Tyndale Bulletin 69.1 (2018) 133-147

CONSTRUCT A FORTRESS AGAINST THE DEVIL

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM'S PLEA TO BUILD CHURCHES IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Michael Strickland
(michaelstrickland@amridgeuniversity.edu)

Summary

Given Chrysostom's famous concern for the poor, it is perhaps surprising that he made multiple appeals to rich, land-owning Christians to build churches in the countryside. In fact, Chrysostom preferred that the poor be helped by building churches for them rather than giving them gifts directly. However, it is clear that he was less concerned with architecture and aesthetics and more with evangelisation. Chrysostom saw church buildings, with 'full-time' ministers, as a way not only to bless the poor of the countryside, but as a means for Christian instruction. Thus, he appealed to rich Christians by challenging them to build more churches. Rather than building baths, or taverns, or hosting markets, why not build churches to establish an eternal legacy, constructing 'a fortress against the devil, for that is what the church is'?

1. Introduction

John Chrysostom, the famed preacher of the eastern empire in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, was a relentless advocate for the poor.[1]

[1] The primary and secondary sources which show this are legion. Some excellent examples from Chrysostom's sermons are his six homilies on the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which can be found in Catherine Roth, *John Chrysostom: On Wealth and Poverty* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984). Likewise, Wendy Mayer has carefully explored the corpus of Chrysostom's works and has written extensively on the subject. She has shown that Chrysostom's views on poverty

https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.27672
https://tyndalebulletin.org/

Perhaps no figure from the ancient church provided as many consistent and powerful admonitions to all Christians, especially the wealthy, to rid themselves of worldly treasure and its trappings by taking care of the poor. It may have surprised some in his day (as it may modern readers) that Chrysostom once advised wealthy landowners to build churches to help the rural pēoor. This essay discusses Chrysostom's *Hom. in Acts 18*, where the bishop of Constantinople argues that church buildings, and the presbyters that accompany them, are the greatest gifts a Christian landowner could give to his workers and to himself.

2. Locating the Sermon in Chrysostom's Life

While the exact occasion of *Hom. in Acts* cannot be stated with certainty, the weight of scholarly opinion suggests the sermons were delivered during Chrysostom's time in Constantinople, perhaps beginning in the year 400 and continuing into 401.[2] All of the sermons

---

were hardly monolithic and showed sensitivity to the fact that not all forms of poverty are equal. Indeed, Chrysostom considered voluntary poverty to be the most desirable state. See Wendy Mayer, 'Poverty and Generosity Towards the Poor in the Time of John Chrysostom' in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. S. R. Holman (Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History 1; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008): 140-58; 'John Chrysostom on Poverty' in *Preaching Poverty in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Realities*, ed. Pauline Allen, Bronwen Neil, and Wendy Mayer (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2009): 69-118; 'Poverty and Society in the World of John Chrysostom' in *Social and Political Life in Late Antiquity*, ed. William Bowden, Adam Gutteridge, and Carlos Machado (Late Antique Archaeology 3; Leiden: Brill, 2006): 465-84. See also Margaret Mitchell, 'Silver Chamber Pots and Other Goods Which Are Not Good' in *Having*, ed. William Schweiker and Charles Mathewes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004): 88-121; Blake Leyerle, 'John Chrysostom on Almsgiving and the Use of Money', *HTR* 87 (1994): 29-47; and the extensive listing of secondary sources on Chrysostom's teaching on poverty and riches in Margaret M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002): 317, n. 562.

[2] J. N. D. Kelly, in *Golden Mouth: John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995): 156, argues that Chrysostom's reference in *Hom.* 44 to having spent three years exhorting the church there is evidence that the sermon was delivered in February of 401. However, Mayer has shown that provenance and dating of Chrysostom's sermons by scholars in the past is often based on weak or faulty conclusions. See W. Mayer, *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom: Provenance – Reshaping the Foundations* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 273; Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 2008); and W. Mayer, 'John Chrysostom: Extraordinary Preacher, Ordinary Audience' in *Preacher and Audience: Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletics*, ed. P. Allen and M. B. Cunningham (Leiden: Brill, 1998): 105-37. For the purposes of this essay, however, it is worth

are typical of Chrysostom's vivid imagery and compelling argumentation, but *Hom. 18* gives one a glimpse of the period of late fourth- and early fifth-century Christianity and can help readers to appreciate the concerns of the people there and then.

