THE QUESTION

# Which early Christian writing says Christians are to the world what the soul is to the body?

*Asked by a THF member on August 8, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 9 numbered quotations · the 8 early Christian passages and 4 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.*

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/which-early-christian-writing-says-christians-are-to-the-world-what-the

## The short answer *From the text: says what the passages say*

The line comes from the Epistle to Diognetus, an early letter in our library. It says that what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world. The soul loves the body that hates it and keeps it alive; in the same way Christians love those who hate them and are the preservers of the world.

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POINT 1 OF 7

## Christians are the soul of the world

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say***

This is the line the question remembers. The writer sums up the Christian life with one picture. The soul lives all through the body, and Christians live in every city of the world. They are spread out among people everywhere, not shut away in one place.

**1**

"To sum up everything in one word—what the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world."

*later in the same passage*

"The soul is spread throughout all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Mathetes,** *Epistle to Diognetus* (c. 80–200 AD) **Source 1, page 5** **Read it in the library ›**
*THF's updated English*

POINT 2 OF 7

## In the world but not of it

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say***

The soul lives in the body but does not belong to it. In the same way, Christians live among other people but do not belong to the world's ways. Their godliness is real, but it cannot be seen from the outside.

**2**

"The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians live in the world, yet are not of the world."

*later in the same passage*

"The invisible soul is protected by the visible body, and Christians are known to be in the world, but their godliness remains invisible."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Mathetes,** *Epistle to Diognetus* (c. 80–200 AD) **Source 1, page 5** **Read it in the library ›**
*THF's updated English*

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POINT 3 OF 7

## Christians love those who hate them

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say***

The writer says the flesh fights the soul, yet the soul still loves the body. He compares this to Christians. The world hates them because they turn away from its pleasures, but they answer that hatred with love.

**3** “The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and loves the members; Christians likewise love those that hate them.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Mathetes,** *Epistle to Diognetus* (c. 80–200 AD) **Source 1, page 5** **Read it in the library ›**
*THF's updated English*

POINT 4 OF 7

## Christians preserve the world that confines them

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say***

Here is the preserving part of the quote. The soul is shut up in the body, yet it keeps that body going. The writer says Christians are likewise held in the world as in a prison, and yet they are the ones who preserve it.

**4** “The soul is imprisoned in the body, yet preserves that very body; and Christians are confined in the world as if in a prison, and yet they are the preservers of the world.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Mathetes,** *Epistle to Diognetus* (c. 80–200 AD) **Source 1, page 5** **Read it in the library ›**
*THF's updated English*

POINT 5 OF 7

## Travelers looking for a heavenly home

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say***

The picture ends with hope. The soul does not die, though it lives in a body that does. Christians live here as travelers and wait for a home in heaven that will not decay. Even under daily punishment, the writer says, their numbers grow.

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**5** “The immortal soul lives in a mortal body; and Christians dwell as travelers in corruptible bodies, looking for an incorruptible dwelling in the heavens.”

*later in the same passage*

“The soul, when poorly provided with food and drink, becomes better; similarly, the Christians, though subjected to punishment day by day, increase more in number.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Mathetes,** *Epistle to Diognetus* (c. 80–200 AD) **Source 1, page 5** Read it in the library ›
*THF's updated English*

POINT 6 OF 7

## Ignatius also says the world hates Christians

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say***

Ignatius makes a similar point in his letter to the Romans. Being hated by the world is not a sign of failure. He says the Christian who is hated by the world is loved by God, and that the faith shows its greatness when the world hates it.

**6** “The Christian is not the result of persuasion, but of power. When he is hated by the world, he is loved by God.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Ignatius of Antioch,** *Epistle to the Romans* (c. 98–117 AD) **Source 4, page 6** Read it in the library ›
*THF's updated English*

**7** “The work is not a matter of persuasion; but Christianity is great when the world hates it.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Ignatius of Antioch,** *Epistle to the Romans* 3 (c. 98–117 AD) **Source 5, page 6** Read it in the library ›
*THF's updated English*

POINT 7 OF 7

## The soul gives the body its life

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words***

Irenaeus and Justin help explain why the picture works. They teach that the soul is what gives the body life and holds it together. Without the soul, the body cannot live. So calling Christians the soul of the world is a strong claim about their place in it.

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**8** “The body does not have more power than the soul, as the body is given life, energy, growth, and cohesion by the soul; but the soul controls and governs the body.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book II* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 8, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
*THF's updated English*

**9** “For the spirit does not die; the soul is in the body, and without a soul the body cannot live. When the soul leaves it, the body ceases to be.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Justin Martyr,** *On the Resurrection, Fragments* (c. 130–165 AD) **Source 6, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
*THF's updated English*

THE LIMITS

## What these passages don’t tell us

- The letter gives the picture but does not spell out exactly how Christians preserve the world.
- Irenaeus and Justin speak about the soul and body themselves, not about this comparison with Christians.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

## The Sources

The 8 early Christian passages and 4 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–8, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 9–10, in Bible order), then 2 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in THF’s updated English unless marked “1885 English” (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). “… [continues online]” marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

### EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *8 passages from 4 writers*

**Mathetes**, *c. 80–200 AD · sources 1–2*

1 *Epistle to Diognetus* **Quotes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, pages 2, 3, 4** “likewise love those that hate them. The soul is imprisoned in the body, yet preserves that very body… [continues online] **read ›**

2 *Epistle to Diognetus* Since I see that you, most excellent Diognetus, are exceedingly eager to learn the way Christians worship God, and you inquire very carefully and earnestly about them—what God they trust… [continues online] **read ›**

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### **Ignatius of Antioch**, *c. 98–117 AD · sources 3–5*

**3** *Epistle to the Romans* (on point 2) ruler of this world would gladly carry me away and corrupt my attitude towards God. Therefore, let none of you who are in Rome assist him; instead, be on my… [continues online] **read ›**

**4** *Epistle to the Romans* **Quote 6, page 4** Christian, I may also be called one, and be deemed faithful, when I shall no longer appear to the world. Nothing visible is eternal. "For the things which are seen… [continues online] **read ›**

**5** *Epistle to the Romans* 3 (1885 English) **Quote 7, page 4** “Christianity is great when the world hateth it… [continues online] **read ›**

### **Justin Martyr**, *c. 130–165 AD · source 6*

**6** *On the Resurrection, Fragments* **Quote 9, page 5** “The body is the house of the soul… [continues online] **read ›**

### **Irenaeus**, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 7–8*

**7** *Against Heresies: Book II* (1885 English; on point 7) “the soul teaches the body, and shares with it the spiritual vision which it has enjoyed… [continues online] **read ›**

**8** *Against Heresies: Book II* (1885 English) **Quote 8, page 5** “the soul possesses and rules over the body… [continues online] **read ›**

## THE BIBLE *2 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

**9** **2 Corinthians 5:1** For we know that if our earthly tent dwelling is taken down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. **read ›**

**10** **1 Peter 2:11** Beloved, I beg you as foreigners and pilgrims to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul. **read ›**

## ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *2 verses, by reference*

*Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.*

**Daniel** 12:2

**John** 17:11

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*Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.*

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “Which early Christian writing says Christians are to the world what the soul is to the body?” on August 8, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

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THE END OF THIS STUDY