

**Pastoral Practice in the Preaching and Correspondence of John Chrysostom**

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## Introduction

When Jesus met with Peter on the beach in Galilee, he gave him a simple but profound charge: “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17). One of Christ’s final commands before his ascension and session at the Father’s right hand was to command the leaders of the church to provide for the well-being of the people of the church. Christ gave this charge to the apostles, and to the perpetual office he established through them – the office of elder. In the fourth century the church recovered from the imperial persecutions of the previous century, and great heroes of the faith wrestled fiercely against heresies arising from within the church. During this time, God raised up a faithful minister who would tend God’s sheep not primarily through theological construction or innovation, but through faithful preaching and genuine pastoral care. In his ministry, John Chrysostom demonstrated a commitment to pastoring well—feeding Christ’s sheep—through faithful preaching and, when providentially removed from the pulpit, through faithful written correspondence; in so doing Chrysostom provides the church with an imperfect but faithful model for how to pastor well.

## Chrysostom’s Preaching

John (ca. 347-407), whose rhetorical and homiletical abilities earned him in later centuries the moniker “Chrysostom”<sup>1</sup> is considered by many the greatest preacher of the Patristic age.<sup>2</sup> As preaching is an essential part of the apostolic doctrine (2 Tim. 4:1-2), the sermons of one of the foremost preachers in the Patristic era are essential to understanding pastoral care in

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<sup>1</sup> From the Greek, literally meaning “golden-mouthed.” Stephen Neill, *Chrysostom and His Message: A Selection from the Sermons of St. John Chrysostom of Antioch and Constantinople* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 9, *St. Chrysostom: On the Priesthood, Ascetic Treatises; Select Homilies and Letters; Homilies on the Statues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 5; N.R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power, Part One: The Age of the Early Church Fathers*, rev. ed. (London: Grace Publication Trust, 2002), 231.

the early church. Chrysostom's sermons demonstrate a preaching ministry that was creedally informed, practical rather than speculative, and eminently simple in its hermeneutical approach.

Chrysostom's preaching had a distinctly creedal emphasis. Chrysostom was ordained as a presbyter in 386, only five years after the Council of Constantinople revised the Nicene Creed.<sup>3</sup> It is evident from his writings and preaching that he was whole-hearted in his commitment to this ecumenical creed. In Chrysostom's estimation, the preaching of the Word was necessary for defending the Church of God against all manner of heretics and pagan philosophies. In a treatise written to his friend Basil of Caesarea on the ministry of the Word, Chrysostom listed Judaism, Marcionism, Manichaeism, Stoicism, Sabellianism, and Arianism as false teachings against which the preacher of God's Word must contend.<sup>4</sup> Chrysostom also painted a vivid picture of the precision needed, as teaching against one error could easily lead the preacher of God's Word into another error. He warned how preaching against Marcionism could lead to Judaizing, and how preaching against Judaizing could lead to Marcionism.<sup>5</sup> Describing how Sabellianism and Arianism must both be refuted, Chrysostom illustrated the need for precision:

There is every reason to fear that, while trying to aim a blow at one enemy, you will be struck by the other. If someone says that the Godhead is one, Sabellius distorts the expression at once, to favour his own madness. If, on the other hand, someone makes a distinction and says that the Father is one, the Son another, and the Holy Ghost another, up gets Arius, twisting the distinction of the Persons into a difference of Substance. We must shun and avoid the impious confusion of the one party and the mad division of the other by confessing that the Godhead of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost is one, but adding that there are three Persons. For by this means we shall be able to defend ourselves from the attacks of both.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Needham, *2000 Years, Part One*, 232.

<sup>4</sup> Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, ed. John Behr, trans. Graham Neville (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 116-118.

<sup>5</sup> Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, 117.

<sup>6</sup> Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, 118.

Cognizant of the theological debates of his age, Chrysostom urged a commitment to the preached Word of God as a sure defense of the church, and a creedal commitment as the surest way to protect the preaching. For Chrysostom, while there was no book but the Bible to be preached, the preaching of that Bible needed to be eminently creedal!

