

**Question: How were the early Christians perceived by the Romans?**

**Answer:** Pliny the Younger, a Roman, and governor of the province of Bithynia, was one of the first officials to address what he perceived as a problem regarding Christians in his province. Pliny is significant because he addresses Christianity from an outsider's perspective. In about the year 107 AD, Pliny writes a letter to the highest authority for an answer in regards to how to deal with the Christian phenomenon: the Roman emperor Trajan (emperor from 98-117 AD). In his letter Pliny makes it clear what he sees as the Christian problem. He tells the Emperor Trajan that men of almost every rank were converting to the Christian religion and renouncing their belief in the Roman Imperial Court of gods. He calls the Christian faith nothing more than a, "depraved and immoderate superstition" (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 37). Pliny even gives account to the odd practice of Christians gathering on a specific day to worship (Sunday), and offering up hymns to Christ as if he were God (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 160).

As provincial governor, Pliny would travel to different cities making sure that their funds were not being misused as well as enforce the power of the emperor beyond the city of Rome. Doing these tasks, he ran into Christians, forcing them either to renounce their faith in Christ or be put to death. Pliny's concern as he encountered more and more Christians was whether or not he should show mercy according to the individual's age, and whether or not punishment should be administered to people regardless if they were true Christians, or just Christians by name (non-practicing Christians). Trajan responded to Pliny saying, "You have adopted the right course, my friend, with regard to the Christians; for no universal rule, to be applied to all cases, can be laid down in this matter. They (Christians) should not be searched for; but when accused and convicted, they should be punished; yet if any one denies that he has been a Christian, and proves it by action, namely, by worshipping our gods, he is to be pardoned upon his repentance, even though suspicion may still cleave to him from his antecedents. But anonymous accusations must not be admitted in any criminal process; it sets a bad example, and is contrary to our age" (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 37). Though this exchange between Pliny and Trajan seems rather light hearted, many Christians lost their lives by Pliny's hand. Considered a "Roman Gentleman" Pliny had sent a "tender woman" to the rack (an execution device) because of her professed belief in Christ (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 37).

Pliny's own concerns regarding the Christians had begun when some of his constituents in his governing region of Asia Minor had complained to him about the growing number of Christians. The problem the Roman citizens wanted Pliny to address seems to be less religiously oriented and more economical. The reason for this is that those converts from the Roman Imperial Cult to Christianity no longer had use for purchasing animals that would eventually be offered up for sacrifice to the Roman gods (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 21). Since this was the case, local butchers and other business owners who made their money off of sales of meat and animals for this purpose began losing their businesses because of Christian converts.

Trajan's own response to Pliny makes it clear that they had no real grounds for putting Christians to death. Other than not offering sacrifice to the Roman gods, the Christians were upstanding Roman citizens. They did not cause public scenes or commit lewd acts. In fact, during violent interrogation of Christians, Pliny discovered that they had taken an oath never to steal, commit adultery, or to break their word (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 241). It is clear through Pliny and the Emperor Trajan's correspondence that they both greatly misunderstood the beliefs and practices of Christianity. Worship of Jesus in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century was an underground phenomenon that spread quickly through the ranks and people of the Roman Empire because of the great appeal it had for the common person.