John Chrysostom

Richard C. Gamble, ThD
Experience: Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

In our last lecture, we were concluding our analysis of the Latin church father Victorinus. Victorinus is very important as a precursor to the theology, especially the Trinitarian theology, of Augustine. We've talked about potency and act and the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. In today's lecture we conclude our analysis of Victorinus and mention a few brief concluding remarks concerning the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Not only does Victorinus develop the doctrine of the Son as He relates to the Father, but also he elaborates this doctrine independently of the Son's relationship to the Father. For Victorinus the Son is thought of as life and as movement, He's the first form of God which can be seen, and the Son is the first being also. Remember that God the Father is seen in Trinitarian theology as being without parts, invisible, and so the Son, according to Victorinus, and rightly so, is the form of God which can be seen.

What about the third person of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit? We notice that the Holy Spirit does not receive as much attention in the theology of Victorinus as do the Father and the Son. The Spirit is distinguishable from the other two persons in that as the Son reveals the Father, the Father and the Son being the revelation, the observable part of the Father, distinguishable from the Father, but He is the one who reveals, who shows the Father, so the Holy Spirit is in a similar relationship to the Son. Victorinus says that the Spirit is the "voice" of the Son, relying upon the passages especially of the Old Testament, but the New Testament as well: as the Holy Spirit is the voice of the prophets, as the Holy Spirit speaks to the church. So the Holy Spirit for Victorinus is the voice of the Son.

Victorinus goes on to compare the Son with the Holy Spirit and with life and understanding. So the Son as the form and image of the Godhead reveals the unknowable Father, in the Holy Spirit,

the same Godhead reflects upon itself, shows itself, and thus the Spirit for Victorinus is the link between the Father and the Son, completing the perfect circle of the divine being. This nuance is a little bit different from what we've seen previously. In other words, the Holy Spirit works here on earth in and with the church, but the Holy Spirit's function, especially in inter-Trinitarian communication, is the unifier between the Father and the Son, the mediator between the Father and the Son, the go-between between the Father and the Son, and so Victorinus emphasizes more the importance of the Holy Spirit for inter-Trinitarian communication rather than the external activity of the Holy Spirit with the church.

These brief concluding words terminate our analysis of Victorinus. What's important for us is to see that Victorinus was a capable Latin theologian. Not in my opinion as good as Augustine, and in many ways inferior to his Eastern brothers. He is influenced by Neo-Platonic philosophy; he takes theology and tries to fit it into the philosophical structures with which he was comfortable, and that being what we call Neo-Platonism, of the philosophy of Plato that has been modified over the centuries.

So with Ambrose from our last lecture and Victorinus from our last lecture, we see much of the groundwork of the thought of Augustine. We need to introduce one more figure which will help provide a springboard for discussion of Augustine and a backdrop under which Augustine can be analyzed, and that person is John Chrysostom or Chrysostom, if you're from the British Isles. His life is fascinating, and the literature on him is enormous. He left behind a legacy of literary works that provides a vast body of reading, many volumes in English translation.

His first name was John, and Chrysostom was a name given to him. Last names were not as important in those days as we have them today, just like Augustine's name was Augustine. We call him Augustine of Hippo or Aurelius Augustinus in Latin, but the word *Chrysostom* is a transliteration of a Greek word which means "golden mouth." John was known as the golden tongue or the golden-mouthed orator or preacher. He was a tremendous preacher, and we have a number of his sermons, which by the way are not quite acceptable in twentieth-century pulpits. They're quite different from how we judge oratory today.

