

## Introduction to the text

More will be said at the Forum regarding the background of this text, but certain information will be helpful prior to reading. Most scholars agree this document was written in the second century and is therefore among the earliest surviving Christian witnesses. Authorship is uncertain, but appears to be the work of Quadratus of Asia Minor, who (in 123-124 or 129) addressed an "Apology" to the emperor Hadrian. The letter is remarkable for many reasons, not least its fresh and vibrant description of ancient Christian life, robust theology, and obvious familiarity with apostolic writings.

Excerpts from "The So-called Letter to Diognetus" (Chaps. 1, 5-10),  
as translated by Cyril Richardson in *Early Christian Fathers*.

**Ch. 1.** To His Excellency, Diognetus: I understand, sir, that you are really interested in learning about the religion of the Christians, and that you are making an accurate and careful investigation of the subject. You want to know, for instance, what God they believe in and how they worship him, while at the same time they disregard the world and look down on death, and how it is that they do not treat the divinities of the Greeks as gods at all, although on the other hand they do not follow the superstition of the Jews. You would also like to know the source of the loving affection

that they have for each other. You wonder, too, why this new race or way of life has appeared on earth now and not earlier. I certainly welcome this keen interest on your part and I ask God, who gives us the power to speak and the power to listen, to let me speak in such a way that you may derive the greatest possible benefit from listening, and to enable you to listen to such good effect that I may never have a reason for regretting what I have said. 2. Now, then, clear out all the thoughts that take up your attention, and pack away all the old ways of looking at things that keep deceiving you. You must become like a new man from the beginning, since, as you yourself admit, you are going to listen to a really new message. [...]

**Ch. 5** For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. 2 They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. 3 This doctrine of theirs has not been discovered by the ingenuity or deep thought of inquisitive men, nor do they put forward a merely human teaching, as some people do. 4 Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. 5 They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure

everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land. 6 They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. 7 They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. 8 It is true that they are "in the flesh," but they do not live "according to the flesh." 9 They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. 10 They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require. 11 They love all men, and by all men are persecuted. 12 They are unknown, and still they are condemned; they are put to death, and yet they are brought to life. 13 They are poor, and yet they make many rich; they are completely destitute, and yet they enjoy complete abundance. 14 They are dishonored, and in their very dishonor are glorified; they are defamed, and are vindicated. 15 They are reviled, and yet they bless; when they are affronted, they still pay due respect. 16 When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; undergoing punishment, they rejoice because they are brought to life. 17 They are treated by the Jews as foreigners and enemies, and are hunted down by the Greeks; and all the time those who hate them find it impossible to justify their enmity.

**Ch.6** To put it simply: What the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world. 2 The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. 3 The soul dwells in the body, but does not

belong to the body, and Christians dwell in the world, but do not belong to the world.

4 The soul, which is invisible, is kept under guard in the visible body; in the same way, Christians are recognized when they are in the world, but their religion remains unseen. 5 The flesh hates the soul and treats it as an enemy, even though it has suffered no wrong, because it is prevented from enjoying its pleasures; so too the world hates Christians, even though it suffers no wrong at their hands, because they range themselves against its pleasures. 6 The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and its members; in the same way, Christians love those who hate them. 7 The soul is shut up in the body, and yet itself holds the body together; while Christians are restrained in the world as in a prison, and yet themselves hold the world together. 8 The soul, which is immortal, is housed in a mortal dwelling; while Christians are settled among corruptible things, to wait for the incorruptibility that will be theirs in heaven. 9 The soul, when faring badly as to food and drink, grows better; so too Christians, when punished, day by day increase more and more. 10 It is to no less a post than this that God has ordered them, and they must not try to evade it. The Christian Revelation

**Ch. 7**        As I have indicated, it is not an earthly discovery that was committed to them; it is not a mortal thought that they think of as worth guarding with such care, nor have they been entrusted with the stewardship of merely human mysteries. 2 On the contrary, it was really the Ruler of all, the Creator of all, the invisible God himself,

who from heaven established the truth and the holy, incomprehensible word among men, and fixed it firmly in their hearts. Nor, as one might suppose, did he do this by sending to men some subordinate--an angel, or principality, or one of those who administer earthly affairs, or perhaps one of those to whom the government of things in heaven is entrusted. Rather, he sent the Designer and Maker of the universe himself, by whom he created the heavens and confined the sea within its own bounds--him whose hidden purposes all the elements of the world faithfully carry out, him from whom the sun has received the measure of the daily rounds that it must keep, him whom the moon obeys when he commands her to shine by night, and whom the stars obey as they follow the course of the moon. He sent him by whom all things have been set in order and distinguished and placed in subjection—the heavens and the things that are in the heavens, the earth and the things in the earth, the sea and the things in the sea, fire, air, the unfathomed pit, the things in the heights and in the depths and in the realm between; God sent him to men. 3 Now, did he send him, as a human mind might assume, to rule by tyranny, fear, and terror? 4 Far from it! He sent him out of kindness and gentleness, like a king sending his son who is himself a king. He sent him as God; he sent him as man to men. He willed to save man by persuasion, not by compulsion, for compulsion is not God's way of working. 5 In sending him, God called men, but did not pursue them; he sent him in love, not in judgment. 6 Yet he will indeed send him someday as our Judge, and who shall stand when he appears? [a

fragment of the manuscript is missing at this point] 7 Do you not see how they are thrown to wild animals to make them deny the Lord, and how they are not vanquished? 8 Do you not see that the more of them are punished, the more do others increase? 9 These things do not seem to come from a human power; they are a mighty act of God; they are proofs of his presence.

