

Learning from the Church Fathers (7) Titus Flavius Clement of Alexandria (150-215)

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For many North Americans, religion has become an individual lifestyle choice. And church members are less literate biblically and theologically than some thirty years ago. They are less capable of articulating what they believe and why. According to pollster George Barna, 45% of Americans say that they are born again, but only 9% have even a most minimal biblical knowledge for making life's decisions. He also discovered that at the level of daily living there are no ethical distinctions, no differences, between those who claim to be born again and those who say they are secularists. In view of the issues we face today, what does it mean to be a disciple of Christ? How do we bring the Gospel to a society which has so many different religions, sects, cults and lifestyles? I am convinced that interaction with both the Western and Eastern Church Fathers will help us to understand the Word of God which has been given to the whole church as well as learning from them their various approaches to the proclamation of the Gospel. One of church fathers who engaged the culture of his time was the learned Titus Flavius Clement of Alexandria, Egypt.

Alexandria

Alexandria was an important seaport where all sorts of cargo was shipped overseas from Egypt but also foreign goods were imported. The living standards were high because of the profit the merchants gained from their trade. But it was more than a centre of commerce and a meeting place of trade routes. It was a melting pot for all kinds of cultures. For example, it was the home of the largest Jewish Diaspora of the Roman empire. And it was also one of the few exceptional cities where Christians came from the "lower classes" but also from the "upper classes," and from the highly educated.

Alexandria was also a cultural and intellectual centre with a famous university. It was therefore not surprising that it attracted various philosophers and philosophies. Gnostic (secret knowledge) influence was also great there. But Christianity was also a widely accepted philosophy of life. Thus philosophy and theology were so close in Alexandria that every theologian had to be well acquainted with philosophy.

Titus Flavius Clement

Clement was not born in Alexandria. His Greek parents were not Christians. We do not know much about his youth. He came to Alexandria after various travels in the course of which he had learned from a number of different Christian teachers. The main attraction was Pantaenus, a convert from Stoicism who is reported to have visited India. Clement says that Pantaenus had the outstanding merit of combining high intelligence with fidelity to the apostolic tradition.

At Alexandria, Clement found a church afraid of and on the defensive against Greek philosophy and pagan literature. He was often in conflict with various Gnostic movements. This was why the catechetical school which Clement headed was so successful and well attended. It was characterized by a broad spirit of learning. He addressed educated pagans

who were looking for an understanding of the meaning of life, as well as Christians who wanted to deepen their understanding of the Christian faith. He appealed to the intellect. He posed questions and invited discussions. He wrote in a polished and graceful style, calculated to attract his readers and make them enthusiastic for following Christ. His most distinguished pupil was Origen.

Music

Clement loved the wonderful power of music to give peace and strength to the human spirit. Christ, he maintained, is the minstrel who imparts harmony to the universe and makes music to God. He was also the earliest Christian writer to discuss what kind of music is appropriate for Christian use. He said that it should not be the kind associated with erotic dance music. Perhaps he had in mind some of the Gnostic sects among whom there would have been much less sense of inhibition and restraint.

One of the hymns he wrote still sung in churches today is:

Shepherd of eager youth,
Guiding in love and truth
Through devious ways;
Christ our triumphant King,
We come thy Name to sing,
Hither thy children bring
Tributes of praise.

True Gnosis

Clement was a staunch defender of the apostolic tradition, which he believed to include "true knowledge", which is opposed to the false "knowledge" offered by the Gnostic sects. The Gospel is the true Gnosis. Christianity is the way of salvation for all people and can only be appropriated by faith but the enlightened Christian could advance to knowledge. The content of the faith is summarized by the church in her confession.

Clement vigorously attacked Gnostic teaching, taking as his basis the doctrine of creation in which he saw that all the truths of science and of revelation and all goodness came from the Creator. "There is but one river of truth," said Clement, "but many streams pour into it from this side and from that." He believed that there was much for Christians to learn from the Greek philosophers and that just as the Law was a schoolmaster bringing the Jews to Christ, so philosophy served the same role for the Greeks. In other words, Clement argued that, in the providence of God, philosophy had a place in preparing the way for the coming of Christ. He stated, "For God is the source of all good, either directly, as in the Old and New Testaments, or indirectly, as in the case of philosophy. But it may even be that philosophy was given to the Greeks directly; for it was 'a schoolmaster,' to bring Hellenism to Christ, as the Law was for the Hebrews."