Let me talk briefly about his life before we take an in-depth look at his writings and his theology. John Chrysostom was a monk,

was a hermit, and was convinced that the ascetic life was the only way in which Christianity should be lived. Not everyone can be a monk, not everyone can be an ascetic, but especially pastors and church workers were to follow that type of an ascetic lifestyle. Chrysostom went from one pastorate to another because of his tremendous abilities always seeming to climb the ecclesiastical ladder, to speak in those words, but it seems each time he was put in a place of more authority and more power, it was always through his own protesting. In other words, he was not an ambitious person himself at all. Quite the contrary; he was quite a humble person and was always seeking to do those kinds of ministry that were not showy, were not flashy. I mentioned just a moment ago that he was a hermit, and he spent, for example, numbers of years living alone in a cave, and he would go through extended periods of time of fasting. And in his attempts to subdue his own flesh, rumor has it (and we don't know that this is historically verifiable, but it seems quite possible) that he would, for example, refuse to lie down to sleep and would have to sleep leaning against the wall of the cave, and that his extreme asceticism injured his own body, that his gastric system was somehow injured as he nearly starved himself to death. Here is a man who took his Christian lifestyle in all seriousness.

Concerning his biography I've one or two last and interesting points to bring up about him. We find that there's a renaissance of study of Chrysostom in Europe, especially in the eastern-bloc countries. As a matter of fact, some of the best Chrysostom scholars in the world now are Eastern Germans, Eastern Europeans, the reason being that Chrysostom had some very radical views of social relationships and is seen by Marxist Christians or Marxist historians as in a sense a forerunner of Marxist ideology, and that certainly is fascinating. But what Chrysostom did was, for example, when he was elevated to a very powerful church position went into the church and took the various pieces of silver, the silver cups for celebrating the Lord's Supper, and those kinds of things, and he went to the pawn shops of his town and sold it all. He took the expensive curtains from the church and sold them and used that money to, in a sense, establish an endowment fund for the poor of the city. During this time period in the Roman Empire as the empire itself is disintegrating, there was in contrast to modern twentieth-century Western cultures no social welfare system, so that in towns or cities like Antioch, where Chrysostom is busy in ministry, as much as 10 percent of the population were destitute, living on the streets. There was no provision for those who were lame or blind. They were reduced to begging, and so Chrysostom

believed that it was the church's responsibility to take care of these poor that were on the doorsteps of the church, and so the church if it had wealth was to sell whatever was luxurious and use that money to feed the poor, not just the poor of the church, but the poor of the city itself. This radical type of Christian activism is extremely attractive to those in the eastern bloc. They see this as an especially effective Christian ministry, and so most Chrysostom scholars, as I mentioned before, are German-speaking and many of them are from eastern Germany.

Chrysostom also was not afraid of worldly power, and that's going to get him into a lot of trouble as he has people like the empress attending his church who did not seem to follow the rules and laws of Christianity. He was public in his pronouncements against kinds of sin, whether it was a sin of the butcher, the baker, or the empress himself. And like our hero, Athanasius, so Chrysostom spends a number of years in exile after being beaten for daring to pronounce sin where sin was evident, even in the private and public life of the empress. Chrysostom is a man who stood for his Christianity, who was not afraid to bear the cross, who was not afraid to stand up for the truth.

Besides that bravery, we need to move next to the literature of Chrysostom, and his literary works can be divided into three categories. First his sermons, second his treatises, and third his letters. The word *sermon* is not used in the patristic era; rather the word *homily* is the proper word to describe what we would call today sermons. Again, sermons of today and homilies of the ancient church are somewhat different. Today as a preacher preaches, he uses the Scripture as his text and does his best to stay with that text and make application from that text. The homilies of the ancient church were more rambling, were usually quite long, and would discuss scientific issues and other issues besides the Scripture text in front of the preacher.

Concerning his sermons we have homilies from many Old Testament, a few Old Testament books, and many New Testament books. We have a number of homilies from the book of Genesis and a number from the book of Psalms. From the New Testament in Chrysostom, we have homilies on Matthew, on John, on Acts, on Romans, on Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews. Did you get all that? We also have some dogmatic homilies, dogmatic homilies being theological sermons, and some of those are on the incomprehensible nature of God, homilies against the Jews, and a

number of other homilies.

