

Reflecting on Diognetus' letter: Paradoxical gospel in a polarised South African context

**Author:**Takalani A. Muswubi¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Missiology,
Faculty of Theology,
North-West University,
Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Takalani Muswubi,
muswubi@gmail.com

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This article reflects on the letter written by an anonymous author, in an unknown date and unidentifiable recipient, called Diognetus, yet with a paradoxical mission witness in a challenging times. The letter of Diognetus is an open letter with a paradoxical mission guidelines, for the church in a challenging time. The letter of Diognetus is a distinct, complex and multifaceted letter that addresses the paradoxical context of the Church, namely that she is called out of the world, but to be in the world, while not being of the world. The main question is: how should the gospel be witnessed in a polarised society such as South Africa? To answer the question, this article is set to discuss the letter's distinct features, namely its significance and role and its goals.

Contribution: The article is not only adding a voice to the on-going debate regarding the mission witness but also adding value by revisiting scriptural basis and guidelines for a paradoxical mission witness in a polarised socio-economic and political context in South Africa and beyond. This article helps to stimulate further missional researches and practises in these areas.

Keywords: Diognetus; paradox; Gospel; polarisation and context.

Introduction

'I'm just a nobody, trying to tell everybody, about somebody, who can save anybody.'

I'm just a nobody is one of the 1985 popular song in an album of 10 songs by the Williams Brothers,¹ a traditional Black gospel group from Smithdale, Jackson city, Mississippi, USA. There are songs sung and sermons² preached using these four concepts, 'nobody', 'everybody', 'somebody', and 'anybody'. (cf. Wikipedia, 2023)

This article reflects on the letter written by an anonymous author,³ in an unknown date⁴ and unidentifiable recipient, called Diognetus, yet with a paradoxical mission call in challenging times. The article is not only adding a voice to the on-going debate regarding a paradoxical witness but also adding value by revisiting scriptural basis and guidelines for a paradoxical mission witness in a polarised socio-economic and political context in South Africa and beyond. This article helps to stimulate further missional researches and practises in these areas.

The significance of the letter to Diognetus

Some of the distinct characteristics of the letter to Diognetus are to win the readers to Christ and to strengthen believers by deepening, clarifying and advancing the distinct nature of Christianity and its theology before the tribunal of reason and philosophy against its critics (Schaff 1980:106). The letter to Diognetus does not only fills the gap between the writings of the Apostolic fathers⁵

1.The Williams Brothers were formed in 1960 by Leon 'Pop' Williams, their father. They have released 42 albums, 23 of which made the Billboard charts. They have been nominated collectively seven times for the Grammy Award for Best Traditional Gospel Album, Best Contemporary Soul Gospel Album and Best Soul Gospel Performance, Male. In 1999, the group was inducted into the International Gospel Music Hall of Fame.

2.More than two decades later, in 2009, a sermon, titled, 'I just want to be a Nobody, willing to tell Everybody, that there is Somebody, who can save Anybody' was posted in a Page, called, 'Serious Faith' by Brent Riggs, pastor of Straightway Bible Church. Still in 2018, a sermon, titled, 'A Nobody Who Told Everybody About Somebody Who Can Save Anybody' based on John 4:28–30, is online from White Sr, D. Pastor of Bethesda Baptist, House of Mercy.

3.The letter is not only a well-crafted personal letter but also a noble and theological masterpiece work of an anonymous author who was apparently a well-known author to his recipient (cf. Schaff 1980:700). Non-conclusive speculations about the authors includes, Theophilus of Antioch, Polycarp, Justin Martyr and Hippolytus (Holmes 1989:292–294).

4.The author calls himself a Μαθητής, the Disciple of the Apostles, well known to the recipient whose letter was regarded as a testament, dated between the 2nd half of the 2nd AD to the mid-third century AD, that is between 150 and 250 AD (Holmes 1989:135).

5.The collection of the earliest extant writings of the Apostolic fathers existed and circulated after (and/or outside) the New Testament era from AD 70–135 (Holmes 1989:1). They wrote to believers, instructing them on the ecclesiastical issues such as Church doctrine, worship, sacraments, and discipline to strengthen their faith and life to be like Christ (cf. the *Didache*).

