

# “VALUING OTHERS” – THE PASTORAL CARE OF THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

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**Abstract — The writings of the Apostolic Fathers are replete with praise, concern, encouragement, confrontation, and comfort for God’s people. Specifically, in the writings of St. Clement of Rome, St. Ignatius of Antioch, and St Polycarp of Smyrna there is an unprecedented collection of their heart as bishops and their approach to pastoring churches. Their approach can be summed up through their persistent and unmitigated regard for “valuing others”. Throughout their writings this theme and facet of pastoral care is readily apparent and it leaves an impressionable example for all leaders of the church to follow.**

**General Research Topic(s) — Apostolic Fathers, Church Fathers, Christian History, Pastoral Care, Early Christian Writings.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the relatively few writings of church leaders that are known in close proximity after the time of the New Testament, the care, concern, and passion for God’s people are not more clearly seen than in the letters of the Apostolic Fathers: St. Clement of Rome, St. Ignatius of Antioch, and St. Polycarp of Smyrna. While the writings we have from these individuals are limited, their heart and attitude toward caring for the church and the people God placed them over is difficult to miss. Such heart is woven into nearly every correspondence we have from them and each one portrays great character and responsibility as overseers of God’s people.

Within their letters, a marvelous arrangement of instruction, encouragement, edification, fellowship, and love is conveyed. The aim of this paper is to investigate the theme of “valuing others” in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers and paint a picture of the love and diligent oversight that these leaders incorporated into their correspondence with congregations of fellow saints at specific churches and even with each other (e.g., St. Ignatius’ *Letter to Polycarp*). Even this cursory glance at the evident heart they sowed into their writings will show a pattern of pastoral care that can doubtfully be matched outside of the apostle’s themselves.

Specifically, the writings of the church fathers that will be discussed are: St. Clement’s *Letter to the Corinthians*, St. Ignatius’s *Letters to the Ephesians, to the Magnesians, to the Romans, to the Philadelphians, to the Smyrnaeans*, and *to Polycarp*, and St. Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philadelphians*.<sup>1</sup>

## II. ST. CLEMENT OF ROME

St. Clement’s *Letter to the Corinthians* is a most remarkable writing to examine the theme of “valuing others” because Clement writes to the Corinthian church in an attempt to resolve a dispute that had arisen where a

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<sup>1</sup> All citations are taken from *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation* (trans. Francis X. Glimm et al.; New York: Christian Heritage, 1947).

couple members of the congregation had persuaded the rest of the church to depose of the current clergy and council of elders. His tone of writing at times is harsh and pointed, but what I saw weaved throughout the entire letter was a bishop who was reaching out to a broken congregation, who were divided and injured, to fix a problem not by cutting them down with cynicism or pompously lording his authority over them or scolding them for their rash choices and actions but by carefully demonstrating the error of their ways from Scripture and God's perspective and at the same time reaffirming their value as believers and the great need for their inclusion in the church.

For a letter addressed to a church where there had recently been an insurgence against their leaders, Clement's approach is far from being denigrating or self-righteous sounding but is more like a firm hand that works steadily but assertively to guide the congregation back to holiness and unity. He calls the believers at Corinth who were part of this dissension, "brothers" and "beloved" over and over again.<sup>2</sup> This frequent repetition seems to suggest that Clement wanted to make sure that the believers at Corinth saw his affection for them in the midst of his rebuke. He was striving to keep in the mind of the congregation his love for them and that he still saw them as precious brothers and sisters in the Lord despite their disagreements they seemed to be having with one another.

Another aspect that caught my attention in Clement's letter was the way he wrote so often in the first person plural. In nearly all of his exhortations, admonitions, instructions, etc. he says, "Let us..." or "Let our..." when writing to the Corinthians.<sup>3</sup> By

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<sup>2</sup> *1 Clem.*: "Dear brothers" (1.1), "brothers" (13.1; 14.1; 21.1; 33.1; 37.1; 41.1-2, 4; 45.1; 46.1; 52.1; 62.1), "beloved" (7.1; 24.1-2; 35.1, 5; 36.1; 43.6; 47.6; 53.1; 56.16); "dearly beloved" (50.11; 56.2).

<sup>3</sup> See *1 Clem.* 9.1; 13.1; 15.1; 17.1; 23.2; 27.1; 28.1; 30.1; 33.1; 35.4; 36.2; as well as many other places.

writing with the first person plural, Clement's heart for unity is made apparent and his acknowledgement that he and the Corinthians are all part of the same organic Body of believers, even though they resided in very different geographical areas. Clement's style of writing indicates that he recognized how needed it was for all of God's people to follow in obedience to the commandments and instruction of the Lord in Holy Scripture. And so, the inclusion of these affectionate and endearing terms of the believers responsible for the mayhem in the Corinthian church showed how much Clement wanted to instill a sense of personal value and continuing love for them in his letter.

