

Church History I

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Session Thirteen

John Chrysostom

Introduction

Some have called the 4th and 5th centuries the “golden age” of the early church fathers. Due to on-going persecution, division, and theological controversies, some of the greatest theologians and preachers emerged during this era, producing theological formulations and writings that continue to guide the church to this day. Among those who led the church during this time was one of the greatest preachers in the history of Christianity, John of Constantinople – best known as John Chrysostom.

1. Early Life

- a. **Birth:** John was born in Antioch around AD 349. His father was a high-ranking government employee, but died shortly after John was born. His mother Anthusa, who was only 20, decided not to remarry, but to raise John alone. As a devoted follower of Christ, she committed herself to bringing John up in the Christian faith.
- b. **Legal Education:** As a young man, John first pursued a career in law. He studied under one of the greatest legal teachers in Antioch, a famous pagan orator named Libanius. He considered John one of his best students, even desiring John to succeed him. But John would soon leave his legal studies to pursue his spiritual calling in ministry. Near the end of Libanius’ life, someone asked him who would succeed him in the law school. He responded, *“It ought to have been John, had not the Christians stolen him from us.”*
- c. **Christian Education:** Following his departure from law school, John experienced a radical change in his life and future. He asked that his name be added to the list of those training for baptism, which was required. After three years of intense study under the direction of Meletius the Confessor, leader of the orthodox church in Antioch, he would be baptized. However, he decided that he wanted to withdrawal from the city and become a monk, following the monastic way of life. But his mother made him promise that he wouldn’t leave her as long as she was alive. So, John compromised by turning their home into a monastery, joined by three friends. During this time, John began trailing under a great Bible interpreter named Diodore of Tarsus, who was an assistant to Miletus in the Nicene church in Antioch.
 - **Exposition:** Diodore played a major role in shaping John’s approach to the exposition of Scripture. There had been two schools of thought regarding how to interpret the Bible.

- **Alexandrian:** Some, such as Origen, favored an allegorical approach, where the goal was to discover a hidden, symbolic meaning behind every passage of Scripture. This allegorical approach became known as the “Alexandrian” method of Bible interpretation.
- **Antiochene:** Diodore represented the other school of thought, which emphasized the straightforward historical meaning of a text. John followed this method of interpretation, which focused on a meticulous study of words, context, and historical background. Later, it would be referred to as the “grammatico-historical” method.

“I know the principles of ‘allegory’ from the writings of others. Some preachers do not admit the ordinary meaning of the Scriptures. They will not call water ‘water,’ but something else. They interpret a plant or a fish according to the fancy of their own imagination; they change reptiles and wild beasts into something allegorical, just like those who interpret the meaning of dreams according to their own personal ideas. But when I hear the word ‘grass,’ I understand that to mean grass! Plants, fish, wild beasts, domestic animals – I take them all in the literal sense.” – Basil of Caesarea

This method of interpretation practiced by those in the early centuries laid the groundwork for expository preaching today.

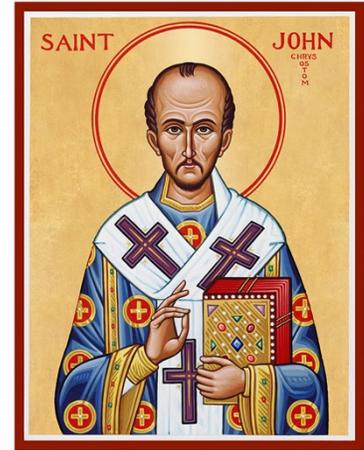
- d. **Monasticism:** After his mother passed away, he continued his training by joining other monks in Syria, on nearby Mount Silpios. While in Antioch, he felt that he was unable to control his sexual desires, so he wanted to get away from feminine company completely and learn from the hermits how to be a better, more self-disciplined Christian. He would practice extreme discipline, doing without sleep when possible and eating very little. Later he would develop severe stomach problems, insomnia, and sudden rushes of blood to the head – permanently damaging his health. John spent four years there learning the disciplines of monastic life, and two more years practicing in complete solitude. However, John later admitted that such a life was not the best kind of training for a shepherd’s task.
 - **Quote:** *“Many who have gone from monastic retreat to the active life of the priest or the bishop are completely unable to face the difficulties of their new situation.” – John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood**

2. Leadership

- a. **Calling:** John’s severe health issues led him to abandon the monastic life in Syria and return to Antioch. Once back in the local church, Bishop Meletius ordained John to the diaconate. Following Meletius’ death, Flavian became bishop of Antioch, and noticed John’s spiritual growth and skill for teaching, which led him to ordain John as presbyter, giving him access to the pulpit.

- b. **Preaching:** John began delivering sermons, leaving people amazed by his incredible preaching. After his death, John received the name “Chrysostom,” meaning “*the golden-mouthed*,” to reflect his incredible skill in the pulpit. He preached verse-by-verse through books of the Bible, without any fear or reservation for denouncing sin among believers, especially the sin of living a worldly life. He focused especially on wealthier Christians living in luxury with no concern for the poor around them.

