

DID CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA TEACH EMDA?

In November 2008 Bro William Van Nunen sent out a couple of letters concerning a statement in Clement of Alexandria, and he asserted this account teaches Essential Mother Daughter Authority (EMDA), although he did not use this term. His letter says in part:

To Interested Parties,

I found an interesting passage from a first century writer that addresses the issue of church organization. This passage suggests that Christians in the first century (within 60 years of Jesus' ascension) did not "organize themselves" into a church apart from some formal authority. They apparently *requested* authority to be formally constituted. This has to trump any tradition to the contrary suggested by our Baptist forefathers.

The excerpt comes from Clement of Alexandria's *The Rich Man Who Finds Salvation* (Section 42). This work is found in most editions of the Church Fathers, should anyone wish to verify it for themselves.

This translation comes from *The Early Church Fathers: Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2. It reads:

"For when, on the tyrant's death [Domitian], he [John the Apostle] returned to Ephesus from the isle of Patmos, he went away, *being invited*, to the contiguous territories of the nations, here to appoint bishops, there *to set in order whole Churches*, there to ordain such as were marked out by the Spirit." (Italics mine)(William Wilson, Trans.)

The Greek word "to set in order" is harmazo. It has a wide range of meanings including to prepare, make ready, to betroth, to set in order, regulate, organize, and to govern.

The passage is also quoted by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical Histories* (Bk 3.23.6). Below you'll find three translations; there should be no questions over the meaning of the passage. Note that these churches "asked" the Apostle John to *form* and *organize* the new churches.

"For when, after the tyrant's death, he returned from the isle of Patmos to Ephesus, he went away *upon their invitation* to the neighboring territories of the Gentiles, to appoint bishops in some places, in other places *to set in order whole churches*, elsewhere to choose to the ministry some one⁷⁵¹ of those that were pointed out by the Spirit." (Italics mine.) (McGiffert)

"For after the tyrant was dead, coming from the isle of Patmos to Ephesus, he went also, *when called*, to the neighboring regions of the Gentiles; in some to appoint bishops, in some *to institute entire new churches*, in others to appoint to the ministry some one of those that were pointed out by the Holy Ghost." (Italics mine.) (Cruse)

"When the tyrant was dead, and John had moved from the island of Patmos to Ephesus, he used to go *when asked* to the neighboring districts of the Gentile peoples, sometimes to appoint bishops, sometimes *to organize whole churches*, sometimes to ordain one person of those pointed out by the Spirit." (Italics mine.) (Williamson)

EXAMINATION OF THIS CLEMENTINE REFERENCE

First let me thank Bro Van Nunen for this information. I welcome all research on this subject.

THE DATE

How are we to understand this account of Clement? First we consider the date.

Either Bro Van Nunen's statement of Clement being a *first century* writer is an oversight, or he has confused him with Clement of Rome [A.D. 30-100] who was the author of *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, as Clement of Alexandria lived in the second and third centuries (AD 150-215) and did most of his writing near the end of the second century, at the earliest, and possibly in the beginning of the third century, i.e., after 200 AD. Schaff says concerning this specific account of John in *The Rich Man* and from which the above quote is taken:

Clement of Alexandria, towards the close of the second century, represents John...[S. I. 429]. (Cf. Neander I. 691; Mosheim. I. 47; Footnotes are given at the end).

Bro Van Nunen also tells us this was *sixty years after the death of Christ*, i.e., about AD 96 or so. But while this is when this account was supposed to have occurred we have to take into account the date when written. *The Rich Man* (from which the quote above was taken) was of course written after Clement became a Christian (perhaps 180-190 AD) and possibly some years after. This means the source for this tradition of John was actually about one hundred sixty years after the ascension of Christ. Much had transpired since the days of the apostles in the way of doctrinal error and we must read this with that date in mind—not when it is supposed to have occurred.

