Between Exegesis and Tradition:

The Influence of Chrysostom's Exegetical Method

On His Views Concerning the Offices of the Church

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Introduction

John Chrysostom, the "Golden-Mouth," was born in c. A.D. 349 to a family of means in the prosperous city of Antioch, the capital of Syria. Despite the lack of information about his childhood years, we know that his father Secundus, who was a distinguished military officer, died during John's infancy, leaving Anthusa widowed at the age of twenty, who then devoted her life completely to the education of her two children.[1] Anthusa's piety and commitment to the widowhood would have a deep impact on John's early life,[2] as well as on his ministry and writings later on.[3]

Chrysostom received the finest education in Greek philosophy under the famous Libanius, and excelled in the art of rhetoric, which would providentially help shape his later ministry, as the foremost preacher of the Greek church.[4] Despite his brilliance in the Greek studies and thought and a promising career as a lawyer, his study of Scriptures along with the examples of his mother and close friends led him into a gradual life change, so at the age of 23, after three years of catechumens class, he was baptized by Meletius the Confessor, by this

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1. Philip Schaff, "Prolegomena: The Life and Work of St. John Chrysostom." In *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (NPNF)*, vol. IX (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 5.

2. Chrysostomus Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, trans. M. Gonzaga, vol. I (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1958), 3–5.

3. See, e. g., John Chrysostom, "Letter to a Young Widow," in *NPNF*, vol. IX, §2: ". . . For once when I was still a young man I know that the sophist who taught me. . . expressed admiration for my mother before a large company. . . . and when I told him that she was forty years of age of which twenty had elapsed since she lost my father he was astonished and uttered a loud exclamation, and turning to those present 'Heavens!' cried he 'what women there are amongst the Christians.' So great is the admiration and praise enjoyed by widowhood not only amongst ourselves, but also amongst those who are outside the Church."

4. Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 33.

signifying "an entire renunciation of this world and dedication to the service of Christ."[5] Shortly after, he was appointed as a lector by Meletius, who had seen in him the aptitude and character of a future church minister.[6]

However, Chrysostom's heart belonged to monastic life, and even before he could retire to the desert, he had already adopted a strictly ascetic discipline. After the death of his mother (c. A.D. 374), it was finally possible for him to withdraw to a monastery in the mountains south of Antioch, where he spent six years.[7] Those years would bear a tremendous influence on Chrysostom's later teaching on asceticism and uncompromising morals. As one may observe, from his surviving writings, "scarcely any other of the Greek ecclesiastical writers devoted all their works so completely to the service of morals and the ascetic life, as he has."[8]

With his health greatly impaired, Chrysostom saw himself forced to return to the church in Antioch, where he was immediately ordained deacon by Meletius in A.D. 380 or 381, and presbyter by Flavian in 386. Through his sixteen or seventeen years of pastorate there, Chrysostom had a lively preaching ministry, delivering some of his most notorious sermons on Scriptures and social concerns. Also, around this time he may have composed his treatise on pastoral theology, wherein he stresses mainly the gravity of the task and his inadequacy.[9]

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5. Schaff, "Prolegomena," 6.

6. Palladius, "Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom," ed. Robert T. Meyer, in *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, ed. Johannes Quasten, Walter J. Burghardt, and Thomas Comerford Lawler, vol. 45 (New York, Newman, 1985), 34, 35.

7. Schaff, "Prolegomena," 9.

8. Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, vol. I, 373.

9. John Chrysostom, "Treatise Concerning the Christian Priesthood," in *NPNF*, vol. IX.

In A.D. 397, Emperor Arkadian appointed Chrysostom to the bishopric of Constantinople, where he preached with the same vigor and led various reformations of the abuses and scandals in the church. But his reforming zeal affected his popularity, and caused him to incur the hatred of Empress Eudoxia, whereby he was banished first to Armenia, then farther away, to Pityus, by the Black Sea, but died on his way, on September 14th, A.D. 407.[10]

Chrysostom was a talented orator, an enthusiast of asceticism, and a zealous reformer of morals. But above all, he was a passionate and effective preacher. Among his extant sermons are series on Genesis, Psalms, Matthew, John, Acts, and all Pauline Epistles, including Hebrews, besides numerous seasonal and thematic homilies. His biblical sermons followed a verse-by-verse exegetical method, typical of the Antiochene school, which sought to explain the meaning of the biblical text in its historical-grammatical context, as intended by the original authors, in contrast to the allegorical method which prevailed in his days.[11] "He always tries to derive the meaning of Scripture from Scripture itself, and his references to tradition are relatively few."[12]

John Chrysostom's exegetical method allowed him to attain to a more biblical view of the offices of the church, sometimes in conflict with the prevailing tradition of his days. The greatness of the impact of Chrysostom's works on pastoral theology is hard to measure, so this research will focus on his more unique teachings on the ministry that derive directly from his use of historical-grammatical exegesis.

