

THE RESOLUTION OF THE PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH USING THE FIRST PATRISTIC LETTER AS A TEMPLATE

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Abstract

As the first letter among the Apostolic Fathers in the study of Patrology, The *First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians* stands as a pivotal document. Following internal divisions and disputes within the Corinthian Church, Clement, writing from the Church of Rome as the successor of St. Peter, composed this letter as an appeal to the Corinthians to address the conflicts and restore peace and unity in their community. Clement emphasizes the importance of apostolic succession and urges everyone to honour and obey the legitimate authority within the Church. He points out that the dispute in the Church stems from strife and jealousy, and calls on the Corinthians to repent for the disorder they have caused. Clement encourages them to adopt humility and obedience following the example set by Christ and the Apostles. Today, more than ever, Clement's letter remains deeply relevant as the contemporary Church faces growing divisions and disputes. It serves as a reminder to the Church today of her responsibility to stand alongside every local Church, diocese, community, and member, just as the Roman church stood with the Corinthians. The letter calls for the Church to seek unity and resolution through mutual support and correction, rather than through

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condemnation and alienation. Clement cautions that hatred, envy, and jealousy are contrary to the Christian faith and will ultimately harm the Church. He exhorts the faithful to pursue unity and peace, virtues that can only be achieved through repentance, humility and obedience. The Church today must rediscover the warmth of the early Christian community to experience the genuine spirit of love and unity.

Keywords: apostolic ministry, authority, dispute, rebellion, humility, repentance, obedience

1. Introduction

This article offers an analysis of the *First Letter to the Corinthians* by Clement of Rome, probably written toward the end of the first century. It highlights the problems within the Corinthian Church and the manner in which the Church of Rome responded to them.¹ Written in Greek, this letter is one of the earliest surviving Christian texts not included in the New Testament Canon, marking it as the first document we have from a successor of St. Peter.² In this letter, Clement

¹ Even though the first century did not witness the development of a formal church hierarchy, a person with authority in the Roman Church named Clement is credited with writing an epistle on behalf of the Roman Church to their fellow Christians in the Corinthian Church. The letter does not explicitly name its author. However, the ancient tradition and the manuscripts identify it as the work of Clement, whose precise identity is not clear. From Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea and Jerome, the author of this letter is identified with the "Collaborator" of St. Paul named in the *Epistle to Philipians* (4, 3). Regarding his life, the most important testimony comes from Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon. He attests "The blessed Apostles, then, having founded and built the Church, committed the ministry of the Episcopate to Linus. Paul mentions this Linus in his epistle to Timothy. And his successor is Anencletus: and after him, in the third place from the Apostles the Bishopric is allotted to Clement, who had both seen the blessed Apostles, and conferred with them, and had the doctrine of the Apostles yet sounding in his ears, and their tradition before his eyes" (Irenaeus, *Adv. Hers.*, III, 3, 3); *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a literary work of the second century that comes under the category of the Apostolic Fathers, mentions the name of Clement and it is stated that it was his duty to write to other churches (vision 2. 4, 3). Further references to Clement are seen in Tertullian, Epiphanius, Polycarp, Clement of Alexandria and Didymus the Blind. Clement of Rome, a martyr according to tradition, is venerated as a saint by the Catholic Church which celebrates his memory on 23rd November on the day of the deposition of his body in the Basilica of St. Clement in Rome.

² This letter was well-accepted and came to be regarded as doctrinally authoritative in the early centuries. It appears at the end of the renowned Egyptian Greek biblical codex Alexandrinus of the fifth century, which contains the entire Old and New Testaments in Greek with a few gaps. It highlights the scriptural status of this letter. It is also found in a twelfth-century Syriac codex that contains mainly biblical materials and it is listed as canonical in canon 85 of the "Canons of the Apostles", which is

addresses the issues of ecclesiastical discipline. It helps us to understand how the Bishop of Rome intervenes with authority as the final tribunal of an ongoing dispute within a distant Eastern Church even with notable pastoral prudence, intelligent missionary strategy and powerful charismatic impulse. This letter from the bishop of Rome recognises in him the role he exercises without giving rise to a claim of power but in the name of humble service as the guarantor of truth and justice. It can be seen as the first exercise of Roman primacy after the death of St. Peter.

A powerful and resonant letter in the early Church, it is depicted in the *Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius* as having been read publicly even in subsequent centuries, highlighting its enduring significance.³ This letter to the Corinthians was written in response to an internal dispute over Church leadership. An unrest erupted within the Christian community of the Greek city, where some younger members revolted against the presbyters, whom they had arbitrarily dismissed. This led to a state of severe disorientation in the community. This crisis also reverberated through other communities, both close and distant, especially the Corinthians residing in Rome. The Church of Rome composed this letter protesting against the deposition of certain presbyters and the resulting factionalism.⁴ Clement addresses in this letter the issues surrounding the authority disputes and the divisions they caused, urging the Corinthians to return to unity and order. The primary aim of this letter is to make an appeal for obedience to duly constituted authority in the Church at Corinth and for the consequent unity of the Church.⁵ The timely intervention of the Church of Rome led by Clement the bishop enabled the community to recognise and address the underlying problems without exacerbating the wounds inflicted upon the Church. A close reading of the text shows that Clement's intervention was not an assertion of authority, but rather a call for peace, love, and communion expressed in humility.