In fact Schaff speaks of this tour of John as that of “faithful and devoted pastor” [S. I. 429]. He lists several of these stories of John including this one by Clement under “Traditions Respecting John,” by Irenaeus, Jerome, Cassian and Polycrates as well. This is a story which Clement had heard and it is to be treated like so many other traditions of the time. Thus no matter if Clement did mean EMDA (for which I see no evidence in the text or context), it is only a tradition. It may be true but on the other hand, it may be only a gloss of which there were many. If the account of John really did happen the next paragraph (which tells of John horseback riding and running which, though possible at his age), makes one suspicious, that it may have been embellished by Clement or others. We can accept such stories only in so far as we judge them to be true to Scripture and no further. Beyond that they have no more weight than any other uninspired document. While interesting they cannot be used to establish or prove any doctrine.

But Bro Van Nunen is quite certain, however, that this account teaches EMDA and that it settles the whole controversy on church constitution in favor of EMDA and does so *without question!* Is he correct? Does this account teach EMDA? Is there anything in this reference which would lead anyone to even suggest EMDA if he did not already have that idea in mind before he read it? Not that I can see.

WHERE IS THE AUTHORITY IN THIS ACCOUNT

There are several questions which need to be asked concerning this reference. Where is this *authority* to which Bro Van Nunen refers? It is not stated. He tells us this account

....suggests that Christians in the first century (within 60 years of Jesus' ascension) did not “organize themselves” into a church apart from some formal authority.

He then goes further and says:

Note that these churches “asked” the Apostle John to *form* and *organize* the new churches.

But there is no church mentioned here unless it is a church by anticipation! How could a non church according to EMDA ask for John's help? If it was a mother church asking (as EMDA assumes) and if the authority is in the mother church, then why was this extra ordinary authority needed? Does a mother church need some other authority for church constitution in addition to what is supposed to rest in the church itself? Why have our EMDA brethren labored so long and so hard on the mother church's authority if there is a further authority required? Of course this reminds us of the unmentioned *laws* of EMDA [See *LUF*. p. 30] and that these can be added or deleted as the case demands!

How does this account **suggest** *formal authority*? Of the translators quoted one rendered *harmoza* as *institute* and another, *organize* (Cruse & Williamson). I do not know who Williamson was, but Cruse was a Protestant Episcopal (same as the Church of England doctrinally) and his translation lines up with the sacerdotalism of that church. [Cf. Reynolds. Church Polity, 1849. Quoted by Dever. Polity, p. 312. Reynolds has this note: “Having referred to the history of Eusebius, I take this opportunity to caution the reader against trusting too implicitly to Cruse's translation of the work.... it was made under Episcopalian influence, and is deeply tinged with it. Some of its errors have been noticed in Dr. Smyth's Confirmation Examined.” This is what I am referring to concerning these translators mentioned above. —JC].

The Protestant Episcopal Church believes succession descends through the ordination or consecration of a Bishop. If there is authority in the Clementine account, where is it? What word *suggests* it? Any group planning to constitute themselves into a church would invite an apostle to their constitution, if any were living and near them. But to claim such an invitation as was given to John **suggests** *authority, formal authority, or a mother church authority* or just *authority* by itself, demands that we put on Episcopal or Catholic glasses to find it! We who believe in DA invite pastors to be with us when we constitute a church but we do not seek authority from them. Yet anyone who read of one of our constitutions, using the exact terms as quoted above could, with as much warrant, say that *that record suggests they did not organize themselves into a church without some formal authority!* How is it that someone can read an account in Clement of Alexandria one way and read a current account using the same terms, in a different way?

Nor does Bro Van Nunen divulge how he determined saints had to get this formal authority which he thinks is in this account:

.... They apparently *requested* authority to be formally constituted....