This creedal commitment in preaching was not just something Chrysostom urged his friend Basil to be faithful in doing, it was something he practiced himself. In a homily on the paralytic in Mark's gospel, Chrysostom began with a moving description of the care and wisdom God exhibits in his interactions with his people.<sup>7</sup> But Chrysostom not only offered his listeners encouragements based on the character of God, he made passionate exhortations to a creedally faithful understanding of Jesus Christ as co-equal with the Father: “[Jesus Christ] uttered these words<sup>8</sup> that He might use them as a starting-point and a pretext for proving His equality of rank with the Father.”<sup>9</sup> While the purpose of this homily focused more on the comfort Christ offers to sinners in trials, Chrysostom still used the opportunity to make sure his listeners understood the need to be orthodox in their understanding of Scripture.

Yet while creedal orthodoxy was of the utmost importance to Chrysostom, these profound theological truths were not to lead to idle philosophizing, but instead practical action. In his treatises to Basil, after illustrating the need to defend against heresies and false religions, Chrysostom lamented what he called the “idle speculation” of his own people: “[The idle speculations] are quite as many as the attacks from the outside, and they cause the teacher even

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<sup>7</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily On the Paralytic Let Down Though the Roof,” in Schaff, *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 212.

<sup>8</sup> “My son, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5, ESV).

<sup>9</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily on the Paralytic,” 218.

more trouble.”<sup>10</sup> Chrysostom warned that probing into questions which are unanswerable, or unprofitable was dangerous:

Some people, out of restless curiosity, want to elaborate idly and irresponsibly doctrines which are of no benefit to those who understand them, or else are incomprehensible... You will find that few are deeply concerned about faith and conduct, but the majority go in for these elaborate theories and investigate questions to which there is no answer and whose very investigations rouses God’s anger. For when we struggle to learn things which God himself did not will us to know, we shall never succeed...and we shall gain nothing but our own peril from the investigation.<sup>11</sup>

While rigorous in his commitment to the creedal formulations of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Chrysostom was aware of a temptation towards looking into those things which God had not revealed.

Chrysostom’s antidote to vain speculation was a vigorously practical pulpit ministry. Hans Von Campenhausen observes, “As a theologian [Chrysostom] was neither profound nor original.”<sup>12</sup> But instead of writing profound theological treatises, “we find him engaged...as a preacher and pastor entirely devoted to the practical service of the Church.”<sup>13</sup> Andrew Purves comments, “Preaching week by week, he was fearless in his exposition of the demands of Christian living.”<sup>14</sup> One particular area of practical Christian living that Chrysostom returned to again and again was almsgiving and generosity to the poor.

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<sup>10</sup> Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, 118.

<sup>11</sup> Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, 118-119.

<sup>12</sup> Hans Von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church*, trans. Stanley Godman (New York, NY: Pantheon Books Inc., 1959), 144. Schaff agrees with Von Campenhausen’s analysis: “[Chrysostom] was not an ecclesiastical statesman, like St. Ambrose, not a profound divine like St. Augustine, but a pure man, a practical Christian, a king of preachers” in *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church*, 133.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 36.

Chrysostom was radical in his exhortations that Christians be generous with their resources. In a homily on Acts,<sup>15</sup> Chrysostom painted a vivid picture of the happiness such generosity would bring about: “If this were done now, we should live more pleasant lives, both rich and poor.”<sup>16</sup> Chrysostom explained the details of what it would look like for all to have everything in common, for wealth to be fairly distributed, and for the church to truly bear the cost of caring for the poor. Yet he did not press further than asking them to imagine this. Catharine Ross explains, “St. John...[realized] his hearers [were] not ready for so radical a change, even within the Christian community.”<sup>17</sup> While in his heart Chrysostom wished that all could live the ascetic life, he realized this was not feasible. Instead, “[Chrysostom concentrated] realistically on the opportunities for good works, alms-giving, and hospitality, which were...open to each person.”<sup>18</sup>

A clear example of Chrysostom’s bold exhortations to almsgiving is in a homily he preached in Antioch during the winter months of 387, when he saw poor beggars exposed to the elements.<sup>19</sup> Chrysostom began by explaining that this sermon would be practical, and that it was preached on behalf of the beggars of the city, who were to him a “pitiful and most bitter

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<sup>15</sup> Acts 4:32 – “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.”

