

# NOTATIONES

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## THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING: JOHN CHRYSOSTOM THE PREACHER

by Gordon C. McMillan

### 1. Introduction

PERHAPS ONCE IN A GENERATION, a luminary arises whose star is so bright and impact so profound that their voice still echoes in the collective consciousness hundreds of years later. Such a man was John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, who was, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Mark 1:3). John’s prophetic preaching sent shockwaves throughout the religious establishment, ultimately costing him his head but gaining him a heavenly crown.

In the fourth century, another luminary arose in the spirit and power of John the Baptist, whose voice cried out for reform in society and the church. His name was John Chrysostom, and he would ultimately be heralded as the greatest preacher in the history of Christendom.<sup>1</sup> John’s preaching prowess was so renowned he would posthumously gain the surname “Chrysostom,” which means “Golden Mouth.”<sup>2</sup> The legacy this prince of preachers left behind is often overshadowed by his contemporaries: Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose in the West, and Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus in the East. Yet his influence as a preacher is arguably more profound than any of the aforementioned.

Chrysostom served in numerous capacities during his ministry, including reader, deacon, priest, social worker, and bishop. But as his surname indicates, he was first and foremost a preacher. Preaching was his passion, and he loved it, once saying, “Preaching improves me. When I begin to speak weariness disappears; when I begin to teach, fatigue too disappears. Thus, neither sickness itself nor indeed any other

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1. Donald Atwater, *St. John Chrysostom: Pastor and Preacher* (London: Harvill Press, 1959), 175.

2. Kevin Dale Miller, “John Chrysostom: Did You Know?” *Christian History*, October 1994 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/1994/issue44/4402.html> (accessed November 8, 2011).

obstacle is able to separate me from your love. . . . For just as you are hungry to listen to me, so too am I hungry to preach to you.”<sup>3</sup>

Described as unimpressive in physical stature,<sup>4</sup> Chrysostom was a spiritual dynamo possessed by a heavenly vision, for which the pulpit ultimately served as the chief means of expression. The vision that compelled him was nothing less than the total transformation of the city.<sup>5</sup> From his pulpit, Chrysostom’s voice thundered, and hell trembled. This study will reveal how John Chrysostom sought to reform both society and the church through his oratorical genius, his fierce denunciation of the sins of the Roman Empire and the Church, and his innovative preaching methods.

## 2. Chrysostom the Orator

In the ancient world, oratory was a highly valued art form. Citizens continually heard from rhetoricians, politicians, philosophers, and preachers.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, a standard education for males in the Graeco-Roman world included training in rhetoric. Into this world, John Chrysostom was born in approximately 349 AD to a Christian family in the city of Antioch.<sup>7</sup> In his mid-teens, he entered the school of rhetoric, where he came under the tutelage of the brilliant pagan rhetorician and professor Libanius.<sup>8</sup> There Chrysostom learned the oratorical skills that ultimately propelled his preaching to unparalleled heights.

In 386 AD, Chrysostom was finally ordained into the priesthood<sup>9</sup> after going to great lengths to avoid it previously,<sup>10</sup> thereby beginning his illustrious preaching career. From the outset of his ministry, Chrysostom focused on preaching as the primary and most effective means of disseminating his vision for the city’s transformation. Whereas his voluminous writings had limited appeal, being read only by the educated and socially elite, preaching was designed for mass consumption. The city’s transformation could only occur if the masses were sufficiently moved to action, resulting in a groundswell of reform that he hoped would eventually permeate society.<sup>11</sup>

Chrysostom sought to move the masses to action and move them he did. His sermons were so mesmerizing that he often had to warn his listeners about the presence

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3. Carl A. Volz, “The Genius of Chrysostom’s Preaching,” *Christian History*, October 1994, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/1994/issue44/4424.html> (accessed November 22, 2011).

4. John Heston Willey, *Chrysostom the Orator* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1906), 169.

5. Aideen M. Hartney, *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City* (London: Duckworth Publishers, 2004), 12.

6. Jaelyn Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and His Congregation in Antioch* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 42.

7. J.N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom: Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 4–5.

8. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 6.

9. *Ibid.*, 55.

10. *Ibid.*, 25.

