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Clement of Rome and His Use of Scripture

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CLEMENT OF ROME PROVIDES A GOOD EXAMPLE OF HOW A PASTOR'S HERMENEUTICAL principles, theological presuppositions, and practical concerns interact to influence his understanding and application of the Gospel.

Is there one correct method of interpreting the Holy Scriptures? It would seem that there are many people who are ready to respond to this question with a vigorous "Yes!" But that lusty "Yes" would be the only point on which many could agree, for they would follow this affirmative answer with an equally vigorous argument that the particular method they use is that one correct method! Some proponents of historical-critical methodologies maintain that such methodologies are either the only way to get at the Spirit-intended meaning of the words; or, if not the only way, at least so far superior to any other way in the results obtained that all other methods should be viewed with suspicion. Opponents of historical-critical methods likewise argue that the contemporary literal method (or the typological or the allegorical or whatever "method" they employ) is the only one. The debate over the proper method is not new to the church; perhaps the intensity with which it is being carried on in some circles today is new.

Some familiarity with the history of the Christian church reveals that there is no one method that has clearly demonstrated its superiority and as a result has been able to drive all competitors from the field. If we were to decide the best method by

counting the number of Christian teachers and leaders in all ages who have practiced it, the allegorical method would win hands down. For a thousand years it ruled almost supreme in the schools of the church. Yet today there are few exegetes who would claim that this is the best way to get at the meaning of the text.

In recent years, students of Biblical interpretation have come to recognize that the presuppositions that the interpreter holds are apt to influence the outcome of his work more decisively than the specific method he employs. For example, when an interpreter denies the inspiration of the sacred text as one of his presuppositions, he is apt to employ only the canons of secular hermeneutics as he studies the Biblical documents. On the other hand, if the interpreter holds as one of his presuppositions that the Scriptures fell directly from heaven and were written in the special Greek of the Holy Spirit, he is apt to reject all canons of secular hermeneutics. Both men will do a poor job of interpreting, not only because they may be using poor methods but also because their presuppositions have skewed their viewpoints.

Method and presuppositions interplay with a third factor: the circumstances in a person's life that prompt him to study

the Scriptures for guidance and advice. Often a man's good method or proper presuppositions conflict with the need and pressures bearing down on him. Or vice versa. It may happen that the pressures and needs confronting a person can overcome bad method and poor presuppositions to lead the man to understand the Spirit-intended meaning.

A brief case history may suffice to demonstrate the interplay of these factors in the life of St. Clement of Rome, corresponding secretary of the Roman congregation, who wrote a letter to the Christian community in Corinth in A. D. 96. This letter was valued highly by many in the early church and found its way into the New Testament canon in the famous fifth-century Codex Alexandrinus. It was also translated into at least three languages, Latin, Syriac, and Coptic, which meant that it was read in Greece, the home of its original addressees, the West, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Ignatius of Antioch (ca. A. D. 110) and Clement of Alexandria (ca. A. D. 225) thought highly of the letter. Thus we are dealing with a very significant and influential document that probably helped shape the theology and perhaps even exegetical practices in some parts of the church.

In Clement's case, as in many other cases, it is impossible to separate his method, presuppositions, and circumstances into neat, independent categories. They are interrelated, and they constantly influence each other. Nevertheless, we will attempt to separate them enough so that some understanding of the contribution that each of these factors made to his interpretation of the Scriptures will be apparent.

It is difficult to catalog Clement's method

of interpretation under any contemporary heading. It was surely not historical, but neither was it in any sense literal. It has allegorical aspects to it, but it is not allegorical in the way that Galatians 4 is. Clement was evidently trained in the school of Hellenistic rhetoric (witness the flowery praises he addresses to the Corinthian congregation in the opening chapters), and perhaps he can be classified as basically a Hellenistic exegete who had been trained to study ancient documents primarily to obtain moral examples from them by separating the events from their original historical contexts and demythologizing all possibly offensive connotations. Clement's contemporaries were trained to interpret Homer with this method, and this is a reasonably accurate description of the way Clement approaches Scripture, which for him was primarily the Old Testament, the "Homer" of the emerging Christian church.

Though Clement quotes the Old Testament some 166 times, his letter does not make it clear that he had ever actually read the Old Testament through or that he was familiar with the history of God's people on the basis of his own reading of the Old Testament. It is evident that he had before him several collections of Old Testament passages, and that he used these collections for many of his Old Testament citations. We know that such *testimonia* or *catenae* had been prepared by Jewish editors already before Clement's time, and it seems likely that Christian editors prepared their own collections or else adapted the Jewish books for their own purposes. The evidence has been conveniently brought together and edited by Robert M. Grant in volume 2 of the Thomas Nelson commen-

rary on the Apostolic Fathers, published in 1965. He points to passages like 1 Clement 14:4 f., which is a mixed quotation including elements from Proverbs 2:1, Psalm 36:9, 38, and 36:35-37. All the Old Testament passages cited here talk about the meek and gentle man, and so it is quite possible that Clement may have had a catena of passages that spoke of the virtues of the meek and gentle man. In 15:2-6, there is a quotation coming from Isaiah 29:13, Psalm 61:5; 77:36 f.; and 30:19 (with no break) and 11:3. Here the common theme is false piety contrasted with true, and again it may be that Clement turned to another *testimonium* for these citations. If Clement used such collections as extensively as Grant's analysis suggests, then we may also venture the observation that this use may have prevented him from a direct and personal exposure to the Old Testament record of the God who acts and who provides judgment and salvation for His people in the day-to-day events of history. Thus Clement's approach reflects no real appreciation of God at work in history.