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10. Berthold Altaner, *Patrology*, 2nd ed, trans. Hilda C. Graef (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 374–376.

11. Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, vol. I, 319.

12. Georges Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. VII, ed. Richard S. Haugh, trans. Catherine Edmunds (Vaduz, Europa: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), 261.

Chrysostom's Exegesis

Since the time of the apostles, the church has worked incessantly towards a sound biblical hermeneutics. Whereas the fathers agreed on divine inspiration and authority of Scriptures, there was still uncertainty on how to attain to the correct interpretation, one that would be both true to the text and spiritually profitable.[13] Seeking to address the issue, by the third century, at least two distinct schools of interpretation had been established.[14]

The Alexandrian exegetical school had as its most prominent figure none other than Origen (A.D. 185–253), and adopted a predominantly allegorical method. Origen had a high view of Scriptures, but he believed in a three-fold sense of the text: the moral, the spiritual, and the allegorical senses. The moral sense is more literal, and has to do with the application of the text to the soul. The spiritual sense is related to the impending fulfillment of types and shadows throughout Scriptures. And the allegorical sense concerns the secret mysteries of God's activities towards men.[15] This method allowed the Alexandrians to derive a broad range of interpretations to one single passage, and far too often led to impositions on the text.[16]

On the other hand, Chrysostom, as a student of Diodor of Tarsus, excelled in the Antiochene school, and used a much more objective exegetical method, based on the linguistic connections already present in the text. He held that scriptural inspiration extends beyond dogmatic and moral theology, thus also including matters scientific and historical.[17]

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13. Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*, 40.

14. Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God*, vol. 3, *God's People in the Western World* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2021), 105.

15. *Ibid*., 105, 106.

16. Schaff, "Prolegomena," 18.

17. Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, vol. I, 318.

Chrysostom did not limit his exegesis to a linguistic analysis of the text. Rather, he sought to derive the true meaning intended by the author. Thus, he states in one of his homilies on Galatians that "it is not right course to weigh the mere words, nor examine the language by itself, as many errors will be the consequence, but to attend to the intention of the writer,"[18] reasoning that the apostle Paul's not coming to Jerusalem to consult with the other apostles[19] was not a sign of arrogance on his part, but rather of the dignity of his own commission: "and therefore he says, 'I conferred not with flesh and blood;' for it would have been extremely absurd for one who had been taught of God, afterwards to refer himself to men."[20]

In place of allegory, in order to derive spiritual significance from a passage, Chrysostom made frequent use of the concept of an image or type.[21] A good representation of his understanding of typology and fulfillment may be found in his commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews.

> For as in painting, so long as one [only] draws the outlines, it is a sort of "shadow:" but when one has added the bright paints and laid in the colors, then it becomes "an image." Something of this kind also was the Law. . . . The types therefore contain the figure only, not the power; just as in images, the image has the figure of the man, not the power. So that the reality and the type have [somewhat] in common with one another. For the figure exists equally in both, but not the power.[22]

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18. John Chrysostom, "Commentary and Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to the Galatians and Ephesians," in *NPNF*, vol. XIII (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 11.

19. Gal. 1:16, 17 KJV.

20. Chrysostom, "Galatians and Ephesians," 11.

21. Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, 259, 260.

22. John Chrysostom, "The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *NPNF*, vol. XIV (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), XVII.5.

