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CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA'S ETHIC OF WEALTH AS AN ETHIC OF GRACE

NELSON D. KLOOSTERMAN

The subject of this essay[1] comes from that area of theological study called "patristic ethics." Its relevance can be demonstrated in a variety of ways, but I shall suffice with one. The church perennially hears, in each generation, that she faces new moral questions, new moral dilemmas. Today one problem presumed to fall into that category is the global inequity between the rich and the poor. Books, articles, speeches, resolutions and pronouncements are brim full with advice about the redistribution of wealth among and within nations. Marxist and socialist analyses of the dimensions of the gap between the rich and the poor lie ready at hand for the Christian church to adapt and adopt in her address of the gospel to mankind. But when one digs deeply enough in the deposit of Christian thought one is surprised to hit upon a vein of rich moral instruction waiting to be mined, refined, cast and employed in the construction of modern moral argument.

One such vein of instruction lies in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, whom I should like to introduce by way of a brief look at his essay on Mark 10:17ff entitled *Who is the Rich Man that Shall be Saved?*

But first I must introduce to you Clement of Alexandria.

Called the father of Alexandrian philosophy, Titus Flavius Clement was born about A.D. 150 and reared in the life and thought of Greek paganism. His early intellectual immersion in the works of Greek poets, philosophers and historicans prepared him so well for the day when, having become a Christian, Clement would mint Christian doctrine into coinage bearing the resemblances of Stoic, Platonic and Philonic thought.[2]

Incidentally, in our age of contextualist theology the accusation that Clement's willingness to dress the gospel in the garments of

contemporary culture was his Achilles heel bristles with irony. In our generation when men seek to undress the Christian gospel of its supposed "western" attire, to then re-dress it in garments woven of modern socio-political rhetoric, one might expect Clement of Alexandria rather to be canonized than vilified. But the charge is unfounded, since resemblance of thought is not identity of conviction.

To know this Clement is to know a child of God whose soul was transformed by the Lord Jesus, whose heart throbbed with the desire for the transforming grace to shape life in his own Greek pagan society.

To know this Clement, one must know his city. Alexandria was successively the capital of Hellenistic, Roman and Christian Egypt, a commercial port and wealthy banking center which served also as the intellectual metropolis of the Greek world.[3] There, in the thought of the Alexandrian church fathers, Athens and Jerusalem met. This city which more than a century before had produced the Septuagint, had embraced the Philo who would initiate the intellectual defense of the Christian gospel, and hosted a world-famous library was the cradle of Clementine theology and, for our purposes in this essay, Clementine ethics.

One meets this Clement most intimately in his writings. In his *Protrepticus* we meet Clement the evangelist. With this very early piece of missionary propagandist literature Clement urged his readers to abandon the futile mystery cults, to embrace the religion of the Divine Logos for salvation and immortality.

We meet Clement the catechist in his *Paedagogus*, where those who have turned from paganism to the gospel are further instructed in morals and manners. Anyone concerned with the history and content of Christian ethics overlooks this work to his severe impoverishment. Where else do we find, for example, such explicit instruction so true to experience as these words about clothes and equipment appropriate for sleep:

> Magnificence of bed-clothes, gold-embroidered carpets, and smooth carpets worked with gold, and long fine robes of purple, and costly fleecy cloaks, and manufactured rugs of purple, and mantles of thick pile, and couches softer than sleep, are to be banished. For, besides the reproach of voluptuousness, sleeping on downy feathers is injurious, when our bodies fall down as into a yawning hollow, on account of the softness of the bedding.
>
> For they are not convenient for sleepers turning in them,

> on account of the bed rising into a hill on either side of the body. Nor are they suitable for the digestion of food . . . . But stretching one's self on even couches, affording a kind of natural gymnasium for sleep, contributes to the digestion of the food . . . . But let not the couch be elaborate, and let it have smooth feet; for elaborate turnings form occasionally paths for creeping things which twine themselves about the incisions of the work, and do not slip off.[4]

Permit this final reference to the wisdom of Clement concerning male grooming:

