

Doing Church With the “Early Fathers”: The Church Living Out Its Faith

Doing Church with Clement of Rome: The Church Living With Leadership

Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-5

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I want us to read two passages this evening, let's begin with Paul to Titus in chapter one and verses five through nine.

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

Then turn over to Peter's first letter and the first five verses of chapter five.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Both Paul and Peter understood the gatherings of Christians, also known as churches, to need leaders to guide, teach and protect them. They needed someone who understood the implications of the gospel to model it well in the complicated circumstances of life. Their character needed to demonstrate they were “men of the cross”. They needed to be able to teach the purpose, plan and nature of the gospel to encourage and guard those entrusted to their care in each gathering. They also understood that the flock should humbly be led by their leaders; learning, growing and serving in ministry in the work of the Gospel in the church.

There would be those teaching variations and outright falsehoods. There would be general malaise and apathy to apply the truth to life. Peter and Paul applied the words and example of Christ to encourage the development of leaders and teachers and then encouraged, or rather commanded us to listen to them.

Again, we are spending a few evenings looking at four historical figures from the very early days of Christianity. Our taking time to think about these individuals gives us some insight on how Christians were applying the message of the gospel and interpreting the Scriptures in the late first and early second centuries. This understanding will help us as we tackle different yet in many ways similar concerns. The quote from philosopher George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" reminds us that the experiences of the past, its mistakes and failures, are training grounds for growth and change in the present and then for the future.

Tonight our subject is a fellow known as Clement of Rome. A couple of hundred years later another notable church leader by the name of Clement who was from Alexandria is also known. We are presenting Clement of Rome, not Clement of Alexandria (although he is quite interesting as well).

Nothing is known of his birth or early life. Some references from the 2nd and 3rd centuries suggest he is the Clement mentioned by Paul in Philippians 4:3 as one of Paul's fellow laborers. Perhaps as one of his entourage he would have been around at times during his time of imprisonment in Rome. Whether this is the same Clement or not, Clement of Rome died somewhere between 99-101AD. He is viewed in Catholicism as the 2nd or 4th bishop of Rome and therefore an early Pope. He was noteworthy as a leading thinker in the end of the century and is mentioned in many of the early Christian documents. The 2nd-century document called the Shepherd of Hermas mentions a Clement whose office it was to communicate with other churches. This correlates with his reported influence and stature among the churches, perhaps because of his close association with Paul and the Apostles.

According to tradition, Clement was imprisoned during the time Trajan was emperor. Trajan was son of Vespasian and brother of Titus the generals and eventual emperor/Caesars who led the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Clement is reported to have had great impact among fellow prisoners during his incarceration. A legendary story indicates he was sentenced to work in a stone quarry. In the quarry, the prisoners suffered from lack of water. He reportedly prayed and seeing a lamb on a hill went to that place and struck the ground with his pickaxe, releasing a gushing stream of clear water. This miracle resulted in the conversion of large numbers of the local pagans and his fellow prisoners to Christianity. He was then executed by being chained to an anchor and thrown into the sea.

Clement's only existing, genuine text is a letter to the church at Corinth, often called the First Epistle of Clement or 1 Clement. It is considered the earliest authentic Christian document outside the New Testament itself and likely was written around 96 AD, just before his arrest and martyrdom. Clement writes to an again troubled congregation in Corinth, where certain "presbyters" or "bishops" have been deposed. Clement calls for repentance and reinstatement of those who have been deposed, in line with maintenance of order and obedience to church authority, since the apostles established the ministry of "bishops and deacons." He goes to great lengths to remind them from the Scriptures the importance of living in light of gospel in community and under leadership of godly and loving teachers.

Although some see him as being a "church boss", exercise authority over another church, the tone is advisory. He does not mention himself, or give indication he has some special title. In the letter he mentions *episkopoi* (overseers, bishops) or *presbyteroi* (elders, presbyters) as single class of minister, served by the deacons. Interestingly, Ignatius of Antioch, whom we met earlier did seem to distinguish bishop from elder, but of the seven letters written by Ignatius of Antioch, to seven Christian churches shortly after the time of Clement, the only one that does not present the church as headed by a single bishop is that addressed to the church in Rome. Even Polycarp is addressed as the bishop, although Polycarp does not seem to apply that singularly to himself.

Reading Clement's letter so soon after our series through 1st and 2nd Corinthians by Pastor Russ was quite enjoyable. In light of our series, Clement even challenged them to remember their past because he was sure they were repeating their mistakes. This extended reading is abridged from several sections of his letter to the Corinthians.