Concerning his treatises, his non-preached theological works, we have one on the priesthood, one on monastic life, one on virginity and widowhood, we have one on the education of children, on suffering, one against pagans and Jews. We can see certain themes, especially in the second area of treatises, themes which are still plaguing the church, perhaps still plaguing the church today, as we think about Christian lifestyle and Christian encounters with culture. The church is still wrestling with ideas like virginity and widowhood, whether there should be second marriages, of practical questions that are important to us today, how we should educate our children, how we should bear suffering. Again, there are many popular books today on suffering in the twentieth century, but notice especially the first two treatises on the priesthood and on monastic life. Here we get a very, very clear glimpse into the movement of the ancient church as it begins to turn the page toward the medieval church.

Chrysostom is convinced that the monastic life is, as I've mentioned from his own biography, very, very important, and that will be in contrast to Ambrose, for example, in the West, who maintained that the best person to minister was a married person who lives among the community. So that the complex unfolding of historical development is seen especially in this time period as we compare and contrast Ambrose and Chrysostom on the nature of Christian ministry. Chrysostom talks about the priesthood, he talks about monastic life. Ambrose and Augustine see married life, normal life as better and don't emphasize this idea of a priesthood of the clergy.

We also have a number of letters, that's the third part of his literary works, to and from friends, which gives us glimpse into his own biography, glimpses also into normal church life during this time period, and some personal reflections of Chrysostom in light of his own sufferings and his own preaching.

What about Chrysostom's theology? Certain important points are worth noting. We should first of all note that when we speak of Chrysostom's theology, we are still talking about pre-Augustinian theology, and so we see in my opinion a lack of precision in certain areas that is not evident in post-Augustinian theology. His doctrine of original sin, for example, may be presented in this manner. Children are not born in sin; newly born children are free from sin, but this doctrine is by the way very similar to the

Cappadocian fathers, and the theology of the Cappadocians and Chrysostom will later be implemented by the Pelagian or semi-Pelagian writers that we'll meet later. There is a theory, however, of original sin in Chrysostom and the other Greek fathers as well. They tend to view original sin more as a wound on our nature than will later Augustinianism. Yet it is undoubted in their theology that in the sin of Adam somehow all of humankind participates in this sin, but they don't exactly know the depth of the wound. There is a great deal of discussion among them as to how badly we are wounded in this original sin in Adam, but we are wounded.

Augustine is going to take that teaching of original sin, and as we'll see in later lectures, probably in this lecture still, the depth of Augustine's analysis of original sin. The point for you to notice now is once again a line, or a stream, or a theme in theology is being well worked out, a theme which we'll continue until the twentieth century, and that theme being the depth of the analysis of the effects of Adam's fall upon humankind. We remember from *The New England Primer*, "In Adam's fall, we sin at all." There is unanimity in the Christian church that all of humankind is affected by Adam's sin, but the precise nature of the effects of that sin will be a source of great discussion, especially during Augustine's life, and then in post-Augustinian theology, continuing into the Middle Ages with people like Thomas Aquinas and once again a discussion in the time period of the Reformation as Luther and Calvin argue with the humanists of the day in terms of the depths of the sin that we find ourselves in Adam. So the background to that whole discussion which is of course current in the twentieth century sees its roots in the patristic church.

Concerning the salvation of human beings, and that directly relates to the doctrine of original sin, Chrysostom sees that Christ's work was on the one hand as counteracting, so to speak, the devil. The devil had the right, according to Chrysostom, to deal wickedly with men in that they had sinned and put themselves under his jurisdiction. But inciting Judas to commit evil against Christ, this was an act of wickedness that went beyond the devil's prerogatives. So Chrysostom's theory maintains that in this act, the devil brought onto himself condemnation and was thrust out of his kingdom by the resurrection of Christ. Chrysostom has also an interesting theory of the atonement. Humankind stood condemned before God, yet was delivered from death by the atoning work of Christ. Christ's death was the unique one that was first seen in the sacrifices of the Old Testament. Even though Christ was entirely righteous, still God permitted His death and

transferred the guilt that was justly ours to him who knew no sin.