Chrysostom provides another lesson on typology when he comments on the use of the words "grace for grace" in the gospel of John:[23]

> What grace, for what? For the old, the new. . . . There was a covenant, and there is a covenant.[24] . . . There was a sanctification, and there is a sanctification: there was a baptism, and there is a Baptism: there was a sacrifice, and there is a Sacrifice: there was a temple, and there is a temple: there was a circumcision, and there is a circumcision; and so too there was a "grace," and there is a "grace." But the words in the first case are used as types, in the second as realities, preserving the sameness of sound, though not of sense. So in patterns and figures, the shape of a man scratched with white lines upon a black ground is called a man as well as that which has received the correct coloring; and in the case of statues, the figure whether formed of gold or of plaster, is alike called a statue, though in the one case as a model, in the other as a reality. Do not then, because the same words are used, suppose that the things are identical, not yet diverse either; for in that they were models they did not differ from the truth; but in that they merely preserved the outline, they were less than the truth.[25]

At another place, he clarifies the use of the word "allegory" by the apostle Paul,[26] saying: "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 hath it announced? no less than all the things now present."[27]

Due to his efforts to stay true to the historical-grammatical context, Chrysostom had to rely much less on church tradition, and was able to let Scriptures speak for themselves more effectively. He did not deny the use of tradition altogether, but has sometimes reached conclusions that diverged from the generally accepted tradition of his days.

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23. John 1:16, 17 KJV.

24. cf. Jer. 31:31 KJV.

25. John Chrysostom, "The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. John," in *NPNF*, vol. XIV, XIV.1, 2.

26. Gal. 4:24 KJV.

27. Chrysostom, "Galatians and Ephesians," 34.

Chrysostom on the Priesthood

On Presbyters and Bishops

The apostles and their immediate successors testify in one voice that Christ had commanded only two continued church offices: those of presbyter and deacon.[28] The New Testament authors and such early sources as Clement of Rome, the Didache, and Irenæus have used the terms presbyter and bishop interchangeably, as referring to one and the same office of authority in the church. However, from Ignatius onward a shift may be observed in the use of the two terms, as the hierarchical structure of the church gradually developed.[29]

In the fourth century, bishops and archbishops gained oversight and authority over large areas, and exercised influence in matters both spiritual and civil.[30] With the challenges that arose out of the new status of Christianity as state religion, the church looked to her bishops for guidance on matters of unity and orthodoxy.[31] As a deacon and then a priest of the church in Antioch, Chrysostom paid the deepest respect to his patriarch.[32] And later, as the patriarch of Constantinople himself, he would set forth an example of character, moral zeal, and care for the poor.[33]

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28. Phil. 1:1 KJV.

29. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 491–494.

30. *Ibid*., vol. III, 263–265.

31. Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, vol. 1, *The Age of the Early Church Fathers* (Fearn, Scotland: Christians Focus, 2022), 146, 147.

32. A beautiful record of their relationship may be found in Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, vol. I, 390–395.

33. See, e.g., Palladius, "Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom," 38–40.

However, Chrysostom's exegesis followed a different direction. Early, in his pastoral theology treatise,[34] one could have observed that he had treated of the priesthood without making a clear distinction between presbyter and bishop.[35] It is remarkable that he chose to use the more general term "priest" in connection with the promise of the keys of the kingdom.[36]

> For they who inhabit the earth and make their abode there are entrusted with the administration of things which are in Heaven, and have received an authority which God has not given to angels or archangels. . . . and what priests do here below God ratifies above, and the Master confirms the sentence of his servants. . . . What authority could be greater than this?[37]

Chrysostom's exegesis confirms that he had a more biblically-informed view of the use of the official designations, as observed in his first homily on Philippians, where he asserts that "then they still interchanged the titles."[38] Furthermore, commenting on the qualifications required of church officers in 1 Timothy 3, he provided a lengthier explanation of the matter, that the apostle,

> Discoursing of Bishops, and having described their character, and the qualities which they ought to possess, and having passed over the order of Presbyters, he proceeds to that of Deacons. The reason of this omission was, that between Presbyters and Bishops there was no great difference. Both had undertaken the office of Teachers and Presidents in the Church, and what he has said concerning Bishops is applicable to Presbyters. For they are only superior in having the power of ordination, and seem to have no other advantage over Presbyters.[39]

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34. Chrysostom, "Treatise Concerning the Christian Priesthood."

35. Schaff, "Prolegomena," 8.

36. Matt. 18:18 KJV.

37. John Chrysostom, "The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians," in *NPNF*, vol. XIII, III.5.

38. Chrysostom, "Philippians," 184.

39. John Chrysostom, "The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon," in *NPNF*, vol. XIII, 441.

An alternate translation of the last clause is provided by Miller, who renders it: "and of this they seem to have defrauded the presbyters."[40] The fact that the verb πλεονεκτεῖν (G4122) along with its cognates is only used in Scriptures[41] in the negative sense of "to defraud, to wrong, or to take advantage of," strengthens his argument. However, it is hard to define what would be the precise semantic range of this verb in the late fourth century. Besides, we may question whether Chrysostom would have used such a verb in reference to his superiors (or fellow bishops) from the pulpit.

