

How an early church theologian can help us subvert white supremacy!

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Having an opportunity to peek into the life of the early Church is always intriguing. Doing so is not for the purpose of discovering some pristine perfect community, which never existed, but it is helpful when considering the historical domestications of Church teachings around what is expected of Christian lives. While diversity existed in the early Church, there certainly are strong currents of overlaps that existed as well, like the fact that there are no examples of Christians participating in the military until about the late in the second century, and that even beyond that the official teaching was always nonviolence. That some shifts took place in the dominant ethical witness of the Church is impossible to argue against. While the churches embodiment of these teachings still would have been complex and dynamic in its pursuit and shortcomings of following Jesus, it is pretty clear that the Church teachers in the first few centuries sought to take Jesus seriously.

And it is precisely in the specificity of Jesus' manifestation on earth that *The Epistle to Diognetus*, a late 2nd century Christian letter, points to God's revelation and character. As the manifestation of God, Jesus was not what humanity imagined the Divine One to be like. In chapter 7, this letter briefly wrestles with the nature of Jesus' manifestation, asking "Was it then, as one might conceive, for the purpose of exercising tyranny, or of inspiring fear and terror? By no means, but under the influence of clemency and meekness." Going a step further, chapter 8 deconstructs any attempts at understanding God by way of taken for granted notions of divinity: "For, who of men at all understood before His coming what God is? Do you accept of the vain and silly doctrines of those who are deemed trustworthy philosophers?" Finally, he makes his point plain, God's character is revealed in Jesus Christ:

But such declarations are simply the startling and erroneous utterances of deceivers; and no man has either seen Him, or made Him known, but He has revealed Himself. And He has manifested Himself through faith, to which alone it is given to behold God. For God, the Lord and Fashioner of

all things... proved Himself not merely a friend of mankind, but also long-suffering [in His dealings with them]. Yeah, He was always of such a character, and still is, and will ever be, kind and good. [\[1\]](#)

Now typically when people highlight particular passages from *The Epistle of Diognetus*, they focus on chapter 5 which focuses on the marginal, sojourning, and persecuted status of the Church that persists in loving enemies in the midst of hardship. It is a favorite passage of Anabaptist scholars because it communicates most of the radical reformation distinctives powerfully in that passage. I certainly find a lot of value in that section as well, however that is not my concern here.

Some Christians often want to explore the shifts in Christian perspectives and practices because western Christendom eventually became the dominant form and expression for much of Church history. However, the reality of white supremacy has been another form of compromise that has plagued the American Church in particular. This concern is not considered as much among white Christians. And yet, our society has 400 years of racialized hierarchy, in which white people have reordered society in such a way that the white majority not only collectively rules over people of color violently, but have perverted our understanding of God. The perversion is so deep that it has been believed by many that God actually aligns with such racialized lifestyles of control and supremacy over others.

In *The Epistle to Diognetus*, thankfully, we have an anti-supremacist theologian who can help us untangle the association of white supremacy (which whiteness itself was socially created specifically solely for the purpose of uniting Europeans for socio-political domination over colonized and enslaved people) and God. Participating in what God is doing, according to this early Christian theologian, will demand breaking alignment with the dominating social order, so one can truly imitate God. If we are to be imitators of God we are encouraged to be for others in solidarity with the poor and oppressed:

And if you love him, you will be an imitator of His kindness. And do not wonder that a man may become an imitator of God. He can, if he is willing. For it is not by ruling over his neighbours, or by seeking to hold the supremacy over those that are weaker, or by being rich, and showing violence towards those that are inferior, that happiness is found; nor can any one by these things become an imitator of God. But these things do not at all constitute His majesty. On the contrary he who takes upon himself the burden of his neighbor; he who, in whatsoever respect he may be superior, is ready to benefit another who is deficient; he who,

whatsoever things he has received from God, by distributing these to the needy, becomes a god to those who receive [his benefits]: he is an imitator of God.^[ii]

^[i] “The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus,” n.d., <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diognetus-roberts.html>.

^[ii] Ibid.