Notice the efficacy of this sacrifice was sufficient, according to Chrysostom, for the entirety of the human race. So according to Chrysostom, Christ died for all human beings. If not all human beings have reached salvation, then the reason is not to be put on the atoning work of Christ, but rather those human beings' refusal to accept His atoning work on their behalf. This thought is radically different from that of Augustine, and this thought might be very familiar to many of you who are studying the ancient church with me.

Once again, we see some current debates, some basic theological issues being hammered out in the ancient church that to many of us in the twentieth century are still live issues, issues as to how deeply we fell in Adam, how much we exercise our free will as we accept Christ, whether Christ's atonement is limited or unlimited, whether Christ's atonement was sufficient or efficient for the entire human race. These modern problems are not so modern. They have been discussed and debated for hundreds of years, and therefore our understanding of the history of that discussion will greatly aid us both in determining our own position, in understanding the positions of those who don't hold the same position, and being able to critique and analyze and debate and especially, though, to realize that this issue or these issues that are being brought up in the East and in the West, being discussed between Augustine and Chrysostom, are not going to be resolved overnight, but will perhaps be with the church until the time of the coming of our Lord.

Speaking practically concerning Chrysostom, his highest value lies for us as an exegete of Scripture. In many ways, he provided the Reformation exegetical method, especially for Calvin's exegesis, and so helping us to understand the way in which we do our own exegesis in the twentieth century, so we should take a very brief look at the nature of Chrysostom's exegetical methodology. The first thing we should remember as we think about Chrysostom is to remind ourselves that he had the Greek language as his mother tongue. That's a great advantage for all of us who have wrestled with parsing Greek verbs. We know that if you have Greek as your mother tongues, you're definitely one step ahead of the rest of us, and that was an advantage for him in understanding the nuances of Koinonia Greek. For the text of the Old Testament, he used the Septuagint, and the general consensus is that he didn't know the Hebrew language.

We should also place ourselves in the historical circumstances that surrounded Chrysostom. At that time, it was not very unusual for monks or presbyters to know very large sections of the Scriptures from memory. It appears from sources during Chrysostom's time that the years that he spent as a monk were spent in meditation upon the Scriptures, so it's not surprising to us to find in Chrysostom's literary treatises, but especially in his sermons and homilies, a knowledge of the Scriptures which very, very few preachers or learned scholars could match today. Many, many chapters were in memory in the Greek language. Now to what an unusual extent he had mastered the entire Scriptures can be understood from the fact that his treatises and sermons (by the way we have almost six hundred sermons of Chrysostom) there are eighteen thousand Scripture citations. Of these about seven thousand are from the Old Testament and eleven thousand from the New Testament.

It's also interesting to note in terms of the development of what we all the canon of Scripture, that in all of his citations of the New Testament, there are no quotations from the book of Revelation, none from 2 Peter, none from 2 and 3 John, and none from the book of Jude. This was because probably these books were not available to him in his Bible as we've tried to recreate the Bible of the Antiochian church. Those books of Scripture were not available to him.

Concerning Chrysostom's doctrine of Scripture, we can at least develop certain outlines of his thought. Chrysostom regards and treats the Holy Scriptures with a reverence, with an esteem that is the greatest imaginable. To him, what we have in the Bible is simply the holy and infallible Word of God, the message, the letter, which God Himself had written to us from all eternity. In the Bible, Chrysostom is convinced that the Holy Spirit speaks to us and indeed in the same way through all of the books of Scripture. Furthermore, the inspiration of God extends into the collective thought concept of the Holy Scripture, not merely in dogmatic and moral theology. Chrysostom, although he is precritical, speaks to some of the matters of postcritical biblical scholarship; he maintains that in matters of scientific and historical learning, in dates, in lists of names, in forms of salutation, and inscriptions and similar things, we have the complete and reliable work of the Holy Spirit. He repeatedly says that in the Holy Scriptures there is nothing without purpose, not a syllable, not an iota, not the smallest dash. Chrysostom understood very well that because of divine inspiration, it is impossible for the Holy Scriptures to

contain errors. Therefore, in his eyes, Scripture proofs are stronger and surer than proofs founded upon reason.

