Golden Mouth:
The Life and Contribution of John Chrysostom

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Called “Chrysostom” (Golden Mouth) because of his eloquence in preaching, the Eastern church father John led a life that was compelling and instructive, not to mention incredibly interesting, for those seeking to serve in church ministry. The categories that J.N.D. Kelly presents in his biography of John (Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop) provide a useful way for arranging not only the chronology of his life but the prominent features of his ministry.

The Enthusiastic Ascetic

John was born around AD 349 in Antioch, the city in which he would spend most of his life. His parents were Sekoundos and Anthousa, who enjoyed a comfortable social status. At least John’s mother was a believer, if not his father, so he was raised in a Christian home. He was not, however, baptized as an infant, his parents following the common practice of deferring baptism for a later age; he would not receive the sacrament until he was almost twenty. Although information about the early years of John’s education is unavailable, it is likely that he would have received the initial instruction at home, from nurses and his mother. At seven he probably attended elementary school, with a strong emphasis on classical literature, grammar, and rhetoric. Kelly comments that “his chief debt to his teachers was for the classic purity of his Greek diction and the astonishing elegance of expression he acquired from them” (p. 7). As a student, it was John’s practice to attend the law-courts, giving close attention to the cases and arguments presented. It appears that John’s initially desired career was to serve as an imperial clerk, drafting ministerial documents and legislation.

However, toward the end of John’s education, he became absorbed by the Scriptures, and he determined to give his life to the study and contemplation of God’s Word. For John, this initially took the form of attending to Bishop Meletios, assisting with his liturgical, pastoral, and administrative duties. It also meant embracing a life of ascetic devotion. He received instruction
in this regard from Diodore, a man who had subjected himself to such extreme privations that he had ruined his health. Under his oversight, John and other young men entered a “pact with Christ,” renouncing marriage and other normally accepted practices as indulgent. From Diodore John also learned his Antiochene method of exegesis, championing straightforward interpretation against Alexandrian allegorizing. This would have a visible influence on his preaching.

John’s writings extend to as early as this period. One essay from this time is *A King and a Monk Compared*, arguing that a monk living a life of complete devotion to God is the true king. Another, *To Theodore When He Fell Away*, is directed to one of John’s friends who had lapsed in his commitment to the disciplined life of the ascetic fraternity, seeking marriage and personal property. Apparently, John won his brother, since Theodore returned to their “life of true philosophy.”

After three years of serving as Meletio’s aid, John was appointed as an official reader (the lowest rank of clergy in the Eastern church). His primary responsibilities were reading the Old Testament lesson and the epistle at mass, as well as whatever pastoral duties that were entrusted to him. Soon after John’s ordination as reader, he was made aware of a report that church authorities were planning to seize both John and his comrade Basil and have them ordained as priests. Both were dismayed by this, convinced of their own unworthiness. They agreed that, whatever they decided, it would be the same—either accepting together or declining together. John, however, thought that Basil was suitable for the priesthood and determined to employ what he termed “prudent management,” deceiving Basil into thinking that he would receive the office. However, when Basil went forward and accepted ordination, John had already gone into hiding. John would later provide a written defense of his actions (in particular his refusal of the priesthood at this time due to his perceived lack of qualifications) in his dialogue *Priesthood*.

This led to a period of withdrawal for John in which he retreated to the nearby mountains. John spent the next four years of his life under the tutelage of an elderly Syrian,
seeking to address what he had perceived as troubling sensual and worldly desires. After this time of semi-communal monasticism, John sought a more rigorous program and lived in solitude for two years. During this time he barely slept, kept a meager diet (with much fasting), memorized the Old and New Testaments, and severely damaged his health. Kelly cites John’s biographer Palladios as commenting that “his gastric regions were deadened, and the functions of his kidneys were impaired by the intense cold” (p. 32).

John returned to Antioch toward the end of 378, and Meletios sought him again as a reader, and then eventually a deacon in 381. As deacon, John fenced the table for the mass and assisted with the instruction of catechumens. After Meletios’ death, Flavian was ordained as the bishop of Antioch, and John served the remaining years of his diaconate under him. John also began to publish pamphlets, although until his years in the priesthood he was not licensed to preach. Among these writings are two apologies for the Christian faith, *St. Babylas, in Refutation of Julian and the Pagans* and *Christ’s Divinity Proved against Jews and Pagans*. There are also pastoral treatises, such as *Contrition of Heart* (on the Christian’s need for a humble and repentant heart) and *To Stageirios* (addressing the issue of personal suffering, which Kelly characterizes as having both Christian and Stoic elements). John celebrates a life of celibacy in *Virginity* (being sure to include an attack on those who reject marriage altogether), and he characterizes second marriage after the death of a spouse as less than virtuous in *To a Young Widow* and *Single Marriage*. In *Against the Enemies of Monasticism*, John responds to the violence that professing Christians were showing monks in Antioch, and argues that monks deserve to be imitated rather than persecuted.