2.1 The Christianisation of the Eastern Roman Empire

While it is clear that Christianity grew from a small Jewish sect in Palestine to the dominant religion of the late Roman Empire, the conversion of the empire to Christianity was far from linear in nature. And though the first Christians were likely, for the most part, rural Jewish peasants, in only a few decades the Way of Jesus became a predominantly urban movement. This transition can be seen in the New Testament itself, and the picture becomes even clearer throughout the second and third centuries. By the time of Constantine, when Christians still made up a minority of Roman subjects, there were large Christian populations in Rome, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. However, people in the countryside were, on the whole, slower to accept the new religion, or, more specifically, to eschew the traditional religious practices of their ancestors. The so-called *Theodosian Codes*, a compendium of Roman imperial legislation from the reign of Constantine to that of Theodosius II, document the means by which emperors tried to circumscribe traditional religious practices in the fourth and fifth centuries. Though is true that the empire became less and less tolerant of non-Christian religions, the imperial edicts were not absolutely effective. This is seen in the fact that some of the codes prohibited the same practices that had already been forbidden (namely, the offering of sacrifices), that provincial and local leaders were not always keen to completely impose the bans ordered by the emperor, and that policing the habits of those in the countryside was much more difficult than in the cities. One bishop, contemporary with Chrysostom, complained, 'Good emperors promulgate laws in behalf of religion, but their agents do not enforce them properly.'[3] It was in the countryside

noting that Mayer is comfortable placing the Acts homilies in Constantinople based on the internal evidence of the sermons themselves. See also W. Mayer and Pauline Allen, *John Chrysostom* (Early Church Fathers; London and New York: Routledge, 2000): 177.

[3] Maximus of Turin, Sermon 106.2, as quoted in Christopher P. Jones, *Between Pagan and Christian* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014): 24.

that the official laws forbidding traditional religious practices were most easily and most frequently ignored.

Frank R. Trombley has carefully documented the growth of Christianity in the ancient world according to historiographical, epigraphical, and archaeological evidence. He shows that the church history of Theodoret, a fellow Antiochian and near contemporary of Chrysostom's, while painting a picture of the heroic march of the Christian faith, readily admits the continued strength of old religious practices in the rural areas of the East. Theodoret records many pagan[4] villages in the Syria of his day, including in locales in near proximity to Antioch.[5] As Trombley rightly remarks, 'The accumulated evidence suggests, then, that the countryside of the early fifth-century Syria was in many places hardly Christianized.'[6]

The situation in Anatolia was more complicated because Christianity had a bigger and earlier footprint there than in the rest of the Roman world. This does not mean that Byzantium and its environs were mostly Christian from an early date, however. For example, in nearby Bithynia there was a widespread presence of pre-Christian cults into the mid-fifth century, according to Callinicus' *Life of Hypatius*.[7]

---

4 While it has long been argued that the word 'pagan' itself demonstrates that the country people, *pagani*, were holdouts to the new religion, so that the word *paganus* came to represent a polytheist of some kind, the linguistic evidence is not definitive. See Thomas Jürgasch, 'Christians and the Invention of Paganism' in *Christians and the Invention of Paganism in the Late Roman Empire: Conflict, Competition, and Coexistence in the Fourth Century*, ed. Michele Renee Salzman, Marianne Sághy, and Rita Lizzi Testa (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 115-38 for an excellent review of the literature and discussion of possible reasons for the shift in meaning of the term.

5 Cf. Theodoret, *Hist. Phil*. 100.4.

6 Frank Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization, C.370–529* (vol. 2; Leiden: Brill, 2001): 163. This remained true in many areas of Asia Minor well into the sixth century. John of Ephesus (*History of the Church* 2.72) recounts his mission 'to convert the pagan populations in Asia Minor'. See D. Ch. Stathakopoulos, 'Travelling with the Plague' in *Travel in the Byzantine World: Papers from the Thirty-fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, April 2000*, ed. Ruth Macrides (Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies; Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2002): 99-106, 104. John of Ephesus claimed to have baptised 80,000 pagans during his ministry in western Anatolia in the 530s and 540s. So A. D. Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium AD 363 to 565: The Transformation of Ancient Rome* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 274.

7 Callinicus specifically mentions the fifty-day festival called 'the defiled Basket of Artemis, which the countryside keeps annually'. See *V. Hypatii* 45.1. As quoted in Trombley, *Hellenic Religion*, 79. Callinicus (*V. Hypatii* 8.7) likewise reports that just a few years before Chrysostom's arrival in Constantinople Ionas and his monks finally

This evidence is consistent with the general scholarly opinion that Christian influence was much less palpable in the Roman countryside, east and west, in Chrysostom's day. From strictly archaeological data, much of the countryside in the eastern empire does not show Christian influence until the fifth and sixth centuries.[8] This reflects a reality which Chrysostom addresses in the sermon, namely the fact that the countryside lacked churches.