<sup>16</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily XI” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 11, *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans* ed. Schaff, trans. J. Walker et. al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 74.

<sup>17</sup> Catharine P. Roth, ed. and trans., *St. John Chrysostom On Wealth and Poverty*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 13.

<sup>18</sup> Roth, *Chrysostom On Wealth and Poverty*, 13. Here Roth illustrates an important point about Chrysostom’s preaching ministry. While he was willing to encourage faithful Christian living, Chrysostom often betrays a belief that the truly excellent Christian path is that of poverty and asceticism.

<sup>19</sup> Chrysostom, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 96, *St. John Chrysostom On Repentance and Almsgiving*, eds. Thomas P. Halton, et al., trans Gus George Christo (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), xvi, 131.

[spectacle].” He went on, “I thought it the worst inhumanity not to appeal on their behalf.”<sup>20</sup>

Chrysostom warned against Christians being overly critical in their appraisals of the poor.

Chrysostom urged his hearers not to assume that the sin of laziness led to the poverty they observed and not to assume that claims of disability or physical limitations were false.

Chrysostom allowed that the sin of laziness could be involved, but he argued that it was a forgivable sin. Chrysostom agreed that some beggars may be lying about physical ailments, but he claimed they did so “that by dramatizing their misfortunes they may deflect our cruelty and inhumanity.”<sup>21</sup> And while Chrysostom preached practically from the text, he was no moralizer. He tied the need to be kind in scrutinizing the poor to the need that each of his listeners had for grace:

And if God should examine minutely each of our issues as we investigate about the poor, we would not bring to pass for ourselves one single pardon or mercy. “*With the judgement you judge,*” He says, “*you shall be judged.*” Therefore, become a philanthropist and gentle toward your fellow-slave, and remit his many sins and have mercy upon him, so that you too may become worthy of the same favourable verdict from God.<sup>22</sup>

Yet the practical exhortations that Chrysostom drew from the text were so poignant not simply because of the skill with which Chrysostom delivered the homily, but because of his ability to demonstrate the exhortation’s rootedness in the text of Scripture.

In Chrysostom’s pastoral ministry, he modeled a hermeneutic that was plain, understandable, and practical for his people. For Chrysostom, the Scriptures were not a puzzle to be solved, but simply a book to be read and understood. The Scriptures, in Chrysostom’s estimation, could be understood by all. Schaff says, “The Scriptures were his daily food, and he

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<sup>20</sup> Chrysostom, *On Repentance and Almsgiving*, 131.

<sup>21</sup> Chrysostom, *On Repentance and Almsgiving*, 146.

<sup>22</sup> Chrysostom, *On Repentance and Almsgiving*, 148, emphasis original.

again and again recommended their study to laymen as well as ministers.”<sup>23</sup> Von Campenhausen adds, “The homilies of Chrysostom are still readable today as Christian sermons....Because they are...so *simple*, and so clear-headed.”<sup>24</sup> Chrysostom longed for his people to hear Gods word simply preached: “I cannot let a day pass without feeding you with the treasures of the Scriptures.”<sup>25</sup> As a preacher, Chrysostom found comfort in feeding his flock, and strength in the exercising of his call to preach: “Preaching makes me healthy; As soon as I open my mouth, all tiredness is gone.”<sup>26</sup> Chrysostom went so far as to preach to Goths and have portions of Scripture translated into their vernacular.<sup>27</sup> In Chrysostom’s ministry, the Scriptures were for all, and beneficial to all.