**The Renowned Preacher**

John’s pamphlets helped him to become a popular teacher, and since John “had finally overcome his scruples about accepting a more responsible clerical office” (p. 55), Bishop Flavian ordained him to the priesthood, probably in early 386. His first sermon has been preserved. Kelly
notes, “By fourth-century standards his address was a small masterpiece” (p. 56). His primary functions as priest, in addition to presiding over the mass in the bishop’s absence, were preaching and instructing the congregation, as well as administering baptism. He soon also became Flavian’s personal assistant.

Throughout the twelve years of his priesthood, John was the leading preacher at Antioch. There were several features about John’s preaching that made him the unrivalled orator of the city, including his careful handling of Biblical texts, his skillful refutation of false teaching, the color and eloquence that characterized his descriptions, and the fact that he spoke extemporaneously. Noteworthy from this period is a series of sermons traditionally titled *Homilies on the Satues*, preached during Lent of 387, which address the tumult and anxiety in the city due to exorbitant taxes that were met with a riotous response.

John’s output during this time was enormous. Numbered among these were the treatises *Priesthood* (mentioned above), *On His Fight* (autobiographical thoughts on the dignities and responsibilities of ordination), and *On Vain Glory and How Parents Should Bring Up Children* (outlining a program for raising godly Christian boys), as well as hundreds of homilies, Scriptural expositions, and Bible commentaries (which Kelly labels his chief literary legacy from this decade). Certain themes reoccur in the application of John’s exegesis, such as refutations of Arians and Manichees, comments on marriage and social ethics, warnings against affluence and love of riches, and criticisms of the corrupting nature of the theater. John’s writings and sermons throughout his priesthood convey “the unmistakable impression of a man steadily growing in self-assurance and in confidence in his authority as a church leader” (p. 100).
The Controversial Bishop

In October of 397, John was summoned by the governor of Antioch and taken to Constantinople, with imperial orders for him to be ordained as bishop of the capital city, since Bishop Nektarios had died in September. The eunuch Eutropios, Emperor Arkadios’ superintendent, had recommended John, but Arkadios had also summoned a special synod of Eastern bishops to participate in the election of the imperial see. One of the bishops present for the summons was Theophilus of Alexandria, who was furious to hear that John had been nominated. However, he was blackmailed by Eutropios and not only gave his vote for John but presided at the consecration. Theophilus’ dislike of John would resurface.

John was ordained as the twelfth bishop of Constantinople at just under fifty years of age. The city held an important status in the church, especially since the council of Constantinople decreed that “the bishop of Constantinople shall have a precedence of honor next after the bishop of Rome, since it is new Rome” (cited by Kelly, p. 109). As bishop of the imperial see, John had both the emperor and the empress (Eudoxia) among his flock.

John took up residence in the episkopeion, where the bishop and clergy lived and received visitors. It was adjacent to John’s church, the Hagia Sophia, as well as to a convent presided over by the deaconess Olympias—a woman who would be one of John’s close friends and defenders toward the end of his life. John began his office with immediate reforms in his church, cutting back on what he viewed as extravagant expenses, deposing clergy for moral impropriety, and setting high standards for day-to-day conduct. From the start he had won the common people with his speech, although he was already creating enemies with his strident policies. One of these was Isaac, who supervised the monastic communities in the city and clashed with John’s ideals, resenting him for years.
As was the case with his time in the priesthood, the most prominent feature of John’s role as bishop was his preaching. He preached every Sunday and feast day that he was available, and during Lent he would sometimes preach daily. John’s preaching was again incredibly popular. “The people were so excited by it, Sozomen reports, so insatiable in their appetite for it, that there was a real danger of their injuring one another as they jostled and shoved to get closer to him so as to hear more distinctly what he was saying” (p. 130). Like at Antioch, John’s sermons at Constantinople were principally Scriptural homilies, and he resumed his systematic exposition of Paul’s epistles.

