

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 2

The Earliest Extra-Biblical Christian Writings – 1 Clement

BACKGROUND

We have started this study focusing on the historical context of the church. Getting our first historical data about the church from Acts and other New Testament writings, we placed the church into the flow of general history. We understand that what began as a reform movement within Judaism (a countryside following of a crucified 33 year old carpenter) spread like a wild fire throughout the civilized world of many faiths in just a matter of decades. We note this occurred as the church was no mere afterthought or coincidence. It was a seed sown at the right precise time, in the perfect soil, with the right nutrients and watering to produce a tree that spread throughout the whole world producing fruit that changed and directed civilization, especially in the west.

How did this happen? What were the signal events along the way? These questions were answered in part in lesson one. We covered two distinct pivot points. First, the destruction of Jerusalem in 68-70 A.D. saw the church separated from its Jewish bearings. Jerusalem was no longer the seat of the church. Any question of the church as a Jewish institution or break off was negated. The early influx of Jewish thought and custom was slowed to a trickle. Greek thought was to come to dominate the church, even in the church's understanding of the Old Testament.

A second pivot point was the death of the apostles. While much of the New Testament church believed the return of Jesus to be an any day event, it was rapidly becoming apparent that such was not going to be the case. In fact, it began to look like only the Apostle John would live until the second coming. Then, John wrote his gospel and explained that there was never a promise of his living until the second coming. As the apostles passed, there were huge questions for the church:

1. Who is in charge?
2. How do all the churches stay united?
3. Who decides doctrine?
4. Who decides right and wrong?
5. What about the renegade churches?
6. What about the renegade teaching?

These questions find their answers in our pages of history. How the church grew through these times is a testimony to God. After all, the church is God's institution, a part of God's kingdom. As we unfold the pages of history, we will see how God works through the frailties of man, the errors of man, and even the evils of man to secure the church, the bride of Christ, as a refuge of the saved awaiting the bridegroom's return. Ultimately, we will see that the church is not a visible structure as much as it is the actual invisible body of the redeemed in a corporate sense.

How do we study this church growth process? We have a number of tools at our disposal. We can examine archaeology and learn a number of things. Our examination of Christian art and architecture certainly can teach us a great deal as well. Most of our insight, however, comes from historical writings that are predominantly religious but also secular.

Today, we have a number of ancient Christian letters and books that date back as far as some of the later New Testament books. These are not alternate scriptures. They are various kinds of writings that include training manuals for new Christians, letters to churches addressing current problems and issues, news reports on what happened to certain leaders and others, argumentative defenses of the faith and orthodoxy, commentaries and sermons, and even (by 330 A.D.) a book on church history!

From these writings, we glean a lot. We learn what the church was doing, its conflicts and problems, what the church considered scripture, and more.

We will simply reference many of these writings as this class unfolds, we will look at but some of these writings in much greater detail. This week and next we will closely examine 1 Clement and the Didache¹ (pronounced *di-da-kay*).

These writings are particularly important because they reflect the larger problems and concerns of the church after the deaths of the apostles. These writings show the predominant needs of the church included a stronger moral, corporate, and devotional life.

Before we go much further, we should discuss footnotes! These lessons will employ more footnotes than we used in Biblical Literacy. The footnotes are there to give sources and to make the lessons more readable. In an effort to improve

¹ A great many of these writings, including 1 Clement and *The Didache* are termed writings of the "Apostolic Fathers." The term, coined in the late 1600's, is used in different ways to refer to early Christian writers. Generally, it refers to the "fathers" of the church that were either personally familiar with the Apostles or at least taught consistently with the apostolic message.

readability, we have moved “extra material” that may interest some into footnotes. Similarly, notes are often needed for accuracy where the general approach of the lesson loses some accuracy without further information. In other words, these lessons should be very readable without going into the footnotes. But, the footnotes are provided for accuracy as well as further information for those who wish to probe deeper.

