

Salt and Light

By David Feddes

Rumors were flying about a strange group of people, and the rumors were scary. These people were atheists: they rejected religion and traditional values. They turned things upside down. They endangered the foundations of society. They were cannibals and held secret meetings, eating human flesh and drinking blood. A tiny group of such people would be bad enough, but this group was big and kept getting bigger. The government made laws against them, but people kept joining. The government arrested and executed many, but more people kept joining. According to the rumors, these atheistic cannibals were called Christians, and they followed someone called Christ.

It was around the year 130, and Christians were the most hated people in the Roman Empire. But for some reason, more and more people were becoming Christians all the time. Why? Who was this person called Christ, and what were those Christians really like? What made some people despise them and other people want to join up with them? Diognetus wanted to know.

Diognetus was a man who became curious about Christianity. He knew the rumors, but he didn't believe everything he heard. He had a little firsthand knowledge of Christians, and what he knew didn't fit the rumors. He found it hard to believe that the Christians were atheists and cannibals. They seemed to worship a god of some sort, so how could they be atheists? As for cannibalism, there was no proof that even one person had been killed by the Christians, so how could they be cannibals? They weren't killing anyone; they were the ones being killed.

The truth of the matter was that the Christians were called atheists because people assumed that if you didn't worship Roman gods and goddesses and didn't worship the emperor as divine, you must be entirely godless. The Christians were rumored to be cannibals based on a wild misunderstanding of third-hand reports of the Lord's Supper. Hearing that there was something about body and blood being eaten, people jumped to the conclusion that this involved killing and eating humans, when in fact the Christians were eating bread and drinking wine as their spiritual participation in the body and blood of Jesus.

Diognetus didn't know exactly where the rumors went wrong, and he didn't know all the facts about the Christians, but he was curious. Finally he got a chance to ask a Christian directly. This Christian, whose name we don't even know—he spoke of himself only as “a disciple”—answered Diognetus by writing a letter in answer to his questions, and that letter has been preserved down through the centuries. It's not part of the Bible, but it offers a striking picture of Christianity around 130 A.D., just 100 years after Jesus' ministry on earth and only decades after the last Bible books were written.

What were those early Christians like? What's the difference between Christians and other people? Here's how the letter to Diognetus answers that question:

The thing that makes Christians different from other people isn't what country they live in or what language they speak or what customs they practice. Christians don't live in cities of their own or speak their own special language or identify themselves by any unique social custom. Their way of life isn't something a philosopher or deep thinker discovered... They simply live wherever they happen to find themselves; they follow local customs in food and clothing and manners; and yet they display to us their wonderful and paradoxical way of life.

They live in their own countries, but as people whose true home is elsewhere... They marry like everybody else; they have babies; but they don't destroy fetuses. They have a common table, but not a common bed... They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the government's laws, and at the same time they live lives that surpass any laws. 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 and yet make many rich... They are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice... yet those who hate them are unable to give any reason for their hatred...

The Christians, though subjected day by day to punishment, increase the more in number. God has assigned them this illustrious position, which it would be wrong for them to forsake.

Those early Christians were different from others, and they made a difference. Centuries ago Christians like that changed the world, and Christians like that could change the world once again: Christians who are involved in the world and yet different from the world, Christians who don't try to be oddballs or stay away from others and yet whose way of life is so striking that the world around them can't help but notice.

Ordinary, Yet Extraordinary

This is what it means to follow Jesus. This what Jesus means in the Sermon on the Mount when he tells his followers, "You are the salt of the earth" and "You are the light of the world." Salt isn't really salt unless it's salty; light isn't really light unless it shines; and a Christian isn't really a Christian unless he or she is Christlike. When you belong to Jesus, you take on the flavor and the radiance of Christ, and you are caught up in his mission to love God and live for him and change the world. In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus tells his followers:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Jesus is talking to ordinary Christians, and he is saying something extraordinary about them. Maybe you are ordinary. You come from an ordinary family. You have an ordinary job. You live in an ordinary house. You look ordinary. You have an ordinary brain. You're not smarter or better looking than others, and you don't have a high-powered job or an elite family. You're just ordinary. But if you are a follower of Jesus, you are extraordinary! You are salt: you preserve a world which would decay and rot without you, and you flavor a world which would taste far worse without you. You are light: you shine in a world which would be dark without you. You may be ordinary in many ways, but if you are a follower of Jesus, then you are an extraordinary person with an extraordinary purpose in this world.

When Jesus speaks of salt and light, he is saying something great about his followers, and he's implying something grim about the world in which we find ourselves. He is saying that the world, left to itself, tends toward decay and darkness.

When Jesus first said these words, salt was enormously important as a preservative. There were no freezers or refrigerators to prevent food from going bad. The only way to preserve meat and keep it from going bad was to rub salt into it. So when Jesus calls his people the salt of the earth, he is implying that without followers of Jesus, the world tends to decay and to become more rotten.

That's not the way the world likes to see things, is it? The world likes to believe things are evolving, progressing, going upward and onward and getting better all the time. With this faith in progress comes the belief that with a little more education, a little more diplomacy, a few more inventions or programs, life will be far better.

But according to Jesus, the world doesn't have a natural tendency toward progress and improvement; it has a natural tendency to decay and rottenness. And who can deny that Jesus is right? Oh, there may be progress in science and technology, but does that mean there's any progress in basic human nature or in the state of the world? No, it just means the wars are more destructive, the divorces more frequent, the abortions more common, the addictions more terrifying, the families more confused, the children more abused. The only thing that can prevent this kind of decay is the salt of the earth, the Christlike conduct of ordinary Christians.

By calling Christians the salt of the earth, Jesus implies that the world on its own is in decay; and by calling Christians the light of the world, Jesus implies that the world on its own is in darkness. Again, that's not how the world likes to think of itself. Who likes to think of themselves as ignorant and in the dark? We'd all rather think we're bright and well-informed. After all, isn't this the information age?

Well, yes, it is the information age, but that doesn't mean it's the truth age or the wisdom age. We've got oodles of information and data and opinion, but where's the truth in all this? Who really knows what it's all about? Who really knows God? Who really understands the deepest spiritual problems that destroy people? Who really knows how to have a right relationship with God? Who really knows how to live as God wants? That kind of knowledge doesn't come from a newsroom or an advertising agency or a web site. Only when God shines his light does the darkness of ignorance and fear go away. And how does God shine his light? Through Jesus, and through those who follow Jesus.

Christian people are the world's only hope! Maybe that sounds arrogant, but it's not. When, as a Christian, I understand what Jesus expects me to be, it doesn't make me arrogant. It makes me humble. It lays on me a responsibility so great that I can't bear it in my own power. What is there in me that can prevent the world's decay? What can I do to enlighten the world? Of myself, nothing! I'm just like everybody else. I don't have some inborn superiority to others. It's only as I trust Jesus, it's only as he flavors and enlightens me, that I become salt and light. There's no room in genuine Christianity for arrogance.

Having said that, however, there's also no room in Christianity for being ashamed of my identity. I don't have to feel inferior to the big shots of this world. I don't have to be intimidated by smart or powerful people who oppose Jesus. A little child who can sing "Jesus Loves Me" or "This Little Light of Mine" is showing deeper wisdom than a brilliant professor who doesn't believe in Christ. As a Christian, I don't have to be shy or embarrassed about my faith. I can lift my head high as I look to my Savior. I can feel great dignity at my high and holy identity. Because of Jesus, I am the salt of the earth! I am the light of the world! That's not just my arrogant opinion of myself. That's what the Lord Jesus calls me.

Different But Involved

What does it take to be salt and light? It takes two things: it takes being different from the world, and at the same time it takes being involved in the world.

First, to be salt and light, you must be different. Salt has to have its own flavor. If salt isn't salty, it's not really salt. It's good for nothing, says Jesus, and it might as well be thrown out. In the same way, light is different from darkness; if it's not different, it's not light at all. If you consider yourself a Christian but you're exactly like everybody in the world around you and you're not different in any way, then you're not a Christian at all. A Christian is different from others.

But there's more to salt and light than just being different. The second thing it takes to be salt and light for Christ is that you must be involved. Salt doesn't do any good just sitting on the shelf. It has to get out of the salt shaker to be of any use. Light doesn't do any good when it's hidden under a bowl. It does the most good when it's brought into the open and put on a stand. "In the same way," says Jesus, "let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Let your light shine! Be different yet involved! It sounds simple, but that doesn't mean it's easy. There's always a temptation either to go with the flow and do whatever the world does, or else, if we insist on being different, it's tempting for Christians just to form our own little cliques and colonies and customs and have as little to do as possible with those who aren't like us. When you are different from other people and yet stay involved with them, it can be awkward. In fact, it can be downright troublesome. It can provoke opposition.

And yet, no matter how troublesome it might be, Jesus expects his followers to be different from the world and yet involved in the world. The letter to Diognetus, which I quoted at the beginning of the program, puts it this way: "Christians live in the world, but are not of the world." In the world but not of the world—that is the motto of every follower of Jesus.