There are three significant controversies that attended John’s six years as bishop: his protection of the deposed Eutropios, his intervention in the Asian churches, and his reception of the Long Brothers. These will be taken in turn.

In 399, the Gothic general Gainas, who had a personal animosity against Eutropios (the emperor’s chamberlain who had nominated John), presented a military ultimatum to Arkadios that was conditioned on the elimination of Eutropios. What did not help Eutropios was that Arkadios’ wife Eudoxia had become resentful of his influence over her husband. Arkadios summoned Eutropios and dismissed him of all his offices and dignities. Eutropios, fearing for his life, fled to the Hagia Sophia to seek protection from the altar (an ironic turn of events, since Eutropios himself had pushed legislation limiting the right of condemned persons to seek sanctuary in churches).

A mob soon surrounded the church, demanding Eutropios’ execution. Government officers arrived to seize him, but John resisted them. Eventually Arkadios himself appeared to persuade the crowd to disband. The following Sunday, the Hagia Sophia was packed with an enormous congregation. John “delivered what has always been considered, from that day to this,
one of his most dazzling addresses” (p. 148). John’s moving eloquence, calling for mercy, saved Eutropios from death, at least temporarily. Eutropios was banished to Cyprus, but when this failed to satisfy his enemies, he was brought to Chalcedon and tried and beheaded there. What is significant for John was that his intervention in this affair was an irritant to those he hindered.

The second controversy which would demand John’s attention was brought to him in the form of a list of accusations against Antoninos, metropolitan of Ephesus, by Eusebios, bishop of Valentinopolis. The charges included misappropriation of various funds, but the most serious on the list was simony (the selling of holy orders). John determined to travel to Asia and carry out an investigation, but when the emperor demanded his presence in the city, he sent a three member delegation to examine the witnesses. This proved fruitless (the witnesses either unable or refusing to appear), and the panel returned. However, after Antoninos’ death, the clergy of Ephesus and the bishops of the province sent a solemn resolution, requesting John to assist them in choosing Antoninos’ successor and completing the investigation of the clergy who were alleged to have purchased their ordination.

John eventually headed to Asia, leaving his episcopal functions in the hands of Severian (bishop of Gabala) and the day-to-day administration to his archdeacon Sarapion (the two would stir their own conflict in John’s absence, gaining him another opponent in Severian). John delivered on both their requests, proposing Herakleides as bishop and discovering evidence against the accused clergy, who acknowledged their guilt. While John’s trip to Asia had been successful, it would not be without criticism. John’s enemies would use this against him as evidence of his extending his authority to those over whom he had no jurisdiction (something contrary to the canons of the council of Constantinople). However, John had been requested by
the local church to help them sort out their problems, so in fact he was not in violation of these canons.

The final affair leading up to John’s eventual trial and exile to be included here is his reception of the Long Brothers. Some fifty Egyptian monks, led by four men—Dioskoros, Ammonios, Eusebios, and Euthymios; called the long brothers because they were “conspicuous for their height” (p. 191)—had been excommunicated by Theophilos (the Alexandrian bishop who presided for John’s consecration), ostensibly on the charge of Origenism but essentially because they had offended Theophilos personally. They travelled to Constantinople in order to submit their case before the imperial see. This placed John in an awkward position; while he sympathized with the way they had been treated, he recognized that they were subject to the bishop of Alexandria who had banned them, and John had no desire of damaging his fragile relationship with Theophilos. Nevertheless, John began a process of careful negotiation with Theophilos, starting with a personal letter, warmly asking him to receive back these men.

Theophilos, however, had his own plan. He sent the heresy-hunter Epiphanios to call a synod in order to have Origen’s teaching formally condemned. He also sent his own propaganda team of hermits and clerics to Constantinople to denounce the Long Brothers and present their eviction in the most favorable light. Theophilos had come into contact with rumors that John was offering communion to these refugees (which were completely false). When John sent a second letter to Theophilos, informing him that the Long Brothers had submitted a formal complaint against him, Theophilos began to view John as a personal threat to be eliminated. He sent a letter to John, rebuking him for his involvement, and John decided that there was nothing further he could do.
The Long Brothers, nevertheless, brought their complaint before the empress (now herself Augusta) Eudoxia. She gave them her support and issued an imperial order, requiring Theophilos to present himself before a court, presided by none other than John. This was the very thing that John was seeking to avoid. Indeed, the entire situation quickly turned against him. In early May 403, John preached a sermon in which he denounced the weaknesses of women. Although he spoke in general terms, the congregation assumed that he was speaking with reference to Eudoxia. She was certainly convinced that this was the case, and she became infuriated with John, especially after bringing the matter to John’s antagonist Severian. This, coupled with John’s refusal to obey the order to preside as Theophilos’ judge, caused the imperial couple to turn the tables completely against John. The plan was revised; now Theophilos would stand as judge in John’s trial.