Several presuppositions that undergird Clement's thought can be identified. The first and dominant one is his conviction that the advent of Jesus Christ, the Mediator, is the high point of revelation and of the new offer of salvation. His thought is strongly Christocentric, and so is his exegesis. But this Christological presupposition needs to be described more carefully. Most commentators agree that Clement's understanding of the work of Christ is noticeably different from that of St. Paul. While Clement speaks several times of Christ's work for our salvation and of His blood that has been poured out for our sal-

vation (7:4; 21:6; 49:1-6; see also 36:1-5), nowhere does he specifically connect this with the forgiveness of sins. Jesus Christ brought the grace of repentance (7:5). It is now necessary for Christians to beseech the Master that He may be reconciled to us (48:1). Our performance of good and virtuous deeds enables us to share fully in the blessings that Christ gained for us. The characteristic Pauline phrase, *en Christô {Iesou}* used by Paul 167 times, is conspicuous by its absence from Clement's letter. His Christology, like his Hellenistic hermeneutical training, inclines him to view the Scriptures as a source book of moral examples of men who have been obedient to the will of God and who, by the practice of faith and hospitality, have earned God's favor.

There is a second presupposition that seems to be almost as significant and influential as his Christological one, and that is his strong feeling for the importance of order in society. There was sedition and strife in the Corinthian congregation, as there had been a generation before. The younger (*neaniskoi*) were challenging the older (*presbyteroi*) (probably not in these contexts to be taken in an official hierarchical sense) and refusing to pay proper respect to men who had faultlessly fulfilled their Christian responsibilities throughout their lives. It is impossible to identify the platform of the younger more fully, although they may have been vigorously protesting against the increasing institutional rigidity of the older generation. It may be that they were fighting for the legitimate freedom of action in the Spirit that they believed was a central part of their Christian heritage.

Clement believes that Christ's Spirit

cannot coexist with strife and that therefore those who cause the strife (and in his judgment the younger men or perhaps one younger man are responsible) ought to leave Corinth and go at once into voluntary exile so that the work of God may go forward again! This suggestion reminds the reader of the common practice of Greek city-states whose political assemblies regularly exiled leaders who had grown too powerful or popular. Clement's proposal helps us understand that his ideas on unity in the church are more Hellenistic than Biblical in orientation. The vocabulary that he uses to describe the ideal life in Christ is taken largely from Hellenistic political and philosophical treatises. *Stasis* (sedition, rebellion) was one of the most discussed problems in Greek political thought. Furthermore, Clement's arguments about *homonoia*, or harmony, follow the patterns in the handbooks of rhetorical schools of his day. His use of cosmological philosophy in chapter 20 is taken directly from the Stoics, although it also echoes some expressions that are found in Jewish wisdom literature. Paul's idea of the church as the body of Christ is filled by Clement with the wisdom of Greek political experience and speculation. His favorite word for describing the new relationship that people have in Jesus Christ is *krasis* (really *synkrasis*), a word used by political thinkers to describe their ideal of political unity as a healthy blend of the different social elements in the *polis*. Clement's understanding of Christian oneness in Jesus Christ is shaped more directly by Hellenistic ideas than by Biblical ones. (Had someone made this suggestion to Clement, he might have been horrified!)

Another minor presupposition is worth

noting in passing, and that is his devotion to men and events from the past. This attitude is both Roman and Hellenistic, and Clement was undoubtedly influenced both by his Hellenistic training and by his life in Rome. The primary function of Scripture is to provide examples from the past of noble men and deeds so that present-day Christians will be encouraged to imitate them. The younger men at Corinth are reminded that God established the perfect pattern for worship in the temple ritual of the Old Testament; they are not to tamper with that model. As a Roman citizen, Clement finds a perfect demonstration of unity and submission in the Roman army, which achieved eternal fame for Rome primarily because officers and soldiers had learned to obey those in command.

The third factor that influenced Clement's interpretation of Scripture is found in the situation that he confronted at Corinth. We have described that briefly a few lines above. Here we want only to emphasize again how critically important obedient submission was to Clement. Continued strife and sedition would bring the work of Jesus Christ to a halt. Where there is strife, the Gospel cannot be present! Clement believes that he is involved in a life-and-death issue, and he marshals all the evidence he can to support his point. He writes to the glory of God and in loving gratitude to Jesus Christ, who poured out His blood for the salvation of believers. Clement addresses every word in this rather long letter to the single problem of submission and order.

Not surprisingly, Clement finds that Scripture is filled with examples of people who have been obedient to the will of

God, as well as with countless injunctions and commands to be obedient and to live harmoniously. For him and his people in need, Scripture was indeed the living word of the living God, designed to meet the precise problem that was threatening the life of the Corinthian congregation.

Shall we say that Clement used a method that was better suited to Homer than to Scripture? Shall we say that some of his presuppositions were not clearly and sharply Christian? Perhaps we can say these things about him. But then we must also say that Clement found a word from God for the people of God. Clement's understanding of that word may have contained the seeds of later hierarchical developments in the church that many believe were unfortunate. As Clement expressed it, that word may not have caught the full meaning of every aspect of the revelation of God's love and freedom in Jesus Christ. But what he conveyed was

still God's word for God's people in their hour of need. One may possibly feel that there were many things that were unfortunate in Clement's use of the Old Testament. There were many ways in which his understanding of the Christian faith failed to match the clarity of St. Paul, since Clement's understanding of that faith found expression in different metaphors from those used by St. Paul. But even granting these things, our final word about (or from) Clement could most appropriately be an invitation to that exegete who is without sin among us in terms of methodology to cast the first stone. Perhaps Clement can caution against becoming so involved in our search for the one right method that we overlook and despise the great richness of the gifts that God's Spirit gives His church to meet every need with new supplies of grace and power.

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