

CHURCH HISTORY (12): Ambrose and Jerome

"In the latter part of the fourth and the first part of the fifth century there were three great leaders in the western part of the Church. They were Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine. These three men played an important part in the merging of the Church" (Kuiper).¹ "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" (Calhoun).²

In the fourth century, God brought to the forefront in the Western church a group of church leaders known as the Latin Fathers. These men are so named because they wrote in Latin, the language of the Western Roman Empire, as opposed to the Cappadocian Fathers, who wrote in Greek and thus were also known as Greek Fathers. The men most widely recognized as Latin Father are Ambrose of Milan, Jerome of Rome, and Augustine of Hippo. These men were mostly trained in pagan schools of rhetoric, but used their skills in the ministry of the gospel and the defense of the Christian faith.³

I. Ambrose and Jerome

1. *Ambrose* (339-397). "At the end of the fourth century, Ambrose of Milan became the most prominent figure in Western Christianity. He is considered the supreme defender of the Christian faith in his time. Certainly, he was a leading foe of Arianism. He was unquestionably Italy's greatest preacher and bishop. Scholars have characterized him as a magnificent minister, a powerful preacher, and a man of great dignity, spiritual force, and unction. Augustine was converted under Ambrose's preaching and hailed him as 'a faithful teacher of the church.'" (Lawson).⁴ "The fourth century, so prolific in great Christian leaders, produced none whose career was more dramatic than Ambrose of Milan" (Gonzalez).⁵ "Apart from Augustine, the fourth century produced no one more substantial than Ambrose of Milan" (Lawson).⁶ "During his nearly 24 years as bishop, he guided Western Christianity toward many of the characteristic ideas and practices that endured through the Middle Ages. He asserted the rights of the church over the state. He extinguished the remains of Arianism in the West, and ended hopes of a pagan revival among the Roman nobility" (Frend).⁷

(1) *His life and death*. "Born in Gaul (France), Ambrose was raised in a prestigious Christian family. His father, Aurelius Ambrosius, had reached the high rank of prefect of Gaul. This gave him oversight of the northwest portion of the Roman Empire, a vast territory that included what is now Spain, Britain, Germany, and France. But Ambrosius died soon after Ambrose was born. This loss prompted his mother to move to Rome, where his family had originated, to start a new life" (Lawson).⁸ "Educated at Rome for the highest civil offices, and greatly distinguishing himself as an orator, Ambrose was elected imperial president of Upper Italy" (Schaff).⁹ "The principal city of this province was Milan, the capital of the Western empire in the fourth century. This meant that the church in Milan also had increased importance" (Lawson).¹⁰ No sooner did Ambrose arrive in Milan, did Auxentius, the

¹ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 76

² David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 14:1

³ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 164-165

⁴ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 165-166

⁵ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:189

⁶ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 166

⁷ W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 618

⁸ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 166

⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:961-962

¹⁰ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 166

bishop and leading Arian in the West, die. "This threw the church into a fierce power-struggle between Arians and Orthodox over who should succeed him" (Lawson).¹¹ "When the bishop of Milan died both the Arians and the orthodox were determined to elect a man of their belief as his successor. The meeting held to elect the new bishop became very disorderly. The young governor Ambrose entered the church to restore order" (Kuiper).¹²

It was Ambrose's duty as regional governor to make sure that the election did not erupt into public disorder and violence. As he addressed the excited church members, exhorting them to peaceful conduct, a child's voice suddenly shouted out, 'Ambrose for bishop!' The whole crowd took up the cry, even though Ambrose was not a presbyter – in fact, he was only a catechumen, not yet baptized. Ambrose was horrified, but interpreted the event as God's will and reluctantly submitted.¹³

"Finally, after eight days of resistance, Ambrose accepted this appointment as the call of God on his life. He stepped down as governor on December 7, 374, and distributed his money to the poor. Though he was not theologically trained or experienced in ministry, he was unanimously appointed the bishop of the city" (Lawson).¹⁴ "From this time forward Ambrose lived wholly for the church, and became one of the greatest bishops of ancient Christendom, full of Roman dignity, energy, and administrative wisdom, and of the unction of the Holy Ghost" (Schaff).¹⁵ "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. 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" (Calhoun).¹⁶ "When the emperor Theodosius the Great made Milan his Western capital, Ambrose became his close friend and advisor; but Ambrose was quite clear that the emperor was not to behave as a ruler in the Church. Ambrose wrote: 'The Church belongs to God, therefore it cannot be assigned to Caesar. The emperor is *within* the Church, not *above* it'" (Needham).¹⁷ "A new problem had arisen in the history of the church. The Roman state was no longer persecuting the church. That was finished. 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" (Calhoun).¹⁸

