

## ***Two Letters***

Trajana became the Emperor of Rome in A.D. 98. Shortly thereafter he conferred the government of the province of Bithynia to his ingenious and celebrated friend Pliny. Severe edicts against Christians had been issued by previous Emperors and Pliny seemed hesitant to carry them out without first consulting the Caesar himself.

The Scriptures command that we “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body” (Heb. 13:2.) Perhaps reading these letters will help us to obey the Bible and remember those who are suffering for the cause of Christ. They may be out of sight, but may they never be out of our minds.

### Letter # 1 - “C. Pliny, to the Emperor Trajan.”

C. Pliny, to the Emperor Trajan, wishes health. Sire! It is customary with me to consult you upon every doubtful occasion; for where my own judgment hesitates, who is more competent to direct me than yourself, or to instruct me when uninformed? I never had occasion to be present at any examination of the Christians before I came into this province; I am therefore ignorant to what extent it is usual to inflict punishment or urge prosecution. I have also hesitated whether there should not be some distinction made between the young and the old, the tender and the robust; whether pardon should not be offered to the penitent, or whether the guilt of an avowed profession of Christianity can be expiated by the most unequivocal retraction - whether the profession itself is to be regarded as a crime, however innocent in other respects the professor may be; or whether the crimes attached to name, must be proved before they are made liable to punishment.

In the mean time, the method I have hitherto observed with the Christians, who have been accused of such, is as follows. I interrogated them - Are you Christians? If they avowed it, I put the same question to them the second, and a third time, threatening them with punishment decreed by the law; if they still persisted, I ordered them to be immediately executed; for of this I had no doubt, whatever was the nature of their religion, that such perverseness and inflexible obstinacy certainly deserved punishment. Some that were afflicted with this madness, on account of their privileges as Roman citizens, I reserved to be sent to Rome, to be referred in your tribunal.

In the discussion of this matter, accusations multiplying, a diversity of cases occurred. A schedule of names was sent me by an unknown accuser, but when I cited the persons before me, many denied the fact that they were or ever had been Christians: and they repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and of your image, which for this purpose I had ordered to be brought with the statues of the other deities. They performed sacred rites with wine frankincense, and execrated Christ, none of which things, I am assured, a real Christ can ever be compelled to do. These, therefore, I thought proper to discharge. Others, named by an informed, at first acknowledged themselves Christians, and then denied it, declaring that though they had been Christians, they had renounced their profession, some three years ago, other still longer, and some even twenty years ago. All these worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and at the same time execrated Christ.

And this was the account which they gave me of the nature of the religion they once had professed, whether it deserves the name of crime or error; namely, that they were accustomed on a stated day to assemble before sunrise, and to join together in singing hymns to Christ as to a deity; binding themselves as with a solemn oath not to commit any kind of wickedness; to be guilty neither of theft, robbery, nor adultery; never to break a promise, or to keep back a deposit when called upon. Their worship being concluded, it was their custom to separate, and meet together again for a repast, promiscuous indeed, and without any distinction of rank or sex, but perfectly harmless; and even from this they desisted, since the publication of my edict, in which, agreeably, to your orders, I forbade any societies of that sort.

For further information, I thought it necessary, in order to come at the truth, to put to the

torture two females who were called deaconesses. But I could extort from them nothing except the acknowledgment of an excessive and depraved superstition; and, therefore, desisting from further investigation, I determined to consult you, for the number of culprits is so great as to call forth the most serious deliberation. Information is pouring in against multitudes of every age, of all orders, and of both sexes; and more will be impeached; for the contagion of this superstition has spread not only through cities, but villages also, and even reached the farm houses. I am of the opinion, nevertheless, that it may be checked, and the success of my endeavours hitherto forbids despondency; for the temples, once almost desolate, begin to be again frequented - the sacred solemnities, which had for some time been intermitted, are not attended afresh, and the sacrificial victims, which once could scarcely find a purchaser, now obtain a brisk sale. When I infer, that many might be reclaimed, were the hope of pardon, on their repentance, absolutely confirmed.

Letter # 2 - "Trajan to Pliny"

My Dear Pliny,

You have done perfectly right in managing as you have, the matters which relate to the impeachment of the Christians. No one general rule can be laid down which will apply to all cases. These people are not to be hunted up by informers; but if accused and convicted, let them be executed; yet with this restriction, that if any renounce the profession of Christianity, and give proof of it by offering supplications to our gods, however suspicious their past conduct may have been, they shall be pardoned on their repentance. But anonymous accusations should never be attended to, since it would be establishing a precedent of the worst kind, and altogether inconsistent with the maxims of my government.

Taken from the Gospel Restored, by Walter Scott, Cincinnati 1836