Today, where the appeal for unity and uniformity from the successor of Peter is distorted and dismissed in some parts of the Catholic Church, the resolutions passed by the Synod of Bishops are

believed to have originated in Syria (Theodore A. Bergren, *1 Clement: A reader's Edition*, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020, viii-ix).

³ Eusebii Pamphili, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, PG 20, 3 (16), 249-250.

⁴ Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, London: Harvard University Press, 1977, 3.

⁵ John Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961, 46.

frequently mistreated and disregarded in favour of personal interests and conveniences, Clement's words from the apostolic era resonate deeply, illustrating the significant influence of the Church of Rome, whose authority is built upon the testimony of the martyrdom of two great pillars of the Church, along with many other saints and martyrs. Nearly two thousand years after its composition, we wonder whether the central themes in Clement's letter have something to offer to the Church today. One has to reflect precisely on the heartfelt invitation to unity, as perhaps it has always been the case. The Church of today has a yearning for unity which clashes with facts that often tend towards fragmentation and separation. Unity appears today more than ever as a good that cannot be exchanged for anything, because, as Clement writes in his letter, one is God, one is Christ, one is faith, so the Church must be one.

2. A Church Lived in Great Humility and Harmony

Following a brief salutation, the author discusses the splendor of the Corinthian Church in the first chapter, reflecting on its glory before the onset of recent disputes. He notes that this church was well-regarded and cherished by all. Everyone who visited this church affirmed and appreciated its steadfast faith, praised its outstanding hospitality, and acknowledged its complete and sound knowledge. He further says

For 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 honour due them. You instructed the young people to think temperate and proper thoughts; you charged the women to perform all their duties with a blameless, reverent and pure conscience.⁶

The Christians in the Corinthian Church exhibited humility and were devoid of arrogance. They willingly submitted and found greater joy in giving than receiving. Content with what God provided, they practiced their faith by attentively listening to the word of God and diligently treasuring it in their hearts. The faith of this church is strongly highlighted, with the author noting that they reached out to Almighty God for forgiveness with fervent zeal and sincere

⁶ S. Clementis, *Epistola ad Corinthios I*, PG 01, 199-328. Cf. Michael W. Holmes, *First Letter of Clement*, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed and tr., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, 33-131. All my citations are from this translation. §1, 3. Clement is talking about the initial years of this Church. In this letter, Clement mentions about St. Paul's letter to this community and says that even then they had split into factions (§47, 1-4).

confidence. They enjoyed profound peace among themselves and had an unyielding desire to do good.

You were sincere and innocent and free from malice toward another. Every faction and every schism was abominable to you. You mourned for the transgressions of your neighbours: you considered their shortcomings to be your own. You never once regretted doing good but were ready for every good work. Being adorned with a virtuous and honourable manner of life, you performed all your duties in fear of him. The commandments and the ordinances of the Lord were written on the tablets of your hearts.⁷

Clement offers abundant praises for the Corinthian Church, portraying it as a model for all emerging Christian communities. She was faithful, loving, obedient, duty-bound, charitable, humble, peaceful, sincere, innocent, and above all, a strong Christian community built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, the Rock. Yet, from such high regard and admiration, this Church descended into a state of discord and division.

3. The Causes of the Dispute

The early Church encountered several critical challenges, especially regarding unity and authority. A key illustration of this is Clement's *First Letter to the Corinthians*, where a significant conflict arose over church leadership in Corinth. A situation of turmoil developed within the Corinthian Church, where a faction of younger members managed to marginalise and remove some of the senior members who held positions in the hierarchy of the Church, specifically in the office of Presbyter/elder. Clement notes that the well-established Corinthian community was rebelling against its presbyters due to the influence of just a couple of individuals.⁸ The real factors leading to this dispute remain ambiguous.

Who were appointed by the Apostles or, later on, by other reputable men with the consent of the whole church, and who have ministered to the flock of Christ blamelessly, humbly, peaceably, 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.⁹

⁷ §2, 5-8.

⁸ §47, 6. Here one can find an indication given by the text regarding the rebellious group. It says that the issue is created by one or two persons.

⁹ §44, 3-4.

The senior bishops, chosen and appointed by Church authority, were described in the letter as humble, holy, unselfish and blameless in their fields of service. Restlessness arose when some self-oriented young individuals ousted them from their offices. The letter highlights two critical factors that led to the problems: the great glory the church received from all quarters and its unbounded growth across all dimensions. He writes, "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."¹⁰

Disputes over authority sparked internal divisions, resulting in various groups aligning themselves with different leaders and causing unrest within the community. Consequently, people began to align the dishonoured against the honoured, the non-reputed against the reputed, the foolish against the wise and the young against the old. In an abrupt shift, this highly profiled community lost its righteousness and peace, turning away from the fear of God. According to Clement, each individual became blind to their faith in God, choosing to follow the lusts of their evil hearts instead of adhering to God's commandments.¹¹ As a result, he references Scripture to illustrate how "The righteous were persecuted by the lawless, they were imprisoned by the unholy, stoned by transgressors and were killed by those who had conceived a detestable and unrighteous jealousy."¹² He identifies jealousy and envy as the root sins, providing a list of Scriptural and contemporary examples to demonstrate their destructive consequences.¹³ Clement argues that these issues of jealousy and envy are central to understanding the internal divisions within the

¹⁰ §3, 1-2.

¹¹ §3, 3-4.

¹² §45, 4.