> About the hair, the following seems right. Let the head of men be shaven, unless it has curly hair. But let the chin have the hair. But let not twisted locks hang far down from the head, gliding into womanish ringlets . . . . The shaving of the chin to the skin is reprehensible, approaching to plucking out the hair and smoothing . . . .
>
> But additions of other people's hair are entirely to be rejected and it is a most sacrilegious thing for spurious hair to shade the head, covering the skull with dead locks . . . . neither is the hair to be dyed, nor grey hair to have its colour changed . . . . For sometimes, when [the young] have been behaving shamefully, the appearance of hoary hairs, arriving like an instructor, has changed them to sobriety, and paralyzed juvenile lust with the splendour of the sight.[5]

Other topics on which Clement favored the Christian world with his moral judgment include painting the face, amusements and the public games, going to church, kissing, and "why we are to use the bath."

We can and need only mention the final member of Clement's remarkable trilogy, his well-known treatise *The Stromata* (or *Miscellanies*), where we meet Clement the dogmatician. Consisting originally of eight books of which seven remain, this work is an early attempt at constructing a distinctly Christian philosophy or world-and-life view.

Before turning to the real subject of our essay, we must inject this observation: someone has neatly dubbed this trilogy of writings Clement's apologetics, ethics and dogmatics.[6] If that description is accurate, then it is worth noting that this (theological) trilogy is remarkable for its Christocentricity. If the *Protreptikus* displays the Logos, the Word, the Son of God who converts men from the superstitious corruptions of paganism to faith, the *Paidagogus* presents to us the Logos who trains, instructs and disciplines the

converted in Christian morality, whereas *The Stromata* conveys the divine Logos who leads us to that higher knowledge of the things of God reserved for those devoted to spiritual and moral culture.[7]

After that brief introduction, we proceed to our point of interest, our single tourist stop on this short excursion into patristic ethics. It is Clement's essay entitled *Who is The Rich Man That Shall Be Saved? (tis ho soodzomenos plousios?)* Little is known about the origin of this treatise, though praise for its timeless moral wisdom has echoed through the centuries. More than one hundred years ago Philip Schaff characterized the piece as "an excellent commentary on the words of the Lord in Mark 10:17sqq. A most practical topic for a rich city like Alexandria, or any other city and age, especially our own, ..."[8]

If it was most practical for a rich city like Alexandria, what interest might it hold for a rich republic like ours? In an age of hunger, when publishers become rich on titles pregnant with accusations about the wealthy, can the words "rich" and "Christian" really describe the same person? Is not a "rich Christian" a contradiction in terms, the resolution of which can lie only in the choice for one and against the other?[9] As a matter of fact, we would contend that as an antidote to modern guilt-inducing rhetoric about wealth, Clement's commentary on Christ's words to the rich young man embodies the rhetoric of grace, the only sound and serious foundation for a Christian, biblical ethic of property and wealth.

Clement's rhetoric of grace proclaimed God as the Creator, Giver and Maintainer of wealth. Because the earth and its produce belong to him, stewardship of wealth, not renunciation of property is required. We might add, with more than a touch of anachronism, that stewardship is not determined by the maxims of statist redistribution, but by God's commandments. The God-ordained user of wealth is the one to whom the Lord has given it in his providence. Not the individual, especially not the state, but the Lord owns the cattle on the thousand hills, the means of production and the profitable returns on capital investments, and by the eighth commandment he makes each one personally responsible to him for the use of his gifts.

Because Clement saw the God of Scripture as the omnipotent, sovereign Owner who graciously bestows wealth, he understood the problem of sin and wealth not in terms of *identity* but of *utility*. That is, riches are not evil in themselves, but where sin exists it is

manifested in the use of wealth. Possessions are spoiled not by the hand of God their maker, but by the hand of man their renter.