11. Hartney, *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City*, 12.

of pickpockets, who would frequent his meetings taking advantage of transfixed audiences.<sup>12</sup> A contemporary described the effect his preaching had upon the people:

As he advanced from exposition to practical appeals, his delivery became gradually more rapid, his countenance more animated, his voice more vivid and intense. The people began to hold in their breath. The joints of their loins were loosened. A creeping sensation like that produced by a series of electric waves passed over them. They felt as if drawn toward the pulpit by a sort of magnetic influence. Some of those who were sitting rose from their seats; overcome with a kind of faintness as if the preacher's mental forces were sucking the life out of their bodies, and by the time the discourse came to an end the great mass of that spellbound audience could only hold their heads up and give vent to their emotions in tears.<sup>13</sup>

Chrysostom's ability to speak extemporaneously became a significant contributor to his preaching success. In the ancient world, the chief mark of an effective speaker was the ability to speak extemporaneously—a skill Chrysostom had mastered.<sup>14</sup> The people were amazed when they heard him preach without the benefit of a prepared manuscript or even a slip of paper, having never seen such oratory on display.<sup>15</sup> The uniqueness of his preaching style is described as:

A power of exposition which unfolded in lucid order, passage by passage, the meaning of the book in hand; a rapid transition from clear exposition or keen logical argument to fervid exhortation, or pathetic appeal, or indignant denunciation; the versatile ease with which he could lay hold of any little incident of the moment, such as the lighting of the lamps in church, and use it to illustrate his discourse; the mixture of plain common-sense, simple boldness, and tender affection with which he would strike home to the hearts and consciences of his hearers,—all these are not only general characteristics of the man, but are usually to be found manifested more or less in the compass of each discourse.<sup>16</sup>

Eloquence was a necessary skill for the preacher in the ancient world. Church services tended to be chaotic due to people moving around and visiting with one another, engaging in conversation about politics and the news of the moment. In this atmosphere, it would have been nearly impossible to hold the people's attention unless the speaker was highly polished and able to captivate the people through his oratory. Young preachers were warned by Chrysostom not to seek the fickle praise of the

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12. Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity*, 75.

13. David Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers, Volume 1: A History of Biblical Preaching from the Old Testament to the Modern Era* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1998), 82–83.

14. Hartney, *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City*, 41.

15. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 57–58.

16. Willey, *Chrysostom the Orator*, 169–170.

people who only wanted to be entertained but to instead focus on polishing their oratorical skills so that they would be able to gain the people's attention.<sup>17</sup>

Chrysostom employed every rhetorical device he could to make an imprint on the minds and hearts of his hearers, upon whom he depended to help him bring to fruition his vision for city transformation. As he systematically preached through the books of the Bible, he applied the principle of recapitulation by beginning each new sermon with a brief synopsis of the previous one. During his sermons, he consistently sought to direct the people's attention to the sermon structure. If he happened to deviate from the course, he would quickly bring them back to the main idea.

He also utilized rhetorical questions to arrest attention. In his homily *On Cain and Abel*, he asked his congregation some twenty-seven consecutive rhetorical questions.<sup>18</sup> In addition, he liberally employed several other classical rhetorical devices such as the repetition of the same word at the beginning of a sentence; his use of diatribe, which is designed to malign and denounce, used very effectively in his homily *Against the Jews*, and his extensive use of athletic, wrestling, and cultural metaphor's.<sup>19</sup>

Chrysostom's words so moved the people that they often burst into applause, a response that horrified him.<sup>20</sup> Believing that applause should be prohibited due to the fear that people were responding to his eloquence rather than his content, he chided them for their rudeness, saying, "If you will applaud do it in the market or when you hear the harpers and actors: the church is no theater."<sup>21</sup> In one particular sermon, he excoriated the people for applauding his message, only to elicit a greater outburst of applause from his adoring audience.<sup>22</sup>

Chrysostom's command of Scripture, honed under the instruction of Diodore and Carterius, served as a compelling component of his oratory.<sup>23</sup> As a young man, he experimented for two years with extreme ascetic living. He spent his time committing the books of the Bible to memory while staving off sleep and never sitting or lying down.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, his sermons were redolent with biblical quotations, sometimes referencing as many as seven biblical passages in rapid-fire succession while expositing only a single verse.<sup>25</sup>

In his quest for societal transformation, Chrysostom shot every arrow in his rhetorical quill, even utilizing shocking and revolting language to arrest attention and affect change. In the Graeco-Roman world, filth and revulsion tended to be associated with the lower class, often being used as a verbal weapon in their continuing subjugation and humiliation. However, Chrysostom sought to turn the language of

17. Volz, "The Genius of Chrysostom's Preaching."

18. Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity*, 92–93.

19. Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, *John Chrysostom: The Early Church Fathers* (New York: Rutledge Publishing, 2000), 27–28.

20. Atwater, *St. John Chrysostom: Pastor and Preacher*, 42.

21. Hugh T. Kerr, *Preaching in the Early Church*, (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1942), 178.

22. Volz, "The Genius of Chrysostom's Preaching."

23. Mayer and Allen, 26.

24. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 32.

25. Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity*, 93.

disgust on its ears and effectively use it as a weapon against the callous socially elite, hoping his listeners would not behave in like manner. His graphic language evoked a visceral response from his audience.<sup>26</sup> Repeatedly he implored his congregation to abandon their consumerism and conspicuous wealth and aid the poor, asking, “Do you pay such honor to your excrements as to receive them in a silver chamber-pot when another man made in the image of God is perishing in the cold?”<sup>27</sup>

During his second year as the principal preacher in Antioch, his oratorical prowess saved the city from panic and built for himself a peerless reputation in the matter of the infamous “Affair of the Statues.”<sup>28</sup> For seven days, the city endured the wrath of Emperor Theodosius, whose tax initiative was met with a rebellious riot. Non-stop executions and all manner of brutalities were inflicted upon the terrified populace. A heavy cloud of gloom and despair hung over the city like a pall as the citizens awaited even more severe recriminations.

Seizing this opportunity, Chrysostom mounted his pulpit and proceeded to deliver a series of sermons that would save the city from panic and dread, simply called, *On the Statues*. In these sermons, Chrysostom used his oratorical skills to bring comfort and hope to his fear-stricken audiences. Encouraging the people to trust in the mercy of God and not to fear the wrath of the emperor, he reminded them that death and slavery were not the worst things that could happen to them. An eternity of blissful happiness awaited those who exercised their faith in God and did not give in to fear.<sup>29</sup>

These sermons profoundly affected the people. His ability to communicate in a manner that touched the soul as well as the intellect and to make theological concepts relatable to the average person, won the hearts of the people, including even some pagans.<sup>30</sup> After the first day, the panic subsided a deep tranquility seemed to possess the people, though no outward circumstances changed. Ultimately, the intercession of the aged Bishop Flavian obtained pardon for the city, but John Chrysostom’s preaching saved the city.<sup>31</sup>

For twelve years, Chrysostom’s oratorical genius flourished in Antioch.<sup>32</sup> This eventually attracted the royal eunuch Eutropius who influenced the young emperor Arcadius to appoint him to the See of the new capital Constantinople after the death of Bishop Nectarius.<sup>33</sup> The people of Antioch had grown so addicted to his sermons<sup>34</sup> he had to be surreptitiously transported in the middle of the night to Constantinople

26. Blake Leyerly, “Refuse, Filth and Excrement in the Homilies of John Chrysostom” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2, no. 2 (2009): 337–56.

27. *New World Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. “Chrysostom, John,” [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/John\\_Chrysostom](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/John_Chrysostom) (accessed November 23, 2011).

28. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 81.

29. Robert Payne. “Preaching to Dread and Panic.” *Christian History*, October 1994 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/1994/issue44/preaching-to-dread-and-panic-4412.html> (accessed November 23, 2011).

30. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 82.

31. Robert Payne, “Preaching to Dread and Panic.”

32. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 57.

33. Hartney, *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City*, 20.

34. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 57.

for fear of a revolt upon learning he was no longer their pastor.<sup>35</sup> In Constantinople, Chrysostom once again moved a city through his powerful oratory. Such was the impact of his preaching it was said of him, “Better that Constantinople cease to exist, than John Chrysostom cease to preach.”<sup>36</sup> While other preachers in the history of Christendom have been effective communicators, no one can match the sheer brilliance of the one called Golden Mouth.