1 CLEMENT

Background to 1 Clement

Most scholars date the writing of the letter we call First Clement² within a few years of 95 A.D. This dating means that First Clement was written roughly the same time as the Revelation of John. Clement was the Bishop over the house churches at Rome.³ He wrote the letter to the church at Corinth (Yes, the same church that Paul had written to just 40 some odd years earlier!). Clement does not identify himself as the author, but history is clear that the letter is his.⁴ Clement writes at a time where John is likely alive in Asia Minor (Ephesus area). We know that in Clement’s area (Rome) as well as that of Corinth, there are still church leaders alive whom the Apostles appointed (Chapters 42-44).

We do not know Clement’s age at the time he wrote. Similarly, we do not know whether Clement had personally known Paul or Peter, who had died in Rome about 30 years before Clement wrote.⁵ While scholars differ on whether Clement knew Paul, all must concede that Paul heavily influenced

² We call this letter “First Clement” because there is a second early church letter called “Second Clement.” Many doubt whether the same Clement wrote 2 Clement. In fact, 2 Clement likely was written as much as 65 years later than 1 Clement.

³ We need to remember that at this stage in church history, the church met mostly in homes. There were no “church buildings” like we think of today. Certainly, the churches may have met outside or at other facilities, but most church meetings were held in homes. Out of necessity, then, oversight issues were very different than they are today. The house churches could only “hold” so many people. The number of homes in use must have been great in certain areas like Rome.

⁴ Some scholars believe that the letter is that of the Roman leadership in a broader sense than just Clement, and that Clement was merely the one chosen to reduce the leadership’s thoughts to writing. This is a minority view.

⁵ Irenaeus, Tertullian, and others write about Clement as the Bishop of Rome. The early writings about Clement differ in detail and provide alternate stories about whether he personally knew any of the apostles. Some say he did; others differ. While some identified Clement as Paul’s co-worker referenced in Phil. 4:3, most current scholars think it unlikely.

Clement. Clement's letter closely imitates the style, language, and message of Paul. In fact, in the 2nd century, Clement of Alexandria cites 1 Clement as scripture. The Orthodox Church itself never accepted 1 Clement as inspirational on par with our scriptural writings. Hence, it is a useful read of what a godly man⁶ and a key church leader had to say on some early church issues, but it is not in our Bibles.

How does 1 Clement fit in secular history?

As discussed earlier, Clement most likely wrote around 95 A.D. This timing places the letter during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. Most scholars agree that Domitian was a persecutor of the church on a significant scale. Eusebius (around 325 A.D.) noted that even secular historians recorded the martyrdoms under Domitian. About 70 years after Domitian (c. 165 A.D.), Hegesippus wrote of a non-martyrdom that occurred to the earthly great-nephews of Jesus under Domitian. As recorded by Eusebius, Hegesippus wrote,

Of the family of the Lord there were still living the grandchildren of Jude, who is said to have been the Lord's brother according to the flesh... They were brought to the Emperor Domitian... And he asked them...how much property they had.... And both of them answered that they had a piece of land which contained only thirty-nine acres, and from which they raised their taxes and supported themselves by their own labor... And when they were asked concerning Christ and his kingdom, of what sort it was and where and when it was to appear, they answered that it was not a temporal nor an earthly kingdom, but a heavenly and angelic one, which would appear at the end of the world, when he should come in glory to judge the quick and the dead, and to give unto every one according to his works. Upon hearing this, Domitian did not pass judgment against them, but, despising them as of no account, he let them go. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 3.20.

⁶ Early lists of the Roman church leaders usually place Clement as the third Bishop (the first Bishops following the Apostles Peter and Paul were Linus and Cletus a/k/a Anencletus). Augustine and Tertullian listed Clement as the second Bishop. The Bishops are not called "Popes" until later.

