

The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians

Synopsis: *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* is a letter written at the end of the first century in which the author advises the church in Corinth about an apparent dispute in which some leaders of that church had been deposed. Within the short excerpt provided by Stevenson (Stevenson and Kidd 1983, 7–9), Clement advises the Corinthians to undertake offerings and service in due order and with care; that each person should give thanks to God in ways that are consistent with established patterns; that the apostles appointed bishops and deacons; and that those duly appointed, who have acted blamelessly, should not be deposed from their office.

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 leader¹ 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).

Apart from being bishop of Rome between about 88-97 CE (Snyder 1998), little else is known of Clement's life or work, although a variety of legends arose in later centuries about him, including his martyrdom by drowning in the Black Sea (Cross and Livingstone 2009; Farmer 2011).

The reference in the opening chapter of the epistle to "sudden and successive calamitous events" may refer to the persecution of Christians under the Roman emperor Domitian. If so, this would date the writing to near the end of both Clement's and Domitian's period of leadership, most likely 95-97 CE (Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe 1994, 1:2; Snyder 1998).

¹ Or "a" leader. I suspect that an important discussion in the second Assignment will need to be about whether a single "bishop" was the norm at the time of writing.

The epistle was highly regarded by the early church: 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). The tone is firm but polite and the rhetorical intention is to exhort rather than command. It is also notable that the author quotes frequently from the Old Testament and alludes to multiple New Testament texts.

Although there are very few early copies of the text extant today the epistle is generally accepted as authentic (Holmes 2007, 38). As such, it contributes greatly to our understanding of the early church’s approach to both worship and leadership. Furthermore the text provides an insight into the style of reasoning of the early church leaders and the relationship between local churches. It is interesting, for example, that a leader of one church considered it appropriate to give advice to people in another location.

Bibliography²

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² Other citations in preparation for the second Assignment: included here just to force my referencing software to place them in the Bibliography: (Hall 2005, 31–35), ("First Letter of Clement" 2016), (Bakke 2001), (Hagner 1973), (Young 1948), (Wilson 1976), (Moriarty 2012), (Berding 2011).