### 3. Chrysostom the Prophet

Perhaps Chrysostom is most well known for the excoriating nature of his sermons. The central focus of Chrysostom’s vision for the city’s transformation was a moral reformation among its citizens. The prevalent sins that he so often railed against included: abortion, prostitution, swearing, gluttony, vulgarity, gambling, avarice, and the abuse of wealth. A compelling example of the prophetic thrust of his preaching ministry can be seen in his expository series on Matthew. Of the ninety sermons he preached, forty dealt with almsgiving, thirty with avarice, twenty with the abuse of wealth, and thirteen with poverty.<sup>37</sup>

It is quite easily discernable from his sermons that Chrysostom was no fan of city life.<sup>38</sup> The realization that the people were unable to resist the temptation of the city’s attractions, which were indissolubly linked to the very sins Chrysostom condemned, motivated him to attack the institutions themselves.<sup>39</sup> The eminent historian Peter Brown has argued that Chrysostom sought the death of the ancient city through his preaching, citing his repeated calls that seemed to advocate abstention from city life, procreation, and financial transactions. However, Chrysostom hoped that through his prophetic preaching, his vision for a transformed city might be realized, resulting in a Christianized city in which the business of Christianity might flourish.<sup>40</sup>

The ancient city encouraged many vices among the populace, which Chrysostom vehemently and persistently attacked. Much like contemporary times, the theater was immensely popular, its actors and actresses serving as cultural icons. In one sermon on the evils of the theater, Chrysostom warned:

If you see a shameless woman in the theater, who treads the stage with uncovered head and bold attitudes, dressed in garments adorned with gold, flaunting her soft sensuality, singing immoral songs, throwing her limbs about in the dance, and making shameless speeches . . . do you still dare to say that nothing human happens to you then? Long after the theater is closed and everyone is gone away, those images still float before your soul, their

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35. Hartney, *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City*, 20.

36. Ilian T. Jones, *Principles and Practice of Preaching*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956), 27.

37. Robert A. Krupp. “Golden Tongue and Iron Will.” *Christian History*, October 1994 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/1994/issue44/4406.html> (accessed November 24, 2011).

38. Hartney, *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City*, 23.

39. *Ibid.*, 29.

40. *Ibid.*, 11.

words, their conduct, their glances, their walk, their positions, their excitation, their unchaste limbs—and as for you, you go home with a thousand wounds! But not alone – the whore goes with you—although not openly and visibly . . . but in your heart, and in your conscience, and there within you she kindles the Babylonian furnace . . . in which the peace of your home, the purity of your heart, and the happiness of your marriage will be burnt up!<sup>41</sup>

In addition to chastising his congregants for attending the theater, Chrysostom also warned the people about the dangers of horse racing—a favorite pastime of the citizens of both Antioch and Constantinople. In Constantinople, the horse track was right across the street from the church, causing him much consternation due to the endless interruptions its noise caused. On one occasion, Chrysostom blurted out during a sermon, “Still there are those who simply leave us here alone and run off to the circus and charioteers and the horse races! So far have they yielded their passions that they fill the whole city with their cries and unrestrained yelling, at which one would have to laugh if it were not so sad.”<sup>42</sup>

Swearing became another vice that drew the recrimination of Chrysostom. In one sermon, he threatened to discipline those who continued to swear in the marketplace:

Behold again: I give you warning, and proclaim with a loud voice, let no one think it a laughing matter. I will exclude and prohibit the disobedient; and as long as I sit on this throne, I will give up not one of its rights. If anyone depose me from it, then I am no longer responsible; as long as I am responsible, I cannot disregard them; on account not of my own punishment, but of your salvation. For I do exceedingly long for your salvation.<sup>43</sup>

If these other sins sparked censure from Chrysostom, nothing quite raised his ire like the misuse and abuse of wealth. Both Antioch and Constantinople were wealthy cities whose socially elite lived in the lap of luxury, while the lower classes suffered exceedingly. He once lamented in a sermon,

It is foolishness and a public madness to fill the cupboards with clothing and allow men who are created in God’s image and our likeness to stand naked and trembling with the cold so that they can hardly hold themselves upright. . . . You are large and fat, you hold drinking parties until late at night and sleep in a warm, soft bed. And do you not think of how you must give an account of your misuse of the gifts of God?<sup>44</sup>

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41. Krupp, “Golden Tongue and Iron Will.”