Chrysostom was a very special significance for the history and destiny of exegesis. Because he was such an outstanding churchman, because of his reputation as a selfless pastor, as a brilliant exegete, as a tremendous preacher with a following that was the greatest in the ancient church, because of his personal importance and the value that was given to him, especially after his death but during his life as well, his personal charisma aided the church in a way that he never thought possible, I'm sure. We've talked about his doctrine of Scripture, and we've talked about his high view of Scripture; we should briefly mention and we'll talk about the schools of exegesis as soon as we finish our analysis of Chrysostom, but we should note that Chrysostom was a follower of what we call the historical-grammatical method of Scripture exegesis. That's nothing new to us in the twentieth century. Those in the evangelical churches follow the historical-grammatical exegesis without question, but such was not the case in the ancient church. We've talked about Origen and his implementation of allegory. Origen was a very popular figure, but Chrysostom, because of his own personal weight, was able to swing the tide of the Eastern church toward historical-grammatical exegesis and away from what I would consider the bad exegesis of Origen and the implementation of allegory. And so as we look at the life and the theology of Chrysostom, we see this to be perhaps his greatest contribution to the continuing church, his contribution to the life of the church, long after his own death; that is, the movement toward historical-grammatical exegesis. And we'll talk about that in more detail in just a minute.

For those of you who are particularly interested, the roots of this method of Scripture did not begin with Chrysostom, but we see them beginning in the third century with some names that are interesting, and I'll mention them just briefly. They're not extremely important theologians, but Lucian, who taught in Antioch in around AD 260, dies around 312; Methodius of Olympus and Eusebius of Emesa, who died in 359. These men were teachers of the theologian Diodore of Tarsus, who died in 394, and Diodore of Tarsus then was Chrysostom's teacher in Antioch, as well as Theodore of Mopsuestia, and these teachers had as far as we can reconstruct and recreate exegetical methodology, these earlier teachers had developed what we call the historical-grammatical method of exegesis, and so Chrysostom as he follows that method was not creating something new but was following what he had

been taught by his earlier teachers.

Chrysostom wrote works on how to do exegesis. He wrote one especially that's interesting concerning the differences between theory and allegory, and by the word *theory*, the Antiochians, and that's the school that Chrysostom belongs to in terms of his exegesis, understood a theory as an objectively real higher sense that was yielded by historical-grammatical exegesis. In other words, they took historical-grammatical exegesis and attempted to understand the mind of the author himself in taking that theory, which they knew to be their theory of what precisely Paul or John meant by that text, and then would apply that theory to the life of the Christian, and that methodology is in contrast to allegory. We've discussed allegory earlier, where words can be separated from the historical context, where an application to the life of the listener or reader could be made in total independence to that actual text.

Now I'd like to mention here that Chrysostom and other followers of his methodology did not reject the allegorical meaning of Scripture entirely. What they did was restrain it or restrict it to those passages where they believed no other explanation seemed possible. And so Chrysostom's commentaries on the New Testament are considered even in our own day from the literary and exegetical point of view, the best and the most useful that the Greek patristic authors have given to us, so that if you are particularly interested in following up Greek patrisitic literature, the person that I would recommend most highly would be Chrysostom's commentaries, especially on the Gospels.

