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CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA:

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN ONE ACHIEVE *LIKENESS TO GOD* ALONE?

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**CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA: TO WHAT EXTENT CAN ONE ACHIEVE *LIKENESS*
TO GOD ALONE?**

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Abstract

An ongoing question concerning much of the early Church, but especially Clement himself, is the question of community. Did Clement believe that a community of believers was necessary for the process of achieving *likeness to God*? When Clement is evaluated based on his work, *The Exhortation to the Newly Baptized*, the answer seems to be no. In this exhortation, Clement offers language that is similar to that of Plato and the ascetic tradition, in that the denial of passions is required for new believers. If this is true in Clement's thought, then this is similar to a form of monasticism where a community of believers is no longer necessary for the ascent to the *likeness of God*. However, when Clement's greater theological treatise is consulted (this is to note all three of the books making a single treatise) it becomes clear, through his language of the sacraments, that a community of believers is necessary. This essay will analyze the continuity between his early work in order to set the stage for the later development of Clement's fundamental belief, a unified community of believers. This will be evaluated through his high view of the sacraments, because these actions cannot be partaken of by the believer without the Church.

INTRODUCTION

Clement of Alexandria is a second-century writer. He becomes the head of the Alexandrian school and as he was a Christian Platonist, so he trained his followers alike. Clement is not shy with his advocacy for deification or, as he most predominantly refers to it, *achieving likeness to God*. Clement uses variations of this language. As Ben Blackwell says, “Clement uses the language of participation (μετέχω), likeness ([ἐξ]ομοίωσις), adoption (υιοθεσία), and imitation (μιμητής) to describe the nature and means of human transformation.”¹ No matter the terminology that is supplied, the fundamental premise of the doctrine is the same, becoming like God, or to use language closer to Clement *assimilation to God*. Clement finely parses this doctrine when he says, “the Word of God became man, that you may learn from man how man may become God.”² This was Clement’s primary soteriological framework in which all other things were viewed. Moreover, there seems to be a large degree of individualism involved in the achievement of this promise.

This individualism is influenced by an ascetic tradition, which Clement has adopted from Plato. This is to say that virtue and the denial of passions is the chief end for the believer.

Clement says it this way:

But on us it is incumbent to reach the unaccomplished end, obeying the commands—that is, God—and living according to them, irreproachably and intelligently, through knowledge of the divine will; and assimilation as far as possible in accordance with right reason is the end, and restoration to perfect

¹ Ben C. Blackwell, “Two Early Perspectives on Participation in Paul,” in *“In Christ” in Paul* (ed. M. J. Thate, K. J. Vanhoozer, and C. R. Campbell; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 331-355.

Daniel Keating catalogues Clement’s use of the term, “*theopoieō* (to deify/divinize) and *theopoiēsis* (deification/divinization).” See ¹ Daniel A. Keating, *Deification and Grace: Introductions to Catholic Doctrine* (Naples: Sapientia Press, 2007) 8.

² *Protr.* 1. 1; ANF, vol. 2, 174. This is ANF text with modernized language.

adoption by the Son, which ever glorifies the Father by the great High Priest who has deigned to call us brethren and fellow-heirs.³

Ben Blackwell explains this saying, “Ultimately, Clement affirms that this coheres with Plato’s argument in the *Theaetetus* 176B that humans should pursue ‘likeness to God as far as possible. And likeness is to become holy and just with wisdom’ (*Strom* 2.22.133.3).”⁴ The question is how is this likeness achieved? Clement offers some explanation within his own *Exhortation to the Newly Baptized*. This is an early document that was probably taught in the Alexandrian school.⁵ In this exhortation Clement offers a list of virtues, both biblical and Platonic, and says, “For the mind, seated on high on a quiet throne looking intently towards God, must control the passions. By no means be swept away by temper in bursts of anger, nor be sluggish in speaking, nor all nervousness in movement; so that your quietness may be adorned by good proportion and your bearing may appear something divine and sacred.”⁶ Though he explained what may seem to be individualistic, in other places he frames this in ecclesial and sacramental terms. Clement’s discussion of baptism which leads to *perfection*, which can be read as a synonym of the “chief end” doesn’t include anything about individualistic asceticism. Clement says, “The same also takes place in our case, whose exemplar Christ became. Being baptized, we are illuminated; illuminated, we become sons; being made sons, we are made perfect; being made perfect, we are made immortal.”⁷ The initial catalyst to perfection is baptism. Clement’s language of *perfection*

³ *Strom* 2. 22; ANF, vol. 2, 376.