42. Ibid.

43. John Chrysostom, “In Acts 8,3,” quoted in R. A. Krupp, *Shepherding the Flock of God: The Pastoral Theology of John Chrysostom* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1991), 45.

44. Krupp, “Golden Tongue and Iron Will.”

Believing that wealth could not be achieved rightfully, but only at the expense of others and through unscrupulous means,<sup>45</sup> Chrysostom blistered the rich, saying, “You say you have not sinned yourselves. But are you sure you are not benefitting from the previous crimes and thefts of others?”<sup>46</sup>

Upon assuming the bishopric of Constantinople, Chrysostom was appalled at the avarice and repugnant displays of wealth and luxury in both the church and the imperial family. He immediately set forth on a reform program in the church, deposing certain contumacious clergy and significantly cutting back the bishop’s expense stipend. Consequently, he not only built a hospital with the funds saved but also fed and clothed the poor.<sup>47</sup>

Once Chrysostom initiated his reform program within the church, he subsequently set his sights on the ostentatious imperial family.<sup>48</sup> As Bishop of the capital church, he assumed the spiritual oversight of Emperor Arcadius and Empress Eudoxia, who were members of his church.<sup>49</sup> In one particular sermon, Chrysostom contrasted the aristocratic women’s donning of golden ornaments with the chains worn by the apostle Paul, explicitly singling out Eudoxia.<sup>50</sup> On another occasion, he severely rebuked Eudoxia publicly for her seizure of a vineyard from a poor widow whose husband had been sent into exile, comparing her to the Old Testament Queen Jezebel who had seized the vineyard of Naboth for her husband.<sup>51</sup>

The repeated public rebukes of Eudoxia—in addition to the machinations of the power-hungry Theophilus, Bishop of Alexandria, whose own candidate for the See of Constantinople had been snubbed—and the sordid “Affair of the Long Brothers,” culminated in Chrysostom’s condemnation at the Synod of Oak in 403, and subsequent exile.<sup>52</sup> His deposition instigated a wave of protest aimed at the imperial family and the bishops who convened the kangaroo court at the Synod of Oak. On Chrysostom’s first night in exile, a severe earthquake allegedly struck the capital, causing a terrified Eudoxia to recall him to his post, fearing she was under the judgment of God for deposing the prophet of God.<sup>53</sup>

After Chrysostom’s return, he continued his acerbic attacks on the vices of the capital city. Events came to a head when a resplendent silver statue of the empress Eudoxia was erected near the church and dedicated on a Sunday. The dedication of singing, dancing, and all manner of revelry interrupted the service at the Hagia Sophia, and Chrysostom unleashed a verbal barrage against the empress for her temerity in dedicating a statue to her own glory on a Sunday.

45. Krupp, *Shepherding the Flock of God*, 193.

46. Volz, “The Genius of Chrysostom’s Preaching.”

47. Hartney, *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City*, 20–21.

48. *Ibid.*, 21.

49. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 109.

50. *Ibid.*, 150–51.

51. *Ibid.*, 170–71.

52. *Ibid.*, 211–28.

53. *Ibid.*, 232. Some scholars believe it was not an earthquake but the death of Eudoxia’s infant child that caused her to recall Chrysostom.

Upon receiving a transcript of the sermon, Eudoxia was livid and started the process of forming another synod against him. Unfazed, Chrysostom publicly compared her to Herodias, who wanted the head of John the Baptist,<sup>54</sup> stating, “Again Herodias is enraged, again she dances, again she seeks to have John’s head on a platter.”<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, Chrysostom’s refusal to compromise and his piercing messages resulted in his second exile<sup>56</sup> and eventual death in 407.<sup>57</sup>

