
What Does America Have to Do with Antioch?

John Chrysostom and the Contemporary Relevance of Patristics

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The teaching of patristics is often neglected in contemporary western schools of theology and religion. To be fair, many schools offer introductory courses, but deeper examinations of the exegetical, theological, and homiletical outlook of the early church fathers in general, and the Greek-speaking eastern fathers in particular, are lacking. There are a variety of reasons for such omissions, not the least of which is the historic separation of the western and eastern churches. There is also a bias toward a modern approach among some scholars, pastors, and laity. Even without such generational prejudice, one can attribute the lack of present-day interest in patristics to a perception that the difference in historical contexts is so great that the contemporary relevance of patristic thought is minimal at best. Put another way, the world in which theologians and their students speak about “JEDP” and “Q” has little to do with the one in which their predecessors discussed terms such as “homoousios” and “miaphysis.”

In the third century, Tertullian cogently asked, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” To this early Christian figure, “Athens” represented Greek philosophical thought and “Jerusalem” stood for the font from which the teachings of Christ could be drawn. In the early centuries of Christianity, as the very posing of Tertullian’s question reveals, Athens had quite a bit to do with Jerusalem—despite the protestations of some Christians. The Hellenistic world, into which Christianity was born, provided both challenges and blessings. Alexander the Great, through his conquests, spread Greek language and culture from the Eastern Mediterranean to India. This Hellenistic language and culture served as a conduit through which the Christian message flowed. Hellenism was a language not only of words but of ideas. Sometimes these ideas were helpful. Terms such as virtue, beauty, and truth translated neatly into the Christian evangelical lexicon. At other times, Hellenistic concepts clashed with a religion that originated in the Middle East and was rooted in a thoroughly Semitic religious system of thought. It seems, in the light of historical developments, that Tertullian’s question was a legitimate one.

Constantine’s victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312 and his subsequent edict of religious toleration, with his ally Licinius in 313, made the third century Latin father’s question more relevant. In the fourth century, the Church was profoundly engaged with the Greco-Roman world. In this engagement, Christian leaders

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found themselves in a sociocultural struggle. These leaders freely appropriated from the Hellenistic world in order to speak to believers and non-believers alike. At the same time, however, they railed against this world when they found it in conflict with the Gospel that they preached.

This classical tension between Athens and Jerusalem expresses a similar strain between our own world and that of late antiquity, which witnessed the birth and development of the Christian church. The “Athens” of which Tertullian spoke is still very much alive throughout the western world and it is in this “Athens” that the contemporary church exists. There are many examples that demonstrate this profound similarity. The fourth-century church in Antioch, in particular, and her preeminent preacher John Chrysostom, provide us with a way in which we can begin to appreciate the contemporary relevance of the early church fathers and the manner in which they can help inform and expand our theological outlook.

John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom (c. 349–407) was a Christian priest from Antioch and later bishop of Constantinople (Antakya and Istanbul in what is now present day Turkey). The fourth-century world in which John lived was culturally and religiously diverse. Antiochene society was composed of Christians, Jews, followers of the ancient Greco-Roman religious cult, and adherents to a variety of eclectic sects. Antioch was a crossroads city and through its streets flowed not only a variety of individuals but also a multiplicity of ideas. Christian preachers in these early, formative centuries of the Church, labored to articulate the Gospel in ways that were consistent with the vernacular of the day but were also in line with the fundamental tenets of the faith.

The pastoral environment of fourth century Antioch is not

dissimilar from that of twenty-first century America. The United States, as with the rest of the so-called western world, is imbued with a Hellenistic ethos. This ethos was lost to Western Europe in the fifth century, recovered in the fifteenth, and then fully embraced in the eighteenth. In the Greek-speaking Christian East, however, the Hellenistic mindset was ever present in a cosmopolitan, multi-cultural, polyglot society. The similarity between Chrysostom's world and ours reframes Tertullian's question as, "What does contemporary, twenty-first century America have to do with fourth-century Antioch?"

While this interconnectedness of Athens, Jerusalem, and Antioch holds throughout the Greek-speaking world of Late Antiquity, it is especially so in John Chrysostom's late fourth century. An examination of John's sermons reflects this similarity and demonstrates the ways in which he used scripture to communicate a Christian response to the challenges of a society so much like our own.

Patristic writings or Sunday sermons?

