Primary Source 3.1

EXCHANGE OF LETTERS BY PLINY THE YOUNER AND EMPEROR TRAJAN ON THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANITY¹

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (61–c. 113 A.D.), more commonly known as Pliny the Younger, as distinct from his uncle Pliny the Elder, was a man of many professions, serving as a military tribune in Syria in his younger years, later as a lawyer, then a politician, and finally as governor of Bithynia, a Roman province near today's Istambul. A prolific author, his best-known works are letters to contemporaries, in particular those during his time as governor, including many to Emperor Trajan (r. 98–117 A.D.) In the first letter below, Pliny writes to Trajan with questions of how to handle those found guilty of practicing Christianity at a time when the Roman government persecuted Christians for rejecting the Roman gods and refusing to worship the emperor. As Pliny had never witnessed a trial of Christians nor was familiar with the laws surrounding them, he wrote to Trajan asking how they were to be punished, if they should be searched for, and what exactly made them guilty—was it specific acts or merely being a Christian that warranted punishment? He also described his treatment of Christians and requested the emperor's approval of his methods. Trajan responded that Pliny had been handling the persecution of Christians properly, and that he should not search them out but only punish those brought before him with sufficient proof that they are Christians; all others should be released.

The exchange of letters occurred very soon after the apostolic period, at most forty years after the death of St Paul. It is also the only genuine document describing Christian doctrine and practice of this era and as such was carefully preserved for centuries by the Christians themselves.

For the text online, as well as other letters by Pliny the Younger, click <u>here.</u>

XCVII TO THE EMPEROR TRAJAN

It is my invariable rule, Sir, to refer to you in all matters where I feel doubtful; for who is more capable of removing my scruples, or informing my ignorance? Having never been present at any trials concerning those who profess Christianity, I am unacquainted not only with the nature of crimes, or the measure of their punishment, but how far it is proper to enter into an examination concerning them. Whether, therefore, any difference is usually made with respect to ages, or no distinction is to be observed between the young and the adult; whether repentance entitles them to a pardon, or, if a man has been once a Christianity, unattended with any criminal act, or only the crimes themselves inherent in the profession are punishable; on all these points I am in great doubt. In the meanwhile, the method I

¹ "Letters of Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus," trans. William Melmoth, in *Letters of Marcus Tullius Cicero and Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus*, vol. 9 of The Harvard Classics, ed. C. W. Eliot (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1909), 404–7.

have observed towards those who have been brought before me as Christians is this: I asked them whether they were Christians; if they admitted it, I repeated the question twice, and threatened them with punishment; if they persisted, I ordered them to be at once punished: for I was persuaded, whatever the nature of their opinions might be, a contumacious² and inflexible obstinacy certainty deserved correction. There were others also brought before me possessed with the same infatuation, but being Roman citizens,³ I directed them to be sent to Rome. But this crime spreading (as is usually the case) while it was actually under prosecution. several instances of the same nature occurred. An anonymous information was laid before me containing a charge against several persons, who upon examination denied they were Christians, or had ever been so. They repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered religious rites with wine and incense before your statue (which for that purpose I had offered to be brought, together with those of the gods), and even reviled the name of Christ: whereas there is no forcing, it said, those who are really Christians into any of these compliances: I thought it proper. therefore, to discharge them. Some among those who accused by a witness in person at first confessed themselves Christians, but immediately after denied it; the rest owned indeed that they had been of that number formerly, but had now (some above three, others more, and a few above twenty years ago) renounced that error. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, uttering imprecations at the same time against the name of Christ. They affirmed the whole of their guilt, or this error, was, that they met on a stated day before it was light, and addressed a form of prayer to Christ, as to a divinity, binding themselves by a solemn oath, not for the purpose of any wicked design, 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 eat in common a harmless meal. From this custom, however, they desisted after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your commands, I forbade the meeting of any assembles.⁴ After receiving this account, I judged it so much the more necessary to endeavor to extort the real truth, by putting two female slaves to the torture, who were said to officiate in their religious rites:⁵ but all I could discover was evidence of an absurd and extravagant superstition. I deemed it expedient, to adjourn all further proceedings, in order to consult you. For it appears to be a matter highly deserving your consideration, more especially as great numbers must be involved in the danger of these prosecutions, which have already extended, and are still likely to extend, to persons of all ranks and ages, and even of both sexes. In fact, this contagious superstition is not confirmed to the cities only, but has spread its infection among the neighbouring villages and country. Nevertheless, it still seems possible to restrain its progress. The temples, at least,

² Uncompromisingly disobedient to authority.

³ By law, Roman citizens enjoyed privileged treatment within the judicial system; they could not be beaten, for example, and could demand trial in Rome, as St Paul did (see Acts 25:1–12).

⁴ From earliest times, the Roman government prohibited all unauthorized gatherings of people.

⁵ These women probably exercised the same office as Phoebe, mentioned by St. Paul (Rom. 16:1–2), a deaconess and leader of the church of Cenchrea, a village near Corinth, Greece, who oversaw charitable activities and helped with the baptism of women and girls.

which were once almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred rites, after a long intermission, are again revived; while there is a general demand for the victims, which till lately found very few purchasers. From all this it is easy to conjecture what numbers might be reclaimed if a general pardon were granted to those who shall repent of their error.

XCVIII TRAJAN TO PLINY

You have adopted the right course, my dearest Secundus,⁶ in investigating the charges against the Christians who were brought before you. It is not possible to lay down any general rule for all such cases. Do not go out your way to look for them. If indeed they should be brought before you, and the crime is proved, they must be punished;⁷ with the restriction, however, that where the party denies he is a Christian, and shall make it evident that he is not, by invoking our gods, let him (notwithstanding any former suspicion) be pardoned upon his repentance. Anonymous information ought not to be received in any sort of prosecution. It is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and is quite foreign to the spirit of our age.

⁶ Pliny the Younger's family name.

⁷ Roman legal precedent demanded persecution of any foreign religious practices, not just of Christianity.