

APOSTOLIC FATHERS

Those who followed the apostles in AD 60's to mid 2nd century.

The name is given to them because they were thought to have known the apostles and their writings show a very close affinity to those of the apostles

The Church faced new questions in this period:

1. The original eye-witnesses of Jesus were diminished or dead so the church lost its links with the historic foundations provided by the original oral tradition

2. There was a separation from the Jewish base to a Gentile based church which affected its teaching and life. Its historic link with the church in Jerusalem ended. When Jerusalem was destroyed in AD70, the Christians had fled to Pella. By AD100, Christians were in Asia Minor, Syria, Macedonia, Greece and Rome. Antioch, Ephesus and Rome were the chief city centres.

3. Converts were mainly from lower socio- economic classes, even slaves, although some were from higher classes.

4. Christians were no longer regarded a sect of Judaism by themselves, the Jews or the Romans. This meant that they no longer sat under the protection given to the Jews to practise their religion but were seen by Rome as an illegal religion and pursued and persecuted as such.

5. The immediacy of the Holy Spirit in guiding the church was less reported.

6. The gospels were compiled during this period, although exact dating is difficult. The most current theory is the Synoptic theory which places Mark as the first written gospel, about AD70, which was then used by Matthew and Luke (about 85-95) who added other material, to Mark, some of which they have in common and other which is special to each of them. There were other fragments around too. The dating of John's Gospel is contested, some say AD90, others are now dating it much earlier.

7. Jesus was no long around in the flesh - he was now exalted and with them in spirit. He had suffered humiliation as the Suffering servant of Isaiah prophesied. The Christians thought of themselves as a separated people, a new race, the true Israel, no longer citizens of Rome although they lived respectfully under its government. Their citizenship was in the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city. Belief in Jesus was accompanied by repentance and by baptism as the entry into the community. In the east - Syria and Asia Minor - salvation lay in the person of Christ and the incarnation. To know Jesus Christ is to have life and immortality - he revealed a new humanity In the west (Rome etc) salvation centred around right relations with God and forgiveness of sins.

The documents are scant but we will consider:

The letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, written between AD 75 - 100

The 7 letters of Ignatius, written from Smyrna and Troas on his way to Rome to 'meet the beasts' and so his Lord, about AD110

Polycarp - His letter to the Philippians and about his martyrdom

Teaching in the Didache,

The Revelation to John written about AD90

** Access to the writings of these men can be got at the website:

< www.earlychristianwritings.com >

Some of the issues of the church at this time

1. Some issues were similar to those of Peter, Paul and other apostles, outlined in our earlier meetings.

2. They continued to face increased **problems from within the church**. They were concerned how to be faithful to the apostolic witness, now that the eyewitnesses were not around, and to keep the testimony true and the **unity** of the church.

(i) Their answer lay in **church order** which meant honoring of the the leadership - the bishops/ overseers, presbyters/ elders and deacons - whose task it was to care for the people and and preserve truth in word and sacrament. Those who oversee and those who serve. Not one person but a group of leaders / elders, chosen by the church and men of good character, heads of local fellowships not of dioceses. By Ignatius he is peaking of one leader/ bishop over a fellowship but working with other elders ans deacons.

(ii) their other answer lay in keeping the **written records** preserved and circulated among the communities of believers in different places.

The records included what we now classify as the canon, plus other writings such as 1 Clement. They covered:

- OT references to the coming Christ / Messiah
 - stories giving information of the life of Jesus and about those who opposed him to give understanding of what led to his crucifixion
 - Jesus' teachings - in sayings , parables , Lord's prayer, sermon on Mount
 - Ethical instruction about how children of God live
- Caird in Apostolic Age points to a 4-fold form of instruction in the early church
- to put off pagan vices and put on new life
 - to submit to each other and those in authority
 - to watch and pray
 - and to resist the devil

These were given in the context of a person having confessed Christ and been baptised in Christ- never as a means of becoming a Christian

3. Threats to the unity or beliefs came from **other groups within the church**

(a) from **Judaizers**, wanting to impose Jewish Law on all believers in Christ. We saw this in out study of Paul but pressure continued from this group.

