

## **Ambrose, Jerome, and Chrysostom**

The fourth century of the history of the Christian church is a very important time because there were so many great Christian leaders. I expect that we will not have anything like the fourth century until we arrive at the sixteenth century with Calvin and Luther and John Knox and many great Christian leaders of the Reformation period. But prior to the sixteenth century, the fourth century is the time when in God's providence there were many outstanding theologians, pastors, preachers, and Christian leaders.

The great Athanasius died in 373. When Athanasius died in 373, the three Cappadocians whom we considered last time were all in their 40s. There were two other Christian leaders in their 30s, Ambrose and Jerome. And Chrysostom was 28. And there was a young man living in North Africa whose name was Augustine, who was only 19 in 373. It would be another 12 years before Augustine would even become a Christian. You can understand by merely hearing those names how important the fourth century is for the history of the Christian church.

This lesson will focus on Ambrose, Jerome, and Chrysostom. The next three lessons will focus on Augustine, because he was such an important figure. I give him more attention than anybody else in the history of the Christian church. Calvin and Luther each get two lessons, but Saint Augustine gets three.

Ambrose is a very important figure in the West. Jerome, who was born in Italy, moved to Bethlehem, and so he is an important figure in both the East and the West. And Chrysostom is a very important figure for the East. He was the patriarch of Constantinople and the creator of the liturgy that is still widely used in Orthodox circles. But Chrysostom is also important for the West because of his wonderful preaching and his biblical exegesis.

As I begin I will select a prayer from Ambrose. So let us now pray in the words of this fourth century church father, Ambrose. *“O Lord, You who are all merciful, take away my sins from me and enkindle within me the fire of Your Holy Spirit. Take away this heart of stone from me and give me a heart of flesh and blood, a heart to love and adore You, a heart which may delight in You, love You, and please You, for Christ's sake. Amen.”*

As we think of Ambrose, we think of a churchman, pastor, preacher, and a man who not only led his congregation in worship but also developed styles of worship that influenced the church all the way down to the present. Ambrose was born in Rome. He was an aristocratic Roman. He made his way as a politician or statesman and was appointed governor of northern Italy. He was a Christian, though not particularly committed. He certainly did not feel called to the priesthood. But the church in Milan, where he was stationed as governor, was in a certain amount of turmoil, partly because of a dispute between orthodox and Arian Christians in that church. Ambrose, as governor, was concerned to bring some stability to the situation. He was actually present in the great cathedral that had been constructed in Milan when a new bishop was being chosen. It was a very tense and important time. Both sides were very much at odds, and it was difficult for them to come to any kind of agreement. Suddenly in the uproar of that situation, a little child began to shout out, “Ambrose for bishop.” Nobody knows why that child said that, and certainly Ambrose had not thought of himself as bishop. Maybe nobody else had thought of him as a potential bishop either, but at that moment it sounded like a good idea. Ambrose was a popular governor, and he had brought order to the region. So perhaps he could bring order to the church. Before long, everybody was shouting, “Ambrose for bishop.” And he became bishop. He had not been baptized yet. So he was baptized, ordained, and consecrated bishop within eight days, which was certainly a record for someone going from baptism to a high church office like bishop of Milan.

Ambrose proved to be a good administrator. His first writings as bishop spoke of the need for silence, discretion, and kindness. He had seen the church torn apart by the agitation that had come to Milan and northern Italy. Then he went on to defend the independence of the church against the control of the state. A new problem had arisen in the history of the church. The Roman state was no longer persecuting the church. That was finished. This is the time of Theodosius, the emperor who made Christianity the legal, official religion of the Roman Empire. But the new problem is that the state wants to interfere with the church and control it. This is the beginning of a long history of tensions between the church and the state. We will study those all the way through the end of this course, and it continues into the class on Reformation and modern church history as well.

On several occasions Ambrose clashed with Theodosius, the emperor, who lived in Constantinople, not Milan. But the emperor did visit Milan from time to time, and he had representatives there. Ambrose was not afraid to stand up to the emperor and say when he thought he was wrong. Sometimes Theodosius was indeed wrong. And there may have been occasions when the emperor was right and Ambrose was wrong. But at least he was an example of a church leader who stood up to the emperor and who wanted to assert the independence of the church from imperial control.