In this point, Chrysostom agrees with such giant theologians as Jerome and Ambrosiaster,[42] even though each had his distinct exegetical standpoint.[43] Whereas they agreed together that the distinct office of bishop was a later development, none of them has dared to assert that the church had no authority to proceed in such a manner, unless we follow Miller's reading of Chrysostom's commentary on 1 Timothy 3. However, Chrysostom himself has not expounded any further on this matter,[44] and was himself submissive and even friendly towards patriarch Flavian in Antioch and other bishops in the East and West, particularly later in life, when he corresponded with the bishop of Rome.[45]

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40. Samuel Miller, "Presbyterianism the Truly Primitive and Apostolic Constitution of the Church of Christ: Or, A View of the History, Doctrine, Government, and Worship of the Presbyterian Church," in *Manual of Presbytery*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1848), 34.

41. cf. 1 Thess. 4:5; 2 Cor. 7:2 KJV; etc.

42. Miller, "Presbyterianism," 32–34.

43. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God*, vol. 3, 152, 153.

44. Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, vol. I, 341, 342.

45. For a clear and concise analysis of Chrysostom's view on the primacy of the bishop of Rome, see Altaner, *Patrology*, 385, 386.

On the Centrality of Preaching

During a time in church history of increasing sacerdotalism, Chrysostom's emphasis on the preaching of God's word is refreshing. By the time that he lived, the notion of the universal priesthood of the saints had been gradually abandoned in favor of a priestly view of the ministry. Although analogies had already been drawn between the levitical priesthood and the church ministry in the writings of the first century, it was Cyprian (d. 258) who helped cement the teaching of a Christian priesthood offering the eucharist as a sacrifice of some sort, which became prevalent in the East and West. The center of Christian worship had gradually shifted from the Word to the sacraments.[46]

In a context where the priests' main duty was to perform the sacraments, it is remarkable that Chrysostom had such a prolific preaching ministry. No other Greek Father has left such an extensive literary legacy as him, composed, for the most part, of exegetical sermons.[47] He has series of expositions on Genesis, 58 Psalms, Isaiah, the gospels of Matthew and John, the Acts of the Apostles, and the totality of the Pauline Epistles, including Hebrews. Considering that his canon most likely did not include four of the catholic epistles nor the Apocalypse, he covered almost the totality of his New Testament.[48] Notably, he dedicates about one third of his treatise on pastoral theology to the subject of preaching and teaching.[49]

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46. cf. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. II, 121–131.

47. Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. III, *The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature: From the Council of Nicaea to the Council of Chalcedon* (Utrecht, Netherlands: Spectrum, 1960), 429, 430.

48. Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, vol. II, 317.

49. Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*, 49.

Chrysostom described biblical preaching as medicine to the soul, the one and only method for its healing. He stressed that even though the apostles had power to work miracles, they have always given primacy to gospel proclamation, thus preachers ought to be skilled in handling the Scriptures.[50] Using the example of the apostle Paul,[51] he prioritized sound biblical knowledge to gifts of oratory: "let a man's diction be poor and his composition simple and unadorned, but let him not be unskilled in the knowledge and accurate statement of doctrine."[52] And being himself gifted in both ways, he has also addressed the issue of pride.

> Let, therefore, the man who undertakes the strain of teaching never give heed to the good opinion of the outside world, not be dejected in soul on account of such persons; but laboring at his sermons so that he may please God, (For let this alone be his rule and determination, in discharging this best kind of workmanship, not acclamation, nor good opinions,) if indeed, he be praised by men, let him not repudiate their applause, and when his hearers do not offer this, let him not seek it, let him not be grieved.[53]

Nevertheless, the fact that Chrysostom had such a high view of biblical preaching does not mean that he reject the sacerdotal aspect of the ministry. It is not without a reason that he has been called in modern times "doctor eucharistiae:" in fact, his pastoral theology helped advance the priestly view of ministry even further than before.[54] He describes in vivid pictures the Christ sacrificed on the altar, being offered by a priest ministering among heavenly ranks, who are entrusted with the sacramental means of even regeneration itself.[55]

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50. Chrysostom, "Treatise Concerning the Christian Priesthood," IV.3, 4.