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and that of the Apologists but also forms a transition from the writings of the Apostolic fathers as they address believers instructing them to be like Christ to the Apologetic writings that address pagans (and Jews) contending its faith (Schaff 1980:702). They existed just two centuries after the New Testament era (Lake 1917:1–6).

The text (genre) of the letter to Diognetus

This article is not focusing on the debate about the anonymous author, unknown date and recipient(s), which is still debatable and four scholars who deal with the subject (cf. H. G. Meecham, J. B. Lightfoot, Michael Holmes, and Clayton N. Jefford). The author's profile remained anonymous and his letter was neither mentioned nor cited by any of the church Fathers for more than 1200 years from its proposed date of writing to its discovery in the 16th century (cf. Ehrman 2003:127; Holmes 1989:294ff.). Yet, on a close analysis to the literary forms and style, the letter has an apologetic writing style with a strong basis on the writings of the Apostolic Father (cf. Meecham 1943:97ff.; Schaff 1980:104f.).

The context (scope) of the letter to Diognetus

Apparently, the letter was written between 150 and 250 AD, the period of the Christian apologist of defending and contending Christianity (cf. Ehrman 2003:140; Van de Beck 2007:192f.). It was the period when the Christians were not only marginalised, hated and misunderstood in the Roman Empire as irrelevant, impractical, abnormal and anti-social religion but also outlawed, persecuted and executed (martyrs) (cf. Grant 1955:25ff.; Hollon 2005:135; Schaff 1980:72f.). It was a period between AD 64 when Roman emperor Nero started Christian persecution and 313 AD, during the Edict of Milan, which was the Constantine period when Christianity was legalized as a state religion (cf. Lightfoot 1879:158). It was written before the formal (established) general church council decisions on significant and critical theological dogma, creed and/or order including the decisions of the General Council of Nicaea, which occurred 175 years later (cf. Meecham 1943:100; Van Drunen 2010:26).

The content of the letter is semantically and conceptually linked to the New Testament

Although it is approximately 100 years since the letter was removed from the New Testament era, its central themes and concepts are the same as New Testament ones, including Pauline's justification, love and *atonement* as he refutes the Judaist sacrificial system and Johannine's *λογος*, love and Christology as he combats and/or refutes the Gnosticism that was circulating during the late 1st century and early 2nd century AD (Keener 2003:1:160–163; Lake 1917:1–6; Magill 1963:50; Meecham 1949:97f.; Schaff 1980:702). Like the Pauline, Johannine and *Didache*, among others, the letter to Diognetus offers the Christian Church instructions and insights into the ecclesiastical issues to enrich and bolster the Christian faith and life to be more like Christ. The author

exhorts (*παραίνεσις*) Diognetus to be a true disciples who is willing, even to die for faith in hope centred in love in the Lord (cf. Jn 13:34–35; 15:12–14).

The goal of the letter to Diognetus: The challenges and contestations addressed

a vivid snapshot of an early attempt to rationally present the integrity of Christianity to a society that was both pluralistic & hostile. (Foster 2007:167)

Diognetus forms the transition between the Apostolic Father's and the Christian Apologist's periods, although classed and published with Apostolic Fathers' writings (cf. Schaff 1980:104f., 702). They have a direct link to the Apostolic tradition and hence was influenced by it (cf. Holmes 1989:1). The letter gives a picture of 2nd century Christianity, as it addresses the Christian condition and position in the Roman empire, which hate and persecute Christians and the Church of Christ for 120 years from AD 64, when Nero accused Christians of starting the fire in Rome, and it continued throughout to the end of 2nd century AD, when the civil society questions Christianity's identity and embodiment in a culturally inclusive society (cf. Lieu 2002:171–189; Schaff 1980:106). From the outset, the author sought to answer Diognetus's three main questions, in the midst of the 2nd century AD persecution, namely: (1) Who God is and how is he worshipped? (2) What love and justice is and how is it expressed? (3) Will Christianity survive and will it attract followers? (Lake 1917:351).

