

The First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians

Excerpt 2^{*}

Proper Church Order, Apostolic Selection, and the Sin of Division

After a general call to repentance, Clement proceeds to give multiple and lengthy examples of obedience and humility (not envy) from Old Testament Scripture and from Jesus. He writes of how it is God we should obey and not seditious men. He speaks of God being a God of order and harmony and not sedition. He shows how the second coming is sure (and notes that the fact of the Resurrection should not be that hard to grasp). And this should motivate us to fear God and do good works, with the understanding that we are justified through faith, not our works, nor do we deserve the rewards and blessings he has given us through Christ, our Leader....

...Let us then, men and brothers, with all energy, act the part of soldiers, in accordance with His holy commandments. Let us consider those who serve under our generals — with what order, obedience, and submissiveness they perform the things that are commanded them. Not all are prefects nor commanders of a thousand nor of a hundred nor of fifty or the like, but each one in his own rank performs the things commanded by the king and the generals. The great cannot subsist without the small, nor the small without the great. There is a kind of mixture in all things, and in these there is use. Let us take our body for an example. The head is nothing without the feet, and the feet are nothing without the head; yea, the very smallest members of our body are necessary and useful to the whole body. But all breathe together, and use one subjection for the preservation of the whole body.

Let our whole body, then, be preserved in, Christ Jesus; and let everyone be subject to his neighbor, according to the special gift¹ placed upon him. Let the strong not despise the weak, and let the weak show respect to the strong. Let the rich man provide for the wants of the poor; and let the poor man bless God, because He has given him one by whom his need may be supplied. Let the wise man display his wisdom, not by [mere] words, but through good deeds. Let the humble not bear testimony to himself, but leave witness to be borne to him by

another. Let him that is pure in the flesh not grow proud of it and boast, knowing that it was another who bestowed on him the gift of continence. Let us consider, then, brothers, of what matter we were made — who and what manner of beings we came into the world, as it were out of a tomb and from utter darkness. He who made us and fashioned us, having prepared His bountiful gifts for us before we were born, introduced us into His world. Since, therefore, we receive all these things from Him, we ought for everything to give Him thanks, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen....

...These things therefore being manifest to us — and since we look into the depths of the divine knowledge — it behooves us to do all things in [their proper] order, which the Lord has commanded us to perform at stated times. He has enjoined offerings [to be presented] and service to be performed [to Him] — and that not thoughtlessly or irregularly but at the appointed times and hours. Where and by whom He desires these things to be done He Himself has fixed by His own supreme will, in order that all things being piously done according to His good pleasure, may be to His will. Those, therefore, who present their offerings at the appointed times are accepted and blessed; for inasmuch as they follow the laws of the Lord, they sin not. For his own peculiar services are assigned to the high priest, and their own proper place is prescribed to the priests, and their own special ministrations

*The entire letter can be read here:

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ii.ii.html>

¹ that is, "spiritual gift"

devolve on the Levites. The layman is bound by the laws that pertain to laymen.

Let every one of you, brothers, give thanks to God in his own order, living in all good conscience, with becoming gravity, and not going beyond the rule of the ministry prescribed to him. Not in every place, brothers, are the daily sacrifices offered — or the peace offerings or the sin-offerings and the trespass-offerings — but in Jerusalem only. And even there they are not offered in any place but only at the altar before the temple, what is offered being first carefully examined by the high priest and the ministers already mentioned. Those, therefore, who do anything beyond what is agreeable to His will are punished with death. Observe, brothers, that the greater the knowledge that has been vouchsafed to us, the greater also is the danger to which we are exposed.²

The apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ [has done so] from God. Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. Both things were done, then, in an orderly way, according to the will of God. Having therefore received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Spirit, they went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. And thus preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the first fruits [of their labors], — having first approved them by the Spirit — to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe. Nor was this any new thing, since indeed many ages before it was written concerning bishops and deacons. For thus says the Scripture in a certain place, “I will appoint their bishops in righteousness, and their deacons in faith.”³

And what wonder is it if those in Christ who were entrusted with such a duty by God appointed those [bishops and deacons] before

mentioned, when the blessed Moses also, “a faithful servant in all his house,”⁴ noted down in the sacred books all the injunctions that were given him? and when the other prophets also followed him, bearing witness with one consent to the ordinances that he had appointed? For, when rivalry arose concerning the priesthood and the tribes were contending among themselves as to which of them should be adorned with that glorious title, he commanded the twelve princes of the tribes to bring him their rods, each one being inscribed with the name of the tribe. And he took them and bound them [together], and sealed them with the rings of the princes of the tribes, and laid them up in the tabernacle of witness on the table of God. And having shut the doors of the tabernacle, he sealed the keys, as he had done the rods, and said to them, “Men and brothers, the tribe whose rod shall blossom God has chosen to fulfill the office of the priesthood and to minister unto Him.” And when the morning was come, he assembled all Israel, six hundred thousand men, and showed the seals to the princes of the tribes, and opened the tabernacle of witness, and brought forth the rods. And the rod of Aaron was found not only to have blossomed but also to bear fruit upon it.⁵ What do you think, beloved? Did not Moses know beforehand that this would happen? Undoubtedly he knew; but he acted thus, that there might be no sedition in Israel and that the name of the true and only God might be glorified, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife because of the title of bishop. For this reason, therefore — inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect foreknowledge of this — they appointed those [bishops and deacons] already mentioned and afterwards gave instructions that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry.⁶ We are of

² This paragraph is often used to argue for an early date of writing (before AD 70), as it may suggest that the Temple was still standing.

³ This seems to be a misquotation of Isaiah 60:17.

⁴ Numbers 12:7

⁵ See Numbers 17.

⁶ The meaning of this passage is often debated, but Clement seems to be claiming that the apostles were directed by the Holy

opinion, therefore, that those appointed by [the apostles] — or afterwards by other eminent men with the consent of the whole Church — and who have blamelessly served the flock of Christ in a humble, peaceable, and disinterested spirit and have for a long time possessed the good opinion of all cannot be justly dismissed from the ministry. For our sin will not be small if we eject from the office of bishop those who have blamelessly and holily presented its offerings. Blessed are those elders who, having finished their course before now, have obtained a fruitful and perfect departure [from this world]; for they have no fear lest anyone deprive them of the place now appointed them. But we see that you have removed some men of excellent behavior from the ministry, which they fulfilled blamelessly and with honor.

You are fond of contention, brothers, and full of zeal about things that do not pertain to salvation. Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit. Observe that nothing of an unjust or counterfeit character is written in them. For you will not find that the righteous were cast off by men who themselves were holy. The righteous were indeed persecuted, but only by the wicked. They were cast into prison, but only by the unholy; they were stoned, but only by transgressors; they were slain, but only by the accursed and such as had conceived an unrighteous envy against them. Exposed to such sufferings, they endured them gloriously. For what shall we say, brothers? Was Daniel cast into the den of lions by such as feared God? Were Hananiah, and Azariah and Mishael shut up in a furnace of fire by those who observed the great and glorious worship of the Most High? Far from us be such a thought! Who, then, were they that did such things? The hateful and those full of all wickedness were roused to such a pitch of fury that they inflicted torture on those who served God with a holy and blameless purpose [of heart], not knowing that the Most High is the Defender and

Spirit to select the next two generations of church leaders in advance.

Protector of all who with a pure conscience serve His all-excellent name, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. But they who with confidence endured [these things] are now heirs of glory and honor, and have been exalted and lifted up by God in their memorial forever and ever. Amen.

To such examples, therefore, brothers, it is right that we should cleave, for it is written, “Cleave to the holy, for those that cleave to them shall [themselves] be made holy.”⁷ And again, in another place, [the Scripture] says, “With a harmless man you shall be harmless yourself, and with an elect man you shall be elect, and with a perverse man you shall show yourself perverse.”⁸ Let us cleave, therefore, to the innocent and righteous, since these are the elect of God. Why are there strifes and tumults and divisions and schisms and wars among you? Have we not [all] one God and one Christ? Is there not one Spirit of grace poured out upon us? And have we not one calling in Christ? Why do we divide and tear to pieces the members of Christ and raise up strife against our own body and have reached such a height of madness as to forget that “we are members one of another?”⁹ Remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, how He said, “Woe to that man [by whom offences come]! It would be better for him that he had never been born than that he should cast a stumbling block before one of my elect. Yes, it would be better for him that a millstone should be hung about [his neck] and that he should be sunk in the depths of the sea than that he should cast a stumbling block before one of my little ones.” 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. And still your sedition continues.

Take up the letter of the blessed Apostle Paul. What did he write to you in the beginning of the [spread of the] Gospel? Truly, under the inspiration of the Spirit, he wrote to you

⁷ This passage is not found in canonical Scripture.

⁸ Psalm 18:25-26

⁹ Romans 12:5

concerning himself, and Cephas, and Apollos, because even then parties had been formed among you.¹⁰ But that inclination for one above another entailed less guilt upon you, inasmuch as your partialities were then shown towards apostles already of high reputation and towards a man whom they had approved. But now reflect who those are that have perverted you and lessened the renown of your far-famed brotherly love. It is disgraceful, beloved — yes, highly disgraceful — and unworthy of your conduct in Christ 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 elders. And this rumor has reached not only us, but those also who are aliens from us, so that, through your infatuation, the name of the Lord is blasphemed, while danger is also brought upon yourselves.

¹⁰ See 1 Corinthians 1:10-17.