⁴ Blackwell, “Two Early Perspectives on Participation in Paul,” 344.

⁵ See *Ecclesiastical History* LCL

⁶ *Clement of Alexandria*, 371-373, LCL Butterworth. τὸν γὰρ νοῦν δεῖ τῶν παθῶν ἐπικρατεῖν ὑψηλὸν ἐπὶ ἡσύχου θρόνου καθήμενον ἀφορῶντα πρὸς θεόν. μηδὲν ὀξυκολίας ἀνάπλεος ἔσο περι ὀργάς, μηδὲ νωθρὸς ἐν λόγοις, μηδὲ ἐν βαδίσμασιν ὄκνου πεπληρωμένος, ἵνα σοι ῥυθμὸς ἀγαθὸς τὴν ἡσυχίαν κοσμηῇ καὶ θειῶδες τι καὶ ἱερὸν τὸ σχῆμα φαίνεται.

⁷ *Paed.* 1. 6; ANF, vol. 2, 215.

must entail the “chief end,” but Clement says that believers embark upon a process of *perfection* that begins with baptism. Can *perfection* be achieved in virtue and contemplation alone or is the church, necessary for the pursuit of *divine likeness*? In light of this dilemma of individualism versus the necessity of the church, a further evaluation of both Clement’s *Exhortation to the Newly Baptized*, as well as his larger theological treatises (*The Protrepticus*, *The Paedagogus*, and *The Stomata*), should offer some clarity for this potential inconsistency. This should lead to answering the question: is the church (ἐκκλησία) necessary for the promise of this doctrine of achieving likeness to God? Or is this achieved through the individual’s moral ascent?

THE EXHORTATION TO THE NEWLY BAPTIZED

Clement’s teaching is important because he helped to shape the future tradition in Alexandria when he became the head of the catechetical school. Even though it is debated concerning the nature and extent of the school, it is most widely held that he was the leader of this school until he fled persecution in Alexandria in 202.⁸ It is most commonly assumed that he was the head of this school for nearly twenty years. It is within this twenty years as head of the school that he would have written this document, *The Exhortation to the Newly Baptized*.⁹

In this exhortation Clement mostly lists virtues to pursue and passions to avoid. The main concern of this document is that Clement does not refer to the Church or any of the sacraments within this discourse. It would only seem plausible that the things that were most dear to the

⁸ Eusebius is the most documented person describing the succession from Pantaenus to Clement to Origen as leaders of the school. See *Ecclesiastical History* LCL.

⁹ This is not easily proven, nor is it well documented. However, it is commonly thought that this is the document that Eusebius refers to in reference to Clement’s teaching in the school. See *Clement of Alexandria* LCL, 368; and *Ecclesiastical History* LCL. Annewies van den Hoek, “The ‘Catechetical’ School of Early Christian Alexandria and Its Philonic Heritage,” *HTR* 90 (Jan 1997), 59-87. He says in his evaluation of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, “The term *didaskaleion* [διδασκαλεῖον] can denote not only an actual locality but also a school tradition.” This is helpful to note that even if the “school” was nothing more than a tradition of teaching in the Alexandrian library, because Clement had influence over it, to refer to it as a formal education system is sufficient.

provost of a catechetical school would be within this document. This particular writing seems to be much more focused on the morality of the believer and the contemplation of the virtues and God. This line of thought could potentially lead to a very individualistic version of Christianity, which does not seem to be consistent in Clement's theology.

Contemplation and Morality

Within this document, Clement refers to contemplation of some sort seven times.¹⁰ The lack of Clement's commentary on the necessity of the Church, seems to portray early Christianity as being about moralism and contemplation, much like Hellenistic philosophy. This is to say that the focus is not on anything other than being a moral and virtuous person. Understanding that early Christianity was in part concerned with morality, it seems plausible that virtues should be sought after. To what degree should these virtues be sought? Everett Ferguson notes, in his discussion of second and third-century baptism, "A lengthy period of instruction and a rigorous moral examination preceded admission to the final stage of preparation for baptism. The *Apostolic Tradition* required that candidates receive instruction for three years, but conceded that conduct—not length of time—was the decisive factor."¹¹ If Ferguson is correct, then why would Clement be so concerned with morality in this document and not mention the Church? One cannot be baptized apart from the Church and three years of examination seems like a more than reasonable amount of time to, at the very least, acknowledge someone's morality in their life. So why should, after a three year examination period, Clement continue to discuss individualistic moralism, and not pursue a theological development for the newly baptized?

