



## ROMAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

### PLINY THE YOUNGER

A Roman author and administrator who served as the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, Pliny the Younger was the nephew and adopted son of a natural historian known as Pliny the Elder.

The younger Pliny is best known for his letters, and Bruce refers to him as “one of the world’s great letter writers, whose letters . . . have attained the status of literary classics.” Ten books of Pliny’s correspondence are extant today.

- The tenth book, written around AD 112, speaks about Christianity in the province of Bithynia and also provides some facts about Jesus.

Pliny found that the Christian influence was so strong that the pagan temples had been nearly deserted, pagan festivals severely decreased and the sacrificial animals had few buyers. Because of the inflexibility of the Christians and the emperor’s prohibition against political association, governor *Pliny took action against the Christians.*

Yet, because he was unsure how to deal with believers, if there should be any distinctions in treatment or if repentance made any difference, **he wrote to Emperor Trajan to explain his approach.**

Pliny dealt personally with the Christians who were turned over to him.

#### **Explaining to Trajan How he dealt with the Christians:**

- He interrogated them, inquiring if they were believers. If they answered in the affirmative he asked them two more times, under the threat of death.
- If they continued firm in their belief, he ordered them to be executed.
- Sometimes the punishment included torture to obtain desired information, as in the case of two female slaves who were deaconesses in the church.
- If the person was a Roman citizen, they were sent to the emperor in Rome for trial. If they denied being Christians or had disavowed their faith in the past, they “repeated after me an invocation to the Gods, and offered adoration . . . to your [Trajan’s] image.” Afterwards they “finally cursed Christ.”

Pliny explained that his purpose in all this was that “multitudes may be reclaimed from error.”

Since Pliny’s letter is rather lengthy, we will quote the portion which pertains directly to an account of early Christian worship of Christ:

*“They (the Christians) were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and*



*then reassemble to partake of food — but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. At this point Pliny adds that Christianity attracted persons of all societal ranks, all ages, both sexes and from both the city and the country.”*

## Conclusions

From Pliny’s letter we find several more facts about Jesus and early Christianity.

- (1) Christ was worshiped as deity by early believers.
- (2) Pliny refers late in his letter to the teachings of Jesus and his followers as “excessive superstition” and “contagious superstition,” which is reminiscent of the words of both Tacitus and Suetonius.
- (3) Jesus’ ethical teachings are reflected in the oath taken by Christians never to be guilty of a number of sins mentioned in the letter.
- (4) We find a probable reference to Christ’s institution of communion and the Christian celebration of the “love feast” in Pliny’s remark about their regathering to partake of ordinary food. The reference here alludes to the accusation on the part of non-Christians that believers were suspected of ritual murder and drinking of blood during these meetings, again confirming our view that communion is the subject to which Pliny is referring.
- (5) There is also a possible reference to Sunday worship in Pliny’s statement that Christians met “on a certain day.” Concerning early Christianity,
- (6) We see Pliny’s method of dealing with believers, from their identification, to their interrogation, to their execution. For those who denied being Christians, worship of the gods and the emperor gained them their freedom.
- (7) Interestingly, Pliny reports that true believers could not be forced to worship the gods or the emperor.
- (8) Christian worship involved a pre-dawn service, (9) which included singing hymns. The early time probably facilitated a normal working day.
- (10) These Christians apparently formed a typical cross-section of society in Bithynia, since they were of all classes, ages, localities and of both sexes.
- (11) There were recognized positions in the church, as illustrated by the mention of the two female deaconesses who were tortured for information.

While Pliny does not relate many facts about Jesus, he does provide a look at a very early example of Christian worship: Believers were meeting regularly and worshiping Jesus.

## EMPEROR TRAJAN

Pliny’s inquiry received a reply which is published along with his letters, although Emperor Trajan’s response is much shorter:

*“The method you have pursued, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those denounced to you as Christians is extremely proper. It is not possible to lay down any general rule which can be applied as the fixed standard in all cases of this nature. No search should be made for these people; when they are denounced*



*and found guilty they must be punished; with the restriction, however, that when the party denies himself to be a Christian, and shall give proof that he is not (that is, by adoring our Gods) he shall be pardoned on the ground of repentance, even though he may have formerly incurred suspicion. Informations without the accuser's name subscribed must not be admitted in evidence against anyone, as it is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and by no means agreeable to the spirit of the age."*

Trajan responds that Pliny was generally correct in his actions. If confessed Christians persist in their faith, they must be punished. However, three restrictions are placed on Pliny.

- (1) Christians should not be sought out or tracked down.
- (2) Repentance coupled with worship of the gods sufficed to clear a person. Pliny expressed doubts as to whether a person should be punished in spite of repentance and only recounts the pardoning of persons who had willingly given up their beliefs prior to questioning.
- (3) Pliny was not to honor any lists of Christians which were given to him if the accuser did not name himself.

These conditions imposed by emperor Trajan give us some insight into early official Roman views about Christianity.

- While persecution was certainly an issue and many Christians died without committing any actual crimes, the first century was not the worst period of persecution for believers.
- Trajan's restrictions on Pliny at least indicate that it was not a wholesale slaughter. Nonetheless, the persecution was real and many died for their faith.