This effective bishop was also an effective, eloquent preacher. We know that when Augustine went to Milan, he went to hear Ambrose preach. It was not because Augustine was interested in Christianity, but he was interested in eloquence. Augustine was a rhetorician, and he wanted to see it done well. Ambrose was doing it well in the cathedral at Milan, so Augustine went in order to revel in the beauty of the words of this great preacher. Before long, Augustine found himself listening to what Ambrose was actually saying, and that was a very important step along the way to Saint Augustine's conversion.

Ambrose was an effective and eloquent preacher who defended Christianity on two fronts. There was a neo-paganism that was arising. Paganism did not die out despite Christianity's status as the official religion. There were many people, particularly in the upper echelons of society, who either secretly or openly worshiped the old pagan gods. There was a resurgence of paganism at the time. Ambrose set himself to preach against that and assert the truthfulness of Christianity against the pagan past of Rome. On the other hand, Ambrose had to fight against Arianism. Even though the Arian heresy had largely been put down in the Roman Empire, it began to seep back in from the Barbarians in the north who were coming across the border. Those Barbarians had become Christians, but they were Arian Christians through the work of Arian missionaries. So Arianism became a problem again. The question arose again, is Jesus really *homoousios* with the Father, or should we use the word *homoiousios*? Ambrose set himself to defend Nicene orthodoxy against the Arians.

It was Ambrose, in the process of doing this, who spoke the clearest of anybody up to this time about the doctrine of original sin and the doctrine of God's grace. Augustine would later build on that. But we are grateful to Ambrose for his emphasis on those two great doctrines, which were not expressed all that clearly in the history of the church from the time of Paul through the time of Ambrose and Augustine. Listen to these words from a prayer from Saint Ambrose: "O God, who looked down on us when we had fallen down into death and resolved to redeem us by the advent of Your only begotten Son..." You can tell by the beginning of that prayer that there is going to be a strong emphasis on what sin really did produce, which was death. And there is the necessity of God's grace to bring us to life again. We will have thorough discussion of all of that when we study Saint Augustine and the Pelagian controversy.

Another aspect of the career of Ambrose that is of great importance is his work as a liturgist. He was very concerned that the worship of God be carried forth in a proper way, but also in a dramatic, public

way. The great dramatic cathedral services with readings, liturgy, and music—particularly music—all take a large step forward in the work of Ambrose of Milan. When Augustine went to the services in Milan to hear the rhetorician and eloquent preacher, Ambrose, Augustine was also very impressed, and perhaps even more impressed, with the music. Augustine said, “How greatly did I weep in the singing of the hymns of the church.” He was deeply moved by the voices of the sweet singing church. He was a restless man who heard the music and was overwhelmed by the wonder, sweetness, and beauty of it all.

Ambrose wrote hymns. *Come Holy Spirit* was one that he wrote in order to teach orthodox doctrine. For Ambrose, the singing of hymns was both the worship of God and the teaching of the people. That is evident in the opening lines of that hymn, which reads, “Come Holy Spirit, who, ever One, reignest with Father and with Son, unsubstantial, coeternal, while unending ages run, ever more and ever more.” There is much theology in that hymn. And people were singing hymns like that, which Ambrose wrote. Ambrose said, “Thus are all become teachers who were scarcely able to be disciples.” As soon as people were in the church he taught them with the hymns that were sung. Another of Ambrose’s hymns is *O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright*, which we still sing sometimes. It has a number of wonderful verses, including, “Come very Sun of heaven’s love, in lasting radiance from above, and pour the Holy Spirit’s ray on all we think or do today.” That is a wonderful hymn for us to pray, even at this very moment. The hymn, *At Cock-Crowing*, talks about the importance about praising God early in the morning. As the cock rises early in the morning so we rise to praise God. It also reflects on Peter’s fall and recovery. One verse says, “Jesu, look on us when we fall. One momentary glance of Thine can from her guilt the soul recall to tears of penitence divine.”

Ambrose was a very important figure in the church. One great thing that he did was to move Augustine along the way to faith and give him a model for faith in many ways. Ambrose was one of the great church fathers of the fourth century.

I want to talk about Jerome now. He was also born in Italy, in Dalmatia, which is in northeastern Italy, and he was from a very wealthy, prominent family there. If you think of Ambrose as a pastor, preacher, and churchman, then you should think of Jerome as a scholar. This man was first, last, and always a scholar. He was educated in Rome. He often said that he had three wishes. One was to have seen Christ in the flesh. Another was to have heard Christ preach. And the third was to have seen Rome in its glory. By the time he got there, the glory days had passed and Rome was beginning to face decline. It would not be long before Rome would fall to the Barbarians. So the great time of Rome was in the past. But Jerome loved Rome, and he wished he could have been alive during the time of Rome’s prime.