The vast majority of Chrysostom's "writings" are homilies. There is no *Summa Theologica* in John's writings and there is nothing in the Antiochene preacher's mindset that would indicate that he saw a need for such a document. John was first and foremost a priest and a pastor. This pastoral inclination was true even when he ascended the episcopal throne in Constantinople.

John preached to transform: the individual into a Christian, his congregants into a church, and his city into a Christian polis. His exposure to Greek paideia from a young age and his education in rhetoric, which he received from the famed rhetor Libanius, provided the young Antiochene clergyman with all the tools he would need to accomplish his threefold pastoral task.

The twenty-first century reader of John's fourth century homilies needs to take into account the rhetorical environment within which the preacher was formed. There was a well-defined structure to public oration. Handbooks of rhetoric listed the acceptable metaphors for beauty, strength, virtue, and sin with a rigor and adherence to convention foreign to contemporary speech. Oration, as Chrysostom learned it, was intended to entertain the listener. Invective and diatribe were mingled with praise and eulogy to hold the audience's attention while making a point. Conventions of speech are not unfamiliar to any present-day speaker or preacher, but John Chrysostom held forth with an intensity of speech seldom found among us.

The themes of John's homilies, however, will be familiar to any pastor of any age. The excessive expense of weddings, the preference of many congregants for attending sporting events rather than church services, the encroaching influence of secular culture, the indifference of wealthy Christians to the plight of the poor, and the tendency of the faithful to engage in a buffet-like approach to sampling some and rejecting other religious practices were all topics of John's sermons. The eloquence with which he preached on these and other subjects earned him the title "Golden mouth," or Chrysostom, by which he was widely known after his

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death in 407 AD. John's relevance to contemporary Christians, therefore, is related to both the subject matter of his sermons and the eloquence with which he preached them.

Transforming the individual

When John was ordained a priest, the bishop gave him the position of preacher at the Golden Church in Antioch. A significant percentage of John's homilies come from the time when he served at the Antiochene cathedral. Chrysostom's abilities as a preacher exceeded that of his contemporaries. For the young Antiochene homilist, eloquence and rhetorical skill were simply a means to an end and that end was Christian formation.

The scriptural text was its basis. Indeed, the text formed the preacher, himself, when he lived in ascetic seclusion prior to his ordination to the diaconate. If the text had transformative properties for John when he was a neophyte, it stood to reason that the faithful would also benefit from instruction rooted in the scripture. It was a bonus that exposition on a historical text, such as the Bible, fit neatly into the rhetorical style he learned during his classical education.

Greek rhetoric in general, and that of the Stoics in particular, embraced the use of ancient figures who exemplified the virtues that the orator wished to communicate to his audience. The greater the antiquity of the exemplar, the greater value the personage possessed as a rhetorical tool. In the New, and even with the Old Testament, John discerned the exemplary Christians he wanted his congregants to become. Using this approach, he presented Abraham and Moses, Peter and Paul, and the rest of the prominent figures of the Bible as role models.

"Do you see the faith of Abraham?" he asked. "Then imitate him!" came the reply. There was no virtue that John could not find in the pages of the biblical text. The exemplars of the Bible and their deeds provided John with a canvas upon which he painted a variety of Christian moral characteristics such as faithfulness, humility, charity, and courage.

The very antiquity of these classic characters conveyed authority. John dragged these figures into his fourth-century Antiochene world. He placed them before his congregation in order to provide a stark contrast with the deficiencies he saw in his people and the society in which they lived. If, for instance, the richer members of his flock failed in their philanthropic duties, then Abraham's hospitality to the three strangers demonstrated that the wealthy also needed to invite the poor into their own homes. Even the political leadership could learn from a great leader such as Moses

who could both lead his people and remain loyal to God. If the people perceived that God was unresponsive to their supplications, then they had Job as an example.

The intent of this technique was not so much to belittle or shame his congregants as it was to demonstrate to them that they too could accomplish great things if they simply followed the example of the great men and women of scripture. Chrysostom found Old Testament figures especially useful in this regard since they lived before Christ. John's logic was that, if Abraham, Moses, Job, and others could achieve such Christian virtue *before* the advent of Christ then the Gospel made the task even easier for the members of his flock.

While John used scripture to teach moral truths he also used the text to convey a variety of theological precepts. There was, however, no systematic presentation of theology similar to that of later, western scholastics. Instead, theology was incorporated as needed. If the reading of the day presented the Antiochene preacher with an opportunity to expound on some important concept, he would seize the moment and educate his listeners. At other times, a contemporaneous event might demand attention. This was the case when John broke off a series of homilies against Arianism to confront the issue of Christians who participated in both Jewish and Christian worship.

