kindness and love of God for man!⁵⁴ No, He did not hate us, or discard us, or remember our wrongs; He exercised forbearance and long-suffering! In mercy, of His own accord, He lifted the burden of our sins! Of His own accord *He gave up His own Son*⁵⁶ as a ransom for us—the Saint for sinners,

the Guiltless for the guilty, *the Innocent for the wicked*, the Incorruptible for the corruptible, the Immortal for the mortal! 3 Indeed, what else could have covered our sins but His holiness? 4 In whom could we, the lawless and impious, be sanctified but in the Son of God alone? 5 O sweetest exchange! O unfathomable accomplishment! O unexpected blessings—the sinfulness of many is buried in One who is holy, the holiness of One sanctifies the many who are sinners! 6 In the previous time He had demonstrated our nature's inability to win life, and now He revealed the Savior who is powerful to save even what is powerless; and on both grounds He wished us to have faith in His loving-kindness, to consider Him Nurse, Father, Teacher, Counsellor, Physician, Mind, Light, Honor, Glory, Strength, Life, and—not to be solicitous about clothing and food!

10. If this is the faith which you, too, desire, then you should, first of all, acquire a thorough knowledge of the Father. 2 The fact is, God loved men, and it was for their sake that He made the world; at their service He placed everything on earth; to them He gave reason and intelligence; them alone He endowed with the ability to look up to Him; them He formed after His own image; to them *He sent His Only-begotten Son*; to them He promised the kingdom in heaven, and this He will give to those that love Him. 3 And when you have acquired this knowledge, with what joy do you think you will be filled! Or how intensely will you love Him who first loved you so! 4 And once you love Him, you will be an imitator of His kindness. And you must not be surprised that man can become an imitator of God. He can, since He so wills. 5 Certainly, to be happy does not mean to tyrannize over one's neighbors, or to wish to have an advantage over the weaker ones, or to be rich and therefore able to use force against one's inferiors. It is not in such matters that one can imitate God; no, such matters are foreign to His majesty. 6 On the other hand, he who takes his neighbor's burden upon himself, who is willing to benefit his inferior in a matter in which he is his superior, who provides the needy with what he himself has received from God and thus becomes the god of the recipients—he, I say, is an imitator of God! 7 Then you will realize, while your lot is on earth, that God lives in heaven; then you will in good earnest discourse on the mysteries of God; then you will love and admire those who submit to punishment for their refusal to deny God; then you will condemn the deceitfulness of the world and its error once you understand the real life in heaven, once you despise the apparent death here below, once you fear the real death reserved for those who are condemned to the eternal fire, which will forever torment those delivered up to it. 8 Then you will admire and pronounce happy those who, for conscience' sake, endure the fire that lasts but for a while—once you grasp the nature of that other fire.

11. There is nothing strange in my discourse, nor is my argument contrary to reason. No, after becoming a disciple of Apostles, I am now becoming a teacher of the Gentiles. What has been handed down I deliver exactly to such as become disciples of the Truth. 2 Really, can anyone that has been correctly taught and has fallen in love with the Logos, fail to strive to learn exactly what has been plainly shown by the Logos to disciples to whom the Logos appeared in person and made revelations in plain language? He was not understood by unbelievers, but gave a detailed explanation to disciples, and these, reckoned by Him as trustworthy, came to know the mysteries of the Father. 3 For this reason He sent the Logos to appear in the world, who, discredited by His people, was preached by Apostles, and believed by Gentile nations. 4 He was in the beginning, appeared new and was found to be old, and is ever born anew in the hearts of the saints. 5 He is the Eternal One, <who> today is accounted a Son; by Him the Church is enriched, and grace, ever unfolding in the saints, is multiplied—the grace which grants understanding,⁶⁸ reveals mysteries, announces seasons, glories in believers, gives freely to seekers—such as do not break their plighted troth or transgress the bounds fixed by the fathers.⁷⁰ 6 And then fear of the Lord becomes a theme of song, prophetic inspiration is recognized, the trustworthiness of the Gospels is firmly established, Apostolic tradition is observed, and the grace of the Church is exultant. 7 And if you do not grieve this grace, you will appreciate what the Logos communicates through whomsoever He chooses and whenever He pleases. 8 After all, urged by love for the revelations made to us, we but share with you whatever, in obedience to the command of the Logos, we felt prompted to speak out with difficulty.

12. If you read this and listen attentively, you will find out what blessings God bestows on those who love Him as they should. Since they become a *paradise of delight*, they rear in themselves a fruitful tree in fullest bloom, and are adorned with a variety of fruit; 2 for in this garden *a tree of knowledge and a tree of life have been planted*. But mark, it is not the tree of knowledge that is fatal; no, it is disobedience that is fatal. 3 In fact, there is deep significance in the Scripture text which states that in the beginning God planted *<a tree of knowledge and> a tree of life in the midst of paradise*, indicating that knowledge is the avenue to life. Because the first men did not make use of it with singleness of heart, they found themselves stripped by the deceit of the serpent. 4 Neither is there life without knowledge, nor is knowledge safe without true life. For this reason we find the two trees planted close to each other. 5 The Apostle saw the significance of this, and so he blames knowledge when applied to life without regard to the real force of the commandment, and says: *Knowledge makes conceited; it is love that builds up*. 6 Certain it is that he who thinks he knows anything without a knowledge that is true and attested by life as genuine, has not yet learnt to know. He is deceived by the serpent,

simply because he does not love life. But he who, guided by fear, has attained to full knowledge and goes in quest of life, can plant in hope and look for a harvest.

7 As for you, let knowledge be your heart, and your life the full realization of the true word. 8 When this is the tree you cultivate, and this the fruit you pluck, you will always harvest the blessings desirable in the sight of God—blessings which no serpent can touch, no deceit defile by its contact. Then Eve is not seduced; on the contrary, a virgin can be trusted. 9 Then, too, salvation is pointed out, apostles are instructed, the Lord's Passover comes along, wax tapers are assembled and arranged in order, and the Logos delights to teach the saints—He who glorifies the Father. To Him be the glory for evermore. Amen.

Quasten, J., & Plumpe, J. C. (Eds.). (1948). *The Didache, The Epistle of Barnabas, The Epistles and the Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, The Fragments of Papias and The Epistle to Diognetus*. (J. A. Kleist, Trans.) (6th ed., pp. 135–147). New York; Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press.