

Studies in Patrology V

Letter of St Clement

Evidenced by the increased Coptic manuscripts that are being discovered, the Copts from the early centuries were interested in and studied the writings of the Fathers. The Patristic literature of the numerous discovered manuscripts was translated into the language of the culture present at the dating of the manuscript. An example of this is a papyrus preserved in the National Library in Berlin contains Coptic translations (Akhmimic) of the Epistle of St Clement of Rome to Corinth (4th century).

Letter of St Clement, the Roman, to the Corinthian Churches:

St. Clement, the Roman, was the third bishop of Rome as stated by St. Irenaeus. Eusebius the scholar further elaborates that St Clement became a bishop of Rome in the 12th year of Domitian's regime. So his bishop years extended from 93AD to 101AD.

Tertullian, the scholar, and Ibas bishop of Cyprus concur that St. Peter the apostle ordained St. Clement, the Roman, a bishop for Rome. In order to keep peace in the Roman Church, St. Clement, left the bishop's See to Linus, then to Anacletus, and after Anacletus he then returned to his See. Scholars agree that St Clement had a direct relationship with St. Paul and St. Peter the apostles. Origen the scholar and Eusebius from Caesarea both concur that St. Paul the apostle eulogized St. Clement in his Epistle to the Philippians "*And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the Gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life (Philippians 4:3).*"

The Letter of St. Clement, the Roman, to the Corinthian Church was accepted from the beginning as a document directly related to the Post Apostolic Era. Its style is similar to the style of the First Epistle to the Corinthians written by St. Paul the Apostle.

Many problems developed in the Corinthian Church during the time of St. Paul due to believers not submitting and obeying the ordained legal bishop there having exiled him and some priests. St. Clement wrote his letter to this church focusing on the bond of love and Christian agape as mentioned by St. Paul in his First Epistle chapter 8.

St. Clement began his Epistle exactly as St Paul in his Epistles with this beautiful verse, "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you (I Corinthians 1:1) "from the Church of God in Rome to the Church of God in Corinth (1:2).*"

St. Clement wrote, "Who can describe the blessed bond God is love? Who is capable of describing its glory? No one can talk about the glory of Agape. Agape unites us with God. Love sustains everything. Love suffers long and is kind. No bride is in love. Love doesn't allow envy. Love makes everything harmonious."

"When love rules, the good deeds will follow. Many of God's gifts come to the believer who does good deeds before God."

"All the saints of the Old Testament became glorified before the Lord not by themselves, nor their good deeds, but by God's will. Likewise, we are so called according to God's will in the Lord Jesus

Christ, we are holy not by ourselves, not by our wisdom, nor by our understanding, not by our good deeds that we did in a pure heart but by justification in the faith through our Lord Jesus Christ, through which all those saints were justified. Glory be to Him forever.

So what should we do our brethren? Do we become lazy? Do we neglect love? No but with zeal and courage we should complete every good deed as the Lord and Creator of everything rejoiced with what He did.”

Also St. Clement in his teaching of eternal life and resurrection of bodies followed the same teachings as chapter 15 in the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians.

The Dogmatic Importance of the Letter:

St. Clement’s Letter has great dogmatic importance as it clearly declares the dogma of apostolic succession. St Clement, the Roman, stated that the Christian priesthood was of great importance as it is clearly an extension of the priesthood of the Old Testament. St. Clement further stated that the church’s Shepherd hood through her bishops and priests is through apostolic succession and hierarchy, and it is of utmost importance for the church’s witness and continuity.

“The apostles preached the Gospel which they received from the Lord Jesus Christ who Himself brought the teachings from God the Father. Therefore if the apostles brought their teachings from the Lord Jesus Christ both teachings originated from God’s will. Likewise, after they had received their teachings, believed in the Glorious Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and were justified by faith departed full of the Holy Spirit to all regions of the world to preach the Holy Gospel that the Kingdom would soon come. From province to province and city to city they preached and with the Holy Spirit they chose other men from among the new believers to be bishops, priests, and deacons for the church. The apostles knew the position of the bishop and priesthood might cause envy, which could develop into plots and conspiracies. The apostles taught that when a church leader died, another would be chosen who should be justified to follow them in the bishop’s position. So it is not a faithful church that will dismiss anyone ordained for the priesthood or bishophood by the apostles or upon approval of the entire church.

The Position of Bishop in St Clement’s Letter:

St. Clement was the first to use the title “bishop” as the one who oversees. He also called bishop’s priests. There was no distinction for the Roman Church as compared to the other churches, the letter was only a trial by St. Clement to overcome the envy and conspiracies in the Corinthian Church and did not express any more dignity for the Roman Church versus the Corinthian Church. The concept of church meant the church as the body of the Lord Jesus Christ not limited by its locality and so St. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch wrote many letters to different churches. All of those fathers understood the catholicity of the church as the true and precise understanding. They also understood it is not right for any bishop to interfere in another church’s affairs in the scope of another bishop. With this in mind, one can understand why the Pope of Alexandria refused to accept Origen whom was ordained as a priest by another bishop outside his See. Therefore ensuring the dignity of the bishop’s See was a respectable dogma in the primitive Church.

Conclusion of the Letter:

St. Clement concluded his Epistle by Liturgical Prayer, which stated the Divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ who is “the only beloved Son of God through whom God taught us, sanctified us and brought us to the Glory.” The Lord Jesus Christ is the Supreme Pontiff and the Guard of our souls.” Then, St. Clement sang hymns that expressed the mercy and care of God. Finally St. Clement concludes his letter with a prayer for the governor of the regime, which clearly declares the relationship between the church and state.

“O You our Master, Give them the Kingdom’s authority by your supreme and ineffable power. So as we confess with dignity and glory which came upon them in obedience to Your will. Give them O Lord the health, the peace, the strength and the ability to practice their high leadership that you gave them. O You, our Master, the King of Kings and the Heavenly King of ages gave the man the power, the authority and the glory to rule over everything on the earth. O Lord, lead their thoughts with every good deed that is justified before You to practice in gentleness the power and authority you gave them in peace and humbleness so they can confess Your power and Your goodness. Amen.”