The lectionary was always at the heart of the homily of the day, as evidenced by a compilation of John's writings. For example, the tract that we know as "Chrysostom on Wealth and Poverty" is a collection of John's homilies on the parable of "Lazarus and the Rich Man." His homilies on Genesis, most likely delivered when he was a young deacon in Antioch, were offered during Lent when catechumens were receiving their final instruction, and after Pascha when they had just entered the Church through baptism on the feast of feasts.

In these sermons, one finds John constantly teaching the Christian moral ethos as he saw it. He also confronted the day-to-day challenges of parish ministry. John warns young couples, "When you prepare for the wedding, don't run to your neighbors' houses borrowing extra mirrors, or spend endless hours worrying about dresses. A wedding is not a pageant or a theatrical performance."¹ It is difficult to imagine a present day pastor who could argue against this admonition. Nor could contemporary clergy argue with the fourth-century preacher's concluding advice to couples that they should only invite people of good character and that such guests will be content with anything set before them. Above all else, John warns the couple to invite Christ.

The Christians of Antioch 1,600 years ago were as hesitant to offer charity to the poor as many of us are today. Their prevailing concerns were with the character of individuals in need and with the manner in which the proffered charity would be spent. John told his congregation that, "The poor man has one plea, his want and his standing in need: do not require anything else from him;

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but even if he is the most wicked of all men and is at a loss for his necessary sustenance, let us free him from hunger." The relevant scripture was Christ's instruction to "be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt 5:45). John contended that a Christian must be like a harbor to the poor, and he instructed the faithful that, "when you see on earth the man who has encountered the shipwreck of poverty, do not judge him, do not seek an account of his life, but free him from misfortune . . . A judge is one thing; an almsgiver is another."²

Irrespective of the manner of his presentation, John was always practical and realistic in his expectations. The Antiochene preacher knew that the scriptural text was a vast repository of moral truths that he could use to mold the individual into a Christian. He also understood that, because of the breadth and the depth of the text, it would take time to disseminate that truth. For John, Christians were made one sermon at a time.

Transforming the family

In the earliest days of Christianity, for the most part, believers entered the Church individually. In the second and later the third century, the Church experienced the advent of Christian families. The Edict of Toleration in 313 and the later Theodosian Edict of 380 helped solidify the Christian family as a distinct entity in the Roman socio-cultural milieu.

The Antiochene preacher, however, was not so sure that the ascendancy of the Christian family in Roman society was a fore-gone conclusion. He was even less sure that those families that identified with the Church were Christian in the first place. John, therefore, embarked on a homiletical program in which he sought to convey his image of an ideal Christian family.

For Chrysostom, all of the great exemplars of the Old Testament were proto-Christians in full agreement with the Christian Gospel message. The Jewish Bible was naturally better suited to portraying ideal family life. Abraham, in particular, was a preeminent father figure upon whom the preacher drew on numerous occasions in an effort to describe his image of a Christian household.

John imagined the patriarch's tent as a beehive of Christian philanthropic activity and Christian virtue. The old man from Ur in Chaldea was a father to all of his servants and a friend of the poor. He was a dedicated husband and devoted servant of God. In Chrysostom's sermons, he admonished his flock to be "like Abraham" who excelled in the Christian virtue he saw lacking in his congregants. The virtuous patriarch was, most especially, an example for the wealthiest members of his community. The

1. John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 79.

2. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 52.

biting rhetoric he learned from Libanius was often directed at members of the local Jewish community, Christian heretical sects, and adherents to the Greco-Roman religious cult. At other times, however, his own parishioners found themselves on the business end of his rhetorical barbs. Abraham, he noted, sat at the door of his tent, and alertly waited for a poor individual in order to give him aid. Where did the indifferent wealthier members of his flock sit at noonday? “In hell,” was the answer.³

Chrysostom’s intent was always to move his people to a higher state of Christian praxis. In the late fourth century, the Church had entered a state of nominal Christianity. The Constantinian and Theodosian edicts made Christianity not only legal but desirable. As the government in general and the governmental leadership in particular adopted the Christian faith, the Church became, for many, a vehicle for upward mobility. Chrysostom, like Basil of Caesarea and other eastern fathers, saw the potential for infection in the Christian community and they treated this infection with the antibody of the Gospel.

