

65. Once More in Pontus

Pliny Letter 96

The troubles of the Nineties continued to recur in the following decades.

In 109, Pliny the Younger was given charge of the north Asian province of Bithynia-Pontus by Emperor Trajan. He worked his way through the territory, cleaning up fiscal irregularities. After two years, he had reached Amisus, the easternmost city of the province. At Sinope, on the Black Sea shore, he was asked to judge cases of Christians who had refused to worship the Emperor, and were subject to the death penalty. Anonymous denunciations poured in. Pliny had never handled such cases, and wrote to Trajan for advice. Pliny's letter includes the only known description of the practice of a Christian church. Here it is.

It is my custom, Sir, to bring before you everything about which I am in doubt. For who can better guide my uncertainty or inform my ignorance? I have never been present at trials of Christians; for that reason, I do not know what the charge usually is and to what extent it is usually punished. I have been in no little uncertainty about whether a distinction should be made between different ages, or whether, however young they may be, they should be treated no differently from the more mature ones; whether pardon should be granted for repentance or whether it is of no help to the man who has been a Christian to have given it up; whether it is the name itself, if it is free from crimes, or the crimes associated with the name which are being punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were prosecuted before me on the charge of being Christians, I followed this procedure. I asked the people themselves whether they were Christians. Those who admitted that they were, I asked a second and a third time, warning them of the punishment. Those who persisted I ordered to be executed. For I was in no doubt that, whatever it might be that they were admitting to, their stubbornness and unyielding obstinacy certainly ought to be punished. There were others of a similar madness whom I have listed as due to be sent on to the city, because they were Roman citizens.

Subsequently, in the course of dealing with the matter, as usually happens, the charge spread widely and more forms of it turned up. An anonymous pamphlet containing the names of many persons was posted. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, after they had called upon the gods when I dictated the formula, and after they had made offerings of incense and wine to your statue which I had ordered to be brought in with the images of the gods for this purpose, and had also cursed Christ, none of which acts, it is said, those who are truly Christians can be compelled to perform, I decided should be discharged.

Others, named by an informer, said that they were Christians and then denied it; they said that they had in fact been Christians but had given it up, some three years before, some longer ago than that, and a few as much as twenty (*non nemo etiam ante viginti*). All these also both paid homage to your statue and to the images of the gods and cursed Christ. Moreover, they maintained that this had been the sum of their guilt or error, that they had been in the habit of gathering together before dawn on a fixed day, and of singing antiphonally a hymn to Christ as if to a god, and of binding themselves by oath not to some wickedness, but not to commit acts of theft or robbery or adultery, not to break faith, and not to refuse to return money placed in their keeping when called upon to do so. When these ceremonies had been completed, they said it had been their custom to disperse and to meet again to take food, but food that was ordinary and harmless; they said that they had given up doing even this after my edict in which, in accordance with your instructions, I banned secret societies.

So I believed it to be all the more necessary to ascertain what the truth was from two slave women who were called deaconesses¹ and under torture. I found nothing other than a depraved and extravagant superstition.

And so I postponed the hearing and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me worthy of your consideration, especially on account of the number who are endangered. For many persons of every age, of every rank, of both sexes, are and will be brought into danger. The infection of this superstition has spread, not only through the towns, but also through the villages and the countryside; it seems possible for it to be checked and put right. At any rate, it is established that temples which just now were almost abandoned have begun to be thronged, and customary rites which had long been suspended to be renewed, and the flesh of sacrificial victims, for which until recently very few buyers were to be found, to be sold far and wide. From this it is easy to conjecture what a host of people could be reformed, if room were given for repentance.²

¹The original Latin is: *ex duabus ancillis, quae ministrae dicebantur*. It is these reports of later persecutions that enable the dating of the earliest persecutions to about 20 years earlier; see Chapters 56 and following

²Translation from Radice.

Reflections

The requirement of Emperor worship was universal in the Empire; only the Jews had been granted an exemption. Once the Jesus sect members had been expelled from the synagogues, they were no longer legally regarded as Jews, and the requirement applied. Once they had had to curse Christ to remain *in* the synagogues; now they had to curse Christ to stay alive *outside* the synagogues. How many died, over the years, we do not know, but Pliny refers to repeated denunciations in his own day, and to trials going back as much as 20 years.

Readers may make their own estimate.

The deaconesses were evidently the leading figures in at least two of these churches. This is a throwback, a pattern persisting despite the post-Apostolic tendency to conform to contemporary society by limiting the role of women. Here, in remote northern Pontus, we see the older way still in being.

These churches were of an older type in another way also: they emphasized the rule against fraud (withholding money owed), which was Jesus' addition to his Five Mosaic Commandments. We have seen that many Alpha documents mention it. By that test, these were Alpha churches.

These churches were most likely founded in the grassroots expansion which began in the lifetime of Jesus. That first wave took the Jesus message south to Alexandria, whence came the Alpha Christian Apollos; north to Pontus; and west to Corinth, where (as Paul later complained) Alpha folk were present.

And the Alpha persuasion, despite lacking an organized institutional base, continued to survive in the years to come.