51. 2 Cor. 11:6 KJV.

52. Chrysostom, "Treatise Concerning the Christian Priesthood," IV.6.

53. *Ibid*., V.7.

54. Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. III, 479, 480.

55. Chrysostom, "Treatise Concerning the Christian Priesthood," III.4–6.

Chrysostom on the Diaconate

On the Office of the Seven

Early in church history, the office of the diaconate has been associated with the appointment of the seven men in Acts 6.[56] Even though the word διάκονος proper is not mentioned in the passage, the desired qualifications and work description provided match the later New Testament teaching on the diaconal office. Some churches have considered the number seven also to be significant: for instance, the church of Rome maintained this number for several generations, despite its growth.[57]

Although Scriptures never use the term deacon in reference to Stephen, nor Philip, nor the other five, early church tradition regarded them as the first deacons of the church. Irenæus had referred to Stephen as "the first deacon [chosen] by the apostles."[58] Cyprian reads that the "apostles appointed for themselves deacons after the ascent of the Lord into heaven."[59] The Council of Neocæsarea (A.D. 314) ruled that "the Deacons ought to be seven according to the Canon, even if the City be very great. This is proved by the Book of the Acts."[60]

Chrysostom, on the other hand, has a more nuanced view of the office described in the passage, that it refers to neither of the continuous offices of the church. His exegetical commentary on the election of the seven in Acts chapter 6 so reads:

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56. Acts 6:1–8 KJV.

57. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. I, 499.

58. Irenæus, *Against Heresies*, ed. Henry Deane (Oxford: Clarendon, 1874), III.12.10.

59. Cyprian, "Epistles," in "The Writings of Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage," trans. Robert Ernest Wallis, vol. I, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. VIII (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1868), LXIV.3.

60. cf. Council of Neocæsarea, canon 15.

> But what sort of rank these bore, and what sort of office they received, this is what we need to learn. Was it that of Deacons? And yet this is not the case in the churches. But is it to the Presbyters that the management belongs? And yet at present there was no Bishop, but the Apostles only. Whence I think it clearly and manifestly follows that neither Deacons nor Presbyters is their designation: but it was for this particular purpose that they were ordained.[61]

Chrysostom argued that the seven men had assisted the twelve apostles in a similar manner that deacons assisted bishops. Considering the offices as being tied one to the other, there could be no deacons where there were no bishops, for the deacons minister under the authority of their bishops. Therefore, according to Chrysostom, the office of the seven was not diaconate proper, but analog to the diaconate.

Conclusion

Chrysostom's high view of Scriptures was expressed through his use of a careful exegetical method. Following the Antiochene school, he sought to find the true intention of the biblical authors in the text itself. This approach was audacious on his part, in that it challenged pre-established conceptions in the church tradition of his days in favor of scriptural truth.

The use of a grammatico-historical exegetical method led Chrysostom into a more balanced view of the church office. His understanding of the interchangeableness of terms blurred the lines that divided the episcopate from the presbyterate to the extent that they are not easily discernible in his pastoral theology treatise. Even so, he submitted to the order of the church and honored his superiors. In this respect, Chrysostom sets an example of speaking the truth in love. The truth, in that he argued carefully from the treasure of Scriptures; in love, in that he always served humbly, according to the position and influence that God had given him.

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61. John Chrysostom, "The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Acts of the Apostles," in *NPNF*, vol. XI (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 90, 91.

Chrysostom's emphasis on preaching is remarkable, particularly during a time of a prevailing sacerdotal view of the ministry. His life and legacy are an encouragement to countless generations of gospel preachers around the world. The message of Christian ministers today is still the same word of healing to the soul that Chrysostom believed and was eager and diligent to proclaim. Doctrinal accuracy remains necessary, as our greatest weapon against old and new heresies that threaten the faith of our flocks.

Chrysostom's boldness to exegete and preach the true intended meaning of Scriptures challenges our pre-established notions and church traditions. At the same time that he focuses on the inspired text in its own merit, his exegesis is not isolated from the context of the church. He did not neglect or deny the existence or validity of church tradition, but rather attempted to elevate Scriptures back to its rightful position. Doing responsible exegesis in the context of the church is still our challenge today, and Chrysostom does encourage the modern preacher to let Scripture interpret Scripture even into unexpected conclusions, always aiming at spiritual growth and the peace of the church.

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