(b) and **false teachers**,

(i) especially from a **gnostic** background.

The Gnostics were present in the Greek- Roman world. They were generally outside the church but their thinking infiltrated into the church and some incorporated the Christian beliefs into their system . They were not a homogeneous group but the belief that was common to them was that they had special knowledge which was available only to those with true knowledge [Gnostics took their name from the Greek word "gnosis" which means knowledge].

They thought that matter and the material world were unreal or evil; the body is material and is evil; it imprisons the spirit and misguides our true nature; it needs to be escaped for the spirit is caught in it. The world and their bodies are not our true home but are an obstacle to salvation.

God created spiritual beings and he will send a spiritual messenger to awaken those spirits, bringing special knowledge that brings salvation. Christian gnosticism thought this messenger was Christ who reminded people of their heavenly origin and gave special knowledge for salvation. They rejected that Jesus had a body like ours. He may have appeared to be human but was

not - so they denied the incarnation of Jesus, that he became a man. Some thought that not all human beings have a spirit and therefore were not able to be awakened and to be saved - only the spiritual will be saved and return to the spiritual realm.

They reflected their belief in two opposing lifestyles

One was that since the body was evil the body and its passions needed to be controlled.

The other was that since the spirit is good and cannot be destroyed, the body could be left to its own devices and let to follow its passions. [Gonzales. Story of Christianity.p58-60]

The movement threatened the church beliefs about creation and the very humanity of Christ, his death and resurrection. **Docetists**, a form of gnosticism, thought Jesus only "seemed" to be a man. In the New Testament, Paul is writing against this group that came into the church in Colossae as is John in his letters. Ignatius is at pains to emphasise Jesus' history in space and time and attacks those who teach that Jesus' life and sufferings were only "apparent".

(ii) some who **split faith and conduct** and so lived immoral lives.

James letter addresses this as do other epistles and the gospels which give direction for the life of a believer. This split was more evident when Gentiles entered the church. The Jewish believers had come from a strong moral tradition based on the Law which had been given by God to Moses for His "holy people". When Gentiles joined them, they did not have the same background and so the new believers had to be taught about living a holy life of the people of God.

4. Opposition to the church came from outside the church and resulted in increased persecution. This was not always across the whole of the Roman Empire at the same time nor always continuous but depended on who was the ruling Emperor and the local peoples' attitudes to their neighbouring Christians. Two of the people we are reading this month were martyred - Ignatius, who writes his letters enroute to Rome to be killed and Polycarp who was also martyred.

More details about the persecution of Christians by Rome in the first 3 centuries is included at the end of this paper.

READINGS: Some of the writings from c AD 70 - 110

1 CLEMENT [AD 30-100??]

Read: the text of his letter at

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-roberts.html>

The English translation is by Roberts-Donaldson

His life:

Not much is known about him- He was a bishop in Rome about the end of the first century. He is identified by Eusebius as a friend of Paul and that his letter was read widely in the early churches. He was highly respected.

Thought to be a bishop in Rome – either immediately after Peter or 2nd or 3rd after Linus and Cletus.

Tradition associates him with the Clement mentioned in Philippians 4.3 and the one mentioned in Shepherd of Hermas 2.4,3. Others suggest he may be the Clement of a distinguished Roman family – Titus Flavius Clemens. In AD 95, he was accused of treason and impiety by his

cousin, the Emperor Domitian, because of his Jewish leanings. He was put to death and his wife, Dimitilla, banished. Some think the Jewish interests were, in fact, Christian.

Another story about Clement is that he was put to death by being tied to an anchor and thrown into the sea. Accordingly, he is often depicted with an anchor, and many churches in port towns, which minister chiefly to mariners are named for him.

His message:

The earliest writings are from Clement, an elder in Rome to the believers in Corinth.

The area of major concern was the division that had arisen by the forced removal of certain leaders by some within the fellowship in Corinth. His appeal to the church in Corinth was to respect the position of authority of the elders and to reinstate them. He sees the source of the disagreement as envy. He calls for repentance and obedience to the Lord and holiness in life. To him humility, lowliness of life, and longsuffering are the key, which is the example given by Christ. His appeal is for unity and peace within the church. He uses examples from the Old Testament, the apostles and Christ himself to back up his arguments.

