

Pliny's Epistle to Trajan

## *Pliny's Epistle to Trajan\**

About A.D. 112

SIR, it is my constant method to apply myself to you for the resolution of all my doubts, for who can better govern my dilatory way of proceeding, or instruct my ignorance? I have never been present at the examination of the Christians (by others), on which account I am unacquainted with what uses to be inquired into, and what and how far they used to be punished; nor are my doubts small, whether there be not distinction to be made between the ages (of the accused), and whether tender youth ought to have the same punishment with strong men? whether there be not room for pardon upon repentance? or whether it may not be an advantage to one that had been a Christian, that he has forsaken Christianity? whether the bare name, without any crimes besides, or the crimes adhering to that name, be to be punished? In the meantime, I have taken this course about those who have been brought before me as Christians:—I asked them whether they were Christians or not? If they confessed that they were Christians, I asked them again, and a third time, intermixing threatenings with the questions: if they persevered in their confession, I ordered them to be executed; for I did not doubt but, let their confession be of any sort whatsoever, this positiveness and inflexible obstinacy

deserved to be punished. There have been some of this mad sect whom I took notice of in particular as Roman citizens, that they might be sent to that city. After some time, as is usual in such examinations, the crime spread itself, and many more cases came before me. A libel was sent me, though without an author, containing many names (of persons accused). These denied that they were Christians now, or ever had been. They called upon the gods, and supplicated to your image, which I caused to be brought to me for that purpose, with frankincense and wine: they also cursed Christ: none of which things, as it is said, can any of those that are really Christians be compelled to do; so I thought fit to let them go. Others of them, that were named in the libel, said they were Christians, but presently denied it again; that, indeed, they had been Christians, but had ceased to be so, some three years, some many more; and one there was that said he had not been so these twenty years. All these worshipped your image, and the images of our gods: they also cursed Christ. However, they assured me, that the main of their fault, or of their mistake was this,—that they were wont, on a stated day, to meet together before it was light and to sing a hymn to Christ, as a god, alternately; and to oblige themselves



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by sacrament (or oath), not to do any thing that was ill, but that they would commit no theft, or pilfering, or adultery; that they would not break their promises, or deny what was deposited with them, when it was required back again: after which it was their custom to depart, and to meet again at a common but innocent meal, which yet they had left off upon that edict which I published at your command, and wherein I had forbidden any such conventicles. These examinations made me think it necessary to inquire, by torments, what the truth was, which I did of two servant-maids, which were called deaconesses; but still I discovered no more, than that they were addicted to a bad and an extravagant superstition. Hereupon I have put off any further examinations, and have recourse to you; for the affair seems to be well worth consultation, especially on account of the number of those that are in danger; for there are many of every age, of every rank, and of both sexes, which are now and hereafter likely to be called to account, and to be in danger; for this superstition is spread like a contagion, not only into cities and towns, but into country villages also, which yet there is reason to hope may be stopped and corrected. To be sure, the temples, which were almost forsaken, begin already to be frequented; and the holy solemnities, which were long intermitted, begin to be revived. The sacrifices begin to sell well everywhere of which very few purchasers had of late appeared; whereby it is easy to suppose how

great a multitude of men may be amended, if place for repentance be admitted.

S. H. Fröhlich wrote in the year 1834:

"The above letter written by a heathen statesman concerning Christians almost at the same time and in the same region where the apostle John completed his work and his life is a mirror for both, for the present Christians and non-Christians, in which to see how very much alike on both sides the spirit and the intention is today as compared with those days. That those were true Christians whom Satan, the god of this world, has persecuted so cruelly and unjustly, no one will doubt that, and that they are true heathens who at the present time are judging so falsely concerning the Christians and are acting with as little regard as the wise men of this world did then, that also is not subject to doubt. We too are now experiencing the same spirit of disbelief which decries and persecutes the Christians as fools, fanatics, sectarians and forbids them to speak the word of Christ and would destroy their meetings. If people were not blind they would be compelled to see how very much alike all the circumstances and relations are now and then. But now it is concealed from their eyes and in their blindness they fall over the stones which lie in their way whereunto also they are set. (I Pet. 2:8; Matt. 21:44)

To idolatry and the service of false gods the devil endeavors to persuade us either by crafty words or to force

us by power, but God forces no one to the true service of God. The devil ever endeavors to separate us from God and Christ, but no one can turn from the devil to Christ without being persecuted. God does not use such means. The spirit of Christ in the faithful is not a spirit of force or of servitude but of will-  
ingness and kinship. (I John 4:16) In this the word of the devil is distinguished from the word of Christ.

In this spiritual struggle between light and darkness the world is still working towards the fulfillment of that mysterious statement concerning the birth of the twin sons of

Rebecca: two peoples are in thy body and one people will prevail over the other people and the greater will serve the smaller. (Gen. 25:22-33; Rom. 9:10-13) and the nearer it comes to birth the more these two strike each other in the body. Whoever has eyes to see, let him see; whoever has ears to hear, let him hear; and to him to whom God has given an understanding heart to know the truth, he will keep His word, bring fruit unto patience, and bear disgrace, ridicule and persecution to the revelation of the children of God in glory.

\*Pliny was one of the foremost Romans of his time, a lawyer, senator, friend of the contemporary historian Tacitus, in late life appointed Governor of the Roman province of Bithynia (near Constantinople bordering the Black Sea) by the Emperor Trajan. The Christians referred to in Pliny's letter were possibly converts of the Apostles directly (Acts 16:7; I Pet. 1:1) and certainly of those who believed in Christ through the Apostle's word.



—*Excerpt from S. H. Fröblich*

1 John 3:4—"But because we were once also of the world and have been saved we dare not hate any human being but instead must love all men for the sake of seeking and saving them. We must, however, hate this world because it lies in wickedness and friendship with it is enmity with God and those believers who do not keep themselves from it are called adulterers and adulteresses in a spiritual sense."

Published by  
APOSTOLIC CHRISTIAN PUBLISHING COMPANY  
1327 W. Colvin Street  
Syracuse, New York 13207

Free copies available