The Christian paradoxical calling means a dual citizenship on earth and in heaven

The dual Christian citizenship also means living a Christian lifestyle in a hostile context:

What the soul is to the body that the Christians are in the world ... the world ... hates Christians, because they set themselves against its pleasures. (cf. Dg 6:4–7; Jn 15.19,17.14)

As 'the flesh hates and makes war to the soul' yet the two cannot be confused, as the soul⁶ within the body is distinct, yet active within it, so are Christians who embody and bear the God-given mission to live by and to die for it, in the world, yet not of it (cf. Lake 1917:361ff.; Meecham 1949:16, 81, 117). They geographically coexist and coinhabit the same vicinity (places), yet not mix with the world in which they live (cf. 1 Cor 1: 20ff.; Dg 6.5–10; Ehrman 2003:142; Foster 2007:165; Holmes 1989:299).

Dual Christian citizenship means living in the cultural clothes, but not by religious beliefs:

While living in Greek and barbarian cities, according as each obtained his lot, and following local customs, both in clothing and food and in the rest of life, they show forth the wonderful and confessedly strange character of the constitution of their own citizenship. (Lake 1917:359)

6. He borrowed Pythagorean, Platonic-Stoic analogy (metaphor), to illustrate paradox of the Christian urged to love the world as the primary recipients (object of love or platform to execute the care for the undeserving, including the wicked, enemies, and persecutors, while living in the World, yet no according to the flesh (cf. Dg 5:8; 6.1; Chia 2000:93; Ehrman 2003:87, 140ff.).

Christians' dual citizenship is understood in terms of the paradoxes (*παράδοξες*) (cf. Dg 4:6; 5:1ff.; 7:1f.; Eh 138/142–145; Holmes 1989:296). They assume double citizenship. Firstly, Christians like all other people are citizens (*πολίται*) who are not only defined by their respective homogenous indicators or make ups including:

- their historical place or locality (*τόπος*);
- their historical era or temporality (*χρόνος*);
- lifestyle (cf. *ἔθεσι* (*βίον*)), but who recognise (acknowledge) and observe (practise) specific civil laws and cultural customs (habits) including certain outward forms such as food, clothes, shelter, etc. Christians in this world do not differ from other people as they are all bound to and shaped by their respective diverse cultures.

All these diverse cultures are created by God for his own glory and are to be used to glorify God not abused (used for evil purposes). Secondly, Christians unlike other people have dual citizenship. They are of and in this world with earthly citizenship and also they are out of and not of this world because of their heavenly citizenship. Although Christians reside in the world, but their *citizenship* is in heaven, not out of (from) this world. And in this world they are (remain) strangers and/or unique people, which echoes Christ's priestly prayer (cf. Jn 17:14–18; Phlm 3:20; Ehrman 2003:140ff.; Keener 2003:141).

Dual Christian citizenship means distinguishing what continues and what discontinues:

... these Jews ought rather to consider it folly maybe, not piety, in thinking that they are offering these things to God as though He were in need of them. (cf. Meecham 1949:77)

He answered the charge that Christianity promotes social separation, isolation and decontextualisation (cf. Van de Beck 2007:185f.). In a rhetoric and sarcasm fashion, he started to exploit, expose and refute the pagan idol worship and Jewish sacrificial system⁷ as illogical and absurd by reasoning and practice, which cannot be a means to save people because they are worldly, external and man-made religious formalism and formulation and not needed for human salvation. It is just pride and arrogance to observe them as such (cf. Dg 4:1,6; Ehrman 2003:136; Holmes 1989:296; Lake 1917:350ff.; Lieu 2002:174; Siker 2001:233; Wallace 2013:225). He vividly explains and clarifies the uniqueness of Christian worship, which should be continued and be distinguished from the pagan idol worship and the Jewish sacrificial system.

Dual Christian citizenship means living in the cultural clothes, but not by religious beliefs: They pass their time on earth, but they have their citizenship in heaven. (cf. Dg.5:9; Lake 1917:361)

He used paradoxes (*παράδοξες*) to illustrate that Christian distinction is not gauged by staying in the certain local place or by speaking a different language, but by the life they live.

7.The author was familiar with the Jewish and Greek religious systems and with the fact that Christianity developed out of and covered with the Jewish and Greek cultural clothes (cf. Florovsky 1957:69).