Even when Clement directly rebukes the Corinthians he does not linger on their failures but moves quickly to rebuild what has been destroyed by them, and all the while working to establish their value in his eyes despite their mistakes. For example, in chapter 47, Clement talks about the letter of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians that addressed a similar problem previously and how that problem involved "less guilt" because people were divided over the Apostles.<sup>4</sup> In essence, what the Corinthians have done by subverting the church leaders this time is much more grave an error than with what Paul was dealing with in the past. And so, to show how wrong the Corinthians were in this decision, Clement says,

*"But consider now who they are who perverted you, and have diminished the honor or your renowned reputation for brotherly love. It is disgraceful, beloved, very disgraceful, and unworthy of your training in Christ, to hear that the stable and ancient Church of the Corinthians, on account of one or two persons, should revolt against its presbyters."*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *1 Clem.* 47.4.

<sup>5</sup> *1 Clem.* 47.5-6.

But rather than lingering on these harsh, critical words or “burying the hatchet deeper,” Clement immediately begins uplifting the eyes of the Corinthians to what should be sought after by every one of them, that is, to have brotherly love. Clement even uses the first person plural when he says,

*“Whatsoever we have done wrong, and whatsoever we have done by suggestion of our adversary, let us hope that it may be forgiven us.”*<sup>6</sup>

He does not point the finger here where he easily could have. He tries to relate to the mistakes of the Corinthians with mistakes of believers in general and possibly even his own. It is like him saying, “We have all gone wrong at times and made stupid choices, but let us forsake our wrong ways and seek to be reconciled and forgiven.” Clement further states that for the Corinthians to turn from their sin and humble themselves will bring great “joy and gladness,” not because they will do what Clement wants but because they will do what makes for “peace and harmony.”<sup>7</sup>

A major component of Clement’s whole premise is not to have the Corinthians bow down to his dictate for them to cease this revolt but that humility is what God desires and Clement implores them to yield obedience to God’s will, not his own.<sup>8</sup> Surely Clement desired for the Corinthian church to be healed from this fracture and be reconciled together once again as one church under one Lord, but it is apparent that his thoughts about appealing to his own office of a bishop would prove self-defeating because what Clement was attempting to accomplish was for the Corinthians to subject themselves to the authority and direction of the Lord. Forcing them to obey his command and stop fighting each other might quiet the scene for a little while in Corinth, but it would

do little for changing the evil and contentious thoughts in the hearts of the dissenters.

Thus, as Clement remarks, allowing the Corinthians to be convicted in themselves by the words of the Lord on the proper remedial course of action will make for a “fruitful, perfect, and compassionate remembrance with God and the saints.”<sup>9</sup> The correction Clement seeks to impart is not meant anger the Corinthians, and he hopes they do not receive it as such, but it is meant to encourage unity to the will of God.<sup>10</sup> Clement points to the value of the Corinthians with respect to pleasing “Almighty God with holiness in justice and truth and long-suffering, in a life of concord. You [the Corinthians] should forget injuries in love and peace, and continue in gentleness, as our fathers aforementioned who, in their humility, were pleasing to God, the Father and Creator, and to all men.”<sup>11</sup>

### III. ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

“Valuing others” is not as challenging when life is easy and there is plenty to be thankful for, but under persecution, oppression, and imprisonment, it is quite a different matter. Ignatius found himself in the latter circumstance as he wrote letters to several churches while being imprisoned during his journey to Rome to stand trial. While a vast majority of the letters we have contain instructions, warnings, and admonitions, there are also elements of praise, thanksgiving, and admiration.

In his *Letter to the Ephesians*, Ignatius provides a humbling line that was bound to show the Ephesians the value they held in his eyes:

*“I am beginning to be His disciple and speak to you as His disciples, too. For I have need of being*

<sup>6</sup> 1 Clem. 51.1.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Clem. 63.2.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Clem. 56.1.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Clem. 56.1.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Clem. 56.2.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Clem. 62.2.

*trained by you in faith, counsel, endurance and long-suffering.*”<sup>12</sup>

Ignatius saw the Ephesians as his equals and traveling companions on the journey of growing in faith. They were disciples of the Lord too and he had something to learn from them as they did from him. The Ephesians were also a source of personal joy for Ignatius as he describes how he was able to rejoice with them for their holiness and purity of life.<sup>13</sup> One of the greatest compliments Ignatius pays in his letter is when he tells the Ephesians:

*“Let nothing appeal to you apart from Him, by whose help I bear my chains about with me like spiritual pearls; and in these, with your prayers – in which I trust always to have a share – may I rise again, so that I may be found in the company of the Christian Ephesians who have always been at one with the Apostles through the power of Jesus Christ.”*<sup>14</sup>

Ignatius’ compliments, positive characterizations, and loving remarks are scattered throughout all his letters. In his letter *To the Magnesians*, he talks about the perfect order of the Magnesians’ love toward God and how they are not vain because they have Jesus Christ within them.<sup>15</sup> And to the important and influential church at Rome, he spares no shortage of accolades when he says,

*“You are a Church worthy of God, worthy of honor, felicitation and praise, worthy of attaining God, a*

<sup>12</sup> Ign., *Eph.* 3.1.

