

PLINY'S LETTER TO TRAJAN ABOUT CHRISTIANS



Pliny the Younger (61–c.113 AD), the Roman governor of Bithynia et Pontus (now in modern Turkey) wrote a letter to Roman Emperor Trajan c.112 AD and asked for counsel on dealing with the early Christians.



Pliny the Younger—Statue on the Duomo in Como Emperor Trajan—Reigned 98 to 117 AD

“It is my custom, Sir, to refer to you in all cases where I do not feel sure, for who can better direct my doubts or inform my ignorance? I have never been present at any legal examination of the Christians, and I do not know, therefore, what are the usual penalties passed upon them, or the limits of those penalties, or how searching an inquiry should be made. I have hesitated a great deal in considering whether any distinctions should be drawn according to the ages of the accused; whether the weak should be punished as severely as the more robust; whether if they renounce their faith they should be pardoned, or whether the man who has once been a Christian should gain nothing by recanting; whether the name itself, even though otherwise innocent of crime, should be punished, or only the

crimes that gather round it.

Roman Court Procedure

- There was a moral obligation to judge a case called "officium" for any male citizen that was chosen to do so.
- Legally no one was required to judge because it was recognized as a burden.
- The judge was also not required to come to a conclusion. If he swore that the case was not clear, he did not have to make a decision about anyone's guilt.

Roman Court Scene

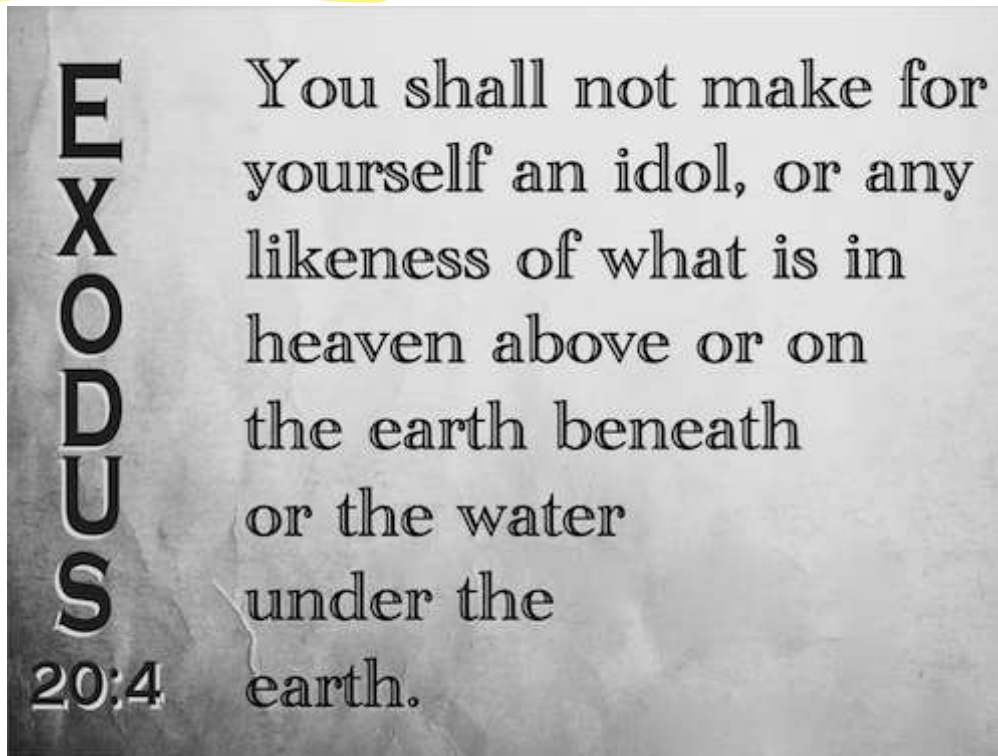


In the meantime, this is the plan which I have adopted in the case of those Christians who have been brought before me. I ask them whether they are Christians; if they say yes, then I repeat the question a second and a third time, warning them of the penalties it entails, and if they still persist, I order them to be taken away to prison until the Roman governor arrived."

Pliny's letter continues:

"For I do not doubt that, whatever the character of the crime may be which they confess, their pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy certainly ought to be punished. There were others who showed similar mad folly whom I reserved to be sent to Rome, as they were Roman citizens. Subsequently, as is usually the way, the very fact of my taking up this question led to a great increase of accusations, and a variety of cases were brought before me. A pamphlet was issued anonymously, containing the names of a number of people. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians and called upon the gods in the usual formula, reciting the words after me, those who offered incense and wine before your image, which I had given orders to be brought forward for this purpose, together with the statues of the deities – all such I considered should be discharged, especially as they cursed the

name of Christ, which, it is said, those who are really Christians cannot be induced to do.



Others, whose names were given me by an informer, first said that they were Christians and afterwards denied it, declaring that they had been but were so no longer, some of them having recanted many years before, and more than one so long as twenty years back. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the deities, and cursed the name of Christ. *But they declared that the sum of their guilt or their error only amounted to this, that on a stated day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak and to recite a hymn among themselves to Christ, as though he were a god, and that so far from binding themselves by oath to commit any crime, their oath was to abstain from theft, robbery, adultery, and from breach of faith, and not to deny trust money placed in their keeping when called upon to deliver it. When this ceremony was concluded, it had been their custom to depart and meet again to take food, but it was of no special character and quite harmless, and they had ceased this practice after the edict in which, in accordance with your orders, I had forbidden all secret societies.*

The above bold/italic print in Pliny's letter is one of the earliest records we have of how, supposedly, very early Christians got together and worshipped.

Pliny continues:

"I thought it the more necessary, therefore, to find out what truth there was in these statements by submitting two women, who were called deaconesses, to the torture, but I found nothing but a de-based superstition carried to great lengths. So I postponed my examination, and immediately consulted you. *The matter seems to me worthy of your consideration, especially as there are so many people involved in the danger. Many persons of all ages, and of both sexes alike, are being brought into peril of their lives by their accusers, and the process will go on. For the contagion of this superstition (Christianity) has spread not only through the free cities, but into the villages and the rural districts, and yet it seems to me that it can be checked and set right. It is beyond doubt that the temples, which have been almost deserted, are beginning again to be thronged with worshippers, that the sacred rites which have for a long*

Because of Trajan's tepid response to Christian "punishment" and because he did not pursue Christians, medieval theologians called him a "virtuous pagan."

These letters were written in c. 112 AD when pagan Rome was still struggling with how to handle this popular Christian movement. But in the ensuing two centuries, when a governor or a judge sat in judgment on Christians, he asked, "Are you a Christian?" If the person said, "Christianus sum" ("I am a Christian"), he or she was set aside for capital punishment.—Article by Sandra Sweeny Silver

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