It would be a mistake to assume that Chrysostom’s blistering sermons intimidated a lack of love for his people, when in fact, it was a lack of faith in human nature that attracted his ire.<sup>58</sup> He once described his congregation as a “wild, unruly bunch,”<sup>59</sup> stating, “It generally happens that the greater part of the church consists of ignorant people. . . . Scarcely one or two present have acquired real discrimination.”<sup>60</sup> His frustration with his congregation’s obtuseness boiled over in one particular sermon evoking a critical response,

My sermons are applauded merely from custom, then everyone runs off to [horse racing] again and gives much more applause to the jockeys, showing indeed unrestrained passion for them! There they put their heads together with great attention, and say with mutual rivalry, ‘This horse did not run well, this one stumbled,’ and one holds to this jockey and another to that. No one thinks any more of my sermons, nor of the holy and awesome mysteries that are accomplished here.<sup>61</sup>

Yet despite his frustration with his flock and constant rebukes, he loved them and sought their transformation, as evidenced in his tender words at the conclusion of one of his sermons:

My reproach of you today is severe, but I beg you to pardon it. It is just that my soul is wounded. I do not speak in this way out of enmity but out of care for you. Therefore, I will now strike a gentler tone. . . . I know that your intentions are good and that you realize your mistakes. The realization of the greatness of one’s sin is the first step on the way to virtue. . . . You must offer assurance that you will not fall into the same sins again.<sup>62</sup>

During Chrysostom’s preaching ministry, no group of people escaped his prophetic arrows. Unfortunately, his acerbic language has, at times, misrepresented his intent, as is the case with his series of controversial sermons titled *Against the*

54. *Ibid.*, 238–40.

55. *Ibid.*, 240.

56. *Ibid.*, 243–49.

57. *Ibid.*, 285.

58. Volz, “The Genius of Chrysostom’s Preaching.”

59. Mayer, 108.

60. Volz, “The Genius of Chrysostom’s Preaching.”

61. Krupp, “Golden Tongue and Iron Will.”

62. Volz, “The Genius of Chrysostom’s Preaching.”

*Jews*. During his first year as the preacher in Antioch, he preached a series of sermons designed to dissuade his people from attending and participating in the upcoming Jewish feasts and ceremonies, with which the people held an inexplicable fascination. Chrysostom assailed the Jews in the coarsest language, calling them demon-possessed “Christ-Killers,” claiming their religion was a filthy plague.<sup>63</sup>

This series of sermons has left an unfortunate stain on the legacy of John Chrysostom, as some historians have postulated that Chrysostom’s homilies influenced Luther’s anti-Semitic writings and ultimately were used by the Nazis to justify their desired extermination of the Jews. But to brand Chrysostom as an anti-Semite is to be ignorant of his context. In fact, it wasn’t the Jews as a race that Chrysostom castigated, as he often praised the Old Testament prophets and writers. It was, in fact, the Judaizers, who were intent on seducing Christians to follow the Mosaic Law that he condemned. The vitriolic language he used to describe the Jews was simply a rhetorical device meant to shock people into seeing the danger of falling under the spell of the religion of Judaism, from which Christ had already set them free.<sup>64</sup>

#### 4. Chrysostom the Innovator

Well known for his oratorical genius and astringent sermons, an often-ignored facet of John Chrysostom’s ministry was his innovative preaching methods. Chrysostom’s major innovation derived from his championing of a literal, historical-grammatical process of interpreting Scripture. As a young man, he had studied the Scriptures in an ascetic school under Diodore, who taught him a literal approach to interpretation as opposed to the Alexandrian method of allegory popularized by Origen, which sought to avoid exegetical dilemmas.<sup>65</sup>

In an exposition on the Gospel of John, he takes time to caution his audience concerning the necessity of proper scriptural interpretation, saying,

If anyone unpracticed in the art undertakes to work in a mine, he will get no gold, but confounding all aimlessly and together, will undergo a labor unprofitable and pernicious: so also they who understand not the method of Holy Scripture, nor search out its peculiarities and laws, but go over all its points carelessly and in one manner, will mix the gold with earth, and never discover the treasure which is laid up in it. I say this now because the passage before us contains much gold, not indeed manifest to view, but covered over with much obscurity, and therefore by digging and purifying we must arrive at the legitimate sense.<sup>66</sup>

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63. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 62–64.