<sup>13</sup> “And with this letter I am able to take part in your festivity, to be of your company, to share in the joy that comes from setting your heart not on what is merely human in life, but on God.” Ign., *Eph.* 9.2.

<sup>14</sup> Ign., *Eph.* 11.2.

<sup>15</sup> “I have heard of the perfect order of your love towards God”; and “I know that you are not vain, for you have Jesus Christ within you; and when I praise you I know that you reprove yourselves more than ever.” Ign., *Magn.* 1.1, 12.1.

*Church without blemish, which holds the primacy of the community of love, obedient to Christ’s law, bearing the Father’s name.”*<sup>16</sup>

Many churches were sources of joy for Ignatius but likely none so much as the church at Philadelphia. Ignatius depicts the depths of his joy to no small end in his letter to this church:

*“Your church is to me a cause of unending and unbroken joy.”*<sup>17</sup>

And he also says,

*“Dear brothers, my love for you is full and overflowing, and with immense joy I give you whatever assurance I can.”*<sup>18</sup>

Joy was not the only benefit to himself that he received from the churches, Ignatius also communicated in his letters an innumerable number of other virtuous qualities and characteristics of the churches that indicated how much he treasured them and needed them. He commends the church of Smyrna on how they,

*“...have been made perfect in unwavering faith, like men nailed, in body and spirit, to the Cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ.”*<sup>19</sup>

Also, to Polycarp the Smyrnaean’s bishop, Ignatius writes in regard to Polycarp’s great faith and resolve in the Lord and how “immovable” Polycarp was in his faith.<sup>20</sup> Ignatius viewed Polycarp very highly according to his letter and made sure that Polycarp knew how valuable he was to his church and all others in the region. Ignatius wrote to Polycarp:

<sup>16</sup> Ign., *Rom.* i.

<sup>17</sup> Ign., *Phld.* i.

<sup>18</sup> Ign., *Phld.* 5.1.

<sup>19</sup> Ign., *Smyrn.* 1.1.

<sup>20</sup> “I was glad enough to learn that your mind is grounded on God as on an immovable rock.” Ign., *Pol.* 1.1.

*“The age is in need of you, if it is to reach God—as pilots need the winds and as a storm-tossed sailor needs port.”<sup>21</sup>*

Basically, Ignatius was indicating that Polycarp was a great leader that the church needed. Ignatius saw Polycarp as one who could steer and direct the church to true life in Christ and peace and tranquility in God.

#### IV. ST. POLYCARP OF SMYRNA

In a similar manner as Clement and Ignatius, Polycarp also discloses how valued he sees the church at Philippi in his letter to them. He says how he rejoices with them over the pattern of conduct they have exhibited in “true charity.”<sup>22</sup> In addition, Polycarp pays the Philippian church a great compliment that shows how critically important their lives were. He says,

*“And I rejoice because the firm root of your faith, famous in times past still flourishes and bears fruit unto our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>23</sup>*

This statement suggests a lasting impression that the church at Philippi had gained a reputation for, and Polycarp recognized it. Their character of love toward all the believers and strong faithfulness were known in the past and have been carried on by their unwavering devotion to the will of God. Polycarp does not miss this high mark of discipleship in the Lord and expressly points it out, demonstrating how the Philippians have yield fruit unto their own commendation. The Philippians were following in the footsteps of the Apostles, and Polycarp was telling them that they are a gem in the crown of the church. As a bishop, Polycarp cut no corners is pouring out gracious compliments so God’s people would know and realize how valued and irreplaceable they are.

<sup>21</sup> Ign., *Pol.* 2.3.

<sup>22</sup> Pol., *Phil.* 1.1.

<sup>23</sup> Pol., *Phil.* 1.2.

#### V. CONCLUSION

While much instruction and specific directions are offered in the letters of these Apostolic Fathers, it is apparent that these bishops were concerned with conveying to their audiences how important their audience’s involvement and function was within the church. In the few passages mentioned above, as well as many others throughout their writings, the heart and care for God’s people by these leaders of the early church is seen at the outset of most of their letters, yet runs throughout them all like a seam along a garment, holding the fabric together. Communicating their heart was certainly something of great significance in order to promote the unity, love, and fellowship that they all were seeking to achieve in the church. The way that these Fathers imparted how they valued others commends their work as bishops and pastors of God’s people. They have set a remarkable example for us leaders to follow on how to show value for others regardless of the circumstance.

#### VI. ABBREVIATIONS

<i>1 Clem.</i>	Clement, <i>1 Clement</i>
<i>Ign. Eph.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Ephesians</i>
<i>Ign. Magn.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Magnesians</i>
<i>Ign. Smyrn.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Smyrnaeans</i>
<i>Ign. Phld.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Philadelphians</i>
<i>Ign. Rom.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Romans</i>
<i>Ign. Pol.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To Polycarp</i>
<i>Pol. Phil.</i>	Polycarp, <i>To the Philippians</i>

## VII. REFERENCES

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