¹⁰ He will use words like *μεγαλόψυχος*, *νόημα*, *φρόνησιν*, *φροντίς*, and *ειδώς* when referring to the *νοῦς* in correlation with *θεός*. However, he never uses the word *θεορία*.

¹¹ Everett Ferguson, *Church History, Volume One: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 2005), 147.

INDIVIDUALISM IN THE WRITINGS OF CLEMENT

Clement's seemingly individualistic mindset is in need of further evaluation. As has already been noted, Clement says, "For the mind, seated on high on a quiet throne looking intently towards God, must control the passions. By no means be swept away by temper in bursts of anger, nor be sluggish in speaking, nor all nervousness in movement; so that your quietness may be adorned by good proportion and your bearing may appear something divine and sacred."¹² This is stated in Clement's opening lines, and it functions as the frame by which the rest of the document needs to be read. When these seven comments about the mind and contemplation are read as the framework of the document, each instance directly corresponds to a list of virtues which are ascribed to a different part of the person. A brief look at two of these would be helpful. The first instance which is the previous quotation, is the frame for the virtues and protection of the mind. This would be against things such as, "avoiding impetuous eagerness, allowing the mind to be agitated, becoming weak and of narrow discernment, boiling with rage, and the signs of arrogance."¹³ The second frame, would be that of Clement's concern with speech and actions related to the tongue, "Endure in silence, as a gentle and high-minded man."¹⁴ The virtues that are in correlation with this statement are, "Speech be gentle, kind greetings, modest toward women, being thoughtful in all of your talk, giving back a useful answer."¹⁵

¹² *Clement of Alexandria, 371-373*, LCL Butterworth. τὸν γὰρ νοῦν δεῖ τῶν παθῶν ἐπικρατεῖν ὑψηλὸν ἐπὶ ἡσύχου θρόνου καθήμενον ἀφορῶντα πρὸς θεόν. μηδὲν ὀξυκολίας ἀνάπλεος ἔσο περι ὀργάς, μηδὲ νοθρὸς ἐν λόγοις, μηδὲ ἐν βαδίσμασιν ὄκνου πεπληρωμένος, ἵνα σοι ῥυθμὸς ἀγαθὸς τὴν ἡσυχίαν κοσμήῃ καὶ θειῶδές τι καὶ ἱερὸν τὸ σχῆμα φαίνεται.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

When these statements of contemplation and individualism are read as the frame for the letter, it can be easily seen how this document could lead to a form of individual Christianity and ascetic moralism. Moreover, this is plausible because this is what the document portrays as its concern. The possibility of individualism is furthered in Clement's thought when a passage in the *Pedagogus* is evaluated.

Context for this passage is that Clement is concerned with the ancient philosophers and their salvation. It is not uncommon for Clement to suggest that the the philosophers were prepared for the Gospel through philosophy, much like the law prepared the "Barbarians" as he calls them.¹⁶ It is from this same state of mind that the following quote comes,

The divine law, then, while keeping in mind all virtue, trains man especially to self-restraint, laying this as the foundation of the virtues; and disciplines us beforehand to the attainment of self-restraint by forbidding us to partake of such things as are by nature fat, as the breed of swine, which is full-fleshed . . . 'He that loses his life,' says the Lord, 'shall save it;' either giving it up by exposing it to danger for the Lord's sake, as He did for us, or loosing it from fellowship with its habitual life. For if you would loose, and withdraw, and separate (for this is what the cross means) your soul from the delight and pleasure that is in this life, you will possess it, found and resting in the look-for hope.¹⁷

This is a passage that is of great interest in reference to our current concern, because Clement has placed self-restraint at the heart of salvation. He even says, "for this is what the cross means."¹⁸

To say that "separating your soul from the delight and pleasure that is in this life, you will possess it, found and resting in the look-for hope" is to say something similar to the gnostic tradition, in which the soul separating itself from the body is true salvation. Clement has an interesting interpretation of the gnostics, even to the point that he calls himself a gnostic. For Clement

¹⁶ See *Strom.* 6. 6; ANF, vol. 2, 490.

¹⁷ *Strom.* 2. 20; ANF, vol. 2, 370-371.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

knowledge of God is key to attaining salvation or *likeness to God*, and immortality. He says, “It is the will of God [that we should attain] the knowledge of God, which is the communication of immortality.”¹⁹

So, if these two passages are evaluated, it becomes clear that there is a struggle for Clement in individualism and the necessity of the church.