Formally constituted! But who said so? What word indicates this? How was it stated? Was the authority to do this in John or something John had? What authority was John said to bring to this group? Is this stated by the author, or is it assumed by the reader? Was it *church authority, apostolic authority, preacher authority* or the *authority of a bishoprick*? Who said these disciples could not organize themselves into a church without some horizontal authority? Those who constitute churches by DA almost always invite others to help in the organization services but those helps convey no power and the church- to- be derives all its power and authority directly from Christ who never fails to be there, Mt. 18:20. The DA position is consistent with this Clementine account. But to find EMDA here one must first wedge it in between the words because otherwise it is not in the record, as far as I am able to see.

To illustrate what I have said I quote a recent author's translation of this account as given by Eusebius.

Listen to a story that is not a story but a true account of John the apostle preserved in memory. After the tyrant's death, he returned from the island of Patmos to Ephesus and used to go, when asked, to the neighboring Gentile districts to appoint bishops, reconcile churches, or ordain someone designated by the Spirit. Arrived at a city near by [Smyrna], he settled disputes among the brethren... [Maier, Paul. Eusebius. Kregel. p. 111].

This indicates that my suggestion that these trips may have been primarily to settle church trouble is very likely.

WHO INVITED JOHN

But again we ask, who invited John? The account says:

he went away *upon their invitation* to the neighboring territories of the Gentiles,

Whose invitation was this? Was it the invitation of the *neighboring territories*? What were these territories? This is not at all clear and it seems far fetched for the purposes of EMDA to assume it refers to a Mother church or to an association of churches! If this account had said “upon the mother church's invitation” then it might have helped the EMDA cause. Or, if it had said, “John was invited because a group needed formal authority to constitute and John (or John's church) had this authority and granted it to the new church” that would have been support for EMDA! But there is nothing of the kind here. Without some specific statement like these suggested the question will not sit down until answered, and the answer is not forthcoming!

Again, assuming this was a church constitution under consideration (which is a debatable issue), was it the invitation of those who desired to constitute a church? If so, whatever the practice was at the time, it was not EMDA because in EMDA constitutions no one except the mother church does any such thing. Mother takes care of the whole thing even ordaining the pastor and deacons in many cases, which is not a step behind the Episcopalians! After all, babies do not plan their own births!

But how one can read into this account (even if it is factual and not a romantic tradition, which it may be) *formal authority* is not easy to say. The best Bro Van Nunen can do is to say:

They apparently *requested* authority to be formally constituted. [Bro Van Nunen's emphasis].

They requested John is made into “They apparently requested *authority*...” One could say with as much validity, *they apparently requested a Bishop* with a capital *B*. Or *they apparently requested a Cardinal with ecclesiastical power in his hands!* You can find the *Bishop* and the *Cardinal* in this account as easily as you can find *EMDA*! The account mentions no such thing! The word *authority* with which EMDA men so constantly harangue their people is not even mentioned! It is not even *suggested*! The word is not there! There is no synonym for it! The *Apparently* is not too apparent.

Bro Van Nunen goes on to say:

This passage suggests that Christians in the first century (within 60 years of Jesus' ascension) did not “organize themselves” into a church

This account is not new to me for I read it many years ago but totally missed this *suggested* horizontal authority to constitute a church, if it is there. Re-reading it has not changed my mind. I still find nothing— nothing at all— for the purpose of EMDA! Nor has Bro Van Nunen given us any hint how

he was able to determine that baptized saints could not organize themselves into a church but had to have some formal and horizontal authority! He failed to tell us just what this authority was and how it was obtained.

BAPTIST HISTORY AND EMDA

It is also interesting that Bro Van Nunen concedes Baptist history is contrary to EMDA! He says:

This has to trump any tradition to the contrary suggested by our Baptist forefathers.

To *trump* means to get the better of someone or something. So Bro Van Nunen means that this account overrides the DA *suggested* by our Baptist forefathers, which he calls *a tradition to the contrary*, that is to EMDA! He seems to admit the historical Baptist practice of church constitution does not line up with that position! This clearly means Baptist history is not friendly to EMDA and this is correct!

