Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers

Week 2: Clement of Rome

**Background:**

The author was possibly the Clement mentioned in Philippians 4:3. Traditionally he has been identified as the third bishop of Rome following Peter, however, from the internal evidence it does not appear that the practice of monarchial bishops (having a single bishop governing each church, with presbyters under him) had developed, at least in the West, at this time. Thus Clement was among the bishops/presbyters in the church at Rome.

The only surviving writing of Clement of Rome is his epistle to the Corinthians, which was written soon after either the persecution of Nero, with a date of writing around A.D. 68, or, more likely, after that of Domitian, it which case it would have been penned about 95-100. The occasion of the letter was a rebellion in the church at Corinth where the presbyters had been deposed without good cause.

Eusebius writes of this epistle:

There is extant an epistle of this Clement which is acknowledged to be genuine and is of considerable length and of remarkable merit. He wrote it in the name of the church of Rome to the church of Corinth, when a sedition had arisen in the latter church. We know that this epistle also has been publicly used in a great many churches both in former times and in our own. And of the fact that a sedition did take place in the church of Corinth at the time referred to Hegesippus is a trustworthy witness.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Clement’s epistle exudes Scripture, and is often alluded to and quoted at length (on the order of 160 quotations from or allusions to the Old and New Testaments over the course of 28 pages).

All quotations are from “The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians”, in “The Apostolic Fathers”, trans. and ed. by J. B. Lightfoot, (Grand Rapids: CCEL, n.d.), 3-34.

The Trinity

For as God liveth, and the Lord Jesus Christ liveth, and the Holy Spirit, who are the faith and the hope of the elect, so surely shall he, who with lowliness of mind, and instant in gentleness hath without regretfullness performed the ordinances and commandments that are given by God, be enrolled and have a name among the number of them that are saved through Jesus Christ, through whom is the glory unto Him for ever and ever. Amen. [58]

Justification

Let us therefore cleave unto those to whom grace is given from God. Let us clothe ourselves in concord, being lowly-minded and temperate, holding ourselves aloof from all backbiting and evil speaking, being justified by works and not by words. [30]

Let us therefore cleave unto His blessing, and let us see what are the ways of blessing. Let us study the records of the things that have happened from the beginning Wherefore was our father Abraham blessed? Was it not because he wrought righteousness and truth through faith? [31]

If any man will consider them one by one in sincerity, he shall understand the magnificence of the gifts that are given by Him. For of Jacob are all the priests and Levites who minister unto the alter of God; of him is the Lord Jesus as concerning the flesh; of him are kings and rulers and governors in the line of Judah; yea and the rest of his tribes are held in no small honor, seeing that God promised saying, Thy seed shall be as the stars of heaven. They all therefore were glorified and magnified, not through themselves or their own works or the righteous doing which they wrought, but through His will. And so we, having been called through His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified through ourselves or through our own wisdom or understanding or piety or works which we wrought in holiness of heart, but through faith, whereby the Almighty God justified all men that have been from the beginning; to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen. [32]

What must we do, brethren? Must we idly abstain from doing good, and forsake love? May the Master never allow this to befall us at least; but let us hasten with instancy and zeal to accomplish every good work. For the Creator and Master of the universe Himself rejoices in His works. [33]

Let him that hath love in Christ fulfill the commandments of Christ. Who can declare the bond of the love of God? Who is sufficient to tell the majesty of its beauty? The height, whereunto love exalts, is unspeakable. Love joins us unto God love covers a multitude of sins; love endures all things, is long suffering in all things. There is nothing coarse, nothing arrogant in love. Love has no divisions, love makes no seditions, love doeth all things in concord. In love were all the elect of God made Perfect; without love nothing is well pleasing to God: in love the Master took us unto Himself; for the love which He had toward us, Jesus Christ our Lord hath given His blood for us by the will of God and His flesh for our flesh and His life for our lives. [49]

Ye see, dearly beloved, how great and marvelous a thing is love, and there is no declaring its perfection. Who is sufficient to be found therein, save those to whom God shall vouchsafe it? Let us therefore entreat and ask of His mercy, that we may be found blameless in love, standing apart for the factiousness of men. … Blessed were we, dearly beloved, if we should be doing the commandments of God in concord of love, to the end that our sins may through love be forgiven us. For it is written: Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall impute no sin, neither is guile in his mouth. This declaration of the blessedness was pronounced upon them that have been elected by God through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen. [50]

Divine Sovereignty

Ye had conflict day and night for all the brotherhood, that the number of His elect might be saved with fearfulness and intentness of mind. [2]

By a word of His Majesty He compacted the universe; and by a word He can destroy it. Who shall say unto Him, What hast thou done? Or who shall resist the might of His strength? When he lists, and as He lists, He will do all things; and nothing shall pass away of those things that He hath decreed. All things are in His sight, and nothing escapes His counsel, seeing that The heavens declare the glory of God, etc. [27]

[Because of God knows all and is everywhere and there is nowhere to hide from his judgment] Let us therefore approach Him in holiness of soul, lifting up pure and undefiled hands unto Him, with love towards our gentle and compassionate Father who made us an elect portion unto Himself. For thus it is written [several passages of God’s calling Israel] [29]