CLEMENT’S THEOLOGICAL TREATISE

The *Exhortation to the Newly Baptized* is Clement’s shortest work and by far the least significant, in reference to the greatest lasting effect. However, it does offer some insight into what possibly would have been taught within the catechetical school in Alexandria, alongside some of these other writings. The *Exhortation to the Newly Baptized* is not the only thing that would have been taught in the Alexandrian School. Norman Russell says this about one of Clement’s greater works, “Clement ran a school, or study-circle, in Alexandria and published several books on the Christian life. One of these was the *Paedagogus*, or *Tutor*, intended to help the recently baptized deepen their understanding of the Christian faith.”²⁰ According to Russell, it should not be concluded that the most prominent teaching in the school would have been from *The Exhortation to the Newly Baptized* considering that the *Paedagogus* is significantly longer and more detailed. Moreover, an evaluation of some texts from the *Paedagogus* countering this individualism is necessary at this point.

¹⁹ *Strom.* 4. 6; ANF, vol. 2, 414.

²⁰ Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 62.

Baptism in Clement's Treatise

As has been previously quoted, and is helpful here, Clement says this in the *Paedagogus*, “The same also takes place in our case, whose exemplar Christ became. Being baptized, we are illuminated; illuminated, we become sons; being made sons, we are made perfect; being made perfect, we are made immortal.”²¹ Clement is connecting Psalm 82:6 with the practice of baptism, “I have said, ‘You are gods, all of you sons of the Most High.’”²² As has been previously noted, the “chief end” for Clement is to achieve likeness to God. Clement’s view of the sacraments, more specifically in this case baptism, allows for the believer’s participation or fulfillment of this *divine likeness*. Clement begins with baptism, because it is the first sacrament in which new believers participate. Baptism, for Clement, is the catalyst in which the initiation of the ascent to the *divine likeness* begins. Clement will further his discussion of baptism in this text when he says,

For as many as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ . . . In the same way, therefore, we also repenting of our sins, renouncing our iniquities, purified by baptism, speed back to the eternal light, children to the Father . . . And such as is the union of the Word with baptism, is the agreement of milk with water; for it receives it alone of all liquids and admits of mixture with water, for the purpose of cleansing, as baptism for the remission of sins.²³

This text is leading to a very sacramental view of baptism. This is to say that it would be necessary for salvation. If baptism is the purification of believers and the putting on of Christ i.e. the ascent to *divine likeness*, it is hard to argue that Clement does not think that it is necessary for

²¹ *Paed.* 1. 6; ANF, vol. 2, 215.

²² Psalm 82:6: אֲנִי־אָמַרְתִּי אֱלֹהִים אֲתֵם וְכִנִּי עֲלֵי־וֶן בְּלִבָּם: However, Clement works from the LXX, so Psalm 81:6 ἐγὼ εἶπα· θεοὶ ἐστε καὶ υἱοὶ Ὑψίστου πάντες· For a further discussion of this see Carl Mosser, “The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and the Origin of Christian Deification” *JTS* 56 (April 2005), 30-74.

²³ *Paed.* 1. 6; ANF vol. 2. 217-222.

salvation. Clement furthers this by suggesting that baptism is for the remission of sins. This is a different connotation from what Clement is teaching in some of the other texts that have been evaluated in light of Clement's individualism, through both gnostic and ascetic traditions. The Church is necessary for the ascent to the divine likeness, because one cannot be baptized apart from the Church. Granted, the title of the shorter work is, *Exhortation to the Newly Baptized*. Therefore, one could argue that the Church is no longer necessary after the baptism. Moreover, an evaluation of Clement's view of the Eucharist would be beneficial at this point.

Eucharist in Clement's Treatises

Clement's *Paedagogus* is the work to new believers. This is the second of the three treatises and is authored to an audience of new believers to further their process of *divine likeness*. He says in his *Paedagogus*, "And the blood of the Lord is twofold. For there is the blood of His flesh, by which we are redeemed from corruption; and the spiritual that by which we are anointed. And to drink the blood of Jesus, is to become partakers of the Lord's immortality."²⁴ Clement is suggesting that believers participation in the Eucharist (εὐχαριστέω), leads to a participation in the *divine likeness*, which is immortality. This is to say that without the sacraments (i.e. baptism and the Eucharist) one cannot be fully participating in and therefore achieving *divine likeness*. A further explanation of Clement's view is explained by Stephen Davis when he says, "Already in Clement, one finds the notion that by partaking of 'the drink and of the Word,' the believer experiences 'growth' (sanctification) and shares in the Lord's

²⁴ *Paed.* 2. 2; ANF vol. 2, 242.

immortality.”²⁵ Davis attempts to explain Clement’s view of the Eucharist as being the method by which immortality is attained.