Notice:

1. He is not acting as a bishop over the whole of the church but as a representative leader in one group of believers in Rome writing a reply to another fellowship, in Corinth. The letter appears to be written by the church in Rome to the church in Corinth not making any claim for an individual writer. Later writers associated it with Clement.

2. He uses as authoritative the Old Testament, words of Jesus #13, #22 and some of Paul's letters, referring to things he wrote to the Corinthians re party spirit arising out of their apostolic origins #47 and the nature of love #49.

3. He has a very strong sense of community of believers and unity within the body of Christ.

4. Claim of authority within the church is based on apostolic authority. #37, 38, 42 -44

He speaks of an order of Christ, the apostles, bishops and deacons (their first-fruits when they proved them by the Holy spirit). Having foreseen that there would be strife about those who would follow the ones who would die they provided men who should succeed them with the following qualities. They had those appointed by them

- with the consent of the whole church,
- who have blamelessly served the flock of Christ in humble, peaceable and disinterested (with all modesty) spirit

- have for a long time possessed the good opinion of all

So Clement thought it was no light sin to unjustly dismiss from the ministry those who have blamelessly and holily fulfilled the duties of their ministry.

These qualities of a bishop/ overseer in the church reflect those of Peter in 1 Peter 5 and Paul in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1.6f.

Bishop and presbyter seem interchangeable.

5. While not outlining any doctrine in detail, he frequently referred to the Trinity of Father, his Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. #46

6. Early in letter he refers to "sudden and repeated calamities and reverses which are befalling us", some see this as increase persecutions of the church by emperors, either Nero 60's AD or Domitian, most likely Domitian (AD 81-96)

7. There was a 2nd letter written by Clement but this is attributed to a Clement of Alexandria later in the 2nd century

IGNATIUS

To read his letters

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/ignatius.html>

In this site, each letter is listed separately so I suggest you open the ones under "Online text for Ignatius of Antioch" marked English translation by J.B. Lightfoot.

Bishop of Antioch in Syria when a persecution broke out there- cause unknown but probably during the reign of Trajan (98-117 Ad)

He was taken to Rome to be "exposed to wild beasts."

He arrived in Smyrna in Asia Minor, was greeted there by delegations from neighbouring churches and wrote 7 letters en route to being killed -

4 from Smyrna – to the Ephesians, to Trallians, to Magnesians and to Romans

and 3 from Troas –to Philadelphians, to Smyrna and to Polycarp.

The major things Ignatius wrote about:

1. Order in the church, under the authority of bishops, presbyters and deacons,

He warned the people about schisms and told them to always respect and obey their bishops, presbyters and deacons. He had a very high view of their place and to disobey them amounted to disinheritance from the kingdom of God. He writes glowingly of the qualities of the bishops who visited him on his journey.

His letter to Polycarp, the bishop at Smyrna, gives advice about how to care for his flock.

Unity in the body was paramount and was maintained by obedience to those in authority and care for one another.

He encouraged the people to live a life of faith and love of Jesus, which would flow over into a life of love for each other.

2. He warned against false teaching of

a) Judaisers who wanted to preserve Jewish practices. It was "monstrous to talk of Jesus Christ and practise Judaism". [to Magnesians. 8-11]

b) docetists who did not think that Jesus was really a man but unreal and so that Jesus' sufferings and death were only "apparent". Ignatius wrote of the reality of Jesus' life in space/ time history– his birth, death and resurrection and pointed out that if Jesus was not truly man then his impending death as martyr was in vain. [To Magnesians 11; Trallians 9-12] Jesus was a real man and son of God.

3. He anticipated his martyrdom in Rome as receiving his inheritance as a disciple of Jesus. This is expressed in his letter to the Romans, which is different from his other letters. He does not want the Romans to do anything that would prevent his death because he sees his martyrdom as attaining to God and Christ, being counted worthy of following His Lord's example of suffering and then rising to be with him. He asks for their prayer to have power to continue to the end.

4. In each of his early letters, he expresses his concern for the church at Antioch in Syria, from which he had been taken. In his letter to Smyrna, however, the church in Antioch seems at peace.[ch12] There was obviously contact between the fellowships in different places for he asks the different churches to send deacons to encourage those in Antioch.

