

Church History, Lesson #9

(This lesson is based on The Story of Christianity by Justo Gonzalez.)

John Chrysostom

- Among all the Christian leaders of the 4th Century John Chrysostom was the most powerful preacher. In some ways he was a giant among giants.
- In his youth John was trained as a lawyer.
- John's mother was quite possessive. She rejoiced when he was baptized. But she balked when he expressed a desire to withdraw to the monastic life of study. She made him promise that he would never leave her until she died. He solved the dilemma by turning their home into a monastery!
 - He had three likeminded friends join with him in monastic life in his mother's home.
 - After her death, he went to the Syrian mountains to pursue the monastic lifestyle.
 - He spent a total of 6 years in monastic life.
- Afterwards, John was ordained a deacon, then a presbyter (pastor), and when he started preaching he became famous throughout the Greek-speaking churches.
- In 397 AD the bishopric of Constantinople became vacant. The emperor wanted John to take the position. But he was so popular in Antioch where he was serving the officials sent to get him were afraid of a riot. They simply invited him to a chapel on the outskirts of the city and sort of "kidnapped" him.
- Constantinople was a rich luxurious city and the church administration was in disarray. John was still a monk at heart and these extravagances and the lack of discipline bothered him very much.
 - Some priests who claimed to be celibate had what they called "spiritual sisters" in their homes. John ordered these women out of the priest's homes.
 - Some clergy had become very wealthy and lived with as much luxury as the court. John ordered that the clergy lead an austere life.
 - And the finances of the church were in shambles. John brought about an audit, he had many of the rich items in the "bishop's palace" sold to help feed the poor, and he ordered that all churches be open for services at times that were just as convenient for the working class as for the wealthy.
 - Eutropius was the chamberlain to the Emperor who had brought John to Constantinople. And he thought that he should receive special favors and concessions from the church and from John. However, John just thought of him as any other Christian who needed the ministry of the Word, so he just preached the Word of God to him like everybody else!
- Eutropius, though he wasn't the Emperor, could be quite a tyrant. When some fled from his soldiers and took refuge in the church of Saint Sophia (the main church in Constantinople) John would not allow the soldiers inside. The chamberlain was furious but had to relent when the Emperor backed John.
- Later, there was a riot against the power and tyranny of Eutropius, and he himself had to flee for refuge to, you guessed it, the church of Saint Sophia. And once again, John did the right thing and protected him, even though he had once been a bitter enemy. Eventually Eutropius became too afraid and tried to flee the church and was killed.
- John Chrysostom's bold preaching made other enemies as well. The Emperor's wife, Eudoxia felt the people's staring at her whenever John preached against extravagance. She made several special grants to the church, but the preacher just kept preaching!
- Eudoxia plotted with others to trump up charges against Chrysostom when he was away attending to church business in Ephesus. There was a kangaroo court and Chrysostom was found guilty. The weak Emperor was prodded into banishing John by his wife.
- Other bishops encouraged Chrysostom to call a synod and condemn the main plotters, but Chrysostom refused. The crowds were in a riotous mood, one word from the popular bishop and there would have been mayhem. But Chrysostom simply surrendered to the officials and was taken out of the city.

- But the people were furious. The streets were full of rumors of a mutiny. The Emperor, his wife, Eudoxia, and the army didn't dare risk going out into the streets!
- Eventually, Eudoxia pled with Chrysostom to return to the city.
- However, Chrysostom was banished again, because the nobility and the rich still couldn't abide his powerful preaching! This time he just took up the pen. Innocent, the bishop of Rome, took up his cause as well as others.
- Eventually, Chrysostom was "re-banished" to a place further away from Constantinople. He died in the journey.
- There is a contrast in the ministries of Ambrose of Milan and John Chrysostom. Ambrose humiliated and bested the Emperor. And the church in the west filled the power vacuum left by the crumbling empire. However, in the east, the John Chrysostom was banished by the Emperor. And the power of the Empire in the East continued for another 1,000 years.
- This pattern would hold true for many centuries to come. In the West, the church was more powerful than the government. In the East, it was just the opposite.

Jerome

- Jerome was born in Northern Italy around 348 AD.
- He was not a humble, peaceful "saint" but rather stormy, proud, and at times even bitter. He could be obstinate and unruly.
- He wanted to become a monk partly to rid himself of his obsession with sex. However, he was still plagued by dreams and memories of the dancers of Rome. He sought to suppress his drive by punishing his body and living an especially austere life.
- At one point, he decided that since he had been washed by Christ, he didn't need to ever wash again.
- Ironically, he finally found some peace and stability among a group of devout women in Rome. Jerome was not only bombastic and overzealous, he was a sensitive soul and he found that he could truly connect with these women. Two of them, a mother and daughter, were especially instrumental in his pursuit of the study of the text of Scripture.
- Jerome made enemies easily because he was so tactless. When the bishop of Rome died, he kind of lost his protection and ended up moving to the Holy Land... or as he put it from "Babylon to Jerusalem".
- This is where he devoted himself to translating the Bible into Latin. There had been other translations of the Scriptures into Latin before, but the Old Testament had been translated from the Greek Septuagint. Jerome translated directly from the Hebrew in the Old Testament and Greek in the New Testament. Jerome's translation is referred to as the "Vulgate" and it eventually became the standard Bible of the Western, Latin speaking church.
- Some people who loved the older translations criticized Jerome for "changing the Bible". Some even believed that the Septuagint translation was inspired. Augustine was one of the critics.
- Most of Jerome's quarrels ended with wounds that were never healed. However, in the case of Augustine, he set aside their differences when they needed to fight against the Pelagian heresy.
- Toward the end of his life, Jerome felt very lonely. He marked the passing of a generation of Christian leaders, and the passing of an era.
- Ten years before he died, Rome was sacked by the Goths. The news really shook the entire world, and the church and the empire were never quite the same.