This was certainly true of Christians back in the time of Diognetus. In those days, it was common practice to abort unborn babies and even to abandon unwanted newborns to die. But the Christians were different. They didn't destroy fetuses, and when they came upon newborns abandoned by parents, they took them in. In that society it was common to go from one sexual partner to the next, and to go from one marriage to the next. But the Christians were different. According to the letter to Diognetus, they shared a common table of fellowship but not a common bed of sexual promiscuity. Many people worshiped the emperor as lord, and it was dangerous not to do so. But the Christians were different. They said, "Jesus is Lord." They worshiped God alone.

And yet, despite being very different from their neighbors, the Christians continued to live in the same cities and towns as non-Christians. They continued to work alongside them. They continued to be like them in things like clothing and customs. And because they stayed so close to them, and because they were like them in so many ways, the differences became all the more striking to the people who knew them, and all the more upsetting.

The Christians were so different and yet so involved that people couldn't ignore them or feel comfortable. They had to react. They felt threatened that living right among them were people who were so very different, and they reacted either by fighting against the Christians or by becoming Christians themselves. There were many killings, and many conversions. Indeed, it seemed that as the killings increased, so did the number of conversions.

The letter to Diognetus says, “Do you not see them exposed to wild beasts to make them deny the Lord, and yet not defeated? Do you not see that the more of them who are punished, the greater becomes the number of the rest? This does not seem to be the work of man: this is the power of God!” That’s what happens when Christians live as salt and light, when they are in the world but not of it, when they are different and yet involved. More and more people see their good deeds and praise the heavenly Father. People exclaim, “This does not seem to be the work of man: this is the power of God!”

The Light of God

Ultimately, that’s what it’s all about: to shine with the light of God in such a way that people are drawn to him. The only reason Jesus can call his followers the light of the world is because of who *Jesus himself* is. Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). “God is light. In him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). When Christians live as the light of the world, they point people to God’s light in Christ.

The letter to Diognetus is an example of how this happens. The Christians’ way of living creates an opportunity to tell of the God they love. The letter to Diognetus not only describes what Christians are like in the way they live, but it goes on to explain why they live this way.

This was no mere human system of opinions but truly God himself, the almighty and invisible Creator of all things, has sent from heaven and placed among people Christ who is the truth, and has firmly established him in their hearts. God did not, as one might have imagined, send a servant or an angel... but he sent the very Creator and Fashioner of all things... to whom all things are subject.

Did he do this in order to exercise tyranny, or to frighten and terrorize them, as one might imagine? By no means! He acted in kindness and gentle humility. He sent him as a king sends his son who is also a king. He sent him as God, but also as a man. He sent him as a Savior, seeking to persuade, not to force something upon us, for violence has no place in the character of God. He sent him to call us, not to pursue us with vengeance; to love us, not to judge us.

The letter then speaks of what God did at the cross of Christ.

He himself took on him the burden of our sins. He gave his only Son as a ransom for us, the holy one for the transgressors, the blameless for the wicked, the righteous for the unrighteous, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal one for them that are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than his righteousness? By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! that the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors! God did two things. First he convinced us that our own nature was unable to attain life, and then he revealed the Savior who can give us life. And why? Why did God do this? Because, says the letter, God “desired to lead us to trust in his kindness, to esteem him as our Nourisher, Father, Teacher, Counsellor, Healer, our Wisdom, Light, Honor, Glory, Power, and Life.” In other words, to trust the Lord as our everything.

It’s only as we know and trust this God in Jesus Christ that we become different from the world around us and yet love those around us. As the letter to Diognetus puts it,

When you have attained this knowledge, with what joy do you think you will be filled? Or, how will you love him who has first so loved you? 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 neighbors, or by bullying those who are weaker, or by being rich, and showing violence to those who are inferior, that happiness is found; and these are not what make a person an imitator of God. These things are not what God's majesty is made of. On the contrary, he who carries the burden of his neighbor; he who uses whatever advantage he has over someone to help that person; he who takes what God gives him and distributes it to people in need, becomes a god to those who receive his benefits: he is an imitator of God. Then you will see while you are still on earth that God in the heavens rules over the universe.

The letter to Diognetus shows how the church lived as salt and light in those first years after Jesus and his apostles. In the centuries since that time, people calling themselves Christians have often lived far from Christ and been part of the problem and not part of the solution. Lots of people wear a cross, but how many bear the cross? Many claim to be Christians but don't know Jesus or shine with his love and kindness.

But what a marvel it is when we truly know Jesus as the light of the world, when we know that he came in love and gentleness to replace our bankruptcy with his riches, and when we imitate him and become Christlike in our eagerness to help others and to win them through love.

So, my friend, trust in Jesus the light of the world, and be the light of the world that others may see Jesus in you. "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

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