THE DIDACHE _ THE TEACHING OF THE APOSTLES

Read <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html>

It is a manual of the early church

The work divides into 2 parts

a) Moral instruction [1-6], founded on "Two Ways" - one of Life and one of Death, with a great difference between them. it has the similar sound to parts of the sermon on the Mount and the Law with its list of do and don'ts.

b) Church ritual and discipline

re baptism, fastings, eucharist / Lord's supper, thanksgiving, reception of teachers apostles and prophets, Lord's day practice and encouragement to live in expectation of the Lord's return.

It is thought to be written in the first or early second century. The manuscript was discovered in 1875 along with a number of other ancient writings, copied in 1056. mention of it is made by Eusebius, an historian in the 4th century. It is thought to be written in Syria or Palestine. It is called the teaching of the Apostles but not thought to be directly from the original 12.

POLYCARP

AD 70-155 Bishop of Smyrna

A disciple of John the apostle

Read

1. His letter to Philippi mentions Paul and Ignatius; encourages people to be strong in the faith; and not to love money but to love one another

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/polycarp-roberts.html>

2.The letter to the Smyrneans about the martyrdom of Polycarp when he died testifying to his life with Jesus for 86 years and refused to recognise Caesar as god.

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/martyrdompolycarp-roberts.html>

Excerpt from Irenaeus

"But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna, whom I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true. To these things all the Asiatic Churches testify, as do also those men who have succeeded Polycarp down to the present time, a man who was of much greater weight, and a more steadfast witness of truth, than Valentinus, and Marcion, and the rest of the heretics. He it was who, coming to Rome in the time of Anicetus caused many to turn away from the aforesaid heretics to the Church of God, proclaiming that he had received this one and sole truth from the apostles, that, namely, which is handed down by the Church. There are also those who heard from him that John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus

within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, "Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within." And Polycarp himself replied to Marcion, who met him on one occasion, and said, "Dost thou know me? "I do know thee, the first-born of Satan." Such was the horror which the apostles and their disciples had against holding even verbal communication with any corrupters of the truth; as Paul also says, "A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself." There is also a very powerful Epistle of Polycarp written to the Philippians, from which those who choose to do so, and are anxious about their salvation, can learn the character of his faith, and the preaching of the truth. Then, again, the Church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan, is a true witness of the tradition of the apostles.

Persecution of the Early Church

The following quote is taken from Caird *An Apostolic Age* p156-157 and points out the Roman attitude to religion in their Empire. The Jews were tolerated as a legally recognised religion.

ACCORDING to Roman law religion was a department of state, so that political loyalty involved religious conformity.¹ In the imperial settlement of Augustus this principle was given a broad interpretation: the traditional worship of subject peoples was respected, and the control of religion was assigned to local government.² The Roman citizen must worship Roman gods, and the provincial must join in the established rites of his own municipality. Throughout the Empire there were organizations responsible for the maintenance of these civic ceremonies. In most places established religion entered deeply into the fabric of daily life. The trade guilds, for example, held feasts which were bound up with the local religion, so that the legal obligation of conformity was reinforced by social and economic pressure. But no roll was kept of attendance at public worship, and, if an Epicurean like Horace chose to stay out of public life and to be "a sparing and infrequent worshipper of the gods",³ nobody would be greatly concerned.

In every city there were large numbers of foreigners, who brought with them their own religions. These foreigners had no legal status, and their religions were in theory illegal. But cosmopolitanism was a fact which had to be accepted, and it had become a custom of Roman administration that foreign religions should be tolerated, provided that they did not interfere either with the celebration of official religion or with the maintenance of law and order. It was conclusively established by Mommsen that any

action taken by Rome against foreign religions was in the nature of *coercitio*, i.e. police procedure, which operated independently of the criminal code and the regular law courts.¹ The enforcement of public order by *coercitio* lay within the *imperium* of emperor, governors, and magistrates, all of whom had considerable powers of discretion; and a new religion was likely to have a different reception in different parts of the Empire. New cults were constantly being ejected from Rome because of their disruptive influence on Roman society, whereas in the East a new religion would excite only a benevolent curiosity. The general tendency towards syncretism made it easy for new gods to be identified with old ones, just as the citizens of Lystra² tried to absorb the Gospel into the framework of established religion by identifying Paul with Hermes and Barnabas with Zeus. If a citizen of Rome or of a provincial city deserted his national religion to adopt a foreign one, he could be put on trial for atheism. But such trials were rare; there was no need for one religion to oust another, when one man could serve many masters.

