

Christians on Trial

This is a transcript of a genuine trial which took place in North Africa in CE 180. Ours is a secondary school (all boys) and I found that they, as an audience, were very moved by the reading. I acted as narrator, reading all the tricky names and including the bits that usually are omitted in readings, 'Speratus said', 'Cittinus said', etc. We felt that by including these we added to the official sound of the proceedings. We made no attempt to dress up or act; we felt that the words spoke for themselves.

The cast were impressed by the obvious sincerity of the proconsul, who was bending over backwards to try and make these Christians see reason. He was clearly baffled by the situation. I waited till after the reading to point out that the names suggest to us that some of the accused were women; schools with boys *and* girls won't have that problem.

'I'm glad you didn't change their names,' said one of the boys afterwards, despite the fact that he had read Vestia's line. I found that they had all identified very strongly with these Christians.

The reason that had prompted me to choose this reading was the fact that the boys had just been given Gideon New Testaments, so the Bible is the 'in' thing of the moment. At the end of the reading I drew their attention to the reference to the letters of Paul, to remind them that the New Testament has a living history. I was in the fortunate position of being able to follow this theme through all the school RE lessons that week; but I see the trial transcript as a useful launching point for many themes: the sign of the fish; persecution, from the story of St Alban to the present day; how the keeping of the first day of the week became an easy means of identifying Christians, for proconsuls as baffled as this one. For teachers who want a more secular theme: the significant point to which this reading gives life is the fact that there was once a time when one's religion was not a matter of convention and in no way second-hand, but a matter of life and death.

Note for historical enthusiasts: CE 180 was the year in which the Emperor Marcus Aurelius died.

The Trial of the Scillitan Christians, North Africa, CE 180

(Official transcript of the trial)

Narrator: On the seventeenth day of July, at Carthage, there were brought before the court: Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Secunda, Vestia and others. Saturninus the Proconsul conducted the trial.

Saturninus the Proconsul said: By the mercy of the Emperor you can go free from this court: If you return to your senses.

Speratus said: We have never done any wrong, we have not committed any crime, we have never even spoken ill, in fact, even when punished for nothing we have given thanks. That is because we are loyal to the Emperor—our Emperor.

Saturninus the Proconsul said: I don't see what the problem is. We are very tolerant to religious people. We too are very religious. Our religion is simple. All we want you to do is to swear by the greatness of our Lord the Emperor and pray for his welfare. We do it; you ought to do so too.

Speratus said: If you will just listen, I'll explain to you the mysteries of our belief; they too are simple.

Saturninus said: I will not listen if you intend to speak evil against our traditions. All I want to hear is an oath from you in the name of the Emperor of the Roman World.

Speratus said: The empire of this world I know not; but rather I serve that God whom no man hath seen nor with these eyes can see. I have committed no theft; in fact if I buy anything I pay the tax. I am a responsible citizen because I know my Lord, the King of Kings and the Emperor of all nations.

Saturninus the Proconsul said to the rest of the accused: At least the rest of you don't be obstinate. Cease to be of this criminal persuasion.

Speratus said: Are you persuading us to break the law of the land by telling a lie?

Saturninus the Proconsul said: I'm asking you to stop this foolishness for your own sakes.

Cittinus said: We have nothing to fear, except letting down our Lord God who is in heaven.

Donata said: Honour belongs to Caesar as Caesar, but our first loyalty is to God.

Vestia said: I am a Christian too.

Secunda said: I am a Christian and I don't want to be anything else.

Saturninus the Proconsul said to Speratus: Do you persist in being a Christian?

Speratus said: I am a Christian. *And with him they all agreed.*

Saturninus the Proconsul said: Do you want some time to think about it?

Speratus said: There's nothing to think about; it's so straightforward that there's no need.

Saturninus the Proconsul said: What are the things in that box you have with you?

Speratus said: Just some books.

Saturninus the Proconsul said: Are they magic spells?

Speratus said: No, they are just copies of letters from Paul; a just man.

Saturninus the Proconsul said: I'll give you one last chance: have a delay of thirty days to think it out.

Speratus said a second time: I've told you; I'm a Christian. There will no changing of my mind.

And with him they all agreed.

Saturninus the Proconsul read out the decree from the tablet concerning Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda and the rest: Having confessed that they live according to the Christian way, and after being offered the opportunity of returning to the custom of the Romans, having continued to persist obstinately in their belief, it is determined that they be put to the sword.

Speratus said: We give thanks to God.

Nartzalus said: Today we are martyrs in heaven; thanks be to God.

Saturninus the Proconsul ordered it to be declared to the herald: Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius, Januaria, Generosa, Vestia, Donata and Secunda, I have ordered to be executed.

Those sentenced all said: Thanks be to God.

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