The totality of this cannot be understood until Clement’s own words describe the significance of the Eucharist. Clement has a lengthy portion of his *Paedagogus* that is devoted solely to the Eucharist. In this section Clement says:

For if we have been regenerated unto Christ, he who has regenerated us nourishes us with His own milk, the Word; for it is proper that what has procreated should forthwith supply nourishment to that which has been procreated. And as the regeneration was conformably spiritual, so also was the nutriment of man spiritual. In all respects, therefore, and in all things, we are brought into union with Christ, into relationship through His blood, by which we are redeemed.²⁶

Clement explicitly offers the Eucharist as a union of those who have been regenerated with the Christ, or Word. For Clement, this is a union that can be experienced not only spiritually, but also materially. Prior to this, the opening context of the quote is the concern of a mother providing for her infant through the milk, which leads to the creation of blood in the body, which is the source of bodily life. So follows, that the blood of Christ be the source of nourishment and sustainment of life in the believer. Clement furthers this by linking the Word, or Christ, with the bread of the Eucharist when he says, “Further, the Word declares Himself to be the bread of heaven. ‘For Moses,’ He says, ‘gave you not that bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He that comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.’”²⁷ The theology of the Eucharist is so dear to Clement, because he feels that it is the true

²⁵ Stephen J. Davis, “The Copto-Arabic Tradition of *Theosis*” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (ed. M. J. Christensen and J. A. Wittung: Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 163-174.

²⁶ *Paed.* 1. 6; ANF vol. 2, 221.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

experience of the Word and salvation (i.e. immortality and further, ascent to *divine likeness*).

With these things in mind, it seems unjust to associate Clement with a staunch individualism, because the Eucharist is a means by which believers experience immortality.

Conclusions from Clement's Treatise

Clement uses the the same language of "immortality" in reference to both baptism and the Eucharist. For Clement, the sacraments are the driving force for the personal participation in the process of achieving *divine likeness*. With this in mind, it is clear that the individual believer, for Clement, who's main goal is *divine likeness* cannot be separated from the Church. If the sacraments are necessary for the participation in the Lord's immortality, then the Church is necessary for the believer because the sacraments are not partaken of apart from the Church. In other words, if the sacraments are necessary for participation in the Lord's immortality (i.e. salvation and *divine likeness*), then the Church is necessary. This is because the "ascent" to divine likeness is not achieved at baptism, but is initiated at baptism and is furthered through participation in the church and the Eucharist.

THE RECONCILIATION OF ASCETICISM AND NECESSITY OF THE CHURCH

So how do we reconcile the differing teachings that are presented in the works of Clement, that is the individual contemplation and the necessity of the sacramental practice? In Clement's last work of his theological trilogy, the *Stromata*, he offers a reconciling statement for the unity of the theology presented in his writings. Clement says, "Wherefore the Saviour, taking the bread, first spoke and blessed. Then breaking the bread, he presented it, that we might eat it, according to reason, and that knowing the Scriptures we might walk obediently."²⁸ Clement

²⁸ *Strom* 1. 5 ANF vol. 2, 310.

offers a different insight into what the Eucharistic meal accomplishes in this text. By taking the bread and knowing the Scriptures, the believer is *empowered* to a pragmatic response, that is walking obediently. The theology of the Eucharist for Clement does not serve as a symbol in which it accomplishes nothing within his own theological system. Moreover, the theology of the Eucharist is driving a pragmatic response to his overall theological schema, a believer who is obedient to their Lord.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it does not appear that Clement can be summarized as an individual advocating for asceticism as a form of salvation. Rather, for Clement the individual must pursue moral growth, but this is driven through participation in the sacraments. In other words both, moral ascent and participation in the church are required for Clement. So for Clement to say on the one hand that morality and the denial of passions is necessary, as he does in *The Exhortation to the Newly Baptized*, among other places, is not to say that it is the only necessity in the Christian life. Moreover, the driving force that is urging the believer in this way is their participation in the *divine likeness*, through that of the Church and the sacraments. Clement's theology should not be confused with that of Hellenistic philosophy, traditional gnosticism, or medieval monasticism where the individual is able to achieve salvation apart from the church. Rather, this evaluation should show that for Clement, the ascent to the *divine likeness* is achieved through the fellowship of the believing community alongside an individual's continual moral growth. Therefore, this is to say that the Church is necessary for the salvation of humanity. The ascetic tradition or the individual pursuit of knowledge is not a sufficient substitute for the believing community, within our call of achieving *divine likeness*.

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