Wherever the imperial cult was instituted, it came under the authority of the *concilium* or *koinon*, and carried the same degree of obligation as the local cult. For most subjects of the Empire the observance of the imperial cult was no more burdensome than it is for us to stand at the playing of the national anthem. They could make their act of grateful homage, and turn elsewhere for spiritual satisfaction.

The Jews throughout the Empire were exempt from all forms of state religion, but they were not exempt from the general obligation to keep the peace. On this score they were constantly in trouble not only in Palestine but elsewhere, including Rome. Tiberius, who attempted to rid Roman society of all foreign influences, was particularly hostile to the worship of Isis and to Judaism; and Claudius also expelled the Jews from Rome for repeated acts of sedition. As long as the distinction between the Jews and

¹ T. Mommsen, "Der Religionsfrevel nach römischen Recht," *Historische Zeitschrift*, lxiv. (1890), p. 398.

² Acts xiv. 12.

Initially Christianity was regarded as a sect within Judaism. Although not necessarily liked, the Jewish religion was seen as legitimate, that is a legally permitted religion by the Roman government— a "religio licita" because it was the religion of a subject nation of the Romans. And so the Jews were able to live with their own practices and to be exempt from certain of the civil and military service, which were connected with idolatry for they were recognised monotheists.

However, Christianity became separated from Judaism -

(i) by the Jews themselves who opposed this new movement. The Romans had seen their fights as in-fighting and left them to sort it out. Eg Acts 25.19

(ii) and by the Christians, especially those of Gentile background, who were not circumcised as was the practice of the Jews. As we have seen, Paul was especially resistant to new converts being circumcised for he saw it as going back under Law and not trusting Jesus for salvation. He saw Christians as a new creation with both Jews and Gentile believers being one new creation in Christ

This meant that Christianity became illegal, a religion not sanctioned by the Roman gov-

ernment – a **“religio illicita”**, a superstition [Suetonius], loathed for their vices [Tacitus]. It was not a religion of any nation and so its followers could be punished even killed if they refused to give it up.

We mentioned in Session 1 that the Jews were the first to persecute the Christians but then the Romans also turned against them. This was seen in 60's when Nero used them as his scapegoats after the great fire of Rome. He accused them of arson.

The persecution of Christians continued on and off for the next 3 centuries, depending on who was the Emperor.

The reasons for their persecution varied but some were:-

(a) They were regarded as “haters of the human race” because they were considered anti-social. They did not join in the public games, feasts and festivities, which involved recognition of a god/ idol.

(b) They gathered in secret, particularly to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Rumours started that they were hiding something; they were cannibals who fed on flesh and blood; they practised incest because they spoke of each other as brother and sister, even those who were married to each other.

(c) Many of their followers came from the lower classes, even slaves which was not acceptable to Roman upper classes, who feared that the new religion might change the status quo or breed rebellion.

(d) In some places they threatened the economy of local traders in idols and butchers etc.

(e) they were called “atheists” because they did not have visible symbols of worship such as altars or sacrifices. Their worship was not obvious.

(f) they refused to worship the Emperor by offering incense to him and calling him Lord which would have recognised him as divine. Worship of the Emperor showed a person's allegiance and loyalty to him. To refuse meant they were seen as a threat to the Empire and as criminals.

(g) Just being a Christian, just for the name, was sufficient to be prosecuted in some periods.

The persecution was often local and sporadic, depending on who was the Emperor and the attitude of locals towards Christians.

A brief overview of the Roman Emperors and attitudes to Christians

57-68 **Nero** persecuted Christians after the fire in Rome. Tacitus thought they were used as scapegoats. Peter & Paul are thought to have been killed under his reign.