64. Orthodox Christian Information Center. “Was John Chrysostom Anti-Semitic?” <http://orthodoxinfo.com/phronema/antisemitism.aspx> (accessed November 25, 2011).

65. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 18–19.

66. John Chrysostom, “In John 40,1,” quoted in Krupp, *Shepherding the Flock of God*, 76.

On another occasion in which he is expositing Galatians 4:24, he is quick to explain the apostle Paul's use of the term "allegory," so as not to give any opening for an allegorical interpretation, "Contrary to usage, he calls a type an allegory; his meaning is as follows: this history not only declares that which appears on the face of it, but announces somewhat farther, whence it is called an allegory. And what has it announced? No less than all the things now present."<sup>67</sup>

According to Chrysostom, each portion of Scripture should be interpreted by itself and in the context of other passages, which is a hallmark of the historical-grammatical method. In addition, he also sought to interpret passages in their historical-cultural context. In a sermon on 1 Corinthians 11, in which Paul forbids men to wear long hair, Chrysostom explains that long hair

was worn by those who belonged to the Greek philosophical schools, which would have made an impression on his hearers, as it would have recalled the public appearance of the emperor Julian in philosophical guise some twenty-five years earlier.<sup>68</sup>

The literal method espoused by Chrysostom became the standard rule for exegesis in the Antiochene segment of the church. Johannes Chrysostomus Bauer, the preeminent biographer of John Chrysostom in the twentieth century, calls him "The chief and almost the only successful representative of the exegetical principles of the school of Antioch."<sup>69</sup> Chrysostom's success in popularizing the literal method of interpretation can be seen in contemporary evangelicalism, in which the historical-grammatical method is central to scriptural exegesis.

Chrysostom's practice of preaching expositionally through the books of the Bible served as a further innovation. During the first three centuries of the church's existence, expository preaching was not widely practiced, as sermons tended to be more topically oriented. Yet, Chrysostom preached word-by-word and verse-by-verse through whole books of the Bible.<sup>70</sup> Over 800 extant sermons remain from Chrysostom's voluminous preaching,<sup>71</sup> covering nearly the entirety of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>72</sup> His method of expository preaching soon gained traction and began to be practiced by many preachers in years to come, including the erudite Thomas Aquinas and the reformer John Calvin.<sup>73</sup> Chrysostom's innovation lives on in the pulpits of the contemporary church as expository preaching has experienced a recrudescence, especially among the more reformed segment of evangelicalism.

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67. John Chrysostom, "In Gal. 4:24," quoted in Krupp, *Shepherding the Flock of God*, 76.

68. John Chrysostom, "In Gal. 4:24," quoted in Krupp, *Shepherding the Flock of God*, 77.

69. Atwater, *St. John Chrysostom: Pastor and Preacher*, 75.

70. John MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1997), 44.

71. Volz, "The Genius of Chrysostom's Preaching."

72. Atwater, *St. John Chrysostom: Pastor and Preacher*, 54.

73. Bradley Nassif. "The Starving Body of Christ." *Christian History*, April 2007 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/2007/issue94/3.11.html> (accessed November 26, 2011).

Though Chrysostom was a brilliant orator and able to speak with great rhetorical flourish, he was no mere sophist. He sought to teach people God's Word. In a day and age in which many speakers sought the accretion of praise for their oratorical prowess, Chrysostom's labored to make the Bible applicable to ordinary people. He constantly sought to bring the Scriptures alive so that all his audience might benefit,<sup>74</sup> fearing that if his hearers did not understand God's Word, they would continue in their sin and be damned.<sup>75</sup> We see evidence of his careful and patient approach to preaching in his comments during one discourse:

So that you do not spit out what you are given, I have not tipped the cup of education for you all at once, but I have cut it up for you into many days, providing you with a break from the work of listening on some days, so that what is put down should stick securely in your thoughts, my friends, and that you should receive what I am about to say next with a relaxed and mature soul.<sup>76</sup>

A related aspect of this innovation was his conviction that worship services should be made available to those who were forced to work and miss regular services. So, Chrysostom embarked upon holding services throughout the week during the day and evening to incorporate as many people as possible, a practice which annoyed the indolent clergy under his charge.<sup>77</sup> While making the Bible applicable seems to be axiomatic in the modern church, we have John Chrysostom to thank for its popularization.