2.2 Chrysostom's Life

Chrysostom grew up in Antioch, a city with a long Christian heritage in the fourth century, but also with a strong traditional Hellenic religious presence among all strata of society.[9] Many elements of Chrysostom's life reflect this diversity of faith present in the city. Firstly, it is possible, but not definite, that Chrysostom's father was not a Christian. We do know that he died when John was very young. Secondly, though Chrysostom's mother was an ardent Christian, she paid for him to study under the renowned pagan rhetorician Libanius.[10] Libanius can help frame our understanding of the general state of the empire in the late fourth century, as well as provide a backdrop for Chrysostom's discussion of the countryside.

A. F. Norman,[11] who translated the autobiography of the most famous fourth-century rhetorician of the eastern empire, argues that Libanius stands as an example of the new moderate paganism of the late fourth century that was able to accept the new religion as legitimately Roman while still advocating for traditional religious practices.[12] As the old ways faded from the government and upper

---

'tamed Thrace and made [the rustics] Christians'. As quoted in Trombley, *Hellenic Religion*, 76.

8 Trombley, *Hellenic Religion*, 235.

9 See Robert F. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2004): 16-26.

10 While there has been doubt expressed as to whether we can know with certainty whether Libanius was Chrysostom's teacher, the evidence, which dates back to the fifth-century church historian Sozomen (see *NPNF* 2.2.399), strongly suggests it. See the discussion in Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 6-7 and Chrysostomos Baur, *John Chrysostom and his Time*, *Vol. 1* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman, 1959): 16-21.

11 A. F. Norman, *Libanius: Autobiography and Selected Letters* (2 vols; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, 1993).

12 However, see arguments against Libanius' supposed moderation in Peter Van Nuffelen, 'Not the Last Pagan: Libanius between Elite Rhetoric and Religion' in *Libanius: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Lieve Van Hoof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 293-314.

echelons of society (replaced by Christian mandates and concerns) some took an antagonistic approach to Christianity in the fourth century. The greatest example of this is, of course, the emperor Julian (the Apostate), who sought to reverse the gains of Christianity in the Roman government and revive the ancient prayers, oaths, vows, and sacrifices of the traditional Greco-Roman religions. Many Roman citizens and subjects gladly resumed the religious practices of their ancestors during Julian's brief reign. Unlike Julian, Libanius was willing to accept the presence of Christianity alongside the traditional religions, but was quick to critique Christian attempts to intrude upon and squelch the traditional religion. In the year 384, when Cynegius, the Praetorian prefect of the East, set about his infamous tour of the eastern empire destroying Hellenic religious sites, Libanius condemned the destruction of those sacred spaces as well as the threatening of priests and the complete disregard of the needs of the local people (who considered the sites to be crucial to their well-being). He complained that when the 'black robed' monks arrived at pagan temples

> Then utter desolation follows, with the stripping of roofs, demolition of walls, the tearing down of statues and the overthrow of altars, and the priests must either keep quiet or die … Such outrages occur even in the cities, but they are most common in the countryside … Temples, Sire, are the soul of the countryside: they mark the beginning of its settlement, and have been passed down through many generations to the men of today. In them the farming communities rest their hopes for husbands, wives, children, for their oxen and the soil they sow and plant. An estate that has suffered so has lost the inspiration of the peasantry together with their hopes, for they believe that their labour will be in vain once they are robbed of the gods who direct their labours to their due end. And if the land no longer enjoys the same care, neither can the yield match what it was before, and, if this be the case, the peasant is the poorer, and the revenue jeopardized.[13]

2.3 Chrysostom's Love of the Countryside

While Libanius seems to present a somewhat romanticised view of the hard-working, devout country people simply seeking to please their gods, make an honest day's wage, and serve the benefit of the humanity, one could argue that Chrysostom often presented an even more idyllic picture of rural life in the fourth century. When he was still preaching in Antioch, he once had an occasion to preach to a

[13] Libanius, *Pro Templis* (Oration 30.9-10), as translated by Norman, 109-10.

mixed group of city dwellers and visiting monks from the countryside. The monks did not speak Greek, as the general population of Antioch would have, but instead spoke what were likely local dialects of Syriac. He described his visitors from the countryside:

> Let us not look to the fact that their speech is different from ours. Let us note carefully the true doctrine of their soul and not their barbarous tongue. Let us learn the intention of their heart and that they prove in deeds the things we, in our love of true doctrine, strive to teach by words … At one time they stand close beside the sacred altar (βῆμα) reading the divine laws and instructing those who hear their words. At another, they toil over the tilling of the earth, as they drag the plough, cut furrows in the field, scatter their seeds, and entrust them to the bosom of the earth. At still another time they take in hand the plough of instruction and sow the seed of the divine teachings in the souls of their disciples … Here you see this simple rustic (τὸν ἰδιώτην τοῦτον καὶ ἄγροικον) who knows nothing but farming and tilling the earth. Yet he takes no heed of the present life, but sends his thoughts winging to the good things that lie stored up in heaven, and he knows how to be wise about those ineffable blessings. He has exact knowledge of things which the philosophers who take pride in their beard and staff have never even been able to imagine.[14]

These monks, it seemed to Chrysostom, represented the ideal. He, at one time, had been an ascetic, living alone in the countryside and trying to embody the very life he praised. These country-dwelling monks, some of whom took orders and later became presbyters, served as models for Chrysostom's audiences in both Antioch and Constantinople.[15]

However, while the countryside could provide an ideal place for Christians to practise their faith, the monks of the late fourth and early fifth centuries often lived among the very rural pagans extolled by

---

[14] Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instruction*, 8, trans. P. W. Harkins, *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions* (Ancient Christian Writers 31; Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1963): 119-20.

[15] To Chrysostom, the monk was a model of piety and faithfulness. In his homily *A Comparison Between a King and a Monk* he argued that a monk's lifestyle was to be far more coveted than that of royalty. He also constructed three sermons to defend monasticism against its critics, entitled *Against the Opponents of the Monastic Life*. See Samantha L. Miller, 'Chrysostom's Monks as Living Exhortations to Poverty and the Rich Life', *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 58 (2013): 79-98. However, Chrysostom had his trouble with the monks of Constantinople, who were often unwilling to take orders from the church. He often considered their lifestyles not austere enough, and he was worried about their political manoeuvrings. Ultimately, a Syrian monk named Isaak and his comrades helped bring about Chrysostom's removal from Constantinople. See Peter Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, c. 350–850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 67-69.

Libanius. As is discussed below, one strategy for Christianising the pagan countryside was to build churches on country estates to allow priests and monks to establish a foothold for the gospel.

2.4 Chrysostom in Constantinople

The fact that the sermon under consideration was delivered in Constantinople is important because of the twin concerns that Chrysostom's sermon reveal, namely that of the propagation of orthodox Nicene Christianity and the evangelisation of pagans. Unlike Antioch, with its long pagan, Jewish, and Christian heritage by Chrysostom's day, Constantinople was envisioned as a 'Christian city' from the time of its founding at the site of the ancient city of Byzantium. Though there was a pagan presence in the capital city of the East from its founding, Constantine ensured that his city would overtly encourage Christianity, with large churches and important Christian leadership positions endowed by the government.[16] While it is evident that Christianity was the dominant religion of the capital city in the late fourth century, the problem, from the orthodox Nicene perspective, is that most of the churches and Christians there were Arians. Theodosius had tried to outlaw Arianism in the East,[17] and while his efforts, no doubt, had a chilling effect on Arianism in many places, when Chrysostom came to Constantinople in 398 as bishop of the city there was still a strong Arian presence there. He observed Arian processions through the city on Saturdays, Sundays, and feast days, all while singing their Arian songs, and he concluded that the orthodox must respond with their own competing parades through town. As one would expect, when these duelling cavalcades met in the streets, trouble would eventually ensue. Once, when an orthodox bishop was hit with a stone, a riot erupted, and the end result was that the emperor banned Arian processions from Constantinople.[18] This would, of course, not mean that Arianism was dead in the area, but that the efforts of Arians had to be more clandestine in the city.

---

16 See Oliver Nicholson, 'Constantinople: Christian City, Christian Landscape' in *The Making of Christian Communities in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Mark F. Williams (London: Anthem Press, 2005): 27-47.

17 See *Theodosian Code* 16.5.6.

18 See Nicholson, 'Constantinople', 32 and Nathanael Andrade, 'The Processions of John Chrysostom and the Contested Spaces of Constantinople', *JECS* 18.2 (2010): 161-89.

3. The Sermon

Though Christianity, in one form another, dominated in the city itself, there is no reason to assume that the country dwellers were likewise predominantly Christian. In fact, the sermon itself would seem to indicate otherwise. In *Hom. 18* on Acts 7–8, Chrysostom offers his traditional verse-by-verse exegesis of the martyrdom of Stephen and the subsequent persecution of the church in Jerusalem, which had the effect of dispersing the disciples in places like Samaria. The preacher marvels at the faithfulness of Phillip and the other Christians who used the occasion of being driven out of Jerusalem to spread the gospel. Chrysostom then turns his attention to the wealthy Christian landowners who lived in the city but had large holdings in the nearby countryside. His rhetorical skills are made evident when he deftly moves from his exegesis of Acts 8:25 into the exhortation portion of the sermon—that wealthy landowners should erect church buildings on their country estates.