69-79 **Vespasian** attacked Israel after a Jewish uprising but was recalled to Rome to become Emperor when Nero died.

79-81 **Titus**, son of Vespasian completed his father's attack on Judea and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. Christians in Jerusalem fled to Pella in Transjordan but Christianity in Judea declined.

81-96 **Domitian**, brother of Titus, proclaimed himself “our Lord and God”. His predecessors had been declared gods after they died but he took the honour upon himself while alive. He reigned 15 years fiercely persecuted Christians, – maybe because he wanted to eliminate rivals.

98-117 ** **Trajan** is best known because of correspondence with Pliny about what to do with Christians. His policy reflected a prevailing attitude to Christians, which had probably been there from Nero's time, and remained the precedent for later Emperors.

Ignatius of Antioch, Syria was martyred during his reign. Some person must have doxed him in to authorities.

On the following pages is a copy of the correspondence between Pliny, a Roman governor in Bithynia to Trajan, asking what to do about Christians. What Trajan recommended was ignore them if they do not come to your attention, either for a crime or accused by someone. They lived very carefully often prosecuted for just having the name of Christian.

14. THE CHRISTIANS IN BITHYNIA: PLINY'S DILEMMA, c. 112

(Pliny, *Epp.* X.96.)

Pliny was sent to Bithynia, instead of the usual Senatorial governor, c. 112 by Trajan to reorganize the affairs of the province, particularly those of the self-governing cities, which had fallen into a deplorable state through the mismanagement of "local authorities". The extant correspondence between him and the Emperor shows Pliny to be "upright and conscientious, but irresolute, pedantic, and totally unable to think and act for himself in any unusual circumstances" (Mackail, *Latin Literature*, p. 225). The Christians were one of the unusual circumstances.

- 1 It is my custom, lord emperor, to refer to you all questions whereof I am in doubt. Who can better guide me when I am at a stand, or enlighten me if I am in ignorance? In investigations of Christians I have never taken part; hence I do not know what is the crime usually punished or investigated, or what allowances
- 2 are made. So I have had no little uncertainty whether there is any distinction of age, or whether the very weakest offenders are treated exactly like the stronger; whether pardon is given to those who repent, or whether a man who has once been a Christian gains nothing by having ceased to be such; whether punishment attaches to the mere name apart from secret crimes, or to the secret crimes connected with the name. Meantime this is the course I have taken with those who were accused before me as
- 3 Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians, and if they confessed, I asked them a second and third time with threats of punishment. If they kept to it, I ordered them for execution; for I held no question that whatever it was that they admitted, in any case obstinacy and unbending perversity deserve to be
- 4 punished. There were others of the like insanity; but as these were Roman citizens, I noted them down to be sent to Rome.

Before long, as is often the case, the mere fact that the charge was taken notice of made it commoner, and several distinct cases

- 5 arose. An unsigned paper was presented, which gave the names of many. As for those who said that they neither were nor ever had been Christians, I thought it right to let them go, since they recited a prayer to the gods at my dictation, made supplication with incense and wine to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought into court for the purpose together with the images of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ—things which (so it is

- said) those who are really Christians cannot be made to do.
- 6 Others who were named by the informer said that they were Christians and then denied it, explaining that they had been, but had ceased to be such, some three years ago, some a good many years, and a few even twenty. All these too both worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, and cursed Christ.
- 7 They maintained, however, that the amount of their fault or error had been this, that it was their habit on a fixed day to assemble before daylight and recite by turns a form of words to Christ as a god; and that they bound themselves with an oath, not for any crime, but not to commit theft or robbery or adultery, not to break their word, and not to deny a deposit when demanded. After this was done, their custom was to depart, and to meet again to take food, but ordinary and harmless food; and even this (they said) they had given up doing after the issue of my edict, by which in accordance with your commands I had
- 8 forbidden the existence of clubs. On this I considered it the more necessary to find out from two maid-servants who were called deaconesses, and that by torments, how far this was true: but I discovered nothing else than a perverse and extravagant superstition. I therefore adjourned the case and hastened to consult you.
- 9 The matter seemed to me worth deliberation, especially on account of the number of those in danger; for many of all ages and every rank, and also of both sexes are brought into present or future danger. The contagion of that superstition has penetrated not the cities only, but the villages and country; yet it seems possible to stop it and set it right. At any rate it is certain enough that
- 10 the almost deserted temples begin to be resorted to, that long disused ceremonies of religion are restored, and that fodder for victims finds a market, whereas buyers till now were very few. From this it may easily be supposed, what a multitude of men can be reclaimed, if there be a place of repentance. (H. M. Gwatkin, *Selections from Early Christian Writers*, pp. 27–31, altered.)

