

The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians and its depiction of early Christian corporate life

Intro

The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, or 1 Clement, is a letter from the bishop of Rome¹ to the church at Corinth, written in Greek about 95-97 CE (Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe 1994, 1:2; Snyder 1998). This essay will briefly describe the genre, purpose and intended audience of 1 Clement before considering what the epistle reveals about corporate Christian practice in the first century.

Genre, purpose and audience

Although 1 Clement is a letter, it is quite a long one: about 13,300 words² and thus longer than any epistle in the New Testament canon (Wilson 1976, 3). Nevertheless, the structure is similar to other letters of the time, including an initial salutation, a clear core message, and ending with some personal notes and a benediction.

Living in Rome, Clement may have been aware of the letter-writing principles promoted by Roman rhetoricians and pioneered by Isocrates in the 4th century BCE (Sullivan 2007). Rhetorically, the epistle is *deliberative*³ (Bakke 2001, 33), using *logos*⁴ as the primary, though not the sole, means of persuasion. A frequent technique in 1 Clement is the appeal to examples, for instance chapter 17 encourages the Corinthians to imitate the humility of Elijah, Elisha, Ezekiel, Job and Moses.

¹ Although the epistle's title includes the name Clement (Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe 1994, 1:5 (footnote)) the text does not state internally who the author was. The letter commences with a salutation from "The Church of God which sojourns in Rome," and consequently the author could be assumed to be the leader of that church. The early historian Eusebius knew of this letter and attributed it to Clement, the friend of Paul's mentioned in Philippians 4:3 (Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe 1994, 1:2), as did Origen (Holmes 2007, 35). That attribution accords with what is known of Clement, the second or third bishop of Rome after Peter (Cross and Livingstone 2009), though there is nothing apart from the name itself that links Clement of Rome with the Clement of Philippians 4:3 (Holmes 2007, 35).

² At least in the English translation by J. B. Lightfoot (Clement of Rome 1891).

³ Seeking to persuade, rather than *forensic* or *ceremonial*.

⁴ Appeal to reason, rather than *pathos* (to emotions) or *ethos* (to the character and authority of the writer).

In general, the tone is politely firm with the intention of exhorting the readers to greater holiness. The text does, however, include passages that shame (45, 46)⁵, command (57) and even threaten (59).

The immediate readership was the church in Corinth (1) but such letters were often copied and circulated beyond the initial readers. Clement, for instance, had read an earlier letter by Paul to the Corinthians (47). Consequently, although the letter addresses some issues specific to the church at Corinth, it also contains a more general message and we may assume that Clement wrote with the wider church in mind. The epistle certainly *was* more widely circulated by the early church and highly regarded: it was “publicly read in very many churches” according to Eusebius (Eusebius 1890 iii. 16) and cited as scripture by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 CE) (Holmes 2007, 38). Polycarp of Smyrna’s *Epistle to the Philipians* (c. 120-140 CE) reveals that Polycarp knew⁶ and respected 1 Clement.

At the beginning of the epistle, Clement notes that he is responding to topics raised in prior correspondence from Corinth, and especially about “shameful and detestable sedition” within their community (1). It is generally claimed that the core intention of this epistle is to bring some younger members of the church, who had deposed one of their leaders, back into line (e.g. “First Letter of Clement” 2016). In his PhD thesis, however, J. W. Wilson points out that this topic is not even raised until chapter 44. The key problem, according to Wilson, is the community’s division into factions, and Clement’s response “is approached in terms of the relationship of the whole congregation, including the elders, to God” (Wilson 1976, 157).

Authority in the early church

Reading 1 Clement provides us with some insight into what counted as a convincing argument to the early church. In particular, Clement makes assumptions about the source of authority within the church. He assumes, for instance, that advice from the bishop of Rome will be respected, but he does not imply that the Corinthians ought to accept his advice merely because he is the bishop of Rome. He does, however, draw on the authority of the Old Testament, the Apostles, and the words of Jesus.

⁵ All citations of 1 Clement are chapter numbers from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* v. 10 (Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe 1994).

⁶ Some scholars claim that Polycarp knew it by heart, though that assumption has been challenged (Berding 2011).

There is hardly a chapter in which Clement does not quote or allude to the Old Testament. He cites books from all sections of the OT, although it is unclear what he included in the OT canon, and includes lengthy quotes from Isaiah (16), Psalms (18) and Job (56). “Clement regarded the OT Scriptures as having come from God and so possessing the highest degree of inspiration” (Hagner 1973, 111). “Virtually the whole of Clement’s argument is drawn from, and thus rests upon, the teaching of the OT” (Hagner 1973, 120).

Although the New Testament canon had not yet been established, Clement shows an extensive familiarity with numerous NT books. 1 Clement contains no verbatim quotes from the NT, nor even references to the names of any NT book, but it does contain many allusions to NT material (Hagner 1973, 135). For instance, Clement refers to “the epistle of the blessed Paul the Apostle” (47), which the subsequent sentences suggest is a reference to 1 Corinthians⁷. Chapters 37 and 38 use the same metaphor of the church as a body as Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 12.

Clement quotes sayings from Jesus in chapters 13 and 46⁸, with words that bear a close resemblance to the reports by Matthew, Mark and Luke. He also puts the words of Psalm 34 into the mouth of Jesus retrospectively (22). These words of Jesus may have been accorded some special merit, but neither they nor the other NT allusions are accompanied by any exegesis. Clement seems to assume that if Jesus or the Apostles said something then it should be obeyed (Hagner 1973, 350).

