

3) Defiance of social order...while the Gospel does tend to level society on certain lines, you will see that the church was not a social reform society. The book of Philemon carries a useful note to this effect.

The illegal status was certainly aided by charges of child abuse and cannibalism and all sorts of wild rumors and these, with the other factors, contributed to the coming of persecution.

The first persecutions began under the harassment of the Jews in Palestine in the manner noted in the Book of Acts. Jewish persecutors operated within and without the bounds of legal sanction and they could incite a mob or call for the officers as they chose! The Romans saw Judaism as a permissible religion--due to its antiquity--and on that basis permitted the Jews not to make temple offerings to the ancient pagan gods. But when Judaism could not take the new faith, the empire rejected it as well. This is a much smaller factor, however, after the revolt of 67-70 AD.

Roman persecutions were sporadic and came for varied causes in this period of our study. Caligula and Nero, cruel and barbarous, seemed to play with the church, although if you were being thrown into the arena it might not have been much fun. There was no systematic attempt to eliminate Christianity from any of the early emperors. This was a situation that did not change until about 250 AD.

The more or less official Roman attitude is summed up on the correspondence of Pliny the Younger and the Roman Emperor Trajan about 112 AD. Pliny, governor of Bithynia, wanted an official policy on dealing with Christians in his territory. Trajan simply advised that if one came to his attention, Pliny should punish the Christian but he should not undertake a major campaign to discover them. If they were criminals for other causes as well, they should be apprehended, but there seems to have been no need for a house-to-house search for the disciples. And, cautioned Trajan, Pliny should be careful about false accusations or those who were accusatorial in a secret way. This correspondence is extant and may be read in Bettenson: DOCUMENTS OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, page 5 and following.

Nero's villification of Christians was an attempt to