The most imposing appearance of our bishop against the temporal power was in his dealing with Theodosius, when this truly great, but passionate and despotic, emperor, enraged at Thessalonica for a riot, had caused many thousand innocent persons to be put to death with the guilty, and Ambrose, interesting himself for the unfortunate, like a Nathan with David, demanded repentance of the emperor, and refused him the holy communion. 'How wilt thou,' said he to him in the foyer of the church, 'how wilt thou lift up in prayer the hands still dripping with the blood of the murdered? How wilt thou receive with such hands the most holy bread of the Lord? How wilt thou bring to thy mouth His precious blood? Get thee away, and dare not to heap crime upon crime.' When Theodosius appealed to David's murder and adultery, the bishop answered:

¹¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:186

¹² B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 76

¹³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:186

¹⁴ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 167

¹⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:962

¹⁶ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 14:2

¹⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:186

¹⁸ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 14:2

'Well, if thou hast imitated David in sin, imitate him also in repentance.' The emperor actually submitted to ecclesiastical discipline and made public confession of his sin.¹⁹

Ambrose died on the 4th of April, 397, at the age of fifty-seven years. After falling fatally sick, all Milan was in terror. "When he was urged to pray to God for a lengthening of his life, he answered: 'I have so lived among you that I cannot be ashamed to live longer; but neither do I fear to die; for we have a good Lord'" (Schaff).²⁰ "Before his death, he spent several hours, with his hands crossed, in uninterrupted prayer. His passing was a cause for much lamenting, even by pagans, who recognized the excellence of his life" (Lawson).²¹

(2) *His hymns*. "Ambrose helped change the face of public worship in the early church by introducing the responsive singing of hymns as opposed to the customary chanting of the psalms. Under this practice, half the congregation sang one stanza of a hymn, then the other half sang the next stanza. Because of Ambrose's influence, this practice spread throughout Europe" (Lawson).²² "Ambrose wrote his own hymns to teach his congregation the orthodox doctrine of Christ during the Arian controversy" (Needham).²³ "Ambrose wrote hymns in order to teach orthodox doctrine. For Ambrose, the singing of hymns was both the worship of God and the teaching of the people" (Calhoun).²⁴ For example, in a hymn on the incarnation, Ambrose wrote: "Savior of the nations, come, virgin's Son, make here thy home! Marvel, now, O heaven and earth, that the Lord chose such a birth. Not of flesh and blood the Son, offspring of the Holy One; born of Mary ever blest God in flesh is manifest."²⁵

(3) *His works*. "Ambrose wrote numerous theological and ethical works, as well as exegetical commentaries. He also composed sermons, addresses, letters, and hymns. These many works comprise a rich legacy for the church" (Lawson).²⁶ "His keen mind helped him to become one of the best theologians in the Western church" (Gonzalez).²⁷ "Ambrose was a strong supporter of the Nicene Creed. He wrote many books, and he is classed among the Doctors or great teachers of the Church" (Kuiper).²⁸ "In his exegesis and in his theology, especially in the doctrine of the incarnation and the Trinity, Ambrose is entirely dependent on the Greek fathers, especially on Basil" (Schaff).²⁹

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

¹⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:963-964

²⁰ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:964

²¹ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 169

²² Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 170

²³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:186

²⁴ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 14:3

²⁵ Hymn 165, *Trinity Hymnal*, Baptist Edition (see also hymn 56 and 339)

²⁶ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 169

²⁷ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:190

²⁸ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 77

²⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:966

homousios with the Father, or should we use the word homoiousios? Ambrose set himself to defend Nicene orthodoxy against the Arians.³⁰

The most popular theological work by Ambrose was his treatise, *On the Christian Faith*. It consists of five books, the first two written in 378, and the latter three in 379-380. "The treatise vindicates the Divinity of Christ from the attacks of the Arians, and has always enjoyed the highest reputation, being quoted and referred to again and again" (Schaff).³¹ He followed this in 381 with a companion treatise entitled, *On the Holy Spirit*, where he "shows that the Holy Spirit is God, and of one nature and substance with the Father and the Son" (Schaff).³²