The on-going authority of the Apostles is explicitly asserted in chapter 42:

“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. ... They [the apostles] went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand ... and ... they appointed the first fruits ... to be bishops and deacons.”

⁷ Clement even affirms this letter of Paul’s to be inspired by the Spirit (47), but the importance of that comment as a claim about the letter’s authority is minimal given Clement’s use of a similar phrase in relation to his own writing in chapter 63 (Hagner 1973, 341).

⁸ Although it does not relate directly to “early Christian corporate life”, I cannot resist noting a doctrinal point in chapter 46. Clement uses a Trinitarian formula that significantly predates any clear statement of that as church dogma: “Have we not all one God and one Christ? Is there not one Spirit of grace poured out upon us?”

In that passage Clement clearly attributes authority to the apostles to preach and to appoint leaders. A significant contention in 1 Clement is that the local church leaders in some sense inherit authority from the apostles, but more on that below.

Forms of ministry

With regard to how worship and service should be undertaken within the church, Clement endorses a continuation of an Old Testament priestly model: “it behoves us to do all things in [their proper] order, which the Lord has commanded us to perform at stated times” (40). There is a right time and place for religious observances, and differing roles for priests and laity (40-41).

Clement compares the church to an army: “each in his own rank performs the things commanded by the king and the generals” (37). The strict structure implied by that military metaphor is immediately balanced by a more organic metaphor of working together as equal parts of a body. Nevertheless, the structure is less important than the goal, which is a harmony that arises when envy is removed (9), humility embraced (13, 16), and God obeyed (9, 14).

Clement gives a mixed message in relation to the contribution of woman to the church. On one hand he writes in praise of Rahab (12), Danaids and Dircae (6), and Judith (55). And yet he encourages women to be taught to “manage their household affairs becomingly” (1) rather than aspire to leadership.

Appointment of leaders

At the beginning of chapter 44, Clement discusses the need for leadership succession and a proper respect for those duly appointed as leaders. These verses, however, are not clear about the *process* for such appointments. Were new leaders to be appointed by the successors of the original apostles, by other local church leaders who had been appointed by the apostles, a local selection committee, itinerant prophets/evangelists, or by some centrally-authorised group of appointers? W. Moriarty compares those five interpretations and settles on the final one (Moriarty 2012). That conclusion seems to me to give inadequate weight to Clement’s phrase “with the consent of the whole church”, which

surely refers to approval by the local congregation rather than, or perhaps in addition to, any external person or group.

Once appointed, those “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” (44). That such a dismissal has taken place in Corinth is “highly disgraceful” (47).

Leadership roles

Moriarty notes that the two words used by Clement to refer to local church leaders may be synonyms, with no separation of duties or authority implied (Moriarty 2012, 118 footnote). He mentions ἐπισκόποι and πρεσβύτεροι as the Greek words used by Clement, but this is incorrect as Clement actually uses *three* distinct words to denote church leaders. The word πρεσβύτερος and its variants appear eight times in 1 Clement, translated by Lightfoot inconsistently as presbyter and elder⁹ (Clement of Rome 1891). The word ἐπισκόπους is used five times; three times in chapter 42 in conjunction with a third word διακόνους, commonly translated as “bishops and deacons”. “Overseers and servants” may be just as accurate and would avoid the 21st century connotations of the more formal titles.

Clement makes no explicit statement about the duties of a leader¹⁰, and no conclusion can be drawn about whether leadership positions constitute a hierarchy. Although Clement describes a succession from Jesus to apostles to leaders appointed by the apostles (42), that temporal sequence does not necessarily imply a hierarchy of authority.

There are differing roles within the church but Clement calls for “every one to be subject to his neighbour” (38), for all to act in love towards each other to the point of self-sacrifice (54), and for all to pray for each other (56). This is no off-handed platitude, but central to Clement’s advice. In response to the disgraceful sedition, the Corinthians should “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” (68).

⁹ Probably implying those who are older rather than any formal position of “Eldership”.

¹⁰ However, a few inferences may be made: preaching is mentioned in chapter 42; and like Moses, a leader should intercede on behalf of the people (53).

Wilson is thus quite right to frame the essence of 1 Clement in this way: “The power of God is not proclaimed primarily by any individual’s mighty works” whether they be the appointed leader or a usurper, but by the “harmony of love”. God’s “dominion is revealed in the mutual subordination to the needs of one another by his people.” (Wilson 1976, 159)

Conclusion

1 Clement reveals the thought process of a significant church leader at a point in history when the understanding of ecclesiology was still in its infancy. This text is not primarily intended to instruct the reader about church structures or practices of worship. As a letter from one established church to another, those details are assumed as common knowledge – knowledge that for us must be inferred.

Clement is explicit about the importance of acting with a proper regard for order and, importantly, an ordered approach to the appointment of church leaders. The text does not make clear, however, either the duties of church leaders, nor the process for their appointment.

From the way Clement structures his argument, we can see that he, and presumably the Corinthian church, accepts the authority of the Old Testament, of the apostles, and of the words of Jesus.

Clement also highlights important attributes of the Christian community’s motivations: exhorting the church at Corinth to strive for harmony through humility, mutual submission, and respect for their duly appointed leaders.

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