¹³ The envious Cain killed his brother Abel (§4, 1-7); our father Jacob ran away from the presence of his brother Esau because of jealousy (§4, 8); It caused Joseph to be persecuted nearly to death and to be sold into slavery (§4, 9); it compelled Moses to flee from the presence of Pharaoh (§4, 10); Aaron and Miriam were excluded from the camp due to jealousy (§4, 11); Jealousy brought Dathan and Abiram down alive into Hades since they revolted against Moses (§4, 12); David was envied by the Philistines and was persecuted by Saul (§4, 13). The greatest and most righteous pillars were persecuted and brought to death due to jealousy (§5, 2); Jealousy caused Peter, Paul and other Apostles to suffer and to be martyred (§5, 3-7). Many women were persecuted because of jealousy (§6, 2); jealousy and strife have overthrown great cities and uprooted great nations (§6, 4).

Corinthian Church, leading to fractured relationships and suffering among God's people.

4. A Call for Repentance and Proper Behaviour

The Church's beauty and unity were compromised by the turmoil instigated by the rebellious faction. Clement appeals to them to seek reconciliation and to revive the honourable and pure conduct that exemplifies their love for others.¹⁴ He also urges them to renounce their evil inclinations of hatred and to adhere to the noble and sacred principles of the ecclesial tradition, by encouraging them to engage in actions that please and are acceptable to God. The significance of repentance is brought to the forefront by discussing the blood of Christ, which He shed for the salvation of humanity. The opportunity to repent is a gift from the Master to those longing to turn to Him, and He desires all His beloved to participate in it which He established by an act of almighty will.¹⁵

Genuine repentance must culminate in obedience to God's will. He admonishes the rebellious that the unrest they have caused within the Corinthian church is a fruitless endeavour, and the strife and jealousy that led them there will ultimately result in death and destruction. The way to escape this ruin lies in repentance and a return to His compassion, presenting themselves as obedient to God's will and petitioning for His mercy. Repentance is portrayed as essential, with punishment and torment awaiting those who neglect God's call to turn back. The rebellious youth tarnished the reputation of the Corinthian church due to their lack of fear of God. In response, Clement urges the community to educate the young about cultivating a proper reverence for God and encourages the children to adopt humility before Him.¹⁶ He counsels the impetuous youth to practice humility and repentance by following the examples of obedience, faithfulness, harmony, and hospitality shown by notable biblical figures.¹⁷ The reluctance to admit

¹⁴ §48, 1.

¹⁵ §7, 1-8, 5.

¹⁶ §21, 6.

¹⁷ The preaching for repentance by Noah and Jonah and the salvation granted to those who accepted their preaching and repented are mentioned. God Himself spoke about repentance and as examples, Clement refers to *Ezek.* 33, 11; *Is.* 1, 16-20. He portrays a list of Biblical characters who remained obedient to the will of God. Enoch did not experience death since he was found righteous in obedience (§9, 3). Noah was found faithful and through him God saved the living creatures (§9, 4). Abraham, Loth and Rahab are presented as examples of faith and hospitality. Abraham was found faithful when he became obedient to the words of God (§10, 1-6). God gave Abraham a son in his old age because of his faith and hospitality and he became ready to offer

faults could bring about the condemnation of many. Thus, he calls on the leaders of rebellion and discord to repent and focus on common ground that fosters hope and unity.¹⁸ In Clement's view, repentance is the sacrifice that pleases God the most. He promises two rewards for those who confess and repent of their sins: they will achieve significant honour in Christ and gain acceptance in the community.¹⁹ He implores the rebellious people to repent and submit to the duly appointed presbyters.

You, therefore, who laid the foundation of the revolt must submit to the presbyters and accept discipline leading to repentance, bending the knees of your heart. Learn how to subordinate yourselves, laying aside the arrogant and proud stubbornness of your tongue. For it is better for you to be found small but included in the flock of Christ than to have a preeminent reputation and yet be excluded from his hope.²⁰

The author calls on to embrace humility and obedience towards the presbyters, setting aside their arrogance and stubbornness to foster a spirit of ecclesial discipline.

4.1. The Behaviour of Humility and Obedience

"The greater one seems to be, the more one ought to be humble, and the more one ought to seek the common advantage of all, and not of oneself".²¹ It is evident that Clement's arguments ultimately center on the virtues of humility and submission, which serve as the intended focus of the letter. The result of sincere submission to God is humility, which naturally leads to submission to one's fellow and, specifically, to the duly constituted authority within the Church. Clement knows that humility is the key to fostering unity and discipline in the Church.²² Thus, he urges them to cultivate it by laying aside all arrogance and conceit, foolishness and anger, reminding them of the

him as a sacrifice to God for the sake of obedience (§10, 7). Lot was saved from Sodom because of his hospitality and godliness (§11, 1). Regarding harmony, the wife of Lot is employed, who changed her mind after leaving with Lot and was no longer in harmony, and as a result she was punished (§11, 1-2). The episode of the wife of Lot is described to communicate that those who are double-minded and question the power of God fall under judgment and become a warning to all other generations. Rahab the harlot was saved because of her faith and hospitality (§12, 1-8).

¹⁸ §51, 1-3.

¹⁹ §54, 1-3.

²⁰ §57, 1-2.

²¹ §48, 6.

²² Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers*, 36.

teachings of the Lord Jesus.²³ Clement highlights that the path to humble obedience lies in fortifying oneself with the commandments and teachings of the Lord.²⁴ The coming of Jesus is illustrated as a perfect example of humility for the community to imitate. He came not with the grandeur of arrogance or pride, but with humility, residing in the hearts of the humble rather than in those who exalt in vainglory. Referring to an extensive passage from Isaiah (53, 1-12), Clement aims to highlight the suffering of Christ as an example of humility and faithful submission to God's will.²⁵ He appeals to the members to adorn themselves with harmony, humility and self-control, steering clear of slander.²⁶ To nurture humility he writes, "Boldness and arrogance and audacity are for those who are cursed by God: but graciousness and humility and gentleness are with those who are blessed by God."²⁷

Revolt against duly constituted authority within the Church is an act of disobedience to God. The author calls on the faithful to respect and obey their community leaders.²⁸ He warns the Corinthians against following the new rebellious leaders, who instigated abominable jealousy through their prideful and unruly actions. At the same time, he urges the faithful to respond with kindness rather than hatred, reflecting the love and compassion of God.²⁹ The call for obedience underscores the distinction between the duly constituted authority and the rebellious group, with the former genuinely promoting peace and the latter hypocritically desiring it.³⁰ Clement employs a scriptural approach, providing various examples to illustrate the virtues of humility and obedience, teaching the faithful that God will bless those

²³ For He spoke thus: "Be merciful, that you may obtain mercy. Forgive, that you may be forgiven. As you do, so shall it be done unto you. As you give, so shall it be given unto you. As you judge, so shall you be judged. As you are kind, so shall kindness be shown to you. With what measure you measure, it shall be measured to you" (§13, 2). Cf. *Mt.* 5, 7; 6, 14; 7, 1-2, 12; *Lk.* 6, 31, 36-38. One can notice some differences between these citations and the canonical texts. Therefore, it is widely thought that here Clement depends on a collection of sayings of Jesus independent of Mathew and Luke (Holmes, *First Letter of Clement in The Apostolic Fathers*, 61-63). This is one of the earliest quotations of the words of our Lord in Christian literature.

²⁴ §13, 1-4.

²⁵ §16, 1-17.

²⁶ §30, 3.

²⁷ §30, 8.

²⁸ §21, 6.

²⁹ §14, 1-3.

³⁰ The author places further citations on the theme of obedience. Cf. *Is.* 29, 13; *Mt.* 15, 8; *Mk.* 7, 6; *Ps.* 62, 4; *Ps.* 78, 36-37; *Ps.* 12, 3-5.

who walk in His way in obedience.³¹ When discussing Paul's concept of Justification by faith, Clement clearly identifies the principle that links faith with the essential good works that arise from it. He believes that faith inspires love in the heart, and this love leads to obedience.³² He exhorts the Corinthians to embrace humility and obedience to the magnificent and glorious will of God, presenting themselves as humble recipients of His mercy and goodness by casting aside the fruitless toil, arrogance, anger, strife, and jealousy.³³

4.2. Eucharist: An Act of Obedience

The pathway to salvation is embodied in Jesus Christ, who serves as the High Priest and benefactor. Clement encourages the community to view their offerings as acts of obedience stemming from their union with Christ, who offered to his Father his sacrifice of obedience.³⁴ He reminds the Corinthians that it is inappropriate to approach the mysteries of Christ with jealousy and contention, as such attitudes are not aligned with Christian principles. The Eucharist, established by Christ through his self-giving, represents a specific act of Christian obedience, visibly uniting the believers with Him. This visible expression of obedience makes the believer one with Christ.

Through him we look steadily into the heights of heaven; through him we see as in a mirror his faultless and transcendent face; through him the eyes of our hearts have been opened; through him our foolish and darkened mind springs up into the light; through him the Master has willed that we should taste immortal knowledge.³⁵

Jesus Christ, as the High-Priest, provides humanity with mysterious access to the heavenly sphere through the Eucharist. This celebration, which highlights the remembrance of the affection and obedience of Jesus Christ and an expression of the love and unity of the Christian community, calls for sincere repentance and a genuine acceptance of one another. Therefore, the author appeals to the Corinthians not to approach the Eucharist with jealousy and strife in their hearts, making it a true manifestation of the unity and harmony of the community.

³¹ §17, 1- 19, 3.

³² Chapters 33, 33. Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers*, 45.

³³ §9, 1 and 13, 1.

³⁴ §36, 1-6. This is a reference to the Sacrament of Eucharist by which the Church makes her one with Christ. Here Eucharist is presented by Clement as a particular act of Christian obedience.

³⁵ §36, 2.

The significance of maintaining order and discipline in the Eucharistic celebration is highlighted in his words: "He commanded the offerings and services to be performed diligently, and not to be done carelessly or in disorder, but at designated times and occasions."³⁶ Here, Clement explicitly refers to the Epistle to the Hebrews, which is the principal source of theology regarding the Christian ministry as a priesthood and of the Eucharist as a Christian sacrifice.³⁷ He appears to be confronting the challenges of disorder and lack of discipline in the Eucharistic celebration, challenges stemming from turmoil caused by the young rebellious group.

Not just anywhere, brothers, are the continual daily sacrifices offered, or the freewill offerings, or the offerings for sin and trespasses, but only in Jerusalem. And even there the offering is not made in any place, but in front of the sanctuary at the altar, the offering having been first inspected for blemishes by the high priest and the previously mentioned ministers. Those, therefore, who do anything contrary to the duty imposed by his will receive death as the penalty.³⁸

He identifies a risk of neglect in the celebration of the Christian sacrifice and calls upon the Corinthian Church to honour the established order and authority in their offerings. It is important to adhere to a sense of decorum in the Eucharistic celebrations. The place and order of the celebrations must be in resonance with the laws proposed by the officially appointed leaders. He appeals to the rebellious group not to overstep the designated rule of ministry, but to act with reverence by upholding a clear conscience. This entails a profound level of submission that will contribute to the Church's unity and order.³⁹

³⁶ §40, 2.

