

The Thought World of Clement's First Epistle to the Corinthians

by Derek Thompson, March 2013

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Introduction

The letter¹ is addressed from “The Church of God which sojourns at Rome, to the church of God sojourning at Corinth”² (Roberts, 1867, p. 15). The author is traditionally identified as Clement of Rome, writing about 96 C.E., although there is insufficient evidence for certainty (Merrill, 1918, p. 442)³. Clement was probably not a monarchical style bishop, but he had a claim to being appointed by either Peter, or his successors, in Rome (Rankin, 2006, p. 26). The church in Corinth had asked the church in Rome for help in an internal leadership dispute (Roberts, 1867, p. 15). The letter's early dating provides an insight into Christian thought in the generation following the apostles.

The Circumstances of the Letter

The presbyters of the Corinthian church had their positions usurped by younger men⁴. Clement thought this action was unjustified and showed a lack of respect for those appointed in an orderly way. The letter is an example of early pastoral concern exhibited by one church for another. The genre of the letter follows ancient deliberative rhetoric (Bakke, 2001, p. 325). Clement argues that the Corinthians should restore the status quo and supports his argument with the passage about how the church should appoint its leaders. Clement does not provide a clear or detailed explanation of ministerial appointments and the passage is open to interpretation having been used to support apostolic succession⁵, presbyterian, congregational, charismatic, and apostolic delegation⁶ (Moriarty, 2012, pp. 116-117).

In Chapter 44:2, it is not clear whether Clement is talking about the arrangements to be made after the death of the apostles or the death of the first generation of local leaders (Moriarty, 2012, pp. 121-123). For the apostolic succession view, it is necessary to interpret Clement as talking about the apostles' death and the “other eminent men” to be their successors (p. 127). However, Clement does not say anything about the second

¹ This essay focuses on Clement's First Epistle to the Corinthians chapters 40-42 and 46.

² Clement, First Epistle to the Corinthians chapter 1. The translation used in this essay dates from 1867 but is still in use and readily available on the Internet.

³ Merrill thought the letter was written about 140 C.E., possibly by someone named Clement, but that the first century bishop probably did not exist.

⁴ Clement, First Epistle to the Corinthians chapter 1.

⁵ Hall takes this view (Hall, 2005, p. 33).

⁶ Moriarty takes this view. He says the “other reputable men” mentioned by Clement were men who had authority to make appointments. For Clement's purposes, it was sufficient to say “that all the local church leaders had their positions with God's approval” (Moriarty, 2012, p. 136).

generations of leaders (such as the deposed Corinthian church leaders) as being divinely appointed. If they were to be considered divinely appointed by virtue of a chain of appointment from the apostles, this would be pertinent to Clement's argument, but he does not mention this in 44:3 as would be expected, and this militates against the apostolic succession view (pp. 128-129).

The audience of the letter is ostensibly the whole Corinthian church but different parts of the letter are addressed to different segments of the church. The letter opens with an apology to those who raised the complaint with the Church in Rome for the tardiness of the reply due to certain successive calamitous events (Roberts, 1867, p. 15). Much of the remainder of the letter is directed towards the new leadership asking them to step down. However, from a congregational view, this appeal appears to address the whole congregation, asking them to re-instate the former leadership.

Clement thought that leaders appointed by “eminent men”⁷ should be accepted (Rankin, 2006, p. 42). Clement does not state who these eminent men are, e.g. they might be laymen⁸ from the church in Corinth, or other presbyters/bishops, possibly from churches elsewhere. Neither does Clement concern himself with the relative merits of the two groups; it is simply unacceptable to change the leadership of the church in this way (Rankin, 2006, p. 27).

The early Christian Thought World.

The letter shows that the early church had a good knowledge and acceptance of the Septuagint and the New Testament⁹. There are 75 Scripture citations according to Hagner (Fahey, 1975, p. 315). The author does not cite the New Testament references as such, so possibly he is drawing on oral tradition rather than the New Testament documents themselves (Fahey, 1975, p. 315).

Another influence on Clement's thought world was the Roman Empire and Greek philosophy. Clement may be conforming to Roman social order in his reaction to the situation in Corinth. This is in contrast to Paul who had mocked Rome's “Peace and Security” dictum in 1 Thes 5:3 (Holmes, 2003, p. 690).¹⁰ Many historians think, “that the organisational structures of the early church ... owed more to imperial Rome than to Jesus himself” (McBrien, 2009, p. 22).

Clement argues that those in authority in the church must be respected. Anything less, he

⁷ Clement, First Epistle to the Corinthians chapter 44.

⁸ Clement used the expression, “laity” in chapter 9 of his epistle.

⁹ See encyclopaedia articles (Snyder, 1998, p. 1) and (“Saint Clement I,” 2013, p. 1).

¹⁰ Holmes was reviewing the book by Odd Magne Bakke entitled “Concord and Peace.”

repeatedly calls sedition¹¹, a term normally used for rebellion against the State. Clement appears to see the church and state as analogous and consequently does not see authority in the church in terms of service in the Kingdom of God. Clement's worldview appears to see authority in the church in the same way as the authority structure of the Roman Empire.¹²

Clement supported his position by saying that God has sent Christ, then the apostles, and then presbyters and bishops to preach the gospel¹³. As pointed out above, the arrangement for ministerial succession is not clearly defined. Clement also does not address the problem of whether leaders were to remain in office if they were incompetent or immoral. Presumably, the young usurpers had some complaints about the leadership in desiring their removal from office. We may assume that Clement had knowledge about the situation at Corinth and his main concern was to restore the church to peace and harmony.

Clement's spirituality enabled him to rise above the Graeco-Roman worldview. For instance, although Rome was famous for its legal system, Clement did not base his argument on conformity to law (church or Roman), but to unity in the bond of love. Chapter 49 in praise of love is the heart of Clement's concern. Here he says, "Love admits of no schisms" (Roberts, 1867, p. 45). The break in church harmony is more important to Clement than defending a procedure for ministerial appointments. Clement's quotation of "Love covers a multitude of sins"¹⁴ could imply that the youthful contenders may have had some reason for their actions, but in Clement's mind, they were not sufficient for them to act in an unloving way.¹⁵ Although Clement does not provide any discussion of the young contenders reasons, he says that they were "full of zeal about things which do not pertain to salvation"¹⁶ (Roberts, 1867, p. 42).

The predominant pastoral concern of Clement meant that such things as the doctrine of justification by faith alone¹⁷ were not at the forefront of his thought. Clement's writing has been criticised for being moralistic, e.g. he says Abram, Lot and Rahab were saved by hospitality and faith¹⁸. Theological consistency is not a feature of the early church fathers (Nielsen, 1962, pp. 132, 149).

¹¹ Clement, First Epistle to the Corinthians chapters 1, 3, 4, 14, 43, 46, 47, 49, 51, 54, 55, & 57.

¹² Possibly Clement had in mind the centurion who was praised by Jesus for recognising his authority in the Kingdom of God by comparing it to the line of authority in the Roman army (Mt 8:5-13).

¹³ Clement, First Epistle to the Corinthians chapters 40 - 44.

¹⁴ Clement, First Epistle to the Corinthians chapter 49 quoting 1 Peter 4:8.

¹⁵ Of course, this line of reasoning is open to abuse. In recent time we have seen bishops standing down from office because they had not dealt with clergy sexual abuse issues appropriately.

¹⁶ Clement, First Epistle to the Corinthians chapter 45.

¹⁷ Bacon concluded that "Clement is undeniably innocent of intentional disloyalty" to Paul's doctrine of faith (Bacon, 1900, p. 21).

¹⁸ Clement, First Epistle to the Corinthians chapters 10, 11, & 12.

Three representatives of the church in Rome took the letter to Corinth so that they could report back¹⁹. A positive response was expected. The Eastern Church treasured Clement's letter, with some churches including it in their canon. There is, therefore, a good probability that the Corinthian church accepted Clement's argument and restored their leaders. It is unlikely that an appeal to church law about ministerial appointments would have been sufficient to cause the usurpers to stand down. However, the appeal to the gospel of love using many Scriptural references would have had a powerful persuasive effect on the congregation, if not on the young usurpers.

The later church focussed attention on the I Clement to defend some features of various episcopal systems, but the letter itself has a pastoral focus. The passage in the letter that compares Christ's resurrection to the rising of a phoenix²⁰ is a clear warning to us not to read Clement's letter apart from its context in Graeco-Roman culture.

Conclusion

The early Christians were trying to understand their faith as it applied to practical issues. Their reasoning was necessarily influenced by their culture. Although we look with interest to the theology and practice of the early church because of their proximity in time to Jesus and the apostles, the letter of Clement to the Corinthians does not set out a system of ministerial appointments that we are obliged to follow. Clement's pastoral concern, however, reveals a Christian mind-set that is laudable in all ages.

¹⁹ Clement, First Epistle to the Corinthians chapter 59.

²⁰ Clement, First Epistle to the Corinthians chapter 25 (Roberts, 1867, p. 30).

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