As Vigen Guroian notes, Chrysostom saw the Trinity as the icon of Christian family life.⁴ The perfect, harmonious relationship of the three persons of the Triune Godhead was the model upon which each Christian household should be based. In his sermons, John characterized the ideal of Christian family life as a type of *imago dei* in which the familial members constituted the intended image of God, who Himself existed as one in three.

Chrysostom, like other early fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, did not regard celibate life as greater than married life. When preaching to monastics, the preacher from Antioch extolled the virtues of celibacy, and when speaking to the parishioners of his community he explained the holiness and sanctity of marriage and family. The celibate and the married Christian each embodied the image of God in their own manner.

Celibacy and marriage, however, were not reflections of this divine glory on their own. Each needed to be grounded in the Christian conception of loving communion in order to be holy. In his homilies, John railed against the nominal (and usually wealthier) members of his community who, he perceived, cared more about the secular advancement of their children than their spiritual well-being. He might well have posed the telling question to our century, “at what cost to the youthful soul comes the accumulation of the prerequisites for entry into the ‘right university?’”

No doubt, the siren’s call of secular life and the natural human attraction to material things is as much a problem today as it was in the late fourth century. Now, as then, the behavior of nominal Christians provides much grist for the mill for an aspiring preacher. It was not enough for John, however, to simply speak against the evils of excessive wealth and the unhealthy influence of entertainment and social pressures. The good preacher (and

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John Chrysostom was a very good preacher) needs to present an alternative.

In John’s homiletic discourse, the Christian home was the “little church” within which the father, mother, and children emulated that which occurred in the church proper. In this way, the Christian family possessed an evangelical quality since it brought the Church, which is the Body of Christ, out into the world. John articulated his vision in his homily on Eph 5:22–23 in which he told his flock, “If we regulate our households...we will also be fit to oversee the Church, for indeed the household is the little church. Therefore, it is possible for us to surpass all others in virtue by becoming good husbands and wives.”⁵ John expected the Christian family to embody scriptural virtue in a way that illuminated and transformed their city.

Transforming the city

If the New Testament provided the theoretical basis of Chrysostom’s conception of the Christian family, then the Old Testament offered the practical application of his model. The aforementioned tent of Abraham was, for John, the prototypical Christian household in which Christian virtue flourished. In this home, Abraham and Sarah lived in partnership with the sole goal to help everyone both inside and outside of their camp. Their reward was an encounter with Christ and two angels in the form of the three angelic visitors who visited their tent. Here the Old and the New intersected. In John’s homiletical universe, the aged patriarch appeared constantly spreading his net to bring in the poor. When the angels passed his tent, he cast out his net for the least of the brethren and received Christ. The visit also demonstrated the fulfillment of Christ’s maxim that, “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20).

John’s hope was that his flock would imitate the Abrahamic virtues of charity and philanthropy and in doing so transform fourth-century Antioch in the way the early Christians had transformed the Roman Empire. The preacher saw himself and his flock in competition with the prevailing religious and philosophical systems of the day. John viewed the culturally and religiously diverse Antiochene society as an impediment to such a transformation. Therefore, in his sermons he used all of the rhetorical devices at his disposal to both extol Christian virtue and denigrate that which he saw in opposition to that virtue.

5. Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, 57.

3. *St. John Chrysostom Old Testament Homilies*, trans. Robert C. Hill, 3 vols. (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2003), 95.

4. Vigen Guroian, “The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood and Children,” in *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 61–77.

There was a progressive order, therefore, in John's vision for Antioch and the Greco-Roman world beyond the confines of the city. The individual first became a devout Christian, he or she then married and with their children fashioned a Christian household. The third stage was the transformation of the city into a Christian polis.⁶

For this to occur, old structures needed to be torn down. The rapidly declining Greco-Roman religious cult and Judaism dominated the religious landscape of fourth-century Antioch. To these groups one could add heretical Christian sects and secular society as parts of the old structure that Chrysostom endeavored to remove. These groups were not passive recipients of Chrysostom's rhetorical blows but were religious groups with their own vision of religious identity in Antioch. Chrysostom's teacher, Libanius, saw religion as an individual affair in which the goal was to obtain personal access to the divine.⁷ The vibrancy of the Jewish services attracted many of John's congregants to the synagogue.

To promote his own vision of a Christian city and respond to those that differed from this vision, Chrysostom utilized the classical forms of invective and diatribe—rhetoric that often strikes us as harsh today. The work of Robert Wilken has done much to put such invective in context as part of the rhetorical style of John Chrysostom's day (*psogos*).⁸ Wilken demonstrates that fourth-century rhetorical norms dictated the manner in which John preached and any perceived harshness is a product of the generation in which he lived. Indeed, one can often cringe at the wording of a homily only a few decades old, much less one delivered to a Hellenistic audience over 1,600 years ago.