³⁷ Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers*, 47. As seen here in the letter, the duly appointed officers and duly celebrated rituals were indispensable parts of early Christianity. Lawson here makes further observations regarding the liturgy. He says that there is a difference between an accepted and authoritative ministry and a precisely organized ministry and between a due and significant ritual and a complicated and rigidly fixed ritual. The primitive Church had the first forms from the beginning, while the second forks of ministry and ritual were later developed.

³⁸ §41, 2-3. The constitution of the Church (New Israel) corresponds to that of the Old Israel. Clement in his letter written at the end of the first century, uses Jewish terminologies to teach the community, consisting of Jewish Christians.

³⁹ §41, 1.

5. A Call to Embrace Good Deeds and Holiness of Heart

In this letter, faith and good works are given equal significance, highlighting their complementary nature rather than presenting them as opposing forces. Clement urges a deep faith in God, insisting that it must be accompanied by a commitment to doing good. His next exhortation emphasizes the matter's importance. "Shall we idly abstain from doing good, and forsake love? May the Master never allow this to happen, at least to us; but let us hasten with earnestness and zeal to accomplish every good work."⁴⁰ The creation narrative in the book of Genesis illustrates God's goodwill, and for this reason, humanity, made in His image and likeness, is obliged to conform to His will by performing righteous deeds. Good deeds are authentic ornaments of human existence, much like the way God adorned Himself with the beauty of creation. Thus, everyone is called to enhance their lives with righteous actions.⁴¹ "It is necessary that we should be zealous to do good, for all things come from him." Good works emerge from a strong and sincere faith. Therefore, a true believer cannot afford to be idle or careless about doing good work.⁴² By promoting whole-hearted belief and the pursuit of good works, Clement advocates for passionate and joyful service in the Christian community.

The holiness of the heart seeks unity, and Clement appeals to the Corinthian Church to attain it by embodying and practicing the gospel virtues. He writes, "The fear of God is good and great and saves all those who live in it in holiness with a pure mind."⁴³ He implies that living in submission to God and adhering to high standards of virtue is highly pleasing to God. In the central section of the letter, Clement addresses key Christian doctrines, including divine grace, the resurrection of the dead, and justification by faith. He presents the doctrine of resurrection as an imprimatur for good conduct. The gift of resurrection is granted to those who live a righteous life and serve him in holiness, which serves as a hallmark of authentic faith.⁴⁴ Faith is ignited in the heart by the belief in God's sovereign majesty, who is steadfast in his promises and righteous in his judgements.⁴⁵ The author urges the Corinthians to cultivate a strong faith and to approach the

⁴⁰ §33, 1.

⁴¹ §33, 1-8.

⁴² §34, 2-4.

⁴³ §21, 8.

⁴⁴ §26, 1.

⁴⁵ §27, 1-4.

gentle and compassionate Father in the holiness of the soul with pure and undefiled hands.⁴⁶ He encourages them to do all their works with the holiness of heart. The disputes within the community stem from a lack of holiness, which ultimately leads to destruction. In the lengthy concluding prayer of the letter, Clement beseeches for the holiness and purity of hearts and the performance of good works: "Direct our steps to walk in holiness and righteousness and purity of heart, and to do what is good and pleasing in your sight and the sight of our rulers."⁴⁷

6. A Call to Honour and Obey the Apostolic Ministry

Clement reinforces the importance of abiding by the traditions and teachings handed down by the Apostles. He illustrates the hierarchical order of the Church established by Jesus Christ, emphasizing the need for order and discipline in both liturgy and governance. Given that the issue in the Corinthian Church concerns the deposition of certain senior presbyters, Clement places significant emphasis on the doctrine of apostolic ministry. The essential reason for establishing a hierarchy in the church's ministry is its correspondence to the divine plan. The Father sent Christ, and the Apostles are from Christ, indicating that in both instances, there is a divine will in perfect order.⁴⁸ The travelling apostles appointed local officials in every place to serve as their permanent personal representatives. Clement writes,

They preached from district to district and from city to city, and they appointed their first converts, testing them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of the future believers. And this was no new method, for many years before had bishops and deacons been written of; for the Scripture says thus in one place, I will establish their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faith.⁴⁹

Clement also explains the significant reason behind the Apostles' decision to appoint certain individuals as their successors. Clement illustrates the rivalry among the Jewish tribes over the prestigious title

⁴⁶ §29, 1.

⁴⁷ §60, 2.

⁴⁸ §42, 1-2.