**Ch. 8** As a matter of fact, before he came, what man had any knowledge of God at all? 2 Or do you really accept the idle nonsense talked by those plausible philosophers, some of whom asserted that God was fire—the very thing that they are on the point of going to, they call God!—while others claimed that he was water, and others said that he was yet another one of the elements created by God. 3 And yet, if any one Of these lines of argument is acceptable, then each and every one of the other creatures could in the same way be shown to be God. 4 No, this is just quackery and deceit practiced by wizards. 5 No man has ever seen God or made him known, but he has manifested himself. 6 And he manifested himself through faith, by which alone it has been made possible for us to see God. 7 For God, the Master and Maker of the universe, who made all things and determined the proper place of each, showed himself to be long-suffering, as well as a true friend of man. 8 But in fact he always was and is and will be just this--kind and good and slow to anger and true; indeed, he alone is good. 9 And when he had planned a great and unutterable design, he communicated

it to his Child alone. 10 Now, as long as he kept back his own wise counsel as a well-guarded mystery, he seemed to be neglecting us and to take no interest in us; 11 but when he revealed it through his beloved Child and made known the things that had been prepared from the beginning, he granted us all things at once. He made us both to share in his blessings and to see and understand things that none of us could ever have looked for.

**Ch. 9**        And so, when he had planned everything by himself in union with his Child, he still allowed us, through the former time, to be carried away by undisciplined impulses, captivated by pleasures and lusts, just as we pleased. That does not mean that he took any delight in our sins, but only that he showed patience. He did not approve at all of that season of wickedness, but on the contrary, all the time he was creating the present age of righteousness, so that we, who in the past had by our own actions been proved unworthy of life, might now be deemed worthy, thanks to God's goodness. Then, when we had shown ourselves incapable of entering the Kingdom of God by our own efforts, we might be made capable of doing so by the power of God. 2 And so, when our unrighteousness had come to its full term, and it had become perfectly plain that its recompense of punishment and death had to be expected, then the season arrived in which God had determined to show at last his goodness and power. O the overflowing kindness and love of God toward man! God did not hate us,

or drive us away, or bear us ill will. Rather, he was long-suffering and forbearing. In his mercy, he took up the burden of our sins. He himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us—the holy one for the unjust, the innocent for the guilty, the righteous one for the unrighteous, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. 3 For what else could cover our sins except his righteousness? 4 In whom could we, lawless and impious as we were, be made righteous except in the Son of God alone? 5 O sweetest exchange! O unfathomable work of God! O blessings beyond all expectation! The sinfulness of many is hidden in the Righteous One, while the righteousness of the One justifies the many that are sinners. 6 In the former time he had proved to us our nature's inability to gain life; now he showed the Saviour's power to save even the powerless, with the intention that on both counts we should have faith in his goodness, and look on him as Nurse, Father, Teacher, Counselor, Healer, Mind, Light, Honor, Glory, Might, Life--and that we should not be anxious about clothing and food.

**Ch. 10**      If you too yearn for this faith, then first of all you must acquire full knowledge of the Father. 2 For God loved men, and made the world for their sake, and put everything on earth under them. He gave them reason and intelligence, and to them alone he entrusted the capacity for looking upward to him, since he formed them after his own image. It was to them that he sent his only-begotten Son, and to them



that he promised the Kingdom in heaven which he will give to those who love him. 3 And when you have acquired this knowledge, think with what joy you will be filled! Think how you will love him, who first loved you so! 4 And when you love him, you will be an imitator of his goodness. And do not be surprised to hear that a man can become an imitator of God. He can, because God wills it. 5 To be happy does not, indeed, consist in lording it over one's neighbors, or in longing to have some advantage over the weaker ones, or in being rich and ordering one's inferiors about. It is not in this way that any man can imitate God, for such things are alien to his majesty. 6 But if a man takes his neighbor's burden on himself, and is willing to help his inferior in some respect in which he himself is better off, and, by providing the needy with what he himself possesses because he has received it from God, becomes a god to those who receive it--then this man is an imitator of God. 7 Then, while your lot is cast on earth, you will realize that God rules in heaven; then you will begin to talk of the mysteries of God; then you will love and admire those who are being punished for their refusal to deny God; then you will condemn the fraud and error of the world, once you really understand the true life in heaven, once you look down on the apparent death here below, once you fear the real death kept for those who are condemned to the eternal fire, which will punish to the end those that are handed over to it. 8 Then you will admire those who for righteousness' sake endure the transitory fire, and will call them happy, when you learn about that other fire . . .