

The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians: A reflection

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First, I want to reflect on how much more steadfast I need to be in reading these materials. It's really not that much reading and shouldn't be that big a deal. We've said we want to dig in a little deeper, theologically, so I need to do that and not be such a wimp about it. God give me Grace.

This has been a refreshing read for me. I find many times when reading early church writings, a harsh tone. I don't find too much grace - unusual. I think they were fighting so many battles in those early days on so many fronts that when they wrote something, it was as a part of the battle. I would hope their everyday lives weren't so harsh and intense. In this letter, Clement seemed well versed in grace and mercy and compassion. I found that very encouraging. Although he pulled no punches about how the Corinthians needed to live, he did so in the context of God's Love and mercy. Here are a couple of quotes...

"Let us look steadfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious that blood is to God, which, having been shed for our salvation, has set the grace of repentance before the whole world."

"Wherefore, let us yield obedience to His excellent and glorious will; and imploring His mercy and loving-kindness, while we forsake all fruitless labours, and strife, and envy, which leads to death, let us turn and have recourse to His compassions."

The kinds of things he chose to write about - to encourage them toward, is also interesting to me. Simple, central things, not grandiose theories - humility, following the example of Christ and holy people, grace, simplicity of heart. These are the kinds of things that are still at the center of our faith, of our lives in Christ, as members of His Body. They never fade. I'm of the mind that thinks these things never change - that they've always been the same few things and always will be. Sort of ties in with the "generous orthodoxy" thing in a way - a few basic truths.

"Let us therefore, brethren, be of humble mind, laying aside all haughtiness, and pride, and foolishness, and angry feelings..."

"For Christ is of those who are humble-minded, and not of those who exalt themselves over His flock. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Sceptre of the majesty of God, did not come in the pomp of pride or arrogance, although He might have done so, but in a lowly condition, as the Holy Spirit had declared regarding Him."

"Ye see, beloved, what is the example which has been given us; for if the Lord thus humbled Himself, what shall we do who have through Him come under the yoke of His grace?"

"The all-merciful and beneficent Father has bowels [of compassion] towards those that fear Him, and kindly and

lovingly bestows His favours upon those who come to Him with a simple mind."

"Boldness, and arrogance, and audacity belong to those that are accursed of God; but moderation, humility, and meekness to such as are blessed by Him."

Woops! That last one was a doozie. That's is though - simple, straight-forward life principles that belong to the life of Christ in us - moderation, humility, and meekness. Yeah, the hard ones - hard for the unrenewed mind. We can't let that hold us back though. That's out big "job" - to bend ourselves to the renewal process. Process - that word again. We don't make the decision today and we're "better" tomorrow.

"And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

Wow, somebody in the first century talking about justification by faith. I guess it's true after all! That whole thing bothers me - that we would jettison such a notion because of the direction someone has taken it. That's just baby-out-with-the-bathwater kind of stuff. Yes, we are "saved" by Grace, through Faith. We are justified and brought into union with God, into a familial relationship with Him through faith in Jesus. Then... Then what? Then it continues and we go on growing in union with our now Father and getting more and more "saved" - the process of unification, of total renewal, of full integration of our humanity with the Life essence of God. It's both! This is a reflection and so I'm reflecting - I reflect that I'm tired of people not seeing that!

"Let our whole body, then, be preserved in, Christ Jesus; and let every one be subject to his neighbour, according to the special gift bestowed upon him. Let the strong not despise the weak, and let the weak show respect unto the strong."

"We are of opinion, therefore, that those appointed by them, or afterwards by other eminent men, with the consent of the whole Church..."

Hmmm, episcopacy. Always interesting. Doesn't seem to be too out of whack. I like him referring to "every one" being subject to every other one "according to the special gift bestowed upon him." This shows a functional mutuality, recognizing different charisms among those who are in the community, but not so much a titular hierarchy. Seems healthy. There is talk of leaders, presbyters who were chosen by the apostles, but not in such a way as seems dangerous and inappropriate to me. The quote where he says, "with the consent of the whole Church" is very significant. There is a definite recognition of the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the whole Body and not just in a "magisterium" of sorts.

"...because even then parties had been formed among you... It is disgraceful, beloved, yea, highly disgraceful, and unworthy of your Christian profession, that such a thing should be heard of as that the most steadfast and ancient

Church of the Corinthians should, on account of one or two persons, engage in sedition against its presbyters. And this rumour has reached not only us, but those also who are unconnected with us; so that, through your infatuation, the name of the Lord is blasphemed, while danger is also brought upon yourselves. "

"Let us therefore, with all haste, put an end to this [state of things]; and let us fall down before the Lord, and beseech Him with tears, that He would mercifully be reconciled to us, and restore us to our former seemly and holy practice of brotherly love. "

Sounds like now. Sounds like every period in church history as a matter of fact. Sounds like all places and all times where there are people in the church going through the process of salvation. We have to recognize it and move forward though. Brotherly love - yes, sisterly too - how about "siblingly love" - there you go. Anyway, he even says as much in so many words, but that this is the conduit through which the Grace of God flows in our midst, and if we don't have it, we don't have Him or His Grace. That would be pretty serious. Love is pretty seriously the most central and important thing in all the universe. We'd best be working on getting that one figured out. Let Clement say it as well...

"Let him who has love in Christ keep the commandments of Christ. Who can describe the [blessed] bond of the love of God? What man is able to tell the excellence of its beauty, as it ought to be told? The height to which love exalts is unspeakable. Love unites us to God. Love covers a multitude of sins. Love beareth all things, is long-suffering in all things. There is nothing base, nothing arrogant in love. Love admits of no schisms: love gives rise to no seditions: love does all things in harmony. By love have all the elect of God been made perfect; without love nothing is well-pleasing to God. In love has the Lord taken us to Himself. On account of the Love he bore us, Jesus Christ our Lord gave His blood for us by the will of God; His flesh for our flesh, and His soul for our souls. "

Good stuff. I think I'll stop there - at the top of the proverbial hill and meditate. I'll let Father Clement take us out with this great benediction. I think we'll be hearing this again in the future...

"May God, who seeth all things, and who is the Ruler of all spirits and the Lord of all flesh—who chose our Lord Jesus Christ and us through Him to be a peculiar people—grant to every soul that calleth upon His glorious and holy Name, faith, fear, peace, patience, long-suffering, self-control, purity, and sobriety, to the well-pleasing of His Name, through our High Priest and Protector, Jesus Christ, by whom be to Him glory, and majesty, and power, and honour, both now and for evermore. Amen. "