In his New Testament exegetical works, Chrysostom occasionally called upon other interpreters. He says some say this, others say that, but who these commentators are is left for the scholar to speculate. He never mentions his sources by name, but we don't know from what writings he oftentimes quotes. It's very difficult to determine those sources, and I think Chrysostom was humble, he didn't want to mention people he disagreed with, and it was also the style not to mention those with whom he was also in agreement. So it gives us some insight into what was being said during that time period, but we're not sure who was saying it.

Chrysostom also gave very practical advice to the members of his own congregation. He said that each person in the church should be reading the Scriptures daily if possible. The Bible was not as readily available in the fourth century as it is to us today. For a

few dollars we can go into most bookstores and buy a paperback Bible. In those days, there was no commercial paper; each page of the Bible was written on translucent sheepskin by hand and then bound by hand. So in other words, the Bible cost about the same as a modern-day Cadillac, and not everyone can afford one, but each church had a number readily accessible to the members of that church where they could come in and read the Scriptures. So the people of the church were admonished to come and to read, and they were given practical advice as to how to read the Bible. Advice that will once again sound old to us, but was of important in establishing some methodologies that we in twentieth-century America take for granted. If there's a passage of the Scripture that you don't understand, Chrysostom advised, then compare that passage with other passages that are less difficult.

We should note, and I would like you to note, that this admonition to the congregation to be reading the Scripture and practical advice as to how to read the Scripture is going to be the same message that is pronounced by Luther and Calvin in the sixteenth century, and this point is going to be picked up by the Reformers in a number of centuries after the time of Chrysostom, a thousand years later, as they are reminding the church that it is the church's heritage, it is the church's tradition to be reading the Scripture, have the laypersons reading the Scripture and interpreting it for themselves. And so a proper Protestant hermeneutic of having difficult passages be explained by easier passages is not something invented by the Protestant church but has its roots in the patristic church, and we should note as we think about our own ecumenical relations that taking away of the Bible away from the laymen is not a tradition of the ancient church, but rather it's very clearly articulated by church fathers, especially Chrysostom, that the laypeople should be heartily involved in Bible reading.

Let's move on to our next section of lectures and very briefly take a look at how the Bible was exegeted in the ancient church, in the various schools of exegesis. We move now to the Antiochian exegesis. Our time period is the third and later centuries. We've seen how the church has been interpreting the Scriptures in the first two centuries, and we need to move ahead chronologically. In the third and later centuries, there were three basic schools of exegesis. The first is what we call the literal and realistic school, the second is the allegorical school, and the third is what we would call the historical-grammatical school.

What is the first, the literal realistic school? Two people are general expositors of this type of teaching, Tertullian and Cyprian, and they maintained that the Bible in the main should always be interpreted literally. Is there anything wrong with that? Generally, no, but what happens when we get to those passages, say, in the Old Testament where the saving of the Israelites from the taskmasters, the Egyptians, is used in words like this, "that by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, Yahweh delivered Israel." Tertullian and Cyprian used that type of language to speculate that perhaps God in fact had arms, and there a literal interpretation would, I imagine, generally be rejected by the great majority of Protestant biblical interpreters in the twentieth century. So those things that are said like that should be understood literally and realistically.

In great contrast to that school is the allegorical school, generally associated with the person Origen and the city of Alexandria in Egypt. We mentioned the allegorical method as we discussed Philo in some of our earlier lectures.

The third school is historic-grammatical school, which we've talked about in terms of especially Chrysostom, and we think of the city of Antioch as the home base for this third school of biblical exegesis. Again, these three schools of thought are teaching devices used by us; not all church fathers fit neatly into these school. For example, the apostolic fathers and the apologists used typology very much, Irenaeus was also important for giving us some of the passages or some of the principles of understanding the Scriptures; for example, exegeting the difficult passages by the easy passages, so not everyone fits neatly into these three schools, but that helps us to understand the way in which the Scriptures were being interpreted.

In our next lecture, we'll begin by taking a more in-depth look at these three schools and then moving on to our analysis of Augustine of Hippo.