

Excerpts from the Letter to Diognetus.

The Letter (or Epistle) to Diognetus is a second- or third-century work that defends the doctrines of Christianity. This type of writing is also called an apologetics letter. Although neither author nor recipient is known for certain, the Letter to Diognetus purports to be written by a student of the apostles who calls himself Mathetes, which in Greek simply means "disciple." The identity of the Diognetus addressed in this letter is uncertain, although he may have been a man of some rank, as the salutation addresses him as "His Excellency."

The epistle contains 12 chapters describing the meaning and results of salvation by faith in Christ, but the name Jesus is never mentioned. References are to "the Son" or "the Word" instead of Jesus Christ.

In this Letter to Diognetus, the author describes the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian.

I see, most excellent Diognetus, the exceptional desire you have to learn the method of worshipping God that prevails among the Christians. You inquire about them with great care and sincerity, seeking to determine what God they trust in and what type of religion they observe that allows them to look down upon the world and to despise death, all the while rejecting both those that are esteemed gods by the Greeks and the superstitions of the Jews.

I hear you asking how they have the kind of affection that is cherished among them and why this new type or practice of religion has only now and so recently come into the world.

I welcome this desire of yours, and I implore God, who enable us both to speak and to hear, to let me speak in such a way that, more than anything, I may hear that you have been built up. And I ask him to enable you to hear in such a way that I, the one speaking, may have no reason to regret doing so.

Christians are not distinguished from other men by country, language, nor by the customs which they observe. They do not inhabit cities of their own, use a particular way of speaking, nor lead a life marked out by any curiosity. The course of conduct they follow has not been devised by the speculation and deliberation of inquisitive men. They do not, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of merely human doctrines.

Instead, they inhabit both Greek and barbarian cities, however things have fallen to each of them. And it is while following the customs of the natives in clothing, food, and the rest of ordinary life that they display to us their wonderful and admittedly striking way of life.

They live in their own countries, but they do so as those who are just passing through. As citizens they participate in everything with others, yet they endure everything as if they were foreigners. Every foreign land is like their homeland to them, and every land of their birth is like a land of strangers.

They marry, like everyone else, and they have children, but they do not destroy their offspring.

They share a common table, but not a common bed.

They exist in the flesh, but they do not live by the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, all the while surpassing the laws by their lives.

They love all men and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned. They are put to death and restored to life.

They are poor, yet make many rich. They lack everything, yet they overflow in everything.

They are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor they are glorified; they are spoken ill of and yet are justified; they are reviled but bless; they are insulted and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if raised from the dead. They are assailed by the Jews as barbarians; they are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to give any reason for their hatred.

To sum it all up in one word, what the soul is in the body, that is what Christians are in the world.

The soul is dispersed through all the parts of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul lives in the body, yet is not of the body; Christians live in the world, yet are not of the world.