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Exercise, not Play: A Church Father's Teaching on Free-Time Activities

DAVID W.T. BRATTSTON

The church father Clement of Alexandria taught that the whole of one's life is to be ceaselessly engaged in learning God's word and conforming one's life to it. All pursuits must be productive in physical or spiritual improvement, with the physical as a handmaiden to the spiritual. Thus there was no place for pleasure or amusing oneself for its own sake. All a Christian's efforts are to be directed to advancing his/her spiritual life, to the greater glory of God. Even what we might think of as sports were not for fun or enjoyment, but as a means of improving the body and soul into a healthy well-rounded Christian personality. Physical activities were not for their own sake, but as serious exercises to equip and train oneself for higher, spiritual ends. Such exercises included manual labor. The body was to be exercised for the sake of the soul, both of which were serious pursuits. Thus, his teachings on this subject are like another realm of activity about which he wrote: "His aim is to reshape Christians so that their entire outward manner reveals their inward, Christian disposition."¹

Clement was the first Christian author to write at length on how Christians should spend the time at their disposal for non-remunerative activities and over which they had discretion, including time for what people in the twenty-first century would call "play". He was well-educated in Greek and Roman culture and philosophy. In adulthood, he converted to Christianity and became the principal or dean of Christianity's foremost educational institution. His extant writings are generally considered to date from this period, AD 192 to 202, at Alexandria in Egypt, the intellectual centre of the Roman Empire and hub of Christian learning.

For Clement, there was no place or time for play in the sense described by Gordon Houser as engaging in an activity that has no goal except the activity itself,² or "nonproductive activity, something done for its own sake."³ There was only exercise, productive activities designed and pursued to improve the body

for the benefit of the soul in the Christian life, not for pleasure or diversion. Such exercise entailed constant exertion to conform to God's law and glory.

Clement exhibited general disdain for physical activities that we would consider sports or play. He thought that "it is absolutely impossible at the same time to be a man of understanding and not to be ashamed to gratify the body."⁴ Although recognizing that they were conducive to healthy bodies and courageous souls, he would allow gymnastics only when "this is done without dragging a man away from better employments".⁵ To further the aim of life, he wrote, a person is not to utilize the body for his/her own purposes, but to *regulate it*, and never "to be earnestly occupied about external things, but about what is proper and peculiar to man—to purge the eye of the soul, and to sanctify also his flesh."⁶ So seriously did he consider attaining holiness that he counseled Christians to consider themselves "defrauded" when diverted for even a short time to earn a livelihood or otherwise secure the necessities of life.⁷ He specifically forbade showing off, vainglory, and cunning in one of the sports he would allow to males and prohibited "illiberal postures in gymnastics".⁸ So opposed was he to pleasure and playfulness for the individual Christian that he asked rhetorically:

How, then, can what relates to meat, and drink, and amorous pleasure, be agreeable to such an one? since he views with suspicion even a word that produces pleasure, and a pleasant movement and act of the mind.⁹

The purposes for which he would permit physical exercise were: regulating the body, relaxing tension from "serious pursuits,"¹⁰ exertion of the muscles to improve the health of the body,¹¹ "exuding of manly sweat",¹² striking a healthy medium "which is harmonious and temperate, and free of either evil, luxury and parsimony",¹³ contributing "to the understanding which leads to goodness of nature"¹⁴, freeing oneself from sexual lust, and to be a groundwork for the improvement of the soul.¹⁶

The purposes for which he would permit intellectual or spiritual exercise included attaining “unswerving abstraction from the body and its passions”¹⁷ and “sanctity towards God and justice towards men; keeping the soul pure with grave thoughts, and pure words, and just deeds,”¹⁸ in order to become

always mild and meek, accessible, affable, long-suffering, grateful, endowed with a good conscience. Such a man is rigid, not alone so as not to be corrupted, but so as not to be tempted. For he never exposes his soul to submission, or capture at the hands of Pleasure and Pain.¹⁹

Clement considered many activities as within these parameters, most of which we would not regard as play. He recommended different pastimes for men and women, all of them directed to frugality and self-help,²⁰ the latter including work normally performed by slaves in Roman society. The link running through all of them was “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”²¹

The female Christian was counseled to be an all-round “housekeeper and helpmeet”²² and to spend her discretionary hours in spinning, weaving, superintending the kitchen (which implies that she still employed slaves), cooking (which implies that she did some of their work herself), fetching goods, waiting on her husband, helping travelers, filling her recreational time with useful tasks, and grinding grain in a mill. Clement praised an ancient Greek king for doing the last-mentioned, and recommended it to Christian men as well. Males were to play ball, walk in rural areas and towns, hoe their crops, draw water, cut their own wood, and read aloud.²³ Surprisingly but within his general disdain for physical activities, Clement tolerated wrestling matches between men but they must not be

undertaken for the sake of vainglory, but for the exuding of manly sweat. Nor are we to struggle with cunning and showiness, but in a stand-up wrestling bout, by disentangling of neck, hands, and sides. For such a struggle with graceful strength is more becoming and manly, being undertaken for the sake of serviceable and profitable health.²⁴

For both genders, Clement commended fishing and waiting on guests at table, after stating that

attending to one's own wants is an exercise free of pride,—as, for example, putting on one's own shoes, washing one's own feet, and also rubbing one's self when anointed with oil. To render one who has rubbed you the same service in return, is an exercise of reciprocal justice; and to sleep beside a sick friend, help the infirm, and supply him who is in want, are proper exercises.²⁵

In addition to idleness and overexertion,²⁶ Clement especially deplored a mode of life that accustoms a Christian to sexual wants,²⁷ the theatre,²⁸ horseracing, gossiping, slander, sports riots and disorders, and large public expenditures for spectator sports.²⁹ His own summary of this was “no one who has his senses will ever prefer what is pleasant to what is good.”³⁰

In addition to permitting some activities for women's discretionary hours (which sound more like work to us), Clement specifically forbade them to run for exercise and, by way of a double standard, to wrestle.³¹

Clement commented negatively on some activities that males would consider recreation:

And let not men, therefore, spend their time in barbers' shops and taverns, babbling nonsense; and let them give up hunting for the women who sit near, and ceaselessly talking slander against many to raise a laugh.

The game of dice is to be prohibited, and the pursuit of gain, especially by dicing, which many keenly follow. Such things the prodigality of luxury invents for the idle. For the cause is idleness, and a love for frivolities apart from the truth. For it is not possible otherwise to obtain

enjoyment without injury; and each man's preference of a mode of life is a counterpart of his disposition.³²

The rationale behind this distinction in genres of pursuits was whether or not an activity contributed to a person becoming the model Christian that God and the gospel call for. Clement presented these descriptions of the ultimate goal of the Christian life, as built up through spiritual exercises with physical exercise as their handmaiden:

This, then, is the perfect man's first form of doing good, when it is done not for any advantage in what pertains to him, but because he judges it right to do good; and the energy being vigorously exerted in all things, in the very act becomes good; not, good in some things, and not good in others; but consisting in the habit of doing good, neither for glory, nor, as the philosophers say, for reputation, nor from reward either from men or God; but so as to pass life after the image and likeness of the Lord.³³

But for the benefit of his neighbours alone, he will do things which would not have been done by him primarily, if he did not do them on their account. Such an one gives himself for the Church, for the disciples whom he has begotten in faith; for an example to those who are capable of receiving the supreme economy of the philanthropic and God-loving Instructor, for confirmation of the truth of his words, for the exercise of love to the Lord. Such an one is unenslaved by fear, true in word, enduring in labour, never willing to lie by uttered word, and in it always securing sinlessness;³⁴

He does not consider whether any extrinsic lucrative gain or enjoyment follows to him; but drawn by the love of Him who is the true object of love, and led to what is requisite, practices piety.³⁵

Also writing about how a model Christian conduct him/herself, Clement phrased this in a shorter way in another of his books: “His whole life is prayer and converse with God.”³⁶