> Riches, then, which benefit also our neighbours, are not to be thrown away. For they are possessions, inasmuch as they are possessed, and goods, inasmuch as they are useful and provided by God for the use of men; and they lie to our hand, and are put under our power, as material and instruments which are for good use to those who know the instrument. If you use it skillfully, it is skillful; if you are deficient in skill, it is affected by your want of skill, being itself destitute of blame. Such an instrument is wealth . . . . That then which of itself has neither good nor evil, being blameless, ought not to be blamed; but that which has the power of using it well and ill, by reason of its possessing voluntary choice . . . . So let no man destroy wealth, rather than the passions of the soul, which are incompatible with the better use of wealth. So that, becoming virtuous and good, he may be able to make a good use of these riches. The renunciation, then, and selling of all possessions is to be understood as spoken of the passions of the soul.[10]

Wealth then is a neutral tool; things are indifferent, adiaphora. What is important is the righteous use of such a tool. Rather than prescribing voluntary poverty, our Lord urges a disposition free from damaging passions, greed, envy and covetousness. Covetousness is essentially a violation of grace, for it turns the heart against the divinely ordained distribution of wealth among men. The tenth commandment forbids not the desire for something itself, but the desire for something which the Lord has not chosen to give me or has chosen to give someone else. Here then we see how the Law of God, forbidding covetousness, far from opposing his grace, rather serves grace.

This explanation of Christ's words to the rich young man is supported by other sayings of Jesus found elsewhere in the gospels. Jesus urged his disciples to "make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations" (Luke 16:9). Moreover, says Clement,

> how could one give food to the hungry, and drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, and shelter the houseless, for not doing which He threatens with fire and the outer darkness, if each man first divested himself of all these things? Nay, He bids Zaccheus and Matthew, the rich tax-gather[er]s, entertain Him hospitably. And He does not bid them part with their property . . . .[11]

Far from negating property and the private ownership of property by his followers, Christ rather redirected property's uses and he himself was ministered unto by the rich.

Clement's explanation of Christ's words have been described by the German theologian Martin Hengel, in his book *Property and Riches in the Early Church*, as a typically Stoic way of putting things, an unsuccessful attempt to cut a path between radical property-renouncing asceticism and all-out justification of riches. Christ's words are allegedly redirected when what is to be renounced is not property, but *the wrong desire* for property. Christ's teaching is presumably robbed of its moral force when its focus is shifted from *external things* to *internal disposition*. Nevertheless, Hengel does give Clement high marks for his emphasis, supposedly uncharacteristic of patristic ethics, on "the absolute religious and social obligations which go with property. Property is the gift of God and in all cases is there to meet the needs of others."[12] In fact, Hengel pays Clement what in today's world of theological etiquette is a heady compliment: ". . . this short, sermon-like writing marks a revolution in the spiritual and sociological situation of the church."[13] Judged in terms of his own time and culture Clement's ethic of wealth forged a synthesis in which, according to Hengel,

> the generally expressed radical and rigorist criticism of property was toned down and made more inward, though the possibility of completely renouncing possessions remained open. Riches were judged critically, but were no longer ruled out in principle; stress was laid, rather, on strict obligations to the community and the right use of them. Inner freedom in the detachment of faith had to prove itself in generosity and the renunciation of avarice and luxury.[14]

But in our opinion Hengel's analysis ignores the truly biblical root of Clement's explanation. It is not Stoical but Scriptural to say as Paul did to Timothy: "But those who *desire to be rich* fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destrucion and perdition. For the *love of money* is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (I Timothy 6:9-10). Earlier in this letter Timothy had been reminded that things in themselves are good: "For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer" (I Timothy 4:4-5). To sanctify wealth "by the

word of God and prayer" is to place it into service of the covenant; it is to *use* wealth according to covenant law in covenant response.

But our characterization of Clement's ethic of wealth as an ethic of grace entails a second criticism of Hengel's analysis. If the residence of sin, and therefore the object of salvation, is not material possessions but the human heart, then Clement's explanation of Christ's word to the rich young man rightly heralds this good news of grace to rich Christians. For

> . . .the Saviour by no means has excluded the rich on account of wealth itself . . . if they are able and willing to submit their life to God's commandments, and prefer them to transitory objects . . . . For if, in consequence of his involuntary birth in wealth, a man is banished from life, rather is he wronged by God, who created him, in having vouchsafed to him temporary enjoyment, and in being deprived of eternal life. And why should wealth have ever sprung from the earth at all, if it is the author and patron of death?[15]