Within the context of the Greek rhetorical style which Chrysostom learned from Libanius, any praise offered required a commensurate level of diatribe. Put another way, the value of a thing needed to be contrasted with the lack of value of another thing, thus proving the former's greatness. Chrysostom's invective, therefore, which was directed at Jews, pagans, the wealthy, Christian heretics, and others was not so much an example of personal animosity as it was a reflection of the groups that he viewed as the principal threat to his plan for a Christianization of the city. Nothing and no one was off limits in his attempt to transform the city—even the Empress.

John's rhetoric was, however, not born out of malice. One can find evidence for this assertion in one of the letters John wrote to Pope Innocent, his brother bishop in Rome. In this letter, John detailed his struggles with the Emperor, the Empress, and his brother clergy who had forsaken him just prior to his

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exile from Constantinople. The only people who stood by him, declared John, were "the Jews, Greeks, and [Christian] heretics."⁹ If invective were any measure, they should have been first in line to rejoice in the bishop's travails. One can only conclude that they understood the nature of John's homiletical and exegetical style, perhaps better than most.

Conclusion

The pastoral setting with which John Chrysostom was faced was not altogether dissimilar from that of today (or yesterday, for that matter). It is not uncommon for a preacher to echo the words of Ecclesiastes and state that, "there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1:9). The homilist, however, should take these words to heart when considering the relevance of the patristic exegetical and homiletical tradition.

There are, no doubt, many patristic tracts that deal with theological minutiae that tax a trained minister, much less the average parishioner in the pews. There are, however, many more that are in line with the pastoral exegetical style presented above. Ultimately, the priest and pastor alike are primarily concerned with the salvation of the members of the congregation, the way in which they live their faith in a world that challenges their core beliefs, and the evangelical mission to make disciples of many nations.

Often, what separates patristic authors such as John Chrysostom from contemporary homilists is not the nature of the task as such, but the zeal with which they engaged in it. In one sense, this intensity was a function of the age within which these early Christian figures preached and the expectations of their congregants. In another sense, the zeal was related to the ambitious goals of Chrysostom and others in the early church. The Antiochene preacher fully believed that the individual, the family, and the city would be transformed through his preaching and through the actions of his flock if they heeded his words.

The sermons of John Chrysostom also demonstrate the centrality of the scriptural text in the homiletical tradition. The Bible was the universal pharmacopeia which the Antiochene preacher used to address a variety of social and spiritual maladies. The plight of the poor, the trials of marriage, the nature of true virtue, the

6. For an excellent discussion on this pastoral vision see Aileen M. Hartney, *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City* (London: Duckworth, 2004).

7. For more on Libanius and Chrysostom's differing visions of Antiochene religious life see Isabella Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews, and Christians in Antioch* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

8. Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1983).

9. Chrysostom, *First Epistle to Innocent*, 3.

responsibilities of a parent and a child, the nature of the priesthood, and the meaning of communion could all be found within the holy scriptures.

The literal Antiochene school in which John was formed was well suited to the task. There was very little subtext in John's reading of the text—it was all there in plain sight. Abraham exemplified faith and obedience, Moses educated them about leadership, Job taught patience, and Christ simply instructed about everything. There was no issue of life, no circumstance of history, no aspect of relationships, no question at all that the Old and New Testament could not answer. One can say that this may be the most succinct description of the value of John Chrysostom's exegetical style—it was all about answering questions. Many, if not all, are questions that still confront the homilist today.

The issues confronting twenty-first century Christians are eternal, in every sense of the word. In this light, the works of

preachers such as John Chrysostom are as relevant today as they were sixteen centuries ago. Particularly in those nations where religious toleration is a matter of law, the contemporary "pastoral environment" has remained consistent. John Chrysostom was a pastor and homilist above all. He, therefore, has much to teach contemporary ministers.

With him, today's homilists share the goal of transforming congregants through the faith in which they were formed. In this ministry, Chrysostom's exegesis serves the contemporary preacher as a compass with which to navigate a complex world. His emphasis on the loving Christian family, his extolling a universal philanthropy as key to constructing the Christian community, his imagining a city transformed by virtuous individuals belonging to Christian families, and his mastery of soaring rhetoric are qualities worthy of imitation. In this and every age, the value of these sermons persists.