Theophilos gathered his charge sheet (with twenty-nine accusations compiled by two deacons whom John had dismissed), as well as a group of John’s opponents. The imperial mansion at The Oak in Chalcedon was the location for the trial. The specific evidence brought against John (consisting mainly of exaggerations, hairsplitting, and false statements) were not what condemned him; when John refused to appear, he was sentenced to exile.

John, however, never reached his destination before the ruling was reversed. When the notoriously superstitious Eudoxia experienced a personal tragedy, what historians believe to have been a miscarriage, she interpreted this as a sign of God’s anger against her plan to remove the bishop who had baptized her children, and begged for John’s immediate return. There was a plan for a new synod to redress the wrong done against John at the Oak with a view for his complete restoration, but this never occurred. John took up his episcopal functions again, but when he once
more found himself in a conflict with Eudoxia, he was for a second time exiled, on the grounds that he had resumed his duties as a bishop prior to formal exoneration.

After three years in Cucusos, John was ordered to be transferred to a more remote location. He did not survive the journey. John died when he was fifty-eight years old. His last words were, “Glory be to God for everything.”

**Learning from the Golden Mouth**

John was a light burning brightly that was snuffed out early. His love for the Scriptures, his commitment to excellence in communicating Biblical truth, his passionate devotion to Christ as his master, and his leadership and authority in pastoring his church while responding to personal attacks are stirring for anyone who aims to serve in church ministry. However, each of these should be qualified, because both positive and negative lessons are available to be learned from John’s life. Three primary categories to be analyzed are asceticism, eloquence, and conflict.

While asceticism that eclipses the gospel and the work of Christ is to be rejected, discipline in the Christian life is an appropriate and too often neglected feature. Christ calls all Christians to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him (Matthew 16:24). Certainly Christ calls believers to deny *themselves*, and not necessarily deny themselves *things*; but Christ presents a vision of following him that includes a healthy category for self-sacrifice. The author of Hebrews exhorts his readers to “strive for…the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14 ESV). The action of *striving* is a vocabulary word often forgotten in modern Christianity. Nevertheless, the specific actions that John prescribes often go beyond (and sometimes against) the Bible’s actual commands and values. While John is careful not to forbid marriage altogether (which would go against Paul’s admonishment in 1 Tim. 4:3), he certainly values celibacy over marriage as the ideal, and he presents no other options for clergy. In the
Bible, however, marriage is not second best, nor is remarriage after the death of a spouse. Furthermore, while the Scriptures forbid love of riches and warn of the dangers of wealth, they do not teach that there is any particular holiness in a vow of poverty. On the whole, some of John’s overemphasis could be corrected by Paul, when he writes to the Colossians, “Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism…If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’” (Colossians 2:18, 20-21). It must also be noted, nevertheless, that John was a man of his times, and his vision for the Christian life reflected characteristic fourth century Eastern spirituality.

The second lesson to be learned from John is that, while there is a kind of eloquence that shadows the folly and the wisdom of the cross (1 Cor. 1:17-18), Christian preachers should seek to use speech that accurately reflects the gravity and the gladness of the truth that is spoken, and should seek to persuade the hearers toward a response of repentance and faith. It must be recognized that this can be dangerous in its own way, and that is witnessed in John’s ministry by the crowds who thronged to hear him speak and often appeared to be there just for the show (as was the case with other famous preachers in history such as Whitefield and Spurgeon). At the same time, the solution is not to abandon any form of eloquence or verbal ornamentation that can be utilized toward convincing and winning (by the work of the Spirit, obviously) those who are listening.

Finally, John’s story informs every minister of the gospel that a life in church ministry is always attended by conflict and controversy. Certainly, there are lessons to learn from John’s mistakes; at several points his own mouth and his own reactions got him into trouble. However, John demonstrates what it is like to be genuinely persecuted, to come under strategic attack and
assault, while maintaining, “Glory be to God for everything.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY