

Historical Mentor Paper

John Chrysostom

---

A Paper

Presented to

Dr. Marc Cortez

Western Seminary

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

CHS 505, Wisdom from Church History

---

By

Luke Todd, Box 207

April 27, 2012

If John Chrysostom had a mouth full of gold, he would have spit it out in disgust, and if he had heard the name given him he would likely have chided his adorers for valuing the precious metal so highly. It is a great irony that the man who preached with such vehemence against the love of gold, the greed and luxury which characterized the cities of Antioch and Constantinople, should be granted the appellation *Chrysostomos*, or Golden mouth. The name given him referred to the eloquence of his tongue which he used to great effect until his death in exile from his post as Archbishop of Constantinople. He was revered by his flock as he is today for his fearless and practical homilies which spoke to the glories of an infinite God and called the people to abandon their wanton lives for such a God. His example in the face of vicious attack and the practical weight of his theology make the study of his life and thought a valuable pursuit.

### **Life and Ministry**

John was born circa 349 A.D. to a young, Christian mother, Anthusa, and a pagan father, Secundus, who was a government official. Their home was Antioch, that magnificent Hellenistic city in Syria where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. Though his father died when he was quite young, John's mother still had the financial wherewithal to provide an excellent education for her son (Kelly 4-7; Krupp 14-15). Due to his giftedness and his mother's efforts, John became a student of Libanius, the most famous rhetorician of the fourth century (Wilken 3, 5), who also was responsible for the education of the emperor, Julian the Apostate (Payne, 196).

After completing his education, John chose to be baptized by Bishop Meletius in 368 rather than follow in his teacher's footsteps as a rhetorician or lawyer. While this deeply disappointed his tutor, who later claimed that John would have succeeded him "if the Christians had not taken him from us", choosing a clerical career was not unusual for someone of John's

education, and was not necessarily a rejection of a successful and influential career (Sozomen qtd. in Wilken 6). John's energies however were turned towards the spiritual rather than the material and though he desired to pursue a life of monastic simplicity, he remained in Antioch for a time due to the persuasions of his widowed mother (Chrysostom 40). While remaining in Antioch, he still pursued the life of rigorous Christianity by joining an Ascetic school run by Diodore, later bishop of Tarsus, from whom he acquired the distinctive Antiochene hermeneutic (Kelly 19).

Shortly after being ordained as a lector in 371, John finally escaped the wild life of the city which tempted him so and joined an eremitic monastic community in the Syrian mountains and attached himself to a spiritual Elder, hoping to master the passions that plagued him (Kelly 29). He devoted his time to memorization and meditation on Scripture and to the extreme ascetic practices which eventually compromised his health. When he returned to Antioch six years later, the Nicene group to which he belonged had gained the favor of the emperor and he resumed his duties as lector. He was ordained to the diaconate two years later, and then to the priesthood by Flavian, the successor of Meletius, after five years in that role (Mayer and Allen 6).

John faithfully preached for twelve years as a priest in Antioch. By preaching with eloquence and fervor to crowds of Christians and pagans alike during the fallout of the statuary riot, he cemented a place of prominence for himself as the leading preacher in Antioch (Kelly 82). The love his congregation developed for him during his tenure in Antioch is clearly displayed by the underhanded way in which he was promoted to the bishopric of Constantinople in 397. Rather than the fanfare and celebration that should have accompanied such an occasion, he was drawn out of the city unawares for fear that the citizens would revolt if they knew that their beloved preacher was being taken from them (Kelly 104).

The nearly six years spent in Constantinople were turbulent times for John of Antioch. His new proximity to the seat of imperial power did nothing to temper his bold and brilliant preaching against the vices and wanton worldliness around him, whether in the people, the clergy, or the government. He certainly maintained his popularity as a preacher, and found success evangelizing the Goths, but he offended a great many powerful people, both in Constantinople and abroad (Garrett 30). Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria, succeeded in having him spuriously condemned at the Synod of the Oak, and he was banished once, reinstated, and then banished again by order of the Empress Eudoxia. His sufferings in exile for three years are well documented in his letters, and eventually the trial proved too much for his already poor health and he died in September of 407 while being moved about the empire (Mayer and Allen 10; Garrett 31).

### **Theological Issues**

John's reputation is that of *chrysostomos*, the golden-mouthed preacher, rather than the precise systematician, and as the bulk of his corpus is homiletical and practical in nature, his theological emphases are implicit in the text. It is difficult in a project of this scope to acquire an understanding of his theology in its entirety. It seems that Chrysostom studies have generally been performed with either a magnifying glass to scrutinize a specific issue or a wide-angle lens with a largely biographical focus. R.A. Krupp's *Shepherding the Flock of God*, the source which most ably analyzes John's theology for the student who approaches with the naked eye, offers *sixteen* different chapters identifying various aspects of John's thought and life as a bishop. Therefore, this discussion must not be seen as a dogmatic attempt to assert the preeminence of these particular issues in Chrysostom's thought, but merely as a selection of a few out of many notable motifs.

John had a theology, of course, but speculation on how to reconcile the mysteries of the faith was unimportant to him. The theology that does come through in his sermons and commentaries is perhaps surprisingly orthodox, given the situation and time in which he lived. John's ministry fell between the two great doctrinal controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, and in his response, or lack thereof, a picture of his theological attitude can be seen (Baur 355). He joined the Nicene assembly, despite the fact that at the time of his baptism in Antioch, the Arians were the favored party, and he, along with the followers of Meletius, the Nicene bishop, were forced to meet outside of the city on a military training ground (Mayer and Allen 5). He preached fervently against the Arians, but was not original or speculative in his thought or terminology regarding the relationship between Father and the Son. He slightly predated the great Christological controversy, and though he represented the Antiochene School, he did not speculate in the direction usually associated with it, as did Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius after him (Baur 357). He is considered a most distinguished witness to the faith, despite not advancing new doctrinal understandings of his own (Baur 365).

Since Chrysostom was primarily an exegete, preaching through or writing commentaries on many books of the Bible, his profound doctrine of revelation is fundamental to his work. The term that John used to describe God's revelatory action towards man, both in the Incarnation and in Scripture, was *συγκατάβασις* or "condescension" (Garrett 176). This was to distinguish the difference between God and man and to recognize God's gracious working despite the limitations of humanity, this being a clear case where condescension is not patronizing but necessary; where it results in the humiliation of the giver, not the receiver. Krupp proposes "graciousness" (71) and Hill "considerateness" (17-18) as preferable translations of the word to avoid the negative sense of "condescension." For John, any act of God toward man was

condescension, showing a gracious willingness to deal with man, and such revelation was not for the sake of knowledge alone, but for knowledge unto salvation (Krupp 72). In Homily 2 on Genesis, Chrysostom says that the words of Moses “are not our own words that we are uttering, after all, but what the love of God provides for the sake of your salvation” (Chrysostom qtd. in Hill 19). This doctrine of revelation informed John’s hermeneutic and caused him to ascribe great worth to Scripture, urging even the poorest in his congregation to purchase it, study it, and cherish it, and even to call “ignorance of the Holy Scripture” the source of all evil (Baur 324).

Due to the magnificent station which John accorded Scripture, and the degree to which he was gladly reliant upon it for his preaching, it will be helpful to delve into his thoughts and practices regarding the use of Scripture. John likened the Bible to a treasure house, a rich gold mine, a fruitful garden, an arsenal of weapons, a quiet sea hiding pearls, a diamond reflecting divine light, a cloud bearing rain, and a pharmacy with remedies for all (Baur 322). Acquiring the treasure that Scripture has to offer is not always as simple as picking a lovely flower from a garden. He compared an unskilled interpreter to someone trying to mine gold but not knowing how. Without careful digging, the gold will become muddled up with the dirt and never found (Chrysostom qtd. in Krupp 76). Despite this vigilant attitude, John assumed that his hearers could profitably study the Scriptures for themselves, and he encouraged them to do so, chastising them for undervaluing and neglecting its study, despite its great clarity (Baur 323-5; Constantinou).

Constantinou suggests that he viewed the Scriptures somewhat sacramentally, as a means of grace, saying that study of the Bible “sanctifies the reader and attracts the grace of the Spirit.” He also said: “If we are willing to examine the Scriptures in this way, carefully and systematically, we shall be able to obtain our salvation; if we are unceasingly preoccupied with

them, we shall learn both correctness of doctrine and an upright way of life” (Chrysostom qtd. in Constantinou). John himself was unceasingly preoccupied with the Holy Scriptures, and had a towering command of them, likely learned in large part during his years of solitude. Baur numbers the Scriptural citations in his six hundred plus works at eighteen thousand, and notes the appropriateness of his quotations in the vast majority of cases (316). Given his understanding of Scripture as an example of God’s great condescension to reach humanity, it is no wonder that he loved it so dearly, devoted his life to its explication and application to life, and did his best to instill that same passion in all his hearers.

When John looked to the Scriptures, his eyes were primarily drawn to the moral lessons that could be found, whether it was the primary intent of the text or not (Hill 14-16), so nearly all of Chrysostom’s work turns to moral exhortation sooner or later. This call to holy living touched on many issues and took many different forms, but the term φιλοσοφία best captures the heart of the upright Christian life to which he called his flock. In contrast to the pagan philosophy of the Greeks, true philosophy is following Jesus (Krupp 138). One of the main keys for Chrysostom’s true philosophy was the ascetic ideal of moderation (Garrett 232; Krupp 138). John’s significant time in a monastic community, which he associated with a life of true philosophy, gave him a great appreciation for a lifestyle of self-denial (Chrysostom 37). He often spoke wistfully of the monastic life of unencumbered pursuit of God which he had given up for the ministry of the priesthood (Payne 214). Even as the bishop of Constantinople, he lived a simple, austere life, refusing the extravagance common among many clergy whom he referred to as “belly-worshippers” and “table giants” (Payne 217). Despite his own desires for the simplicity of monasticism, he considered it foolishness to call ordinary men to the rigors of life in the desert,

and instead called them to the asceticism of hard work and a pure life in the midst of the city (Payne 197; Krupp 27).

The life of true philosophy which Chrysostom practiced and preached was directed towards God and others. He berated his flock for attending the circus and horse races as they proved a distraction from corporate worship and a God-ward focus (Krupp 153-54). Likewise he had no patience for those who overlooked the poor, hungry and cold so as to fill their closets with clothes, their bellies with wine, and to sleep in warm, soft beds (Chrysostom qtd. in Baur 378). Maintaining eternal perspective in the face of trouble, exercising the will to curb sinful habits, disciplines of prayer, fasting, and Scripture reading, liturgical participation, and the cultivation of relationships with soul-caring friends were all aspects of the truly wise life lived towards God and man (Krupp 138-46). Baur and others have seen the theme of mercy and almsgiving, combined with the worthlessness of riches as such a prevalent theme of John's conception of the life of true philosophy that he could have accurately been given the honorific of "John the Almsgiver" (299). There were a great many other topics which preoccupied John's thought, but these three of the life of true philosophy, the inestimable value of Scripture, and the miracle of God condescending to make himself known to humanity offer a glimpse into his mind.

### **Theological Approach**

John's theological approach was dictated by his primary pastoral intent, the salvation of his hearers (Gorday 108). He says that "the Church of Christ is Christ's own Body...and the man who is entrusted with it must...make it worthy, as far as lies within human power, of that pure and blessed Head to which it is subjected" and that the means by which this work is done is the preaching of the word (Chrysostom 114-15). As he did his exegetical work, he was consumed

with moral questions rather than dogmatic and speculative ones. For example, though he did agree with them about justification by faith as the doctrinal theme of the book of Romans, he spends little time addressing the rich theological content that so entranced the Reformers, opting instead for moral exhortation (Baur 298). This is not to say that he denigrated the doctrinal content, but that he saw it as foundational to Paul's higher purpose of exhortation to Christian living, rather than an end in itself (Gorday 108). In a way, John's lack of speculation and original theology is a theological approach in itself, as he chose to appropriate the terms and ideas of other thinkers where he saw them to be scripturally valid rather than attempt to frame the discussion on his own terms.

Having studied under Diodore of Tarsus, John was trained up in the Antiochene School of interpretation, which emphasized a historical-grammatical approach to scripture rather than the more common allegorical approach that was associated with Alexandria (Kannengiesser 786). He preferred to let scripture interpret itself and would not assign an allegorical reading to a passage unless Scripture itself offered the interpretation, so that it might not fall prey to the "undisciplined desire of those who enjoy allegorization to wander about and be carried in every direction" (Chrysostom qtd. in Garrett 203). The notion of God graciously condescending to meet man at his point of need led Chrysostom to view revelation as both progressive and culturally conditioned (Garrett 178). This hermeneutic controlled his understanding of the biblical text, but within these bounds, he did not feel it necessary to strictly exposit the word, but only so far as to exhort his hearers as he felt they needed (Hill 15).

Garrett notes Chase's suggestion that his love of the Scriptures, common sense, sensitivity to human life and emotion, and his use of clear, vigorous language were the qualities that allowed him to be such an effective interpreter (Garrett 208). These four qualities were

fundamental to the lasting power of John's exegesis, but these alone do not guarantee accuracy. When his exegesis appears weak, it is rarely a matter of methodology, stemming instead from the same inadequacies that plagued all interpreters of his era. Based on the knowledge we have today, he was operating under some woeful misunderstandings of biblical history and background, and his inability to study the Old Testament in Hebrew led to numerous errors (Garrett 246).

Since we have received homilies from Chrysostom rather than precise exegetical outlines or theological treatises, it can be difficult to assess his theological or exegetical method. Do apparent shortcomings stem from problems with his method, or does it have more to do with the direction he took his sermons as he sought to speak to a particular need or situation? Surely both answers are at times appropriate, but understanding when and where is challenging. And because these were rhetorical sermons, at times exaggerated to make a point, he seemingly saw no need to reconcile the contradictions that cause us such trouble when trying to understand and systematize his thought. For instance, Gorday has him strongly affirming *sola fide* in his Romans commentary yet Krupp cites more than ten sermons as affirming that one cannot be saved apart from giving alms (Gorday 108; Krupp 153). Chrysostom's Eastern mindset may not have even seen an issue here, but it is difficult for my Western brain not to grate at the ambiguity.

### **Chrysostom as Mentor**

There are many challenges that present themselves in attempting to draw on John Chrysostom as a historical Mentor. Since he is eminently practical, his teaching most often applied directly to the daily life of his audience, and Late Antique Mediterranean culture is one that I need to grow in familiarity with in order to make the best use of his work. Another similar factor stems from Chrysostom's rhetorical training and the resulting techniques which he used to

great effect to communicate to his listeners. Those same rhetorical devices can be a hindrance to using Chrysostom today, such as when they play off of ancient cultural stereotypes, or simply by not being familiar to modern discourse (Harrison 259). Carter warns against always understanding him literally, however ironic it may seem in light of his hermeneutical tendencies, given his rhetorical style which often utilized overt hyperbole that must not be read woodenly. Since he wrote non-systematically and in a situation so different from today, it will be important to avoid the temptation to find proof-texts where he appears to say what I want him to, and ignore everything else (Carter).

This same pastoral practicality, which can be problematic if read simplistically, is also part of what draws me to Chrysostom. I tend to think abstractly about theology and as I pass by his planet, I want John to pull me into his practically-minded orbit. In my brief opportunity to interact with him this semester I caught a glimpse of the passion which he directed so practically towards his own life and that of his hearers. I find my own lifestyle challenged by the standards he saw in Scripture, lived out, and held others to. If what came out of his mouth was golden, it was only because it had been refined by the fire in his heart. As I continue to engage his work, I hope that the Holy Spirit will ignite the same in mine, and give me not only golden words to speak, but even more his golden hands which gave such weight to what he said.