Jerome learned Latin, which was easy because it was a native language to him. And he also spoke Greek. And he also learned and spoke Hebrew, which was unusual at the time. It was not until the sixteenth century that Hebrew became a common study among pastors and Bible commentators. Augustine never learned Hebrew, and he envied Jerome’s ability to use Hebrew, though he sometimes put it down as unnecessary by saying that the Septuagint was sufficient. But Jerome learned Hebrew, and as a translator and commentator of the Bible he set an important example for scholars of the future.

We know that Jerome had one of the most impressive personal libraries of anyone who lived during his time. He loved books and he collected them, including all kinds of books, especially the pagan classics such as Cicero, which he loved to read. In spite of the fact that Clement of Alexandria and Origen had said it was all right to read the pagan writers, Jerome felt a certain guilt about reading such works. He wrote a letter about his library that is known as *On my way to Jerusalem to wage my warfare*. That meant that he was going from Rome to Jerusalem—and he finally ended up in Bethlehem—to become a monk. To him that was waging his warfare. As he reflected on this step in his life, he said it was very

difficult to leave Rome and to leave home, and it was harder to leave the dainty food he was used to, but it was really impossible to leave his library. It was the one thing that this man who wanted to become an other-worldly monk held onto with all of his might. We know that Jerome would fast in order to afterward read a bit of Cicero. He thought that if he inflicted himself with a fast, he would deserve a reward, which was to read something from Cicero.

Justo Gonzalez, in his book *The Story of Christianity*, tells the famous story of the dream Jerome had when he was sick during lent. He was about 28 years old at the time. In the dream he watched preparations for his own funeral. Then he came before a judge who asked him, "Who are you?" And Jerome said, "I am a Christian." Then the judge said, "You lie. You are a follower of Cicero and not of Christ, for where your treasure is there will your heart be also." That was a startling dream for Jerome. He said, "Thenceforth I read the books of God with a zeal greater than I had given to the books of men." But much later, we find that Jerome still read Cicero. And even when someone reminded him of his dream, he said that you cannot pay too much attention to dreams. So he continued to love and read the pagan classics as well as the Bible.

The greatest thing that Jerome did as a scholar was translate the Bible into Latin. That translation is known as the Vulgate. It was not the first translation into Latin. There were old Latin translations already, but they were not very well done. Jerome, however, did it very well. He completed his translation in 405 after working on it for 22 years. That provided for the first time in church history a competent translation of the Bible in Latin. It is a strange thing that the Vulgate eventually became a kind of prison for the Bible because the Roman Catholic Church held onto that translation even when Latin was no longer spoken by anyone but clerics. But in Jerome's day, Latin was the common language of the people. What he was doing was translating the Bible into the vernacular of the people. Not all people could read Greek and very few could read Hebrew. So a good translation of the Bible into the common language of the people was needed. Jerome's Vulgate was a very skillful translation. He translated the Old Testament directly from the Hebrew. The older Latin translations were translations from the Greek Septuagint. The Vulgate also became a great piece of literature. It was quoted, loved, and used throughout the middle ages.

Jerome also made it very clear that only the Hebrew books were canonical. Those are the 39 books that appear in the Protestant Old Testament. The other books, some of which the Roman Catholic Church accepts as canonical parts of Scripture, Jerome felt could be read for edification but not to establish doctrine. So on the issue of the canon, Jerome was very much a Protestant and not a Roman Catholic.

Jerome also wrote many commentaries. They were very influential throughout the middle ages. Augustine wrote to Jerome, "I bless you for your writings because God has given someone like you to yourself, to me, and to the whole church." Augustine was able to praise God for this fellow scholar, even though there were some tensions and even disagreements between the two from time to time. Those arose particularly because Jerome was not an easy man to get along with. He had a very touchy temper. He could put people down easily if they did not agree with him, or if they were not too smart. He was not a very pleasant soul. But he was a great scholar. Despite the defects in his personality and his sanctification, God did use him in a great way to set forth the Bible in the common Latin language and to write important commentaries. In writing his commentary on Galatians, "We do not think that the Gospel consists in the words of Scripture, but in its meaning." I do not think he meant by that to set meaning against words, but you have to view the words as they are meant to be viewed. So you read the words, but you must understand the words properly. According to Jerome, Scripture is useful for the hearers when it is not spoken without Christ nor presented without the fathers. We must see Christ as the center of all Scripture, and we must look to the tradition of the church so that we do not interpret