Chrysostom’s method of interpretation was simple and rooted in the text of Scripture. The Scriptures acted as an anchor, steadyng Chrysostom on the Word of God, rather than being a springboard to strange, extra-biblical philosophical ideas which are found in other patristic methods of interpretation. Stephen Neill describes Chrysostom’s approach as always letting the Scriptures speak for themselves, on their own terms. He writes, “Chrysostom works steadily through the chosen passage; he tries to let it speak to himself, and hopes that in this way it will speak to his hearers....The sermon is a real exposition of the word of God; and often that sharp and piercing word will find its target in the hearts of the hearers.”<sup>28</sup> In Chrysostom’s pastoral ministry, simple hermeneutics informing practical and creedal sermons was an essential aspect.

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<sup>23</sup> Schaff, *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church*, 144, emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup> Chrysostom, quoted by Von Campenhausen in *The Fathers of the Greek Church*, 133.

<sup>26</sup> Chrysostom, quoted by Von Campenhausen in *The Fathers of the Greek Church*, 134.

<sup>27</sup> Schaff, *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Neill, *Chrysostom and His Message*, 17.

## Chrysostom's Correspondence

While Chrysostom's creedal, practical, and hermeneutically simple preaching has certainly earned him a reputation as a preacher *par excellence*, his pastoral correspondence also demonstrates his commitment to feeding Christ's sheep by pastoring well. Mayer and Allen comment on Chrysostom's writing, "Letter writing is another major avenue for pastoral care....It is clear that...John would have continually engaged in writing to colleagues, former parishioners, contacts and friends."<sup>29</sup> It is also noteworthy that all of Chrysostom's extant letters were written during the period of his exile.<sup>30</sup> In 403, Chrysostom fell out of favor of the Byzantine Empress, Eudoxia, by allegedly comparing her to Herodias and himself to John the Baptist. Whether Chrysostom made such a claim is disputed, but it was reported to Eudoxia, and Chrysostom spent the rest of his life in exile.<sup>31</sup> Robbed of his pulpit, Chrysostom turned to the pen to be the instrument of his pastoral work.

Chrysostom's letters demonstrate a continuing pastoral desire for the well-being of the church, and of individual Christians. One example of this desire is in Chrysostom's willingness to confront men caught in sin and his aim to see them repentant and restored. In a letter to Salustius, a presbyter in Constantinople, Chrysostom confronted him for being derelict in duty: "I was more than usually upset when I heard that you and Theophilus the presbyter have lapsed."<sup>32</sup> The lapse into which these men had fallen was failure to attend and participate in worship. In the first ten months of the year, Salustius had only preached five times, and

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<sup>29</sup> Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, *John Chrysostom* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 44.

<sup>30</sup> Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 196.

<sup>31</sup> See Schaff, *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 15-16.

<sup>32</sup> Chrysostom, "To Salustius" in Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 200.

Theophilus had not preached at all. Chrysostom similarly challenged Theophilus, “I was exceedingly upset when I saw that both you and Salustius the presbyter attend worship irregularly, and this news caused me greater than usual sorrow.”<sup>33</sup> Chrysostom then urged in his letter to each man that they “get things in order,”<sup>34</sup> and “correct this particular carelessness.”<sup>35</sup> Chrysostom followed these letters with another to a wealthy patriarch in Constantinople, Theodore. Theodore was evidently a friend of Salustius, and Chrysostom implored Theodore to ensure that Salustius mended his ways: “I am writing to your worthiness on account of Salustius, since I know you are an extreme admirer of his....Please, now grant both yourself and us the most enormous favour and give him an extremely rude awakening, and don’t allow him to sleep on the job or be idle.”<sup>36</sup> Chrysostom, as an elder statesman in the church, committed himself to being faithful in his administrative pastoral duties, even in exile.

Chrysostom’s letters also demonstrate a heart of genuine care for those in pain, grief, and trouble. To Studius, a man who was grieving the loss of a dear friend, Chrysostom offered gospel comfort and assurance. Chrysostom urged Studius to “impose a limit on his grief,” reminding him that in death believers “move from the contests to the prizes, from the wrestling bouts to the victors’ crowns, from the raging sea to the tranquil harbour.”<sup>37</sup> Chrysostom also wrote letters on behalf of those who were in trouble. Writing during the winter months, Chrysostom petitioned Valentinus, a wealthy aristocrat, to help a group of widows and virgins who were nearly in a

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<sup>33</sup> Chrysostom, “To Theophilus” in Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 200.