They assume double citizenship: (1) the earthly citizen of the country they live in, with entitled socio-economic and political right with local cultural activities and customs such as other residents and (2) the heavenly citizen living being ruled by Christ in his sphere (state) of authority and hence their Christian attitudes, lifestyle and/or well-being radiate a distinct value system. The letter to Diognetus in chapters 5 and 6 explains the identity keys, which makes Christians to be distinct earthly citizen with a new, unique and heavenly citizenship identity, which makes them to transcend the earthly realm and enter or have an access to God and his sphere (state) in Christ by his Holy Spirit (cf. Costache 2012:29–50; Lake 1917:357). The letter to Diognetus in chapters 5 and 6 explains God's people who believed in the true living God in the Old and New Testament, who are the Jewish and Gentile Christians are God's new race with unique identity, which is beyond their Jewishness or Gentleness and hence are foreigners representing heavenly citizenship (cf. Chia 2000: 92f.; Jefford 2014:2; Lake 1917:361). The homogenous make up are not normative standards, which unify Christians in a multicultural context (cf. Dg. 4.6; 5:1–7, 11, 16; Ehrman 2003:138–140; Meecham 1943:97). As Paul urged (cf. Gal.3:28) that they no longer assimilate to or defined by their homogenous⁸ indicators (make ups) including the socio-ethnic indicators such as blood, culture, customs, language etc. (cf. Dg 5:7; Chia 2000:92f.; Jefford 2014:2).

The letter urges Christians to imitate God's love and justice as their paradoxical calling

Christians are called to be the imitators (*μιμητης*) of God's goodness in the hostile context:

... when a man loves God, he will seek to 'imitate His goodness'. (cf. Diognetus 9:2; 10:4)

And when you have acquired this knowledge, with what joy do you think you will be filled, or how will you love Him who so loved you first? By loving him you will be an imitator of his goodness. (cf. Dg. 10.3 & Jn 1.4, 4.19; Barnard 1966:132; Holmes 1989:303; Lake 1917:377; Meecham 1949:99,143ff.)

God willed and urged his people to follow, obey, emulate (*μιμεομαι*) and/or imitate (*μιμητης*) his noble qualities of love (*ἀγαπη*) and his goodness (*καλος*) for the sake of all humanity (cf. Dg 10.2, 4–6; Jn 3.16, Jn 4:34–38; 14:12; 17:20; 20:21–23; 21:15–23; Ac 18:21; 1 Jn 4.9; 3 Jn 11; Lake 1917:370f.; Laniak 2006:211; Holmes 1989:133; Meecham 1943:57f.; 87; Zerwick 2005:30f.).

Christ and his selfless love is the prime example worthy to be imitated and embodied

Ultimately the child of God imitates the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:1; cf. also Akin 2001:250)

[H]appiness lies not in lordship over one's neighbours, nor in the desire to have more than one's weaker brethren, nor in being rich and coercing the more needy. Not in these things can any man imitate God. They are outside His majesty. (Meecham 1943:87)

8.Such homogenous (cf. the Greek words *ὁμός* (*homós*, 'same') + *γένος* (*génos*, 'kind' [*γένος*] should fade away that Christians should neither be loyal to [trust] them nor boasting about them as God's called and elected people).

No one is able to imitate God apart from divine intervention (Holmes 1989:115–117). All who are saved (and recreated in his image) with a guaranteed assurance of their spiritual and heavenly citizenship ‘πολιτευοντα’ are urged therefore (δω) not only to live a specific moral lifestyle (cf. Dg 4.24, 10.1f.) but also to be imitators (μιμητης) of God (cf. Eph 5:1; Lampe 1961:871f.) and to emulate, that is to follow and/or embody and witness him as good shepherd who cares and risks for his flock (cf. Jn 4:34–38; 10:11; 14:12; 17:20; 20:21–23; 21:15–23; Laniak 2006:211]. It is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, a mark (byproduct) of true discipleship and an underlying principle (motive), which is not only to be imitated, embodied and obeyed as Christ’s new commandment (cf. Dg 10 and 11 echoes Jn 14:15, 21; 15:10; 21:15) but also to be lived out, witnessed and/or expressed by Christian in all aspects of life including by promoting and preserving good life in the creation (humanity’s civil life and nature’s eco-system) (cf. Dg 10:5–6 echoes Jn 13:34–35; 15:12–14 and Paul-Ro 8:34–36; 1 Cor 13; Ps 44:22; Barnard 1966:134), which include the willingness to die for Christ in the midst of the world, haters and persecutors (cf. Akin 2001:84f.; Ehrman 2003:142f., 152f.; Keener 2003:2, 972; Meecham 1943:110).