Clement's Writings

Clement's main legacy, and a rich resource for theology and ethics for today's Christians, is

the trilogy *Protrepticos* (or "Exhortation"), the *Paedagogus* or ("The Tutor"), and the *Stromateis* (or "The Miscellanies").

1. *The Exhortation*

The Exhortation was written to convert the philosophically-minded Greeks to Christianity. Clement argued that it is necessary to condemn the superstition, crudity, and eroticism of pagan cults and myths. He noted that the great philosophers, despite their realization of the corruption of paganism, had failed to break with it. But he also argued that persuasive argumentation has to present the Christian faith positively, giving a comprehensive picture of Christ and the way of salvation. Like most early Christians he believed that Christ is the fulfilment and the revealer of true knowledge and the giver of immortality.

2. *The Tutor*

A large number of Christians in Alexandria were well educated like Clement himself; otherwise *The Tutor* would have missed its target as a guide to ethics and etiquette for a Christian moving in a cultivated society. His teaching was marked by moral earnestness. He rejected the Greek view that matter is inherently evil. Sin is found in the human will. He vigorously opposed the Gnostic thesis that sex is either irrelevant to or incompatible with the higher spiritual life. While affirming all respect for individual vocations to celibacy, he dismissed any suggestion that marriage is an inherently inferior spiritual status. On the same principle he rejected demands that all Christians ought to be teetotallers or vegetarians; it was for him a matter of individual conscience, not of universal prohibition.

Clement wrote for Christians who knew the luxuries of the very wealthy. He gave practical advice to these rich Christians. For Clement, a Christian was in the world but not of the world. He wrote for those who ate well but noted that overeating spoiled digestion. He dealt with the problem of Christian appearance and behaviour, e.g., their clothing and their behaviour in public baths and in social events, an indication of how rich his readers and listeners were. He sought to help Christians puzzled about the right use of their money and troubled especially by the command of the Lord to the rich young ruler, "If you would be perfect, sell all you have...". He did not condemn wealth and luxury as, for example, fine clothes worn by Christians and their attendance at public baths, but he rejected the excessive use of it. By using the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Clement warned the wealthy of the danger for their salvation. According to our Lord's teaching, he urged the rich to give generously to the poor.

Clement dealt in great detail with the practical moral life and the problems of daily lives of Christians in Alexandria. He wrote about eating and drinking, sleeping, fellowship, personal hygiene, ownership, and many other aspects. Why was Clement so concerned about the so-called mundane things in the Christian life? So that we may seek to fulfill the Father's will and imitate the life of Christ. Because Clement understood spiritual life as a never-ending progress, he did not think that sanctification came to an end with death. He argued that for the sinner there is burning fire, destructive not of the image of God but of the wood, hay and stubble of sins. No one in this life can achieve such holiness that he does not need to be purified by "the wise fire" so that he may be fitted for the presence of God.

3. *The Miscellanies*

Clement did not produce a systematic theology. In his largest work, *The Miscellanies*, he intended that it should contain a systematic exposition of Christian doctrine. However, he never wrote the intended study. He believed that high matters of theology should be treated with reverence as being concerned with divine mysteries, and would be dangerous to put into writing as a full and extended work for all to read. Instead, therefore, he decided to write a work of a very different character. The *Miscellanies* turned into a collection of diffuse materials, containing a varied mixture of apologetic, ethical, and practical themes. The Christian's basic virtues are righteousness and love, which direct him in all the trials of life, including pain, illness, and martyrdom. Clement attempted to wrest the term "gnostic" (one who knows) away from the heretics and give it a *Christian* meaning. He argued that knowledge of philosophy is useful, on the one hand, for the purpose of extracting seeds of truths from it and, on the other, for knowing what is to be rejected.

Clement developed his Christian perspective in tumultuous and dangerous times. He was a brilliant teacher and courageous leader. But he contended that it was exhibitionism and a waste of time to purposely seek martyrdom, as some Christians did – a denial of God's Word. At the onset of the persecution of Christians under Septimus Severus (202/203), Clement travelled to Palestine to his friend Alexander, the future bishop of Jerusalem. He never returned to Egypt.

(To be continued).