<sup>34</sup> Chrysostom, “To Salustius” in Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 200.

<sup>35</sup> Chrysostom, “To Theophilus” in Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 201

<sup>36</sup> Chrysostom, “To Theodore” in Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 202.

<sup>37</sup> Chrysostom, “To Studius” in Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 199.

state of famine: “We flee to your hands as to a harbour, that you might put a stop to this famine-induced shipwreck. And so I ask you and I ask you strenuously...to give aid.”<sup>38</sup> In a letter to Theodora, a woman who had been sinned against, Chrysostom encouraged her to be forgiving.<sup>39</sup> He reminded her of the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:21-35), and how those who have been forgiven much have the same obligation.<sup>40</sup> Despite his exile, Chrysostom persisted in being involved in the pastoral support of his people and his friends.

There is perhaps no stronger example of this pastoral care than Chrysostom’s correspondence with Olympias, a widowed aristocrat-turned-deaconess from Constantinople. Olympias was a close friend of Chrysostom and was distraught at his exile. While many of Chrysostom’s letters were brief and to the point, his letters to Olympias were lengthy and thoughtful. Schaff comments on these letters: “To [Olympias] he revealed his inner being, upon her virtues he lavished extravagant praise, which offends modern tastes as fulsome flattery.”<sup>41</sup> In one letter Chrysostom had recently become aware of great despondency in Olympias, affecting her body and her soul. Interested in the well-being of her physical body, Chrysostom urged Olympias to be faithful in using medicines: “I beseech you, dear lady, to employ various and skilled physicians, and to take medicines which avail to correct these conditions.”<sup>42</sup> Yet

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<sup>38</sup> Chrysostom, “To Valentinus” in Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 201.

<sup>39</sup> Chrysostom, “To Theodora” in Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 197.

<sup>40</sup> In this letter Chrysostom seems to suggest that forgiveness is meritorious and will earn a greater right to forgiveness from God, betraying a faulty doctrine of justification which pervades much of his preaching and writing.

<sup>41</sup> Schaff, *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 17. Chrysostom thus places himself in a line of godly ministers who carried on extensive correspondence with women. John Knox’s correspondence with Anne Lok and Samuel Rutherford’s correspondence with prominent Scottish noblewomen constitute examples in the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition. See Susan M. Felch, “‘Deir Sister’: The Letters of John Knox to Anne Vaughan Lok,” *Renaissance and Reformation*, 19, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 47-68; Rutherford’s letters to Ladies Kenmure, Culross, Boyd, Kilconquhar, et al. in *Letters of Samuel Rutherford: A Selection* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973).

<sup>42</sup> Chrysostom, “Letters to Olympias” in Schaff, *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 293.

Chrysostom realized that the despondency into which Olympias had fallen was not merely physical, but spiritual. Olympias' despondency was so great, that she was even tempted towards suicide. Chrysostom warned her, "In this excessive infirmity of yours you have a perpetual executioner residing with you."<sup>43</sup> This was not the first time Chrysostom had attempted to encourage her: "Listen *once more* whilst I try to heal thy wounds of thy despondency by repeating the same incantations: 'for me to write the same things,' it is said, 'to me indeed is not grievous, and for you it is safe.'"<sup>44</sup> Chrysostom proceeded to encourage Olympias in her suffering by having her consider Job, "that greatest hero of endurance."<sup>45</sup> Citing Paul, Chrysostom explained to Olympias that while to depart and be with Christ is truly far better, it is often necessary for the sake of the church to abide in the flesh.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout his correspondence with men and women, laypeople and ordained officers, Chrysostom demonstrated a love for the brethren and a pastoral desire to see saints built up and God glorified. Removed from them by difficult providences, Chrysostom labored hard to continue faithfully in his pastoral responsibilities.

### **Lessons and Cautions from Chrysostom's Ministry**

Aspects of Chrysostom's ministry present the church with a model for how to pastor well. Chrysostom stands out among the early church as a faithful minister and a champion of the plain-sense interpretation of Scripture. He is an example for modern pastoral ministry, and especially for modern preaching. In Chrysostom, John Calvin found an example of faithful

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<sup>43</sup> Chrysostom, "Letters to Olympias" in Schaff, *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 296.