Bro Van Nunen then says there should be no questions about the meaning of the words. Indeed there would be none in reading the article by itself, but the questions flow in like a broken dike when he insists this account and the words of it mean that EMDA was in operation here! This indicates how ingenious our EMDA brethren are. They can find an epidemic of words, ideas, patterns and theories and special authority for EMDA from accounts which are totally sterile of that germ! This Clementine reference is a prime example!

THE TERMS

Whatever the meaning of *harmodzo* in this account, let it be remembered that church constitution itself is not in question for we who hold to DA believe in constitution as well as those who hold to EMDA. The real question, then, is not whether there is such a thing as constitution of churches in Clement's account, but was there this essential church authority, a mother church's authority, so that the new church was a *begotten church*? (The term is borrowed from Bro. R.E. Pound and is apropos to the EMDA view). So far as I am able to see, this account, gives no evidence of a mother church or of any horizontal or ecclesiastic authority for constitution in any sense! Nothing of the sort is mentioned; none sought, none entertained and none given— as far as the record indicates! If there is any authority at all in this account, it does not come from a *mother church*! No *mother church* was contacted! No church claimed to be the *mother*. No church claimed to have *mother* authority! No *mother* granted authority! If there was such a thing as a *mother church*, no one would ever know it from reading Clement! This EMDA-touted proof melts away by simply reading the text!

ORDINATION

Ordination is mentioned in this account. Was this to the ministry? Was this by an apostle alone? Exclusively? Was it essential? Could men other than an apostle do this work? Were there no pastors chosen by churches while John was on Patmos? Could a church ordain a pastor without an ordained man being present? How did the Spirit mark out men for the ministry? Was it by John selecting them? Or by the church selecting them? How were these bishops appointed? Was it by the authority of John as an apostle? What NT text supports this? If so, then how was this authority passed on when John died? Was Judas replaced by the apostles or by the church? Did a presbytery lay hands on Matthias? What text declares this? Did Jesus ever lay hands on the Apostles or the seventy? Was

John's appointment in this case by decree? Was it the authority of an *ordained* man? How do we know this? Is there any record in Scripture that John received the laying on of hands himself? When? Where? Cf. Mk 3:13. Did Paul and Barnabas select the pastors or did the churches do it, Acts 14:23? Why was there a show of hands in Acts 14:23, if Paul and Barnabas made the selection? Do Baptist churches merely approve of a *Bishop's* choice, as Methodists do? Or was it that the church in Clement's account that had already selected those to be ordained? Would this account in Clement fit better with Baptist or with Episcopalian principles? Graves said:

It is evident that, if a church must exist before her officers, and that she is absolutely independent of all other bodies, she must be authorized to elect and to commission her officers without being required to call upon some outside party.....Subsequently, by the direction of the Holy Spirit, the church at Antioch formally commissioned Paul and Barnabas to the full work of the ministry, and to go forth as missionaries to foreign lands. There is no intimation that either one had administered the ordinances before this ordination. No neighboring churches were called upon to send their officers to ordain these men; nor can we bring ourselves to believe that a number of ministers belonging to this church ordained and gave them credentials, 'bearing their *individual signatures*; the record of the church alone was the visible proof of their ordination, and it is given. Graves. OL, p. 47.

Crowell said:

Fourth, it is distinguished from these systems [Papal, Episcopal, etc., --JC] by the principle that all church power is in the church as a body, not in its ministers; that it comes to each church directly from the Lord Jesus Christ according to his promise, by virtue of the union of its members in the church relation, and is not transmitted by succession from any previously existing body... [Crowell. 117].

Surely we are not to think that this account means that John only could ordain men to the ministry! Surely, we are not to assume that it requires an apostle to ordain!

