

Reflection Paper

First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians

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3/13/05

“Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life” (Philippians 4:3, NRSV).

Who am I? Where do I come from? These are universal questions of identity. While these are questions I see everyone I know chasing in one form or another on a personal level, these are questions noticeably absent from the life of Christian faith. Other than some rather intellectual discussions or classes skipping the surface of Church history, my experience with the heritage of the Church, while unspoken from the pew and pulpit, communicates the succession of faith as Jesus, the Apostles and our church. If it's not in the Bible, it's not valid to my religious experience.

But who am I as a Christian? Where does my faith come from? My family tree of faith runs five hundred generations deep. I cannot accept that the Holy Spirit vanished at the death of Peter and Paul and has suddenly reappeared 2000 years later for me. I once heard a charismatic preacher lament over the present day Church. He seemed to hold up the state of the New Testament Church as the utopian Good Old Days: “How did we get here from there, brothers?” A valid question, and certainly not a rhetorical one. Just how did we get here from that so-revered utopian community lifestyle found in the second chapter of Acts?

I believe that the First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians offers us a glance into the life of the Church as it shifted into an age in which the eyewitnesses of Jesus and the apostles were passing away. I believe it begins untying the knot to the question of where my faith comes from, in essence, how we got here from there. Three themes of Clement strike me as significant: the interwoven relationship of humility, obedience and love, the role of Scripture and the complexity of Church leadership.

Clement establishes his argument for the virtues of humility, obedience and love by first introducing the evil produced in the world through the vice of envy. He says, “Everyone... walks after his own wicked lusts, resuming the practice of an unrighteous and ungodly envy, by which death itself entered into the world” (Ch. IV). Through the following three chapters, he provides examples from the Old and New Testaments, as well as examples of contemporary martyrs, who faced opposition because of envy. The word appears a total of 13 times in these three sections.

Then, exemplifying humility himself, he states in chapter 7, “These things, beloved, we write unto you, not merely to admonish you of your duty, but also to remind ourselves. For we are struggling on the same arena, and the same conflict is assigned to both of us.” Never does he look down upon the challenges of the Corinthians. Rather, Clement identifies with the failings of this community, and all of his exhortations through the entirety of the letter contain the language “Let us...” He counts himself as audience to this persuasive argumentation.

Clement continues to emphasize the theme of humility and obedience: “Let us yield obedience to His excellent and glorious will” (Ch. IX), “[Abraham], in the exercise of obedience, went out from his own country” (Ch. X), “Let us therefore, brethren, be of humble mind” (Ch. XIII), “let us establish ourselves, that we walk with all humility in obedience to His holy words” (Ch. XIII), “It is right and holy... to obey God than to follow those who... have become the leaders of a detestable emulation” (Ch. XIV).

All throughout this discussion, Clement again and again falls back upon the heritage of godly example provided in Scripture. Often, he references large passages at a time. Repeatedly, he uses the word “example” in reference to these quotations. In this, Clement himself provides a model to understanding the Bible. It provides a record of men’s dealings with God—men who then become examples, for both good and ill, of how to live a life of active, godly obedience. The list is plentiful: Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Rahab, Elijah, Elisha, Ezekiel, Job, Moses, David, climaxing with Jesus. Clement argues that reflecting upon the historical record of God’s work found in the Scriptures, provides us adequate knowledge into the character of God as well as encouragement in our present struggle:

“Thus the humility and godly submission of so great and illustrious men have rendered not only us, but also all the generations before us, better; even as many as have received His oracles in fear and truth. Wherefore, having so many great and glorious examples set before us, let us turn again to the practice of that peace which from the beginning was the mark set before us; and let us look steadfastly to the Father and Creator of the universe, and cleave to His might and surpassingly great gifts and benefactions, of peace. Let us contemplate Him with our understanding, and look with the eyes of our soul to His long-suffering will. Let us reflect how free from wrath He is towards all His creation” (Ch. XIX).

But Clement deals not just with the past of his religious tradition. He also looks forward. He evolves his discussion into the polity and organization of the community of faith. Humility and obedience become his foundations for Christian leadership. For Clement, order marks not only public worship, but also private life: “It behooves us to do all things in [their proper] order, which the Lord has commanded us to perform at stated times” (Ch. XL).

He looks to the Old Testament, to the Levitical delegation of authority in worship in establishing the order of Christian worship. Clements understands authority as first coming from God to Jesus, from Jesus to the Apostles, and from the Apostles to the Church. The orders of bishops and deacons are valid in the Church based upon their provision by the Apostles. Yet Clement is no idealist when it comes to Christian leadership; he recognizes the human frailty of institution when he says, “Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, and there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate” (Ch. XLIII).

Above all, Clement values the unity of the Church in the face of this strife. His exhortation strikes much too close to the heart of modern independent American Protestant thinking and even “Emerging Church” thought. He says, “Your schism has subverted [the faith of] many, has discouraged many, has given rise to doubt in many, and has caused grief to us all.”

In this letter to the Christian community at Corinth, Clement provides us with the beginning of what happens to the Church after Peter and Paul. He begins to answer for us the question of who we are as Christians and where we come from. He encourages us to look at the past and be encouraged by the stories we find there so that we might find the inspiration to act in such a way that this faith continues to the next generation.