One last innovation credited to Chrysostom was his attempt to compete with the civic events of his time. In Chrysostom's day, as in current times, many outside interests contended for the people's attention. When church services coincided with civic events such as horse races, or athletic contests, attendance lagged. He once complained to his congregation,

I have no idea what I shall say to you today. I see that since the Feast of Pentecost the attendance at divine service has fallen off, the Prophets neglected, the Apostles are little valued, the Fathers are set aside. . . . There is divine service once a week, and even this day you cannot spend without the cares of business. Some say they are poor and must take care of making their living, while others have urgent business. As a matter of fact the whole city is at the circus.<sup>78</sup>

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74. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 60.

75. Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity*, 91.

76. John Chrysostom, "De Laz 3.1," quoted in *Ibid.*, 92.

77. Volz, "The Genius of Chrysostom's Preaching."

78. John Chrysostom, "On Anna," quoted in Thomas K. Carroll. *Preaching the Word: Message of the Fathers of the Church*, vol. 11. (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984), 105.

To combat the attraction people felt for the banal amusements the culture offered, Chrysostom embarked upon a new strategy; he would seek to preach his best sermons on the days the civic events concurred with church services. The hope was that word would spread among the attendees on what a great sermon it was so that the missing would regret their absence. Every possible means was procured to get people in the church to hear the Word of God, which would transform their lives.

On one Sunday in the year 399, Chrysostom's patience would come to an end when his sermon was drowned out by the noise accompanying a race at the Hippodrome. Promptly approaching the authorities with his complaint, he demanded that the civic events be moved to another day of the week, to which it was agreed unless the emperor's birthday fell on a Sunday.<sup>79</sup> Such was the influence of Chrysostom that he was able to shut down the races on Sunday with his complaints. We see evidence of Chrysostom's innovative attempts to compete with public events and build attendance throughout modern church life, such as big days, illustrated sermons, and the promotion of special sermon series. Though he has been dead for over 1600 years, echoes of John Chrysostom's innovative legacy can be heard each week in pulpits worldwide.

## 5. Conclusion

In what ultimately came to be John Chrysostom's final sermon before his second exile and eventual death, he seemed to have a portent of what was soon to come:

The waters are raging, and the winds are blowing, but I have no fear, for I stand firmly upon a rock. What am I to fear? Is it death? Life to me means Christ, and death is gain. Is it exile? The earth and everything it holds belong to the Lord. Is it a loss of property? I brought nothing into this world, and I will bring nothing out of it. I have only contempt for the world and its ways, and I scorn its honors.<sup>80</sup>

Such was the steely resolve of the one called Golden Mouth. Though forced into an ignominious exile, Chrysostom continued to preach and write for three more years until his broken health failed him, resulting in his death in 407.<sup>81</sup> Thirty years after his banishment from Constantinople, his relics were returned accompanied by great pomp and circumstance. This included the public repentance of the new emperor Theodosius II, who wept in repentance over the injustices committed against the Golden Mouth by his parents.<sup>82</sup> His relics returned, his honor restored, he was given the title "Doctor of the Church."<sup>83</sup>

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79. Hartney, *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City*, 48–49.

80. Volz, "The Genius of Chrysostom's Preaching."

81. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 250–85.

82. *Ibid.*, 286–89.

83. Chrysostomus Bauer. "St. John Chrysostom." *Catholic Encyclopedia*. New Advent. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08452b.htm> (accessed on November 27, 2011).

In the history of the church, there has never been a preacher quite like John Chrysostom. While other preachers down through the ages may be identified as gifted communicators, zealous polemicists, or innovators, no one combined them all into such an effective display of pulpit genius as John Chrysostom. The sermons that saved one city and shook another instigated a series of reforms that continue to shape the church even today in the twenty-first century.

Yet all the laud and honor with which modern admirers have ascribed him would have horrified him. The reputed last words uttered by him were, "Glory to God in all things."<sup>84</sup> John Chrysostom lived and preached for the glory of God and the transformation of the city. Those of us who are called to the awesome responsibility of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ should seek the same and find inspiration and encouragement in our difficult and thankless task from the one they called Golden Mouth.

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84. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 285.