We have no information about the early propagation of Christianity in Bithynia. The province is included in the list in 1 Pet. 1.1.

Notwithstanding Pliny's diffidence, he knew quite well what to do with Christians, i.e. have them executed. As time went on however, being "upright and conscientious", he naturally felt doubts because some of those accused must have appeared such unlikely people to be guilty of something wicked, or of the "crimes attached to the name". But he had already condemned those who were obstinate Christians.

3. *I asked them a second and third time . . .* "Roman law did not accept a single confession of a prisoner as proof of guilt, unless the confession was supported

by external proof, but required the confession to be repeated.” (Pritchard and Bernard, *Pliny's Selected Letters*, ad loc.)

obstinacy and unbending perversity: “The feature of Christianity which Pliny here points out as his personal reason for punishing, was exactly the point which, as Christianity grew, made it seem politically dangerous to the authority of the empire . . .” (E. G. Hardy, *Pliny's Correspondence with Trajan*, ad loc.), cf. 112.

7. The information given by the apostates shows that the Christians met regularly on two separate occasions:

(1) *before daylight*: the meetings had got to take place before work started for the day, or after it had ceased. The first meeting mentioned was for worship: “to recite a form of words” (*carmen dicere*) may mean “to sing a hymn”.

they bound themselves with an oath (sacramentum). Pliny understands the apostates thus, but in using *sacramentum* they may quite well have meant “sacrament”.

(2) Later, probably in the evening, for the *Agape*, now distinct from the Eucharist, which was no longer taken at a meal time. (Pritchard and Bernard, op. cit., ad loc.) From the apostates Pliny discovered that reports of cannibalism among Christians were unfounded.

Some of Pliny's informants must have apostasized within the period of his governorship, or else they must have remained in close touch with the Christians, as they knew that the Christians, to avert suspicion from themselves, had given up their *Agape*.

clubs (Hetaeriae (Greek) or Collegia (Latin)). “The right of voluntary association for some purpose of common interest not inconsistent with good citizenship was freely recognized in the Roman realm. Such organizations might be for business, social, charitable, or religious purposes” (Merrill, *Essays in Early Christian History*, p. 52f.). Some *collegia* were *licita*, i.e. authorized, they had received official sanction: most were *illicita*, unauthorized. That does not mean “prohibited”, but it does mean that action might be taken against them if they proved centres of political disaffection as happened on various occasions in Roman history (Hardy, op. cit., ad loc.). Other correspondence of Pliny and Trajan shows that the *collegia* had a bad reputation in Bithynia, and were probably in no small degree responsible for the rotten condition of the province. (*Epp.* XXXII and XXXIII, XCII and XCIII.)

Many have thought that the Christians were punished for being a *collegium illicitum*; this idea may cover part of the truth, but quite clearly it was not for this reason that Pliny condemned Christians.

8. *deaconesses (Ministrae)*, cf. Rom. 16.1.

10. *fodder for victims*: “the farmers who brought into the various markets food for the temple victims were in danger of being ruined” (Hardy, op. cit., ad loc.); cf. Acts 19.23ff. for another instance of Christianity being bad for business.

15. TRAJAN'S REPLY TO PLINY

(Pliny, *Ep. X.97.*)

- 1 You have adopted the proper course, my dear Secundus, in your examination of the cases of those who were accused to you as Christians, for indeed nothing can be laid down as a general
- 2 ruling involving something like a set form of procedure. They are not to be sought out; but if they are accused and convicted, they must be punished—yet on this condition, that whoso denies himself to be a Christian, and makes the fact plain by his action, that is, by worshipping our gods, shall obtain pardon on his repentance, however suspicious his past conduct may be. Papers, however, which are presented unsigned ought not to be admitted in any charge, for they are a very bad example and unworthy of our time. (Gwatkin, *Selections from Early Christian Writers*, p. 31, slightly altered.)

