

VBCC Schola

The Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians

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Clement begins his letter by praising the prominent Corinthian church for their previous good conduct, offering the details of what he considered faithful discipleship. He quickly diagnoses their problem without long discussion of the symptoms: some of their number have been overcome by “envy and jealousy” and so have departed their former virtues. He reviews a list of righteous biblical personalities who through envy and jealousy have been mistreated or murdered: Abel, Peter, Paul, Aaron, Miriam, and others. Clement calls them to repentance, citing God’s mercy toward sinners through the preaching of Jonah and Noah. He cites OT passages that reference honesty, hypocrisy and repentance, reminding them especially of Jesus’ place as Isaiah’s suffering servant, who provides the supreme example of humility. The ascendant leaders at Corinth provide an opposite example: “Christ belongs to the humble-minded, not to those who exalt themselves above his flock” (16:1). He calls them to repent, and demonstrate the Christian virtues of obedience, humility and hospitality. God desires peace, but that which comes from obedience, not control: “...Let us cleave to those who are peaceable in piety and not to those who desire peace in hypocrisy” (15:1). Those who through envy and jealousy have removed the leaders given them by God seek to create their own peace rather than submitting to his will.

Through the middle of the letter, Clement reminds them of their obligation to holiness in the context of God’s good creation: they were created for good works, so to do the will of their Creator they must fear Jesus, respect their leaders, honor their presbyters, teach the young, and guide women, lest they bring judgment upon themselves (21:6; 33, 34).

While Clement does not present an elaborate ecclesiology, he does demonstrate familiarity with the prior (Pauline) Corinthian correspondence, so we can assume acceptance of Paul’s metaphors for the Church, notably those of temple and body: there is one Body of Christ, and one Temple in which the living God dwells. These metaphors could provide the theological background for the importance he places on unity, but it is notable that he does not offer justification. Clement will not even consider the validity of any disunity or factionalism, and calls their schism “abominable and unholy.” It is telling that he sees no need to justify this: any separation or division is already a failure of fraternal love, which “admits of no schisms” (49). As Paul, Clement takes for granted that commitment to Jesus is equivalent to commitment to the New Community – to falter in love for them is to falter in love of him.

It is disgraceful, beloved, very disgraceful, and unworthy of your training in Christ, to hear that the stable and ancient Church of the Corinthians, on account of one or two persons, should revolt against its presbyters. And this report has come not only to us, but also to those who are unconnected with us. The result is that blasphemies are brought upon the name of the Lord through your folly, and danger accrues for yourself. (47:6-7)

Clement clearly considers the community to be in dire straits, but he models a deep commitment to the community as such: he does not explore the possibility that the leaders of the coup could be excommunicated or punished. Instead, he still speaks of them as full and beloved members of the Body, indicating that even such serious sins as these, done against the community, are not “deal breakers” in terms of life in Christ:

“Let us also intercede for those who fall into any transgression, that meekness and humility may be granted them, so that they may yield not to us but to God’s will. For in this way there will be for them a fruitful, perfect and compassionate remembrance with God and the saints. Let us receive correction, and not be angered by it, dearly beloved. The admonition which we give to one another is good and most beneficial, for it unites us to the will of God” (56:1-2).

Reliance upon Paul’s temple metaphor could explain the reference to current sacrifices in Jerusalem, something which surely had not happened for 20 years (41). It is notable also that he holds a high doctrine of Eucharistic celebration, reminding the Corinthians that every Christian has a proper order, and that “offers and ministrations” must be offered accordingly. To establish this, he uses a military metaphor along with Paul’s body metaphor, showing no apparent discomfort with possible authoritarian leanings. It is possible then, that presbyters did function as liturgical priests, celebrating the Eucharist in a pattern after that of Temple worship.

Regarding authority, Clement considers the deposed presbyters to be holy, upstanding and blameless men. If they had been charged with any wrongdoing, he does not demonstrate awareness. Their credentials were their apostolic ordination. That they would remain with the community, waiting in holiness until the promised End, seems to be taken for granted.

Possible discussion points:

What might Clement think of American Christianity, in which the tenure of presbyters might last from 6 months to a decade, but probably somewhere in between?

Ought Christians to have “rank and order” in the Body? What would obedience mean?

In post-modern, post-Roman, post-Protestant, post-Western Christianity, how would we go about deciding the demands of obedience and what that looks like in a concrete fashion?

I’m impressed that Clement so strongly condemns factionalism. His standards of dedication to the community might put mine to shame: how do we go about living in unity with other Christians?

What should our own credentials for presbyters be? Should we have presbyters? Is some adapted idea of the apostolic succession possible?