Now this is the declaration of our Faith, that we say that God is One, neither dividing His Son from Him, as do the heathen, nor denying, with the Jews, that He was begotten of the Father before all worlds, and afterwards born of the Virgin; nor yet, like Sabellius, confounding the Father with the Word, and so maintaining that Father and Son are one and the same Person; nor again, as does Photinus, holding that the Son first came into existence in the Virgin's womb: nor believing, with Arius, in a number of diverse Powers, and so, like the benighted heathen, making out more than one God. For it is written: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord thy God is one God.'³³

If, then, God is One, one is the name, one is the power, of the Trinity. Christ Himself, indeed, said: 'Go ye, baptize the nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' In the *name* mark you, not in the *names*. We say, then, that there is one God, not two or three Gods, this being the error into which the impious heresy of the Arians does run with its blasphemies. For it says that there are three Gods, in that it divides the Godhead of the Trinity; whereas the Lord, in saying, 'Go, baptize the nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,' has shown that the Trinity is of one power. We confess Father, Son, and Spirit, understanding in a perfect Trinity both fulness of Divinity and unity of power.³⁴

2. *Jerome* (347-420). "Jerome is the most learned, the most eloquent, and the most interesting author among the Latin fathers. He had by nature a burning thirst for knowledge, and continued unwearyingly teaching, and learning, and writing, to the end of a very long life" (Schaff).³⁵ "None of the great personalities of the fourth century is more intriguing than Jerome. He is outstanding, not for his sanctity, like Anthony, nor for his keen theological insight, like Athanasius, nor for his firmness before authorities, like Ambrose, nor even for his preaching, like Chrysostom, but rather for his titanic and endless struggle with the world and with himself. Although he is known as 'Saint Jerome,' he was not one of those saints who are granted in this life the joy of God's peace. His holiness was not humble, peaceful, and sweet, but rather proud, stormy, and even bitter" (Gonzalez).³⁶ "The great scholar among the Latins was Jerome, a considerable part of whose life was spent in the East. Unhappily, neither his scholarship and learning, nor his religious principles, availed to curb effectually the fervor of temper which made him an expert in denunciation" (Fisher).³⁷ "He had little patience for those who appeared slothful, or who dared criticize him. Those who suffered his sharp attacks were not only the

³⁰ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 14:2

³¹ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 10: xvii

³² Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 10: xvii

³³ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Ambrose, 10: 202

³⁴ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Ambrose, 10: 202-203

³⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:967

³⁶ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:201

³⁷ George Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, 125

heretics of his time, as well as the ignorant and the hypocritical, but also John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan, Basil of Caesarea, and Augustine of Hippo" (Gonzalez).³⁸

(1) *His life and death.* "Jerome 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" (Calhoun).³⁹ "In 372, he left Rome and set off on a journey through the Middle East, becoming a hermit in the Syrian desert in 374. Here he learned Hebrew, which made Jerome almost unique among Christians of that time – hardly any of them knew the ancient language of the Jews" (Needham).⁴⁰ "In order to fill his mind with something that would take the place of the pleasures of Rome, he decided to study Hebrew. That language, with its strange alphabet and grammar, seemed barbaric to him. But he told himself that, since the Old Testament was written in it, it must be divine" (Gonzalez).⁴¹ Jerome eventually concluded that the hermit life was not for him, and he returned to civilization. "After receiving ordination as a presbyter in Antioch in 379, he travelled to Constantinople, and studied theology there for two years with the renowned Cappadocian father, Gregory of Nazianzus, who was at that point bishop of Constantinople. Jerome and Gregory became close friends. Then in 382 Jerome visited Rome, where he began his Latin translation of the Bible" (Needham).⁴² "However, Jerome was not a tactful man, and he soon made enemies among the leaders of the church in Rome. When the bishop died (Damasus), late in 384, Jerome lost his staunchest defender. The new bishop (Siricius), had little use for Jerome's scholarship. Finally, he decided to leave Rome and go to the Holy Land—or, as he said, 'from Babylon to Jerusalem'" (Gonzalez).⁴³