God’s ἀγάπη love is seen in Christ’s sacrificial death

This love is expressed in various ways:

God speaks plainly of an inability to enter the kingdom of God according to our own worthiness or goodness. Our hope is only in the saving power of God which was demonstrated by the ransoming of His righteous Son for our unrighteousness. (cf. Dg.7)

When he sent him he was calling, not pursuing; when he sent him he was loving, not judging. (cf. Dg 7:4f.)

God urge, persuaded and not force sinners to follow him. (It echoed Jn 3.16–18; 12.47 cf. in Dg 10:4–6; Keener 2003:1:141; Lake 1917:365)

Christ’s sacrificial (ἀγάπη) love is redefined, rephrased and/or applied in a distinct (theological) word and semantical verbiage, which was intentional (not rhetorical) exercise for the 2nd century Greek context (cf. Dg 8:7,9:1,2). They do it to express and illustrate the depth of the characters and roles of God’s love, by comparing it with some of the characteristics of love (like the goodness, affection, tenderness, interest, care and concern) of the pastor, nurse, the family, parent, mother, father, teacher and child, counsellor and/or physician and patient (cf. Lampe 1961:1483; Martin 1961:166f.; Oldfather 1967:480f.). The Greek words such as φιλανθρωπος, a compound word (φίλος + άνθρωπος) that literally means ‘a love of man’. It is a holistic and inclusive love (a benevolence) for humanity (cf. Dg 1:1; 8:7, 9:1,2; 10:2–4; 11:11; 15:14; 19:12 echoes 2 Cor 6:10; eds. Bauer et al. 2000:504f.; 943, 1059ff., 1090, 1056; Jefford 2014:2; Keener 2003:1:569 ff; Lake 1917: 351, 367ff.; 371). The word, κρηστοτητα that means goodness or kindness basis of and for the righteousness and redemption received in Christ and his Gospel (cf. Dg 9:2; 10:2–7 echoes Tit.3:4f.; eds. Bauer et al. 2000:1056; Hiebert 1978:444f.; Holmes 1989:114, 301ff.; Meecham 1949:21f., 84ff., 125; Robertson 1931:606; Wallace 2013:231). This love is a base for and expressed in justification. It made justification possible.

The same love reveals God’s heart and selfless love (goodness or non-discriminatory love for all of sinners (humanity). His death is a ransom (fragrant) offering for the world while all of humanity was (and is still) at enmity with God (cf. Rm 5:8; Dg 10.2 & Jn 3.16, 1 Jn 4.9). God urges us to walk in the sacrificial love of Christ as standard for us to imitate and to express to one another (cf. Jn 3:16; 1 Cor 5:7; Eph 5:2; 1 Tim 2:6; Dg 6:6; 9:2; 10:2,4,7; [13x in Dg]; eds. Bauer et al. 2000:6, 1030f.; Morris 1981:129–248; 260–269).

The four primary or key expressions of God’s ἀγάπη love:

Author of Diognetus intentionally goes to great lengths to communicate the love of God in its diverse expressions, including: Firstly, the familial Love: φιλοστοργια. In Dg 1:1 the author used φιλοστοργια which means, to have a benevolent love, affection, tenderness, interest in and/or concern for each other as friends, family members and relatives (cf. eds. Bauer et al. 2000:943; Lake 1917: 351; Lampe 1961:1483; Meecham 1943:94; Oldfather 1967:480f.). Secondly, the love for all of humanity: φιλανθρωπος. To Dg.9:2-a φιλανθρωπιας is a tender-hearted, kindness and/or a heart-felt love expressed to all of humanity (cf. eds. Bauer et al. 2000:1056; Holmes 1989:301f.; Lake 1917:367ff.). This love carries a holistic, inclusive view and picture of God’s love, devotion and hospitality to all of humanity and not just for a specific group (cf. Dg. 8:7; Martin 1961:166f). It describe in essence how the kings and the nobles express their good will to their subjects (people) (cf. Meecham 1949:125). Thirdly, God’s love as goodness, or kindness: κρηστοτητα that expresses God’s character (as the Creator who cares with a tender heart [cf. Holmes 1989:301]). In life, God’s people are urged to imitate God, his will and his character as the agents of his goodness, beneficence, kindness and mercy in their response (as the fruit of the Holy Spirit) in honour of God (cf. Dg 9:1–2; 10:4 echoes Paul in Tit.3:4f.; 2 Cor 6:6, Gl 5:22–23, Col 3:12. cf. Luke’s use of μιμητης in Ac 18:21; eds. Aland et al. 2007:621, 651, 692, 736; Ehrman 2003:50f.; 189f.; 196f.; Meecham 1943:84, 87,135). Fourthly, God’s love as goodness (expressed in humility and forgiveness): κρηστοτητα. The inclusive love expresses God’s attitude of love shown in Christ where he reached out to save: so the φιλοστοργια is redefined as φιλανθρωπος so that to love God in Christ of taking human’s burden upon Himself as an example to imitate God’s κρηστοτητα-attitude of humility and forgiveness (cf. Dg 7:3f.; 8:7; 9:1,2 eds. Bauer et al. 1090; Lake 1917:367;. 2 Dg10:4 2l). He draws the parallels between humility attitude of Jesus and our imitation of God in Christ of taking others’ burden so as to benefit those in need. This love which is rooted in his humility is to be embodied in Christians’s love (cf. in Dg. 7:3f.; 10:5–6; Meecham 1943:87).

The relation between Imitating God and the primary or key expressions of his ἀγάπη love

The nature and/or essence of loving God (Christian love) is demonstrated by loving others (cf. Dg 10:4–6; Meecham 1943:133). Three words define and give the holistic picture of the nature of love expressed in the letter to Diognetus, namely: (1) the inclusive love for all mankind (φιλανθρωπια), (2) the sacrificial (selfless) love of God (ἀγάπη), and (3) the

communicative love expressed in goodness or kindness (χρηστοτητα) to the recipient (cf. Holmes 1989:303). The relation between imitating God and the primary or key expressions of his ἀγάπη love is seen in the manner in which Jesus came to earth, to conduct his own ministry, and sacrificed his life. Many aspects are identified, including: Firstly, the relation between imitating God and φιλανθρωπια (love for the humanity). The key link or connectors between Imitating God and φιλανθρωπια (love for the humanity) is God's patience (μακροθυμια) and the author uses many phrases to express it, including, (1) 'the righteousness of one should justify the many', and (2) and, 'what else could cover our sins but his righteousness?' and (3) God's love is directed towards Christians '... who in past times were from our own deeds convicted as unworthy of life might now by the goodness of God be deemed worthy' (cf. Dg 9:2–4; Meecham 1943:85–87). Christians are to imitate God's unconditional and non-discriminate love to all sinful people of all nations (cf. Clement of Alexandria endorse the concept, unconditional election in the *Stromata* 7.17). Secondly, the link between Imitating God and χρηστοτητα (goodness) is seen in *Diognetus* 10:4, the author urges the Christians to imitate God's goodness by loving all men and by showing them God's goodness, which includes humility and helping the needy as Christ did (cf. Dg 7:4; 10:5; Lake 1917:364, 372). Thirdly, the relation between Imitating God and ἀγάπη (sacrificial love). It is a divine favour shown towards men and the author urges Christians to imitate and embody this love (ἀγάπη) and express it to Christians and non-Christians, including the enemies and persecutors (cf. Dg 5:11; 6:6; 9:2; 10:2; 10:4; &10:7-thirteen-times in the text-echoes Jn 3:16; cf. eds. Bauer et al. 2000:6; Morris 1981:129–148, 260–269).

Based on God's love, his justice is understood as a starting point as sinners cannot save selves

His reasons for delaying his justification work as his mission plan (not sinners' work-plan):

'God, Himself from heaven established among men the truth and the holy and incomprehensible word and fixed it firmly in their hearts.' (cf. Meecham 1943:83)

And having clearly demonstrated our inability to enter the Kingdom of God on our own, one might be enabled to do so by God's power ... having therefore planned everything already in His own mind with His Child ... creating the season of righteousness which is now, so that we who in past times were from our own deeds convicted as unworthy of life might now, by the goodness of God be deemed worthy. (Dg 9:1–2; Holmes 1949:302; Meecham 1949:84–85)

'He [Jesus] might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.' (Rm 3:26; Lienhard 1970:285)