⁴⁹ §42, 4-5. Here we can see no mention of Presbyters as distinct from bishops. The titles used in this letter to refer to the ecclesial authority are "bishops, presbyters, elders and deacons". This is a shred of evidence that in the churches known to Clement, there was at this time no clear distinction between the presbyters (elders) and the bishops. According to John Lawson, the local Church was governed by a corporate body of substantially equal 'presbyter-bishops' (J Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers*, 39). Robert M Grant opines that there were presbyters, and at least some of them were equivalent to bishops (Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 160).

of the glorious priesthood under Moses, emphasizing that positions within the Church can easily lead to jealousy and strife. He concludes that without a recognized and continuous ministry, the Church cannot be at peace.⁵⁰ Regarding the presbyters, he states that the Apostles made provisions for the succession of other men to care for the sheepfold of Christ. These leaders are called Presbyters and their office is referred to as 'overseeing or episcopate or more generally ministry'.⁵¹ Only the flock of Christ can experience peace with the presbyters set over it by the Lord.⁵²

Clement indeed appeals to the Corinthian Church to respect and obey the legitimate authority; however, he is not afraid to challenge the authority to step down to emancipate the faithful if they are the ones who caused the disunity in the Church. He writes "If it is my fault that there are rebellion and strife and schisms, I retire; I will go wherever you wish and will do whatever is ordered by the people. Only let the flock of Christ be at peace with its duly appointed presbyters."⁵³ A due responsibility is placed upon the authority to be real men of spirit and holiness in leading the Church of Christ to its perfection. Thus, he affirms that leadership is for the good of the community. In this letter, Clement makes a continuous appeal to the Corinthian Church to adopt an attitude of obedience to those officially appointed presbyters who are the leaders of their souls.

7. A Call for the Restoration of Unity

The virtues of humility and obedience promote unity and order within the Church. Clement wrote this letter to restore the lost unity of the Corinthian Church by terminating the "strife and passions and divisions and schisms and even war in the community." The unity and harmony that Clement wishes for the Corinthian church are conveyed through two imageries from St. Paul: the imagery of the body and the military imagery. St. Paul emphasized the interdependence of believers, with both great and small gifts, within the body of Christ. For Clement, Church is the body of Christ, thus, he writes to the Corinthians,

Why is there strife and angry outbursts and dissension and schisms and conflict among you? Do we not have one God and one Christ and one Spirit

⁵⁰ §43, 1-6. J. Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers*, 50.

⁵¹ §44, 5; 47, 6; 54, 2; 57, 1; 44, 1-4; chapters. 40, 41 and 44.

⁵² §54, 2.

⁵³ §54, 2.

of Grace that was poured out upon us? And is there not one calling in Christ? Why do we tear and rip apart the members of Christ, and rebel against our own body, and reach such a level of insanity that we forget that we are members of one another?⁵⁴

He reminds his readers that Christians serve one God and are all members of one body. While acknowledging the distinct functions of various body parts, Clement primarily discusses the harmonious nature of the human body to endorse unity in the church. He draws a parallelism by stating that the great cannot exist without the small, nor the small without the great, indicating that everything is interconnected. Just as the head without feet is nothing, even the smallest parts are essential to the whole body. All members come together harmoniously, united in mutual subjection.⁵⁵ Thus, he emphasizes that the benefit of this unity lies in the perfect integration of all the church's members, both small and great. He expects the members of the Corinthian Church to demonstrate the virtue of precise military obedience, where soldiers of all ranks execute the orders of the emperor and their commanders with readiness and diligence.⁵⁶ Those who are strong and wealthy should assist the weak and poor, fostering mutual support and unity within the Church. Therefore, he demands a sense of harmony, unity, and orderliness within their community.

God as Trinity represents a fundamental aspect of Christian unity. After discussing this divine trinitarian unity, the author turns to the created world to illustrate the rational order present in nature. The section on natural theology, which stands out as one of the most striking parts of this letter, demonstrates the principle that adherence to law fosters unity and order. Clement perspicuously depicts that the world created by God operates within a framework of law and order.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ §46, 5-7. Robert M. Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary*, Vol. 1, New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1964, 137-138.

⁵⁵ §37, 4-5.

⁵⁶ §37, 1-5. John Lawson is of the opinion that Clement is dependent on St Paul in the body and military imageries, but unlike St. Paul, his conception of the Church is less mystical, and more external (Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers*, 46-47).

⁵⁷ The heavens move at his direction and obey him in peace. Day and night complete the course assigned by him, neither hindering the other. The sun and the moon and the choirs of stars circle in harmony within the courses assigned to them, according to his direction, without any deviation at all. The basin of the boundless sea, gathered together by his creative action into its reservoirs, does not flow beyond the barriers surrounding it; instead, it behaves just as he ordered it..... The seasons, spring and summer and autumn and winter, give way in succession, one to the other

After creating everything, the Master of the Universe, ordered them to live in peace and harmony, doing good to all. The author explicitly applies this truth to call for adherence to ecclesiastical order in the Church of Corinth. In this exploration of natural theology, he conveys to the people that compliance with the law cultivates order and unity in the Church of God. Thus, he urges everyone to honour the law in the church and focus on their personal responsibilities as assigned by the Master through the ecclesial structure.

Submission to God brings unity within the Church. God graciously and lovingly bestows His favours on those who draw near to Him with singleness of mind.⁵⁸ He appeals to them to fear God and abandon the abominable lusts that spawn evil works, so that they may be shielded by his mercy from impending judgements.⁵⁹ This letter features numerous citations from the Old Testament, through which Clement seeks to convey that important Biblical Characters, the life of Israel, the law, and the prophets all emphasize the importance of submission to God and of unity within the Church. He proposes that heartfelt harmony and earnest collective prayer are essential for their community prayer gatherings.⁶⁰ He encourages them to pursue a life of immortality, splendour in righteousness, truth with boldness, faith with confidence, and self-control with holiness. The means to achieve all these is expressed in the following words.