The church of God that sojourns in Rome to the church of God that sojourns in Corinth, to those who are called and sanctified by the will of God through our Lord Jesus Christ...we acknowledge that we have been somewhat slow in giving attention to the matters in dispute among you, dear friends, especially the detestable and unholy schism, so alien and strange to those chosen by God, which a few reckless and arrogant persons have kindled to such a pitch of insanity that your good name, once so renowned and loved by all, has been greatly reviled...you did everything without partiality, and you lived in accordance with the laws of God, submitting yourselves to your leaders and giving to the older men among you the honor due them...all glory and growth were given to you, and then that which is written was fulfilled: "My beloved ate and drank and was enlarged and grew fat and kicked." From this came jealousy and envy, strife and sedition, persecution and anarchy, war and captivity. So people were stirred up: those without honor against the honored, those of no repute against the highly reputed, the foolish against the wise the young against the old...We write these

things, dear friends, not only to admonish you, but also to remind ourselves. For we are in the same arena, and the same contest awaits us. Therefore let us abandon empty and futile thought, and let us conform to the glorious and holy rule of our tradition; indeed, let us note what is good and what is pleasing and what is acceptable in the sight of the one who made us. Let us fix our eyes on the blood of Christ and understand how precious it is to his Father, because, being poured out for our salvation, it won for the whole world the grace of repentance...Therefore it is right and holy, brothers, that we should be obedient to God rather than follow those who in arrogance and unruliness have set themselves up as leaders in abominable jealousy. For we shall bring upon ourselves no ordinary harm, but rather great danger, if we recklessly surrender ourselves to the purpose of people who launch out into strife and dissension in order to alienate us from what is right...The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent for the from God. So then Christ is from God and the apostles are from Christ. Both, therefore, came of the will of God in good order. Having therefore received their orders and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and full of faith in the word of God, they went forth with the firm assurance that the Holy Spirit gives, preaching the good news that the kingdom of God was about to come. So, preaching both in the country and in the towns, they appointed their first fruits when they had tested them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons for the future believers...Our apostles likewise knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife over the bishop's office. For this reason, therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the leaders mentioned earlier and afterwards they gave the offices a permanent character; that is, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry. These, therefore, who were appointed by them or, later on, by other reputable men with consent of the whole church, and who have ministered to the flock of Christ blamelessly, humble, peaceable, and unselfishly, and for a long time have been well-spoken of by all—these we consider to be unjustly removed from 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. Blessed are those presbyters who have gone on ahead, who took their departure at a mature and fruitful age for they need no longer fear that someone may remove them from their established place. For we see that you have removed certain people, their good conduct notwithstanding, from the ministry that had been held in honor by them blamelessly... Take up the epistle of the blessed Paul the apostle. What did he first write to you in the beginning of the gospel? Truly he wrote to you in the Spirit about himself and

Cephas and Apollos, because even then you had split into factions. Yet that splitting into factions brought less sin upon you, for you were partisans of highly reputed apostles and of a man approved by them. In contrast now think about those who have perverted you and diminished the respect due your renowned love for others. It is disgraceful, dear friends, yes utterly disgraceful and unworthy of your conduct in Christ, that it should be reported that the well-established and ancient church of the Corinthians, because of one or two persons, is rebelling against its presbyters...

We should note that he is engaging many of the same concerns that occurred during Paul's correspondence. He challenges them to remember Paul's letters (written about 40 years before).

So how does that impact and inform us to live as a church, engaging leaders?

We must recognize the nature of leadership established in the NT as the order for ensuring integrity in doctrine and practice. We must have a commitment to follow the Word and not the current corporate practices in vogue at the time. Sometimes good companies have practices that work, sometimes they are even compatible with Scripture, but our leadership is not to model the US government, General Motors, Google or Pixar.

We must be careful to choose wise leaders based on Scriptural qualities. It is easy to choose leaders we like. Perhaps they appear intelligent, they may be commercially successful, or they may be leaders in other venues. Sometimes we are impressed by mannerisms, public speaking ability or even their financial status. Many of these could indicate spiritual wisdom, but in and of themselves, not necessarily. We must constantly be reminded from the Scriptures what true Biblical, spiritual leadership looks like and follow that.

We must work hard to be leaders in faith and practice. Those who are in roles of leadership must not become complacent in growing and developing in their faith and understanding of the Word. They should constantly be attentive to those they are leading and be eager to apply the Scriptures to their situations, because they both understand people and understand the Word.

We must listen and learn from our leaders. We can often hear our leaders much like Charlie Brown heard the teachers. He understood them, even responded to them, but still the teacher was heard as "wha-wha-wha". Not only can we tune them out, but worse yet, not heed their advice and counsel.

We must model our community to live out the gospel in community lead by the truth as taught by our teachers.