To benefit the sinners who are depraved and unable to understand and/or grasp the need for the Saviour and his just and right acts of salvation, he revealed his son, Jesus Christ, whom he send to save the sinners. God creator kept mystery with him from the start and hence he patiently wait for his own right time of grace (mercy) and timing, and hence

with love, care and/or tender-hearted he ushered in the age of redemption (cf. Dg. 8:7–10; 9:2; Eph 1:3–10; Holmes 1989:301). Humanity needs divine revelation (intervention) for 'no one is righteous, not one' for in and/or by themselves they are incapable to save themselves as they are dead spiritually and hence not in a right relationship with God (Rm 3:10–12, 23; Ps 14; Rm 1–3; eds. Aland et al. 2007:525; Schreiner 1998:165). The author used the biblical concepts such as justification to give a clear picture in addressing the needy and sinners' questions and challenges (cf. Arnold 2013:105, 114, 125; Chia 2000:97; Heintz 2004:107ff.; Magill 1963:50; Schaff 1980:106, 702).

His justification work as his mission plan deepen redemption story

The '... righteousness of one should justify the many', and '... what else could cover our sins but his righteousness?' (cf. Dg.9:2–4; Meecham 1943:87). '[F]or if he had not lived a life free from sin, then he could not have imputed his righteousness to sinners.' (cf. Arnold 2013:133f.)

The Epistle to Diognetus presents a forensic view of justification that is rooted in grace and stems from penal substitution. For the anonymous author of this epistle, justification is a legal declaration whereby God declares a sinner just and imputes to him the righteousness of Christ. (cf. Arnold 2013:104f.)

Justification is not a merit, but it is an unexpected or undeserving blessings. The letter made it clear, that: (1) forensically and legally the sinners deserve God's punishment – a death penalty, yet by his grace (mercy) God declared, imputed, attributed or counted sinners worthy of righteousness (δικαιοσυνη); (cf. Arnold 2013:105; eds. Bauer et al. 2000:605; Erickson 2006:835f.; Grudem 1994:722ff.); (2) base (root) for justification is of Christ's sacrificial love in paying a ransom (λυτρον) to make sinners' justification possible, whereby the unjust (ἀδικος) and lawless (ἀνομος) sinners are freed by God to stand before and relate with him (cf. Rm 3:2,12; Ps 14:3; Gl 4:4; 2 Cor 5:21; Arnold 2013:131ff.; eds. Bauer et al. 2000:246f.); (3) *In union with Christ, by virtue of his righteousness* and by his incorruptible (just, pure and holy) sacrifice, Christ become a substitutionary atonement to bear sinner's sin and they bear Christ's righteousness (cf. Crowe 2011:107; Holmes 1989:302; Lake 1917:351, 368, 370f.; Needham 2006:28).

Lastly, but not the least, the ὑπερ which is used 6x in Diognetus 9.2–3 is echoed in the New Testament, particularly in the Pauline letter (cf. Gl 3:13–Christ *became* a curse; 2 Cor 5:14, One has died *for* all; 2 Cor 5:15, Christ died *for* all; 2 Cor 5:21, Christ *became* sin; 1 Tm 2:6 – A ransom for all and in Tt. 2:14 Christ gave himself for us). The writers used the concepts in the letter that should be understood within their early Christian context of persecution the mid-2nd century (cf. Dg 5.11f., 14ff.; Williams 2006:651ff.).

His justification work as his mission plan has three goals as responses of imitating Christ:

[Y]ou will begin to speak of the mysteries of God, then you will both love and admire those who are being punished because

they will not deny God, then you will condemn the deceit and error of the world. (Lake 1917:373; Meecham 1943:85–86)

The first goal of imitating Christ is an Immediate goal, which is to persuade and convince his pagan recipient, Diogenetus is to continue to be strong as a Christian in time of hardship and persecution (cf. 1 Th 1:6; Foster 2007:162–168; Lake 1917:373; Meecham 1943:87, 135). The second goal of imitating Christ is the mediate goal, which is to defend, combat and/or refute (denouncing) the circulating pagan beliefs and practices, including the Gnostic and Platonic based philosophy and also the Judaism teachings in the late 1st century and the early 2nd century AD (cf. the author's arguments in Diogenetus, chapters 1, 4, 5, 11 and 12; Ehrman 2003:126, 130f.; 140; Gaston 2009:573ff.; Jefford 2014:2f.; Keener 2003:1:160ff.; Lake 1917:1ff.; Lieu 2002:183; Meecham 1949:97f.; Siker 2001:242–249). The third goal of imitating Christ is an ultimate goal, which is to honour and glorify God in all work done.