This is the way, dearly-beloved, wherein we found our salvation, even Jesus Christ the High-priest of our offerings, the Guardian and Helper of our weakness. Through Him let us look steadfastly unto the heights of the heavens; through Him we behold as in a mirror His faultless and most excellent visage; through Him the eyes of our hearts were opened; through Him our foolish and darkened mind springs up unto the light; through Him the Master willed that we should taste of the immortal knowledge; Who being the brightness of His majesty is so much greater than angels, as He hath inherited a more excellent name. [36]

Let us consider, brethren, of what matter we were made, who and what manner of beings we were, when we came into the world; from what a sepulcher and what darkness He that molded and created us brought us into His world, having prepared His benefits aforehand ere ever we were born. Seeing therefore that we have all these things from Him, we ought in all things to give thanks to Him, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen. [38]

Encouragement to Holy Living

Wherefore let us forsake idle and vain thoughts; and let us conform to the glorious and venerable rule which hath been handed down to us; and let us see what is good for what is pleasant and what is acceptable in the sight of Him that made us. Let us fix our eyes on the blood of Christ and understand how precious it is unto His Father, because being shed for our salvation it won for the whole world the grace of repentance. [7]

Look ye, brethren, lest His benefits, which are many, turn unto judgment to all of us, if we walk not worthily of Him, and do those things which are good and well-pleasing in His sight with concord. For He says in a certain place, The Spirit of the Lord is a lamp searching the closets of the belly. Let us see how near He is, and how that nothing escapes Him of our thoughts or our devices which we make. It is right therefore that we should not be deserters from His will. Let us rather give offence to foolish and senseless men who exalt themselves and boast in the arrogance of their words, than to God. Let us fear the Lord Jesus, whose blood was given for us. Let us reverence our rulers; let us honor our elders; let us instruct our young men in the lesson of the fear of God. Let us guide our women toward that which is good; let them show forth their lively disposition of purity; let them prove their sincere affection of gentleness; let them make manifest the moderation of their tongue through their silence; let them show their love, not in factious preferences but without partiality towards all them that fear God, in Holiness. Let our children be partakers of the instruction which is in Christ; let them learn how lowliness of mind prevails with God, what power chaste love hath with God, how the fear of Him is good and great and saves all them that walk therein in a pure mind with Holiness. For He is the searcher out of the intents and desires; whose breath is in us, and when He lists, He shall take it away. [21]

Having adduced OT examples of obedience and repentance, Clement exhorts

The humility therefore and the submissiveness of so many and so great men, who have thus obtained a good report, hath through obedience made better not only us but also the generations which were before us, even them hat received His oracles in fear and truth. Seeing then that we have been partakers of many great and glorious doings, let us hasten to return unto the goal of peace which hath been handed down to us from the beginning, and let us look steadfastly unto the Father and Maker of the whole world, and cleave unto His splendid and excellent gifts of peace and benefits. Let us behold Him in our mind and let us look with the eyes of our soul unto His long- suffering will. Let us note how free from anger He is towards al His creatures. [9]

With regard to church leadership, Clement knows no distinction between bishops and presbyters.

The Apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God, and the Apostles are from Christ. Both therefore come of the will of God in the appointed order. Having therefore received a charge, and having been fully assured through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and confirmed in the word of God with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth with the glad tidings that the kingdom of God should come. So preaching everywhere in country and town, they appointed their first fruits, when they had proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons unto them that should believe. And this they did in no new fashion; for indeed it had been written concerning bishops and deacons from very ancient times; for thus saith the scripture in a certain place, I will appoint their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faiths. (LXX: “I will give thy rulers in peace,

and thy overseers in righteousness.”) [42]

And our Apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the name of the bishop’s office. For this cause therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the aforesaid persons, and afterwards they provided a continuance, that if these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministration. Those therefore who were appointed by them, or afterward by other men of repute with the consent of the whole Church, and have ministered unblameably to the flock of Christ in lowliness of mind, peacefully and with al modesty, and for long time have borne a good report with all – these men we consider to be unjustly thrust out from their ministration. For it will be no light sin for us, if we thrust out those who have offered the gifts of the bishop’s office unblamably and holily. Blessed are those presbyters who have gone before, seeing that their departure was fruitful and ripe; for ye have no fear lest anyone should remove them from their appointed place. For we see that ye have displaced certain persons, though they were living honorably, from the ministration which had been respected by them blamelessly. [44]

Finally, may the all-seeing God and Master of spirits and Lord of all flesh, who chose the Lord Jesus Christ, and us through Him for a peculiar people, grant unto every soul that is called after His excellent and holy Name faith, fear, peace, patience, long-suffering, temperance, chastity and soberness, that they may be well-pleasing unto His Name through our High-priest and Guardian Jesus Christ, through whom unto Him be glory and majesty, might and honor, both now and for ever and ever. Amen. [64]

1. Eusebius of Caesarea “The Church History of Eusebius”, trans. by Arthur McGiffert, in Phillip Schaff, “Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers” Series II, vol. 1, (Grand Rapids: CCEL, n.d.) 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)