THERE WERE GREAT DOCTRINAL ERRORS AFOOT AT THIS TIME

Is it possible that by this time in the third century or very near it) some were teaching baptismal regeneration? Yes, it is and Clement is one of those who did so:

Being baptized, we are illuminated; illuminated, we become sons; being made sons, we are made perfect; being made perfect, we are made immortal... This work is variously called grace, and illumination, and perfection, and washing. Washing, by which we cleanse away our sins; grace, by which the penalties accruing to transgressions are remitted; and illumination, by which that holy light of salvation is beheld, that is, by which we see God clearly. [Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, pg. 215; Cf. Oxford D. 303].

Is it possible that by this time Clement was leaning to that other Clement's (Epistle from the church in Rome to Corinth, 1st century AD) error

"on the divine origin of a church order and the apostolic succession of ecclesial office (40:1—44:6) [which—JC] seemed to lay the foundation for the concept of the monarchical episcopate and the claim of the Roman church to primacy"? [Anchor. I. 1056].

At least we know Clement of Alexandria quoted the other Clement's Epistle to the Church at Rome frequently in his *Stromata*. Is it possible that by this time Clement and others were elevating the office of bishop to be a ruler over several churches? Yes, it is and men were at this time pressing hard for the

purple! By this time major departures from the simplicity of the NT had been instituted. But let this be as it may. One thing is very certain; no matter what Clement says about John's activities in reference to churches, whether of constitution or of the more likely scenario of settling church trouble, we are not to read these ideas back into the NT as if they were Scripture, which is to make the tail wag the dog. But we must read doctrine from Scripture alone! J.B. Jeter, on early Christian Fathers, expresses what I perceive to be the truth:

Their testimony seems to be entitled to but little credit. Their writings abound in puerile conceits, gross mistakes, and pernicious errors. [Jeter. *Campbellism Examined*. p. 216].

But suppose this account does refer to EMDA in the constitution of churches. Grant that this is a true record and that it represents real events of John the apostle and that it does mean church constitution. Let us give all the force we can to this idea. Press the words to the ultimate limit. Let it be that it teaches no church can be scripturally constituted unless there is this specific authority granted by a mother church, I mean EMDA with all that it implies.

What then?

If this is the case, then it proves Baptists cannot be churches of Christ!

Why not?

Because it is certain Baptists never have taught or practiced EMDA! Their history has no record of this doctrine! They never list it as an essential for church constitution in confession, manual, history, covenant or message. Nor do the records of churches constituted, whose records are fully detailed and complete, make any mention of desiring, seeking, obtaining or submitting to such a law. See the nineteen original churches in the *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association*, for example. This authority could not have been obtained unconsciously, unwittingly, insensibly or unawares, as EMDA men often assert. If EMDA is the law of church constitution then it must have been a *published* law! It is preposterous to think a law, an essential law, could be so stringently practiced for all the ages since Christ and yet be never enunciated! Remember those who contend for this theory never allow such underhanded methods to make legal churches now. And if not now, how could this have been done all through Baptist history, especially in every single case of constitution? Without this law being **enunciated, affirmed, reiterated and continually practiced**, church vote by church vote, EMDA emphatically maintains there can be no true churches! Ergo, Baptist churches, because they did not know this law are not the churches of Christ! Bro Van Nunen admits the practice of our Baptist forefathers was contrary to EMDA. Thus, they cannot be true churches because for hundreds and hundreds of years, to say the very least, they did not hold to the EMDA law! This fact is reinforced because the challenge to find one explicit statement of EMDA before 1900 has never been met!

To take Clement's statement to mean EMDA here, as Bro Van Nunen has done, is comparable to the Campbellite who asserts the Bible teaches baptismal regeneration on the statement of an apostolic father who held that error! This proves far too much for Baptists! We do not deny that many taught baptismal regeneration very early but we yet deny that it was a doctrine of the apostles and Scripture. So with EMDA. If Clement taught it, still it does not help the cause of EMDA because Scripture does not teach it and Baptist history knows nothing of it!

References:

S=Schaff. *Church History*.

N= Neander's *Church History*.

M= Mosheim. *Church History*.

LUF=*Landmarkism Under Fire* by J. C. Settlemoir