One aspect of John's life which stood out as an obvious opportunity for me to learn from him was his interaction with authority, especially those he took issue with. This might seem surprising based on the abrasiveness and lack of tact he often employed when appealing to those in power, but I know that underlying the bluster, there was a man convinced of the gravity of his position and captivated by his convictions. When in ministry I certainly do not want to alienate and exasperate those in power over me or those in my power, but my tendency swings so far the

other way as to need some correcting to return towards balance. Ministry is a messy business, and when I inevitably come under the conviction that I must confront, call out, and challenge, I will certainly look to Chrysostom for fortification. Who could read his thoughts on the difficulty of pastoral care, the temptations that lie in wait, the penalty for failure, and the frailty of the flock without turning to Christ for help with a shudder and a prayer (Chrysostom 52-59)? Regardless of the challenges that await as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I will take courage from the golden words of Chrysostom made all the more believable because of his feet of solid rock planted immovably where the Spirit and the Word directed him.

For me, Chrysostom will be a mentor who restrains and corrects rather than one after whom to model my entire life and ministry. We are very dissimilar, but in spite of and because of this, I can learn a great deal from him. I feel as if he sees me clearly and speaks words of conviction and encouragement directly to my soul. The beautiful simplicity of his life in the midst of tumultuous ministry summons me to be cauterized by his words and examine my own life afresh. His disciple John Cassian said: “It would be a great thing to attain to his stature, but it would be hard.” I have no such lofty aspirations, but I too would like to follow his faithful example, which Cassian said it is “lovely and magnificent” to do (Payne 234). If I can simply say with him his daily and dying refrain, “Glory be to God for everything”, I will count it a great victory (Kelly, 285).

## Works Cited

- Baur, Chrysostomus. *John Chrysostom and his Time*. Trans. M. Gonzaga. Westminster: Newman Press, 1959. Print.
- Carter, Robert. "The Future of Chrysostom Studies: Theology and Nachleben." *ANALECTA Vlatadon*. Ed. Panayotis Christou. Thessaloniki, (1973): Internet: [www.myriobiblos.gr](http://www.myriobiblos.gr).
- Constantinou, Eugenia. "The Scriptures as Sacrament: St. John Chrysostom's Advice to his Congregation about Reading the Bible." St. Katherine College Forum. Encinitas, CA. 13 February 2012. Lecture. [www.ancientfaith.com](http://www.ancientfaith.com).
- Chrysostom, John. *Six Books on the Priesthood*. Trans. Graham Neville. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984. Print.
- Garrett, Duane A. *An Analysis of the Hermeneutics of John Chrysostom's Commentary of Isaiah 1-8 with an English Translation*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992. Print.
- Gorday, Peter. *Principles of Patristic Exegesis: Romans 9-11 in Origen, John Chrysostom, and Augustine*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983. Print.
- Harrison, Nonna. "Women and the Image of God According to St. John Chrysostom." In *Dominico Eloquentio – Essays on Patristic Exegesis in Honor of Robert Louis Wilken*. Ed. Paul M. Blowers, et al. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. Print.
- Hill, Robert C. Introduction. *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on Genesis 1-17*. Trans. Robert C. Hill. Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001. Print.
- Kannengiesser, Charles. *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity*. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2004. Print.
- Kelly, J.N.D. *Golden Mouthed: The Story of John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998. Print.

Krupp, R.A. *Shepherding the Flock of God: The Pastoral Theology of John Chrysostom*. New York: Peter Lang, 1991. Print.

Mayer, Wendy and Pauline Allen. *John Chrysostom*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.

Payne, Robert. *The Holy Fire*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980. Print.

Wilken, Robert. *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4<sup>th</sup> Century*. London: University of California Press, 1983. Print.