1. *Nothing can be laid down as a general rule . . .* Trajan used this policy in dealing with other matters (*Ep. LXVI, CXIII*).

2. *They are not to be sought out. . . .* "What a decision, how inevitably entangled! He says they must not be sought out, implying they are innocent; and he orders them to be punished, implying they are guilty. He spares them and rages against them, he pretends not to see and punishes." (Tertullian, *Apology*, 2.8, Tr. T. R. Glover (Loeb Library).) Tertullian's conclusion is a natural one, but there was a great deal of sense in Trajan's decision. It avoided constant difficulties such as those with which Pliny had been faced, while retaining sanctions that could be imposed if necessary. The pardon granted to apostates shows that it was the "name" that was attacked.

Trajan's decision, in so far as it released Christians from anonymous accusations, worked in their favour.

These excerpts are taken from *The New Eusebius* edited by J. Stevenson

117-138 Hadrian & Antoine 138-161 Both followed Trajan's policy

161-181 **Marcus Aurelius** was a highly respected Emperor thought of as enlightened for his respect of persons and of high moral values, which were based on his Stoic philosophy.

But he despised the Christians for their "crass superstition" even though they were steadfast in face of death and suffering, a Stoic virtue. His attitude is illustrated in his treatment of Christians in Gaul in Lyons and Vienne. Mobs turned on the Christians with the support of the local magistrates. Aurelius ordered them to recant. If they would not, they should be put to death - by beheading if Roman citizens or torture if not. This also happened in Scilla in North Africa.

He was also very superstitious so that, early in his reign, in 166, natural disasters of famine and flood and invasions were seen as evidence of the wrath of the gods and were blamed on Christian "atheists", who were then persecuted.

Polycarp of Smyrna was burned to death during his reign

180-193 **Commodus**, the son of Aurelius, continued to persecute Christians sporadically but generally it was an easier time than under his father.

193-211 **Septimus Severus**. In 202 he made a decree forbidding people to become either Jews or Christians. i.e to proselytize. There was severe persecution in Egypt. Origen's father was martyred, Origen wished to join him but was prevented by his mother who hid his clothes. In Carthage, Perpetua, a free born woman and her slave Felicitas were martyred..

From 222 there was a 50 year Period of relative peace for Christians Their numbers increased

249-251 **Decius** a period of severe persecution.

He instituted a policy of one Empire, one religion. Christianity was to be crushed. Everyone must sacrifice to the gods and have a certificate to say that they had done so. Christians responded differently to the attack – some offered the required sacrifices under little pressure, others after great coercion; some acquired the certificate without making sacrifices, called libelatici. This later caused great turmoil in the church when they wanted to be readmitted. The state implemented his edict but often the ordinary people, who were no longer so hostile to Christians, protected them. Origen died after torture.

253 **Valerian** came to power

In 257 he gave an edict forbidding Christians to hold their usual public meetings and banned their access to their cemeteries.

In 259 he codified the penalties of being a Christian - Clergy were to die if convicted; senators and knights to be degraded from their rank; ladies of rank to be exiled; employees of the imperial household sent to forced-labour camps. Bishops of Rome and Carthage were executed.

He was taken prisoner by Persians which caused a period of crisis for the Empire.

259 **Gallienus**, son of Valerian revoked his father's anti-Christian edicts

Period of peace for 40 years

285- 305 **Diocletian** He ruled with peace for 20 years

But in 303 he ordered the destruction of church buildings and of copies of the scripture. In a 2nd edict he ordered the arrest of clergy

304 – all Christians were to offer sacrifice to state gods. His Christian wife and daughter were forced to offer sacrifices. In Gaul & Britain there was little persecution but in Egypt and Palestine it was severe.

The Empire divided

305-311 Under Galerius in the east Terror reigned But in 311 he rescinded the anti-Christian legislation

In 313 **Constantine** in the west & **Licinius** instituted toleration for all religions; Christians' property was restored and exiles returned.

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