<sup>44</sup> Chrysostom, "Letters to Olympias" in Schaff, *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 294, emphasis added. Chrysostom quotes Phil. 3:1.

<sup>45</sup> Chrysostom, "Letters to Olympias" in Schaff, *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 294.

<sup>46</sup> Chrysostom, "Letters to Olympias" in Schaff, *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 295.

exegesis. Richard Gamble comments on Calvin's use of Chrysostom, "It is the method of exegesis that Chrysostom propounds that gives him such great value, a method that Calvin incorporates at least in part, as his own."<sup>47</sup> John Walchenbach adds, "Of all the Fathers, Calvin thus awards Chrysostom first place in the exposition of Scripture."<sup>48</sup> Calvin praised Chrysostom: "The outstanding merit of our author, Chrysostom, is that it was his supreme concern always not to turn aside even to the slightest degree from the genuine, simple sense of Scripture and to allow himself no liberties by twisting the plain meaning of the words."<sup>49</sup> Chrysostom's adherence and submission to the plain meaning of the text is a model for Christian preachers in all ages.

Chrysostom also presents the church with warnings, and tendencies to be avoided. In his preaching and correspondence, he was often more abrasive than was advisable. A contemporary of Chrysostom, Palladius, observed, "[Chrysostom] did not trouble himself to be agreeable to any chance person."<sup>50</sup> Schaff notes much the same tendency, "With a little more worldly wisdom and less ascetic severity he might perhaps have conciliated and converted those whom he repelled by his pulpit fulminations."<sup>51</sup> A more winsome presence in the pulpit and in correspondence could have led to even more fruitfulness in his ministry.

There is no more famous warning of the danger of Chrysostom's propensity towards severity in the pulpit than in a series of eight homilies he preached against Jews and Judaizing

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<sup>47</sup> Richard C. Gamble, "Brevitas et Facilitas: Towards an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 9.

<sup>48</sup> John Robert Walchenbach, "John Calvin as Biblical Commentator: An Investigation Into Calvin's Use of John Chrysostom as an Exegetical Tutor" (PhD diss., Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1974), 30.

<sup>49</sup> John Calvin, quoted by Walchenbach, "John Calvin as Biblical Commentator," 30.

<sup>50</sup> Palladius, quoted by Purves in *Pastoral Theology*, 36.

<sup>51</sup> Schaff, *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 17.

Christians. The context in which Chrysostom preached these homilies is noteworthy. During the brief reign of Julian the Apostate (361-363), there was an attempt to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>52</sup> Even after that failed attempt, there was a growing syncretism between Jews and nominal Christians within the city of Antioch. Harken comments, “The [Judaizing] movement [in Antioch] was...distinctly marked with popular syncretism.”<sup>53</sup> To combat this threat to the Christians in his city, Chrysostom preached eight infamous homilies.

Chrysostom’s rhetorical skills were turned with full vigor against his enemy. He asked his audience, “Shall I tell you of [the Jews’] plundering, their covetousness, their abandonment of the poor, their thefts, their cheating in trade? The whole day long will not be enough to give you an account of these things.”<sup>54</sup> Chrysostom preached another homily against the Jews on a day when Christians in Antioch normally celebrated their martyrs. He defended his deviation from the expected topic: “The martyrs have a special hatred for the Jews since the Jews crucified him for whom they have a special love. The Jews said: ‘His blood be on us and on our children’; the martyrs poured out their own blood for him whom the Jews had slain. So the martyrs would be glad to hear this discourse.”<sup>55</sup> Chrysostom explained that because the Jews had crucified Christ, God’s perpetual judgement rested on them: “Is it not obvious that [God] hated [the Jews] and turned back his hand from [them] once and for all?”<sup>56</sup> Chrysostom encouraged his

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Harken, trans., “Introduction,” in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 68, *St. John Chrysostom: Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, ed. Hermigild Dressler, et al. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1977), xxix.

<sup>53</sup> Harken, “Introduction,” in *St. John Chrysostom: Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, xxx.

<sup>54</sup> Chrysostom, *St. John Chrysostom: Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, 25-26. Chrysostom was so impassioned in one of his homilies against the Jews that he became hoarse and lost his voice, cutting his sermon short: *ibid.*, 147.

<sup>55</sup> Chrysostom, *St. John Chrysostom: Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, 149.

<sup>56</sup> Chrysostom, *St. John Chrysostom: Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, 160.

congregation to engage in that same hatred: “Just as before, we keep right on turning our backs on them and hating them.”<sup>57</sup>

Robert Wilken comments on these sermons, “The ancients were not embarrassed by name-calling and obloquy. Yet the asperity of these homilies gives us pause. Still, there is no evidence that John’s homilies led to violence against Jews. His goal was to win back refractory members of the Church by shaming them, not do physical harm to the Jews.”<sup>58</sup> Wilken is observing an important point; it would be anachronistic to impose a post-World War 2 interpretation on Chrysostom’s homilies. Nevertheless, Paul Harkins is certainly correct when he writes, “Even if [Chrysostom] was motivated by an overzealous pastoral spirit, many of his remarks are patently anti-Semitic. For these objectively unchristian acts he cannot be excused, even if he is [a] product of his times.”<sup>59</sup> Scholarly debate about the context, content, and proper understanding of Chrysostom’s homilies against the Jews continues.<sup>60</sup>

There is a warning in Chrysostom’s homilies against arrogance, as Stephen Atkinson observed: “Sadly, church history is filled with a Gentile arrogance against the natural branches

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<sup>57</sup> Chrysostom, *St. John Chrysostom: Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, 171.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 123

<sup>59</sup> Harken, “Preface,” in *St. John Chrysostom: Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, x.

<sup>60</sup> Some apologists for Chrysostom insist that the homilies should properly be understood as being against Judaizing Christians and not the Jewish people. William LeRoy Mullen argues, “The polemics in question were directed toward Judaizing Christians, not the Jewish community as a whole” (“The Polemical Sermons of John Chrysostom Against the Judaizers: A Dramatistic Analysis” [PhD diss., University of Nebraska – Lincoln, 1990], 3). Mullen seems overly optimistic in his analysis. Chrysostom himself called his homily “a discourse against the Jews” (Chrysostom, *St. John Chrysostom: Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, 148). Nevertheless, while his homilies were demonstrably against the Jews, his aim was the restoration of wayward Christians. He ended each of his eight homilies with the same application to his congregation: go get those tempted towards Judaism and bring them back into the fold (Chrysostom, *St. John Chrysostom: Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, 33, 45, 70, 95, 144, 175, 203, 239).

[the Jewish people].”<sup>61</sup> Chrysostom’s comments serve as a reminder that an irenic spirit and commitment to speaking the truth in love will win more to the cause of Christ than polemics and slanderous, hateful speech.

### **Conclusion**

In his ministry, John Chrysostom demonstrated a commitment to pastoring well—feeding Christ’s sheep—through faithful preaching and, when providentially removed from the pulpit, through faithful written correspondence; in so doing Chrysostom provides the church with an imperfect but faithful model for how to pastor well. He had failures of doctrine and failures of practice, to be sure. Yet what Schaff writes about his piety can certainly be said of his whole ministry, “We must look at the spirit, rather than the form of his piety, which bore the stamp of his age.”<sup>62</sup> Christ’s command to feed the sheep still stands, and by holding fast to what is good in the ministry of Chrysostom, the church can be better equipped to tend the flock of God.

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<sup>61</sup> Stephen Atkinson, “Romans 9-11” (chapel sermon, Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, PA: March 19, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPP8EsHfjlc>. Atkinson quoted Chrysostom specifically, “God has always hated the Jews, therefore I hate the Jews.” Atkinson responded bluntly, “Sorry John, you’re wrong. Read Romans 11:28.”

<sup>62</sup> Schaff, *A Select Library*, vol. 9, 16.

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