The closest Clement came to tolerating play or other activity we would consider lighthearted was for senior citizens. He allowed them alcohol, subject to stringent safeguards such as diluting with water, and only for purposes of relaxation, enjoyment, and to warm “the chill of age”.³⁷ His other concession was that “elderly people, looking on the young as children, may, though but very rarely, be playful with them, joking with them to train them in good behaviour.”³⁸

In Clement’s view, there is no place for play or anything frivolous in the Christian life, which to him was an all-consuming and relentless striving for spiritual improvement until reaching perfection. So adamant was he for avoiding pleasure in order to build up a Christian’s soul that he opined that “it is the highest achievement for one who has had trial of it [pleasure], afterwards to abstain”,³⁹ adding that a person’s Christian character is not really enhanced by restraining oneself from what s/he has not previously enjoyed. Clement’s principal purpose in writing such sentiments was so that Christians would train all aspects of their thoughts and outward manner towards developing and maintaining a disposition aimed at glorifying God and conforming completely to His will.

NOTES

Except where otherwise indicated, all quotations are as translated in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. American Reprint of the Edinburgh ed. by A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885-96; continuously reprinted Edinburgh: T & T Clark; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson) and cited as ANF with the volume number followed by a period and the page number. Numbers after the titles *Paedagogus*, *Stromata*, and *Clement of Alexandria Stromata* indicate book number and chapter, such as 2.5 refers to book 2 chapter 5.

¹ Blake Leyerle, “Clement of Alexandria on the Importance of Table Etiquette,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3, (1995): 123 at 125f.

² Gordon Houser *Present Tense: A Mennonite Spirituality* (Telford, Pennsylvania: Cascadia Pub. House, 2011) p. 95; Gordon Houser “Mennonite play,” *The Mennonite Magazine*, October 2011, http://www.themennonite.org/issues/14-10/articles/Mennonite_play.

- 3 Houser, Present Tense, 92.
- 4 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.5 (43) translated in *Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations* by John Ernest Leonard Oulton and Henry Chadwick (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 60.
- 5 Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* 3.10 ANF 2.283.
- 6 *Paedagogus* 2.1 ANF 2.237.
- 7 *Stromata* 7.12 ANF 2.545.
- 8 *Paedagogus* 3.10 ANF 2.284.
- 9 *Stromata* 7.12 ANF 2.543.
- 10 *Paedagogus* 2.5 ANF 2.250.
- 11 *Paedagogus* 3.10 .
- 12 *Paedagogus* 3.10 ANF 2.284.
- 13 *Paedagogus* 3.10 ANF 2.284.
- 14 *Stromata* 4.4 ANF 2.412.
- 15 *Stromata* 7.12.
- 16 *Stromata* 4.5.
- 17 *Stromata* 5.11 (67) ANF 2.460.
- 18 *Clement of Alexandria Stromata* 6.14 ANF 2.506.
- 19 *Clement of Alexandria Stromata* 7.7 ANF 2.535.
- 20 *Paedagogus* 3.10 ANF 2.283.
- 21 *Clement of Alexandria Stromata* 4.7 ANF 2.419, quoting 1 Corinthians 10.31.
- 22 *Paedagogus* 3.10 ANF 2.283.
- 23 *Paedagogus* 3.10.
- 24 *Paedagogus* 3.10 ANF 2.284.
- 25 *Paedagogus* 3.10 ANF 2.284.
- 26 *Paedagogus* 3.10.
- 27 *Paedagogus* 3.10.
- 28 *Paedagogus* 3.11; Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 7.7.
- 29 *Paedagogus* 3.11.
- 30 *Paedagogus* 3.11 ANF 2.290.
- 31 *Paedagogus* 3.10.
- 32 *Paedagogus* 3.11 ANF 2.289.
- 33 *Stromata* 4.22 ANF 2.434.
- 34 *Clement of Alexandria Stromata* 7.9 ANF 2.538.
- 35 *Stromata* 4.22 ANF 2.436.
- 36 *Stromata* 7.12 ANF 2.544.
- 37 *Paedagogus* 2.2 ANF 2.243.
- 38 *Clement of Alexandria Paedagogus* 2.7 ANF 2.252.
- 39 *Stromata* 7.12 ANF 2.545.