While we do not know the full extent of Domitian's persecutions,⁷ much of early church history equates the severity of the persecutions as to or greater than Nero's.

Why did Clement write?

Just as when we were studying Biblical Literacy, we use the same word for asking this question. The scholastic word is "occasion." So the scholars ask, "what is the occasion for 1 Clement?" But, that is just the technical jargon for asking, "what was going on that caused Clement to write this letter?"

Clement wrote because the Corinthian church was up to its old tricks (or old problems!). We recall Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church where he addressed problems of splits and factions within the church. Clement writes addressing a variant of the same beast rearing its head. Divisions are again front and center for the Corinthian church. This time, though, the divisions took on a new face. The problems were not so much one group "of Apollos," "of Peter," or "of Paul." When Clement writes, the church leadership and structure itself was under attack. It is apparent from reading 1 Clement that some of the young men in the church basically revolted and took over the church and its leadership. We do not know exactly what occurred there. Much like studying the New Testament letters, we are listening to what seems like one side of a phone call and trying to figure out what the other side is saying.

What does Clement say?

There are a number of important passages in 1 Clement for students of the Bible as well as students of church history.

We can divide Clement's passages in three categories: Those containing important factual material for church history, those containing personal instruction, and those containing church instruction.

⁷ In this short time, Christianity had already penetrated all levels of society. Flavia Domitilla was a niece of Emperor Domitian. According to Jerome, Flavia was exiled by her uncle, dying on the island of Ponza, because of her faith. One of Rome's most extensive catacombs ("Catacomb of Domitilla") started with a Christian cemetery on the land of Flavia Domitilla. Some of our best early Christian artwork is found in these tombs.

A. Factual Material

From a broad perspective, it is important to notice how much New Testament scripture Clement either quotes or references. Many passages show Clement's great awareness of many of much of our New Testaments today. We see Clement using the gospels of Matthew and Luke as well as multiple letters of Paul, 1 Peter, and Hebrews.

This indicates that the post-apostolic church found authority and answers (a measuring rule for the church) in the writings of the Apostles. Once the Apostles were gone, it makes sense that the church would try to gather their writings and teachings into a coherent form that could be shared by the many churches around the known world.

Of course, Clement is clearly well versed in Old Testament books as well. He teaches that the Holy Spirit gave the scriptures (45:2) and he uses Old Testament scriptures constantly. In this way, Clement was like Paul (2 Timothy 3:16). The Old Testament had absolute authority over the church (when interpreted "correctly!").

There is more factual material of note in Clement than the usage of scripture. It is Clement who first writes of the death of Peter and Paul in Rome under the reign of Nero (5:4-7). This same passage seems to confirm that Paul finally made it to Spain in his missionary efforts, as he planned (Romans 15:28):

Peter endured not one or two, but numerous labors and when he had at length suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him. Paul also obtained the reward of patient endurance, after being seven times thrown into captivity, compelled to flee, and stoned. After preaching both in the east and west, he gained the illustrious reputation due to his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world, and come to the extreme limit of the west, and suffered martyrdom.

Some of the interesting "factual" material is actually non-factual! By that, we mean there are passages in Clement that by today's standards are wrong. Clement writes in chapter 25 about something quite bizarre. Clement evidently believes in the story of the Phoenix which we know to be mythical.

Let us consider that wonderful sign [of the resurrection] which takes place in...Arabia. There is a certain bird which is called a phœnix. This is the only one of its kind, and lives five hundred years. And when the time of its death draws near, it builds itself a nest of frankincense, and myrrh, and other spices, into which...it enters and dies. But as the flesh decays a certain kind of worm is produced, which, being nourished by the juices of the dead bird, brings forth feathers. Then, when it has acquired strength, it takes up that nest in which are the bones of its parent, and bearing these it passes from the land of Arabia into Egypt... And, in open day, flying in the sight of all men, it places them on the altar of the sun, and having done this, hastens back to its former abode. The priests then inspect the registers of the dates, and find that it has returned exactly as the five hundredth year was completed.

Clement then questions why it should seem remarkable that God would resurrect Christians (“those who have piously served him in the assurance engendered by honest faith”) when he bothers to resurrect a bird!⁸

B. Personal Instruction

Clement stressed God’s desire of our repentance (Ch. 7–8). He wrote that we follow repentance with obedience and hospitality (10–12). In 15:1 Clement urged the church to:

[U]nite with those who devoutly practice peace, not with those who hypocritically wish for peace.

Clement goes through Isaiah 53 in great detail emphasizing our need for humility. Clement not only wrote of humility but also clearly modeled it as well. Within the letter itself, Clement does no self-aggrandizing. He does not even mention himself by name. Over and over, however, he stresses the need for humility and underscores the dangerous sins of jealousy and envy (Ch. 1–7).

⁸ In the process, Clement wrongly references Psalm 92:12 as supporting his views. Psalm 92:12 reads, “The righteous will flourish like a palm tree.” In Greek, the word for palm tree is “*phoinix*” (φοινίχ) which Clement may have misunderstood as the Phoenix bird.

Clement also offers specific instructions to women and children in chapter 21. He wants women guided “toward that which is good” with “a sincere desire to be gentle.” Children are to learn how “strong” (meaning essential or important) humility is before God and what “pure love is able to accomplish.”

As we think of this wise man Paul so directly influenced, who ministers in a church in transition, grappling with issues of a delayed second coming, a second generation of leadership, and a vacuum of authority, we find a passage of great trust and faith. Reminiscent of Paul (“the one who calls you is faithful and he will do it!” 1 Thes. 5:24), Clement writes that God:

[W]ill do all things when he wills, and as he wills, and none of these things decreed by him will fail. (27:5)

These are strong words of faith by someone who had every reason to wonder! Certainly history, as well as scripture, has born out the truth of Clement’s confidence.

Clement had a good grasp of the role of faith and works. Modeling Paul’s teaching in Romans,⁹ Clement explained our salvation comes not from “ourselves” or “our wisdom” or “any works we perform in holiness of heart” but “through the faith” which was God’s sanctifying means “from the beginning of time” (32:4).

Clement then poses a question echoing Paul in Romans 6:1.¹⁰ Clement asks, “What, then, are we to do, brethren? Shall we rest from doing good?...May the Master never permit that this should happen!” (33:1)

Clement, so well versed in scripture himself, urged the Corinthians to read the Old Testament as a source to teach the “ways of blessings” (31:1). This echoes Paul’s messages in Romans 15:4 (“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us”) and I Corinthians 10:11 (“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us”).

⁹ Actually, we see Paul make this very same point in most of his writings! (See Eph. 2:8-10, etc.)

¹⁰ Rom. 6:1, “What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so grace may increase? By no means!”

C. Church Instruction

Clement took a slightly different approach to correcting the division issues in the Corinthian church than Paul did. Paul explained the union of the church in one Spirit and one baptism through the person and cross of Christ (1 Cor. 1-3). Clement, on the other hand, basically orders unity by commanding the church to obey the Bishop.

Our apostles likewise knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife over the Bishop's office. For this reason, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the officials mentioned earlier [Bishops and Deacons] and afterwards they gave the offices a permanent character; that is, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry...For it will be no small sin for us, if we depose from the Bishop's office those who have offered the gifts blamelessly and in holiness. (44)

Did it work? What happened to the Corinthians? We have writings from 70 years later that indicate the Corinthians heeded the counsel of Clement. The insurrection ended and the church was still reading his letter!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Thank God for scripture. Read it, learn it, and use it! (2 Tim. 3:16)
2. Blessed are the peacemakers...not the peace talkers. (Mt. 5:9)
3. God does what God says. (1 Thes. 5:24)
4. Honor our church leaders. (Heb. 13:17)