



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

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 19 – The Preaching of John Chrysostom (“Golden Mouth”)

John of Constantinople was not known as John Chrysostom (from Greek meaning “Golden Mouth”) until long after his death. Apparently, the memory of his great preaching ability survived several generations, and that is why he was given this name. John, originally from (Syrian) Antioch, was trained as a lawyer, but at the age of twenty he began a three-year program of catechetical training after which he was baptized. After his baptism he, like so many others, withdrew into the wilderness and became a monk. In fact, he spent two years in complete solitude before returning to Antioch, where he became known as an eloquent preacher in the Greek language.

His fame was so great that when there was a vacancy in the bishopric of Constantinople, Emperor Arcadius (395-408) ordered that John should be called from Antioch to fill that vacancy. John was so popular in Antioch that he had to go to Constantinople under false pretenses so that the people in Antioch would not force him to stay in Antioch. John’s career in Constantinople began in the year 398 and was stormy. It was not long before he recognized that his new congregation(s) needed strong preaching of the Law to make them aware of their selfishness and immorality. Both the church and the state had become corrupt. The pastors (also called presbyters or priests) claimed to be celibate, but they lived with women whom they called “spiritual sisters”. They had become rich and were not concerned very much about being good shepherds of their flocks. Emperor Arcadius was controlled by his right-hand man, Eutropius, who used his station for selfish purposes rather than for the citizens of the land. He was a tyrant who oppressed many.

John’s attempts at reform were not received well by all. The powerful people in the city resented John’s pointed accusations. Bishop John gave Eutropius’ innocent victims sanctuary in the Saint Sophia church, and this time Emperor Arcadius sided with John against Eutropius. A short time later, the people finally rebelled against Eutropius, and he himself fled to Saint Sophia, where John gave him refuge, but when he left St. Sophia, he was captured and killed.

John was also opposed by the wife of Arcadius, the empress Eudoxia. She and a neighboring bishop drew up a list of accusations against him and called for the emperor to banish John from the city. By this time John had many supporters in the city and he could have easily stirred up the people against the emperor. But John loved peace and was ready to leave the city at the emperor’s command rather than stir up a revolt. At this moment God intervened

by sending a powerful earthquake that led the emperor and empress to invite John back into the city.

Not long after this, however, the emperor's forces attacked John's supporters and killed many of them. John and some of his followers were exiled from Constantinople to smaller towns. The bishop of Rome supported John, but the emperor used his power to keep John out of Constantinople for good. In exile John Chrysostom became sick and died. Some of his sermons have survived, as well as the memory of his gifted preaching.

Both John Chrysostom (in the East) and Ambrose of Milan¹ (in the West) boldly proclaimed the truth of God in the face of powerful enemies. In their time they imitated John the Baptist, who was not afraid to accuse King Herod of adultery and was imprisoned and beheaded as a result.

Notice the difference between the Western church and the Eastern church:

- In the West, the emperor listened to the preacher. This was a sign of things to come when the church in the West would exalt itself above the power of the state.
- In the East, the emperor and other secular rulers took it upon themselves to rule the church. This was true already at the time of Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor.

Both West and East did not understand God's will in this matter. God does not want the church to rule the state, and He does not want the state to rule the church. He wants both the church and the state to function in its own spheres. The church and its leaders should obey the laws of the land in every case unless these laws are contrary to God's Word. The state and its leaders should protect all its citizens from bodily harm, but they should not interfere with the teachings and practices of the church unless life and property are endangered. The church should handle its own spiritual affairs under the direction of its Head, Jesus Christ, and it should give its highest allegiance to the Word of God, not to earthly government. It was not until the Reformation in the sixteenth century that these principles were understood, at least in part, but even then, they were hardly ever put into practice.

Questions:

1. Why was John of Constantinople given the name Chrysostom?
2. What kind of life did John live after his baptism?
3. What did he become famous for when he returned to Antioch?
4. What was wrong with the way John was called to Constantinople?
5. Why was John so unpopular among the leaders in both the church and the state?
6. What act of God led the emperor to ask John to stay in Constantinople?

¹ See the previous lesson, lesson 18.

7. Why did John finally leave Constantinople?
8. What did Ambrose of Milan and John Chrysostom have in common?
9. What difference developed between the Western church and the Eastern church?
10. What is God's will with reference to the state and the church?
11. What is the relationship between the state and the church in your country?