Scripture as individuals but in the stream of church history. And those who are preaching Scripture should not introduce it without the Holy Spirit. That seems to me a wonderful description of exposition and exegesis. We look for Scripture's meaning in its words. We look to see that Christ is central. We present it in the context of the history of the church. We preach it in the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is another side to Jerome that is not as helpful. He was not only a scholar, but he was also a monk. Even though Jerome wanted to be a monk, with the communal life of the monastery, and he did spend most of his life as a monk in Bethlehem, he did not want to have a regime that was too rigorous. He wanted to be a comfortable monk. He wanted to be one who could get away from the hubbub of the world in order to study. So while he was a monk, we was not one out in the desert, or up on a pole, or beating his body. He was a monk who wanted to enjoy life.

As a monk, Jerome began to think and write more on celibacy. There had been a growing interest in celibacy and virginity in the church at that time, even though earlier church fathers had honored and held marriage in high esteem. They did not denigrate marriage in favor of celibacy, although the church fathers would say that celibacy is a proper call for some, as Paul says. With Jerome, however, there is a shift to the view that there is something good about celibacy itself or even something better about it. If Jerome was rating the various states of life, he would give virginity a 10, widowhood a 6, and marriage a 3. Marriage may not be bad for Jerome, but it is not the best. In one of his writings, *The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary*, the idea of which was already being taught in the church, although not everybody would agree with Jerome on it, Jerome reflected on why it is better to not be married. He says, "Is the sofa smooth? Is the pavement swept? Are the flowers in the vases? Is dinner ready? Tell me where amid all this is there room for the thought of God." The idea is that if you get married and have a family you will not have time to think about God. An answer will come to Jerome's question of where is room for the thought of God, but it will not come until Luther and Calvin offer answers to it. And an answer will not come from the Roman Catholic side until Brother Lawrence offers an answer to it in his writing, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. That little book by Brother Lawrence states that as you wash dishes and as you serve in the monastery or in the home and as you do any of those kinds of tasks, they are things done in the presence of God. Washing dishes is also prayer. Brother Lawrence had to wash many dishes, and he did not like that task. So he wrote that book to teach himself that such tasks do honor God and should not be put on the side as something inferior to meditation and prayer. But Jerome makes his point, and that emphasis on the importance of celibacy and the argument that in order to really be spiritual you need to be a monk and be celibate becomes a stream in the history of the Catholic Church, which is not corrected until the time of the Reformation.

Our third great fourth century church father is Chrysostom. He was the bishop of Constantinople. We usually speak of him as Chrysostom, rather than by his name John, because Chrysostom means "golden mouth." He was given that name quite early because he was such a wonderful preacher. He was eloquent and powerful as a preacher. This man John was born in Antioch and was converted through the influence of Basil, one of the Cappadocians whom we already covered. His mother was a woman named Anthusa. She became a widow when she was very young after John was born, and she had a great influence on the life of her son. She kept him in the Christian faith and guided him through the perils of growing up and into his teenage years and beyond.

People recognized right away that Chrysostom had unusual gifts as a speaker. Speaking was probably considered the ultimate gift in the ancient world. If you could speak, you could do almost anything. A great rhetorician of the time, a man named Libanius, very much wanted this man to be his disciple and successor. Stephen Neill in his book *A History of Christian Missions* talks about Libanius and says, "He was the last of the famous Greek orators. He really had nothing to say, but he said it interminably with

consummate skill.” But because of Anthusa, John kept his focus on a Christian calling and not a calling as a rhetorician. So Libanius made the famous statement, “What women these Christians have.” He must have been surprised by somebody so strong-willed and determined and influential as the mother of John. I think it would be better to say, “What Christians these women are.” There were some great Christian women of the time. We have already considered Macrina and Anthusa, and later there will be Monica and many others.