Clement penetrates to the core of the truly biblical ethic of wealth when he argues that

> . . .if one is able in the midst of wealth to turn from its power, and to entertain moderate sentiments, and to exercise self-command, and to seek God alone, and to breathe God and walk with God, such a poor man submits to the commandments, being free, unsubdued, free of disease, unwounded by wealth. But if not, "sooner shall a camel enter through a needle's eye, than such a rich man reach the kingdom of God."[16]

The trouble, you see, is that in terms of Clement's ethic of wealth, ancient and modern property-renouncers didn't and don't go far enough. Speaking of the ancient povertists Clement reminds us that

> those who formerly despised external things relinquished and squandered their property, but the passions of the soul . . . they intensified. For they indulged in arrogance, pretension, and vainglory, and in contempt of the rest of mankind, as if they had done something superhuman . . . . [O]ne, after ridding himself of the burden of wealth, may none the less have still the lust and desire for money innate and living; . . . .[17]

Jesus "cut out the passions thoroughly by the root, —not as the law does the bare effects, the fruits of evil plants, but applies His axe to the roots of wickedness."[18]

The recommendations of modern ethics for the redistribution of

global wealth fail to address the real sin when they refuse to first locate it in the human heart. To frame this moral issue in terms of the gap between rich and poor, between wealth and poverty, rather than in terms of the gap between covetousness and the Divine Owner's commandments, is to guarantee that the moral use of wealth, lacking rootage in divine grace, becomes the dried fruit of manipulative guilt rather than the fragrant offering of hearty gratitude. More to the point, it is to remove the scandal of grace embodied in Christ's answer to the disciples' question "Who then can be saved?": "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible." This human impossibility extends to rich and poor alike, but so does the divine possibility of grace!

But if ethics ought to pay attention to dispostions and passions of the human heart *and* to outward acts and policies, what benefits accrue when moral recommendations ignore the former and treat only the latter?

When moral recommendations about foreign aid, overpopulation, price controls, minimum wages, commodity tariffs, and so on, proceed without recognizing the law's internal function in limiting personal covetousness and enhancing personal responsibility, then what pevails is a Robin Hood morality: loving my poor neighbor means robbing my rich neighbor.[19] It permits those who presumably speak for the poor in society to avoid altogether the presence of covetous greed as a source of discontent and a motive-power among the poor. Locating the moral dilemma outside of the human heart justifies the creation and enforcement of social and economic policies whose effectiveness requires the politics of force rather than persuasion by the good.

Constructing one's ethic of property in response to the fiscal gap between rich and poor externalizes the moral issue, thereby externalizing the law of God. This was the charge which Christ levelled against the Pharisees when he said,

> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matthew 23:25-28).

Instead of legislating in terms of God's law, the inevitable result of externalizing morality and God's requirements is that men permit themselves the privilege of legislating beyond God's law. Ethicists, which after all is what the Pharisees were, can now play God. And whereas the commandments of the Lord are not burdensome, those of men which exceed the Lord's most often are. Is not this what the Old Testament refers to when it speaks of taking away property by force, as for example in Micah 2:1-2:

> Woe to those who devise iniquity, and work out evil on their beds! At morning light they practice it, because it is in the power of their hand. They covet fields and take them by violence, also houses, and seize them. So they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance.

But Clement's biblical ethic of wealth avoids both of these dangers. Clement's ethic of grace receives God's law with thanksgiving as a divinely ordained limitation upon the heart-sin of covetousness and protection of personal economic responsibility, a responsibility which is simultaneously economic authority over what one possesses. It recognizes God's law as an expression of his grace—remember the preamble to the law!—and how that law therefore serves grace also in human economic relationships. Our Lord's instruction to the rich young man constitutes a Christological fulfillment of the tenth commandment, interpreted beautifully by Question and Answer 113 of the Heidelberg Catechism:

> What does the tenth commandment require of us?
> That even the smallest inclination, or thought, contrary to any of God's commandments, never rise in our hearts; but that at all times we hate sin with our whole hearts, and delight in all righteousness.