If our mind is fixed on God through faith; if we seek out those things that are well-pleasing and acceptable to him; if we accomplish those things that are in harmony with his faultless will, and follow the way of truth, casting off from ourselves all unrighteousness and lawlessness, covetousness, strife, malice and deceit, gossip and slander, hatred of God, pride and arrogance, vanity and inhospitality.⁶¹

A strong faith in Christ empowers Christians to resist anything that disrupts harmony within the Church, guiding them instead to act in ways that please both God and others. He emphasizes love as a vital means of restoring unity in the Church. Arrogance, rebellions, and divisions reflect the absence of love, while true love fosters fidelity,

in peace. The winds from the different quarters fulfill their ministry in the proper season without disturbance (20, 1-12).

⁵⁸ §23,1. At this moment the Church of Corinth, according to Clement, is double-minded, which causes unrest.

⁵⁹ §28, 1.

⁶⁰ §34, 7.

⁶¹ §35, 5.

understanding, and togetherness.⁶² The love of one another is the genuine and effective bond of unity in the Church, surpassing a mere sense of ecclesiastical responsibility. This love results in God's forgiveness, which in turn cultivates unity in the church. Observing God's commandments within a spirit of love leads to God's forgiveness through His grace. True love fosters a willingness to obey, resulting in unity within the Church, and Clement clearly indicates that this love is a divine gift.

8. Conclusion

The '*First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians*' is a significant text in early Christian literature, offering valuable insights into the difficulties encountered by the early church and the proposed solutions to overcome them. Although this document was written near the end of the first century, prior to the formal establishment of church hierarchy, a clear and marked distinction between Clergy and Laity is evident in this letter. Though it is unclear how the Church of Corinth received this letter, subsequent Christian writers valued it highly, indicating its profound influence in the early Church.⁶³ Written in a context with a completely different ecclesial framework from today, this letter is full of valuable insights and certainly contributes to the harmonious development of the contemporary church on multiple levels. Clement provides resolutions deeply rooted in Christian teachings, emphasizing the importance of maintaining unity and order. Clayton Jefford offers a balanced perspective on the importance of the Apostolic Fathers for modern readers. He writes

In the final analysis, it would be a gross overstatement to claim that the Apostolic Fathers offer an answer to all of our modern questions about the development of the church after the New Testament period. At the same time, however, it is certainly fair to say that our helpful knowledge of these materials enables us to better understand how the views of the biblical authors came to fruition in the subsequent years of Christianity's historical evolution.⁶⁴

⁶² "Love unites us with God; love covers a multitude of sins; love endures all things, is patient in all things. There is nothing coarse, nothing arrogant in love. Love knows nothing of schisms, love leads no rebellions, love does everything in harmony. In love all the elect of God were made perfect; without love nothing is pleasing to God" (§49, 5-6).

⁶³ Holmes, ed and tr. *First Letter of Clement*: in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 38.

⁶⁴ Clayton N. Jefford, *The Apostolic Fathers: An Essential Guide*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005, 129.

The First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians stands out as the first writing in the Apostolic Fathers and addresses some of the contemporary issues faced by the church. Historically, the church had encountered various problems, but the proactive response from authority, as reflected in this letter, has helped the church effectively address these challenges. Clement of Rome encourages the Corinthian community to embody humility and to draw inspiration from Jesus and His Apostles. He calls for repentance and promotes the pursuit of holiness, making a heartfelt appeal for peace and unity. The letter highlights arrogance as a trait of those who are cursed by God, while moderation and humility are presented as traits of those who are blessed.

This letter primarily highlights the bond of sisterly concern between two local congregations. It serves as a reminder to the modern church of her duty to stand in solidarity with every local church and her members, helping them to address issues and find appropriate resolutions to disentangle them through support and constructive correction, rather than through condemnation and exclusion. Another important implication of this letter is its emphasis on apostolic succession and the nature of authority. The author contends that the Church must be led by a divinely appointed ministry that continues the lineage established by the Apostles. He reminds the Corinthian community that their leaders have been appointed by the Apostles or their successors, urging them to respect this divinely sanctioned authority. Loyal obedience to the duly appointed ministry is essential for Christian discipleship. Therefore, the Church of Rome wrote this letter to the Corinthian Church calling them to embrace discipline, unity and respect for established authority in the Church.⁶⁵

Another aspect to consider is how the Church in Rome exercises the gift of governance. Clement and his community do not approach the Corinthians with an attitude of command or coercion, but rather with a tone of guidance and support. It is remarkable to observe the humble and compassionate mindset of Church leaders. Clement, as the successor of Peter, writes to another ecclesial community not to assert his authority but to offer guidance in correcting their mistakes, aiming for peace and unity within the body of Christ. Rather than asserting her status as the Church of the imperial capital, the Roman Church emphasizes her role as a witness to the teachings and martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul, the two foundational pillars of the Church. As John

⁶⁵ Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers*, 21-24.

Lawson observes, the authority of the whole Church lies in the fact that she treasures the heritage of the first authentic apostolic witness to the facts of the Gospel.⁶⁶ The letter also emphasizes the equality of all members in the Church of Corinth regardless of age or gender. This is illustrated through the imagery of the church as the body of Christ, emphasizing various parts of a body work in concert, so too should the members of the Church. Each part is essential for the harmonious functioning of the body, and every member of the church must contribute with humility and obedience to foster unity and harmony within the Church.