The conclusion of the letter to Diogenetus

O sweet exchange, o the inscrutable creation, o the unexpected benefits, that the wickedness of many should be concealed in the one righteous, and the righteousness of the one should make righteous the many wicked! (cf. Dg 9:5; Lake 1917:371)

At the climax of explaining salvation, Diogenetus interjected. He expressed exclamation, as a doxology of Joy, after explaining and realising his mercy of salvation and his goodness and love as a reason and motive behind and a basis of and for such a joyous exclamation to save and to justify sinners (cf. Dg 9:4; Probst 1872:329–333) and of joy (Eph 5:2; eds. Aland et al. 2007:664; Crowe 2011:101; Lake 1917:371; Meecham 1949:100; Blakeney 1941:12). Man is unable to imitate God apart from divine intervention (Holmes 1989:115–117).

Conclusion

This article reflects on the open letter written to unidentifiable recipient, called Diogenetus by anonymous author, in an unknown date and is full of paradoxical mission guidelines, for the church in challenging times, including the multicultural context including South Africa. In the letter of Diogenetus, it is clear that the Church is called out of the world, but to be in the world, while not being of the world. This sums up the significance and role and goals of the anonymous author. It is part of the distinct characteristics of the letter to Diogenetus, to win the readers to Christ and to strengthen believers by deepening, clarifying and advancing the distinct nature of Christianity and its theology in the period when the Christians were not only marginalised, hated, and misunderstood as irrelevant, impractical, abnormal, and anti-social religion, but also outlawed, persecuted and executed (martyrs). Like the Pauline, Johannine and *Didache*, among others, the letter to Diogenetus offers the Christian Church instructions and insights into the ecclesiastical issues to enrich and bolster

the Christian faith and life to be more like Christ. The author exhorts (*παραινέσεις*) Diogenetus to be a true disciple who is willing, even to die for faith in hope centred in love in the Lord (cf. Jn 13:34–35; 15:12–14).

The church in the polarised multicultural context of South Africa needs such a paradoxical mission guidelines, for the where the author of Diogenetus portrays the Christian paradoxical mission witness as a calling not only to live a Christian lifestyle being aware of their dual citizenship nature which is earthly and heavenly, but also to distinguishing what continues (while living within their respective cultural), and what discontinues especially when it comes to religious beliefs. The letter urges Christians to imitate God's love and justice as their paradoxical calling, whereby they are called to be the imitators (*μιμητής*) of God's goodness in the hostile context based on God's justification work carried out on their behalf that they are saved from God's anger regarding their sins. In response, three main goals in their imitation and witness of Christ include: *The first goal of imitating Christ is an Immediate goal*, which is to persuade and convince his pagan recipient, Diogenetus who is to continue to be strong as a Christian during hardship and persecution (cf. 1 Th 1:6; Foster 2007:162–168; Lake 1917:373; Meecham 1943:87, 135). *The second goal of imitating Christ is the mediate goal*, which is to defend, combat and /or refute (denouncing) the circulating pagan beliefs and practices, including the Gnostic and Platonic based philosophy and also the Judaism teachings in late 1st Century and the early 2nd century AD (cf. the author's arguments in Diogenetus, chapter 1, 4, 5, 11 and 12; Ehrman 2003:126; 130f.; 140; Gaston 2009:573ff.; Jefford 2014:2f.; Keener 2003:1:160ff.; Lake 1917:1ff.; Lieu 2002:183; Meecham 1949:97f.; Siker 2001:242–249). *The third goal of imitating Christ is an ultimate goal*, which is to honour and glorify God in all work performed.

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Author's contributions

The article is not only adding a voice to the on-going debate regarding a paradoxical mission witness but also adding value by revisiting scriptural basis and guidelines for a paradoxical mission witness in a polarised socio-economic and political context in South Africa and beyond. This article helps to stimulate further missional researches and practises in these areas.

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Disclaimer

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