



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 18 – The Leadership of Ambrose of Milan

Milan in Italy was an important city in the Western Roman Empire. When the bishop of the Milan church died in 373 AD, there was the threat of riots and violence in the city over who would be named the next bishop for the church was still caught in a struggle between the Nicenes and the Arians. Ambrose, the governor of Milan, was a catechumen in the church but he was not yet baptized. Nevertheless, he attended the election meeting of the church in order to maintain order and prevent violence. When a child saw him at the meeting, he cried out: “Ambrose – bishop.” Ambrose had a good reputation as governor of the city, and the child’s suggestion was supported by the crowd, and Ambrose was elected as bishop of Milan, even though he had not yet been baptized. Within eight days Ambrose finished his catechetical training, he was baptized, he was ordained as a priest, and he was consecrated as the bishop, in spite of his initial rejection of such an honor.

Ambrose took his new duties seriously. He found a teacher to advance his knowledge of Christian theology, and he himself became an honored theologian. Ambrose was a supporter of the original Nicene Creed. When Ambrose melted down some of the church’s golden vessels to pay ransom money to the Goths for the release of some captives, the Arians accused him of sacrilege. But Ambrose replied: “It is better to preserve for the Lord souls rather than gold... The church has gold, not to store it, but to give it up, to use it for those who are in need” (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 191). Ambrose followed a policy of supporting the poor and weak against the strong. Among his other gifts, Ambrose wrote hymns, some of which are still being sung today.

At this time the empire was still controlled by Arians. Justina, the mother of a boy emperor, wanted Ambrose to set aside a basilica in Milan where the Arians could worship. Ambrose refused, for he did not want a holy place to be desecrated by heretical worship. Ambrose was threatened by imperial troops, but he refused to give in to Justina and her son. Eventually the Arian emperors lost their power when the Eastern Emperor Theodosius (379-395) took over the entire empire – East and West. Theodosius supported the Nicene cause against the Arians, and he convened the Council of Constantinople in 381 to affirm the Nicene Creed and remove the Arians from power.

Ambrose and Theodosius were allies in the struggle against the Arian heresy, but there were at least two times when they found themselves on opposite sides. The Christians in a certain village had foolishly set fire to a Jewish synagogue. Theodosius rightly wanted to punish the perpetrators of this crime and commanded them to rebuild the synagogue. Ambrose,

however, insisted that Christians should not be forced to build a Jewish synagogue, and Theodosius gave in. This was not good, for the Christians escaped punishment for their arson, and this miscarriage of justice most likely gave them encouragement to continue in such illegal attacks against their enemies. They must have forgotten that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world.

On another occasion Emperor Theodosius reacted to a riot in Thessalonica by pardoning the rioters but then killing them as they were celebrating the pardon. About seven thousand lost their lives. When Ambrose learned of this, he went to the church Theodosius attended and stood at the door to accuse Theodosius of murder. He told Theodosius that he should not dare to enter the church and partake of the Lord's Supper until he repented of this sin. Theodosius realized that Ambrose was right. He repented of his sin and gave orders that any time he ordered anyone to be executed in the future, the execution should be delayed thirty days. He knew that his hot temper needed to be held in check.

Ambrose died in 397, but not before he had instructed and baptized a young man named Augustine, who later became more famous than his instructor. We can also remember Ambrose whenever we sing one of his hymns, such as "Savior of the Nations, Come", "O Splendor of God's Glory Bright", and "O Trinity, Most Blessed Light". We should thank God for providing His Church with Ambrose, a bold defender of the orthodox faith, who was not afraid to confront the mighty Roman Emperor and reprimand him for his crime.

Questions:

1. How did Governor Ambrose become Bishop Ambrose?
2. How did Ambrose show he was more interested in men's souls than in money?
3. What was the theological difference between the Arians and Nicenes?
4. How did the Lord of the Church finally end the dominance of Arian belief?
5. In what way were Ambrose and Theodosius on the same side?
6. How should the burning of the Jewish synagogue have been handled?
7. What is the reason for your answer to question 6?
8. How should the riot in Thessalonica have been handled, in your opinion?
9. What is the reason for your answer to question 8?
10. How is Ambrose still teaching us today?