While correcting the issues faced by the Corinthian Church, Clement acknowledges that similar challenges could one day emerge in the Roman Church as well. He states “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”.⁶⁷ His words highlight the turbulent situations that the church is currently experiencing. Some of the current issues involving bishops, priests and faithful are scandalous in the sight of God and an impediment to our witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As a solution, Clement’s voice resounds, urging everyone to forsake empty distractions and to align with the noble and sacred tenets of ecclesial tradition. Clement believes that reproof within the Church is beneficial, as it assists everyone in aligning with the will of God.⁶⁸ He recommends a positive approach to the contentions and problems within the Church, with the aim of fostering greater unity and harmony. Everyone is encouraged to accept corrections and to adhere to authority for the greater glory of the Church. The pedagogical method of God involves addressing problems while also suggesting necessary corrections. In this pedagogy, God is portrayed as a compassionate Father, who disciplines His children to grant them mercy, providing significant protection for those who are disciplined by the Father.⁶⁹

He cautions the faithful about the impending danger as he writes, “You see, brothers, as we have been considered worthy of greater knowledge, so much the more are we exposed to danger.”⁷⁰ This first-century letter distinctly highlights the need for the Church to exercise greater care in its discipline and order. Today, after nearly two

⁶⁶ Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers*, 25.

⁶⁷ §7, 1.

⁶⁸ §56, 2-3.

⁶⁹ §56, 16.

⁷⁰ §41, 4.

thousand years, the Church has achieved many milestones, yet this letter serves as a reminder that the more the Church grows, the more it is exposed to danger. Clement acknowledges the value of a competitive and zealous approach within the Church, yet he insists that it should not cause divisions and instability, but rather be focused on the goal of attaining salvation.⁷¹ Upholding discipline over personal preferences and situations requires a spirit of humility and obedience, paving the way for unity and prosperity in the Church.

In the contemporary church painful divisions continue to arise, largely as a consequence of human pride and selfishness. Clement warns that outbreaks of strife, jealousy, dissension, schisms, and conflicts will tear apart the members of the Church and turn against our very own unity.⁷² Referring to a schism in the Corinthian Church, he notes that it perverted many Christians, brought many to despair, plunged many into doubt, and caused sorrow to everyone.⁷³ Issues resulting from personal drift, disobedience, strife, and arrogance will have a more lasting impact on the church. Thus, he calls for a renewed focus on discipline. The collective discipline of the Church is the expression of the will of God.⁷⁴ This letter makes a heartfelt appeal to pray for those embroiled in disputes, urging them to submit not to earthly powers but to the Will of God by embracing the gifts of forbearance, humility, and obedience.⁷⁵

Toward the end of the letter, Clement invites the rebellious to embrace repentance, humility, and obedience for the good of the Church, exposing various Scripture passages, the words of Christ, and the teachings of the Apostles.⁷⁶ He explicitly states that authority

⁷¹ §45, 1.

⁷² §46, 5-7.

⁷³ §46, 9. It is the crisis that the disputes and divisions induce in the Church. Many simple practicing Christians are in despair and doubt. The dispute caused by pride, envy, strife and jealousy creates a vacuum in their hearts. The true faith of many Christians is put into question. Distracted and annoyed by all these issues, many tend to abandon the Christian faith and leave the Church. The whole faith formation undertaken by the Church, without arriving at an apt resolution for the dispute, is in jeopardy.

⁷⁴ Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers*, 58.

⁷⁵ §56, 1.

⁷⁶ "Listen! I will bring forth for you a saying of my spirit, and I will teach you my word. Because I called and you did not obey, and because I held out words and you paid no attention, but ignored my advice and disobeyed my correction, I therefore will laugh at your destruction and rejoice when ruin comes upon you, and when confusion suddenly overtakes you, and catastrophe arrives like a whirlwind, or when tribulation

obtained in the church through unlawful means and contrary to God's will is destructive. Thus, Clement calls on the faithful to be loyal to God rather than to follow those who have become leaders through pride and disorder.⁷⁷ He cautions that God's wrath is directed not only at those who are wrongdoers but also at those who endorse such errors. He exhorts them to obey the most holy and glorious name of God and follow his guidance, so that they may live securely and without regret.⁷⁸

In the face of growing conflict and divisions in the contemporary Church, Clement's letter stands as a crucial and timely reminder. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this epistle appeals for peace and reconciliation. It is a reminder to all believers – whether shepherds or the flock – that they have to live in accordance with the will of God, by eradicating unlawful anger, strife and jealousy. The aim is to honour God in righteousness and truth, live in harmony, and embrace each other with love and compassion. The letter ends with an earnest prayer, asking God to grant His special people unwavering faith, fear of God, peace, patience, steadfastness, self-control, purity and sobriety. This patristic letter of the first century remains profoundly relevant and continues to serve as a powerful model for the church in today's world. The Church today must rediscover the warmth of the early Christian community to experience the genuine spirit of love and unity. It is my hope that the wisdom imparted by Clement of Rome, in his efforts to resolve the disputes and restore peace and harmony within the Corinthian Church, will illuminate the hearts of both the ecclesiastical authority and the faithful. May they come to understand the rich traditions of the Church and work together for unity, setting aside all personal grievances and communal divisions. By embracing the Christian values of repentance, humility, and obedience, may peace and harmony be restored among all.

and distress come upon you. At that time when you call upon me, I will not listen to you. for they hated wisdom and did not choose the fear of the Lord, nor did they desire to pay attention to my advice, but mocked my correction" (*Prov.* 1, 23-33) (§59, 3-7).

⁷⁷ §14, 1.

⁷⁸ §58, 1-2.