In his answer to the young man's request for eternal life Jesus had recited every commandment of the second table except the tenth: "Thou shalt not covet . . . ." In place of the tenth commandment, as it were, Jesus says, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow me" (Mark 10:21). Don't covet—follow me. Don't be filled with greed—take up your cross. Don't serve your possessions—serve your neighbor with them. This divine summons was the dispensation of grace, for the obedient use of wealth according to the tenth commandment.

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We stand together at the threshhold of a new academic year,

Mid-America Reformed Seminary's fifth academic year. And we're standing by God's grace. If you should ask me what we'll be studying this year, I would say: *that* grace. The grace of which we sing with the words:

> Through many dangers, toils, and snares
> [We] have already come;
> 'Tis grace hath brought [us] safe thus far
> And grace will lead [us] home.

But this grace is not only the grace by which we're led, by which we're being saved; it is also the grace out of which we live, by which we buy and sell, by which we live married and unmarried, by which we work and play, by which we do our duty.

That is to say, Christian ethics—whether we speak now of the Christian ethic of wealth, the Christian medical ethic of life and dying, or the Christian ethic of marriage—must begin with the thankful recognition what *what is there* in terms of property lawfully obtained, life physically given, or marriage solemnly entered, by divine gracious design. Christian ethics then is the study of living by grace, as God's children, according to the Law of God. Because the context of Christian duty is divine grace, Christian ethics is to be, in whatever moral problem it speaks about, the ethic of grace. Saint Paul describes such an ethic this way:

> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. *For* we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them* (Eph 2:8-10).

It happens so often that we study God's grace apart from the obedience which it enables, so that when we come to look at our duty, we construct it without reference to enabling grace. This accounts for the simultaneous presence of nomism and antinomianism; the one constructs obedience without grace and the other enjoys grace without obedience. For Christian ethics particularly, and for theological education generally, but for Christian living universally, it is imperative that we not put asunder what God has joined together: heart *and* hand, doctrine *and* life, grace *and* obedience, promise *and* demand. Just as surely as the one precedes and issues in the other, so surely the other arises out of the first. What Clement of Alexandria teaches us, then, in terms of an ethic of wealth can serve as a paradigm not only for Christian ethics and theological education, but for Christian living as well: only when grace and obedience begin in the heart will our service to and love for our neighbor fulfill God's commandments and satisy his will.

NOTES

[1]This essay is an abridgement of the author's Convocation Address delivered at the beginning of the 1986-87 academic year of Mid-America Reformed Seminary.

[2]For concise introductions to the life and work of Clement, cf. Berthold Altaner, *Patrology*, translated by Hilda C. Graef (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1960) 215-222; Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. 2 (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1958) 5-36; Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1910) 781-785; *Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations of Clement and Origen with Introduction and Notes*, John Ernest Loenard Oulton and Henry Chadwick in The Library of Christian Classics: Ichthus Edition (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1954) 15-39; and Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol. 1 (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960) 177-207.

[3]McGiffert, *History of Christian Thought*, 177.

[4]*The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF), Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983 [reprint]), 257-258.

[5]ANF, Vol. 2, 286.

[6]Schaff, *History*, Vol. 2, 783.

[7]ANF, Vol. 2, 168.

[8]Schaff, *History*, Vol. 2, 784.

[9]Perhaps the most scandalous example might well be Ronald J. Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, with as subtitle: *A Biblical Study*[!] (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977). Our judgment was considerably enlightened by the stimulating antidote to it: David Chilton's *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt-Manipulators: A Biblical Response to Ronald J. Sider*, 2nd ed. revised (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1982).

[10]ANF, Vol. 2, 595.

[11]ANF, Vol. 2, 594-595.

[12]Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1974) 75.

[13]Hengel, *Property*, 75.

[14]Hengel, *Property*, 78.

[15]ANF, Vol. 2, 598.

[16]ANF, Vol. 2, 598.

[17]ANF, Vol. 2, 594.

[18]ANF, Vol. 2, 599.

[19]Chilton, *Productive Christians*, 63.