While in Palestine, Jerome, and a lady friend from Rome who travelled with him, Paula, "devoted themselves to the monastic way of life. Their goal, however, was not the extreme asceticism of the desert monks, but rather a life of moderate strictness, spent mostly in study" (Gonzalez).⁴⁴ "Since Paula was rich, and Jerome was not lacking in means, they founded two monastic houses in Bethlehem, one for women under Paula's leadership, and another for men under Jerome's supervision" (Gonzalez).⁴⁵ Paula died in 404, and Jerome felt alone and deserted. Jerome began her eulogy with these words: "If all the members of my body were turned into tongues, and all my joints were to utter human voices, I should be unable to say anything worthy of the holy and venerable Paula."⁴⁶ A few years later, on August 24, 410, Rome was taken and sacked by the Goths. "Jerome survived for almost ten years. They were years of loneliness, pain, and controversy. Finally, a few months after the death of Paula's daughter, who had become a daughter to him, the tired scholar went to his rest" (Gonzalez).⁴⁷

(2) *His monasticism.* "The most zealous promoter of the monastic life among the church fathers was Jerome, the connecting link between Eastern and Western learning and religion. His life belongs almost with equal right to the history of theology and the history of monasticism" (Schaff).⁴⁸ As mentioned above, while Jerome spent three years as a hermit in the Syrian desert, his monastic life, as it

³⁸ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:201

³⁹ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 14:3

⁴⁰ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:265

⁴¹ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:202

⁴² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:265

⁴³ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:23-204

⁴⁴ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:204

⁴⁵ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:204

⁴⁶ As quoted by Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:215

⁴⁷ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:204

⁴⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:205

lasted over 20 years in Bethlehem, was less rigid and more about reflection and study. This meant, Jerome collected a massive library. "He could not live without books. He accordingly collected, by great sacrifices, a library for that time very considerable and costly, which accompanied him on his journeys" (Schaff).⁴⁹

And yet unfortunately, Jerome depreciated marriage and wrote several treatises in favor of celibacy. For example, in a treatise written in 393 entitled, *Against Jovinian*, Jerome presented three levels of chastity: "The virtue of chastity is threefold: one kind that of married life, a second that of widowhood, and a third that of virginity."⁵⁰ He provided three basic arguments in favor of virginity (remaining single): (a) Jesus' statement that there would be marriage in the kingdom of heaven (Lk.20:34-36). If heaven is a happier state than earth and there's no marriage in heaven, then to remain single on earth is a happier state than marriage. "It is this angelic purity which secures to virginity its highest reward."⁵¹ (b) Paul's statement that he wished the unmarried would remain as he was (1Cor.7:8). "Happy is the man who is like Paul! Fortunate is he who attends to the Apostle's command (to remain unmarried), not to his concession (marry if you must). This I desire, says he, that ye be imitators of me, as I also am of Christ, who as a Virgin born of a Virgin, uncorrupt of her who was uncorrupt."⁵² (c) The perpetual virginity of Mary. "Mary continued a virgin, and Joseph himself, on account of Mary was a virgin, so that from a virgin wedlock a virgin son was born."⁵³

(3) *His Latin translation*. "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" (Calhoun).⁵⁴ The word Vulgate comes from the Latin word meaning "common." It refers to Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible, as Latin was the common language of the day. While other Latin translations had translated from the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation of the OT), Jerome directly translated from the Hebrew text. And yet, his translation was not without controversy. "The new translation, naturally enough, changed some people's favorite texts, and many demanded to know who had given Jerome authority to tamper with Scripture" (Gonzalez).⁵⁵ Such criticism also came from Augustine, who believed, as did most, that the Septuagint was without flaw or error. "Therefore, when Jerome published a version that disagreed with the Septuagint, there were many who felt that he lacked respect for the inspired Word of God" (Gonzalez).⁵⁶

I pray you not to devote your energies to translating the sacred books to Latin, unless you do as you did earlier in your translations of the book of Job, that is, adding notes that show clearly where your version differs from the Septuagint, whose authority has no equal. Besides, I cannot imagine how, after so long, someone can find in the Hebrew manuscripts anything which so many translators did not see before, especially since they knew Hebrew so well.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:967-968

⁵⁰ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 6:346-346-386

⁵¹ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 6:345

⁵² Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 6:352

⁵³ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 6:344

⁵⁴ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 14:4

⁵⁵ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:204

⁵⁶ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:204

⁵⁷ Augustine, as quoted by Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:204