- **Quote:** “*The gold bit on your horse, the gold circlet on the wrist of your slave, the gilding on your shoes, mean that you are robbing the orphan and starving the widow. When you have passed away, each passer-by who looks upon your great mansion will say, ‘How many tears did it take to build that mansion; how many laborers deprived of their honest wages?’ Even death itself will not deliver you from your accusers.*”
- **Writings:** Many of John’s sermons were written down, such as his fifty-eight sermons on selected Psalms, ninety sermons on Matthew’s Gospel, and eight-eight sermons on John’s Gospel. These sermons have been noted as easy to read and apply. The most famous of his writings was “*On the Priesthood*,” which was an exposition of the natures and duties of the Christian pastor. He also wrote a powerful book on how to raise children, titled, “*Golden Book on Bringing Up Children*.”



3. Bishop of Constantinople

- a. **Appointment:** In AD 397, the bishopric of Constantinople became vacant, and emperor Arcadius ordered that John be taken to the capital city for this prestigious position. However, due to his popularity and fame in Antioch, authorities feared that a riot might break out if the people learned that he was being taken. So, they invited John to preach at a small church on the outskirts of the city, where they ordered him (kidnapped) into a carriage and forcefully took him to the capital. Upon his arrival, he was consecrated bishop in AD 398. By this point, the empire was selecting who would become bishop, with the people merely assenting to the imperial choice.

- b. **Ministry:** Like in Antioch, Chrysostom instantly became a popular preacher in Constantinople, at the magnificent Church of Sophia (Church of Holy Wisdom). His fame was such that he once invited a visiting bishop from Galatia to fill the pulpit, only to have the vast congregation stream out of the church in protest. They simply wanted to hear John. However, his fame did not lead him to compromise the truth. Constantinople was a wealthy city, one given to luxury. So, it wasn’t uncommon for John to preach against those who wasted wealth on themselves, while avoiding helping the poor. He would later reform the church’s budget, which did away with luxurious banquets and ceremonies, in favor of helping the destitute and homeless. John would set up and support Christian hospitals, even a special medical facility to care for lepers. Chrysostom would also bring reform to the priesthood.



When he arrived in Constantinople, some priests who claimed to be celibate had in their homes what they called “spiritual sisters,” and it was a scandal for many. John ordered that these sisters be removed from the homes.

- c. **Controversy:** After arriving in Constantinople, John developed a relationship with the imperial family of Arcadius and Eudoxia. Many have described Emperor Arcadius as a push-over, with his wife Eudoxia being more intelligent, spirited, and strong-willed. She often ruled her husband through an inner circle of ladies from her court. On special occasions, Arcadius and Eudoxia would join the crowds at the Church of Sophia to hear Chrysostom preach. However, as they listened to him again and again, he didn’t fit into the corrupt political world of the empire. As Needham notes, “*Chrysostom was an intense, unworldly man, who had neither taste nor talent for politics or intrigue. Nor did he change or tone down his preaching from the hard-hitting style that had marked his ministry in Antioch*” (Needham, 259). It wasn’t long before Eudoxia and her court turned against Chrysostom, especially after preaching against the ways the affluent were living. John once preached a sermon from 1 Kings 21, expanding on the story of Naboth’s vineyard, vigorously denouncing Jezebel for her evil role. Little did he know, but Eudoxia had likewise seized the vineyard of a poor widow. He was so detailed in the sermon that those in the audience were sure John was referring to Eudoxia. She was outraged and began thinking of ways to silence Chrysostom. First, she gave the church special grants. The bishop thanked her and continued preaching. Second, while John was away, she compiled a long list of ridiculous charges and presented them before a small gathering of bishops. However, John paid no attention and kept on preaching. Finally, she asked her husband, Emperor Arcadius, to banish him, and the weak-kneed emperor agreed. John was ordered into exile.
- d. **Exile:** Once Chrysostom left Constantinople, other bishops, clergy, and believers from neighboring towns became outraged. All it would take was for John to call for a synod of bishops to condemn the decision to have him exiled and he would be able to return. However, being a lover of peace, he didn’t pursue action that would have led to a civil war. Therefore, he bid farewell to friends and followers and surrendered to authorities. Following his departure, the people rose up to challenge Arcadius and Eudoxia, threatening mutiny. That evening, a large earthquake was felt by all. Others reported that Eudoxia gave birth to a still-born child. These were taken as a sign of God’s anger. As a result, a few days later, Eudoxia brought Chrysostom out of exile and placed back in his pulpit. However, after months of strong preaching and humiliation, Arcadius and Eudoxia had the bishop exiled once again. He was led to the remote village of Cucusus, where he began writing, which led to incredible criticism of the Roman Emperor.
- e. **Death:** Finally, John was ordered to an even more distant location near the Black Sea, on the outer edge of the Empire. The soldiers were ordered to show no regard for Chrysostom’s well-being, so he was forced to march a great distance on foot, being exposed to blistering sun and heavy rain. After three weeks, he collapsed. A massive fever left his skin “as red as brick.” When death was near, he asked to be taken to a small church by the roadside. He took communion, bid farewell to those around him, and said, “*In all things, glory to God. Amen.*” John Chrysostom passed into glory.