John became a preacher, and a great one. His language is vivid. His illustrations are memorable, even as we read them today. He offered very searching applications. Of all the people that we have studied thus far in the history of the church, his sermons are the most readable and edifying. If you want to read sermons from anybody up to this point, you should choose the sermons of John Chrysostom. Saint Thomas Aquinas of the thirteenth century said he would rather possess a copy of Chrysostom’s homilies than be master of Paris. He said that while approaching Paris during some travels when a friend pointed out the beauty and glory of the city. But Aquinas said he would rather have Chrysostom than all that. The contemporary writer Kathleen Norris said in her book *The Cloister Walk* that even today John Chrysostom goes over really well in North Dakota. So if people in North Dakota can read Chrysostom and enjoy him, then we can too.

Even though Chrysostom was a wonderful preacher, he did not get everything right. Charles Spurgeon admired Chrysostom, but he also wrote that “there is enough of solid truth and brilliant utterance in Chrysostom’s homilies to justify his title of ‘Golden Mouth,’ but still all is not gold which fell from his lips.” Spurgeon was particularly disappointed in the fact that you cannot find a consistent and clear doctrine of God’s grace and justification by faith alone in this great preacher of Constantinople. You can find hints of it, but you can also find hints of something else. So despite his greatness as a preacher, the central doctrine of grace is not prominent in what he says.

Chrysostom is, however, remembered and admired as a great exegete. Calvin believed that Chrysostom was the supreme exegete of Scripture. Calvin loved Augustine and quoted him far more than he quoted Chrysostom, and even far more than he quoted everyone else put together. But Calvin believed that Augustine was over-subtle in his interpretation of Scripture. That is because Augustine followed the Alexandrian school of interpretation, which was the allegorical approach to Scripture. Their tactic was to get quickly through the literal meaning, or maybe even ignore it, in order to penetrate deeper into a mystical, spiritual meaning of the text. That approach became the primary way that people read the Scripture in that period and all the way through the middle ages up to the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. So as we read expositions of Scripture from the people of that time, there are some interpretations that seem astounding to us. Even Augustine can go into flights of fancy from a rather simple text of Scripture. The competing view of Scripture was that of Antioch, which was the literal view of Scripture. It was the school of interpretation that looked for what we might call the “natural” sense of the text. If we visited ancient Antioch or Alexandria, we would feel much more at home in Antioch. Antioch represents much more closely the way we are accustomed to handling Scripture today. And our primary example of Antiochene exegesis is Chrysostom. So as we read Chrysostom, we see the natural sense of Scripture coming forth, as opposed to the more mystical sense of Scripture that was coming forth from Alexandria. That has always left me with a problem that I have never been able to solve. Why was Chrysostom the better exegete but Augustine the better theologian? You would think that the person doing the best exegesis was also the best theologian, but that was not the case. Calvin makes the same point with some wonder.

Before I close I want to speak about Chrysostom as a pastor. One of the great books of church history is Chrysostom’s *On the Priesthood*. He actually wrote that book before he was ordained as a priest. He

was already a deacon in the church. And as he contemplated a career in the church as a priest he wrote a book to prepare himself for the task. It is a book of pastoral theology. It is a wonderful book that we can even read with great profit today. Chrysostom writes about the various qualifications in order to be a pastor. Anyone thinking of a career as a pastor would do well to read Chrysostom's *On the Priesthood*. He writes that great discretion is needed along with great zeal. When he covers the nature of the work, or what the pastor is going to do, he provides much valuable information and reflection for us. He breaks it down into two points. He says there are two jobs: people and preaching. He says a pastor must give equal attention to both. A pastor must give attention to the people he preaches to in order to understand them and communicate with them. And a pastor needs to study how to preach in order to be an effective minister of God's covenant.

I have given you a little bit about these three important figures so that they stand out in your minds and so you can see their significance in the history of the church. "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).

I have heard it asked if the way Ambrose dealt with Theodosius had an effect on the rise of the papacy. I argue that it did. Ambrose, at that point in his career, was in some ways more influential than the pope. Rome was a less important town at that point compared with either Milan or Constantinople. With Ambrose asserting the independence of the church, that is something the popes would assert all the way through the middle ages, as we will study in more detail later. The murder of Thomas of Becket in the cathedral at Canterbury really had to do with the church and state relations. The question was whether the king would be on top or would it be the church. At different times in the West the issue sways different ways. In the East the matter stays consistent with the emperor on top. After all, the emperor lived in Constantinople and the patriarch was there too. And while there was sometimes tension between those two in that city, there was not the fluctuations of power that we see in the West, where there were fluctuations between strong emperors and later strong popes, with both claiming temporal power. Everyone admitted that the popes had spiritual power, but sometimes they asserted temporal power to control the politics of nations.