> We should also make such journeys. Why do I speak of journeys? Many own villages and estates, yet are careless and do not take account of this. They are diligent to build baths, to increase revenues, to have courtyards and buildings constructed. But not so with the cultivation of souls.[19]

Chrysostom knew that these rich landowners liked to construct fine edifices on their estates, and he appeals to them to build a church instead of the other options (marketplaces, baths, mausoleums, courtyards, or hosting fairs and festivals), something not many were inclined to do. He says,

> Most will provide marketplaces and baths, but not churches – No, anything but churches! Therefore, I encourage you, I implore you, I ask a favour of you – I lay down a law – that no country estate be without a church.[20]

One gets the impression that the golden-mouthed orator had argued with estate owners before and had heard their excuses: 'Don't tell me that there is one nearby, on the neighbouring estate, or that the cost is great and the income small.'[21] To allay concerns of great cost, he recommends starting small and expanding later: 'Begin with a small

---

[19] John Chrysostom, *Hom. Acts 18.3* (PG 60.146.50-56, translation mine). All subsequent translations of this sermon are my own.

[20] *Hom. Acts 18.4* (PG 60.147.10-14).

[21] *Hom. Acts 18.4* (PG 60.147.14-15).

house to serve as a temple. After that another can put up a porch, and his successor can make further additions.'[22]

Further, Chrysostom allows that, if one landowner does not have the money to build a church, two or three can come together to build one for adjoining estates. It is in this context that Chrysostom makes a striking statement about the building of churches: 'If you have anything to spend on the poor, spend it in this way. Better there than here.'[23] This command, from the one who despised opulence and frequently condemned the wealthy while pleading the cause of the poor, is remarkable. It shows that he believed a church in the countryside was the most useful way to help the rural poor. But why?

3.1 The Advantages of Church Buildings

To Chrysostom, the construction of a church serves two overarching purposes: the discouragement of sin and the encouragement of orthodox Christianity. It is the responsibility of the landowner to build a church to achieve these ends and, in the process, receive personal benefit. He boldly commands, 'construct a fortress against the devil, for that is what the church is'.[24] First, he notes that many of the ways in which landowners tended to reward their workers served to work against the Christian message: 'Your baths make the peasants soft, your taverns make them indulgent, and yet you provide these for your own glory. Your markets and fairs, on the other hand, promote recklessness.'[25]

These fairs, or *paneguries* (πανηγύρεις), had roots in worship of the gods, so they could not only lead to sin, but also flirt with paganism.[26]

---

[22] *Hom. Acts 18.5* (PG 60.148.17-18).

[23] *Hom. Acts 18.5* (PG 60.147.16-17): Εἴ τι ἔχεις εἰς πένητας ἀναλῶσαι, ἐκεῖ ἀνάλωσον· βέλτιον ἐκεῖ, ἢ ἐνταῦθα.

[24] *Hom. Acts 18.5* (PG 60.148.60-61): Φρούριον κατασκεύασον κατὰ τοῦ διαβόλου τούτο γάρ ἐστιν ἡ ἐκκλησία.

[25] *Hom. Acts 18.5* (PG 60.147.43-46).

[26] On πανήγυρις, see G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961): 1002, s.v. The term could simply refer to an assembly and is used as such to describe heavenly (Heb. 12:23) and Jewish gatherings (see Philo, *Life of Moses* 2.211, and, in the LXX, Ezek. 46:11; cf. Hos. 2:11; 9:5; Isa. 66:10). However, the negative connotation which Chrysostom gives the term here seems to suggest a much rowdier scene of recklessness (ἰταμούς). Chrysostom elsewhere encouraged feasts of the Christian martyrs, but warned that even they could lead to sin: 'In order that we may maintain this flame of devotion not just now but always, even once this spiritual spectacle is over, let us return home with the same reverence, rather than giving ourselves over to taverns and brothels and drunkenness and revelling. You made the

And it is clear that many of the villagers and farm workers of whom Chrysostom speaks are not Christians. Chrysostom asks: 'Tell me, how will your farm worker become a Christian if he sees that you do not care for his salvation? You cannot work miracles to persuade him. Use every means at your disposal to convert him by kindness (φιλανθρωπία), by protection (προστασία), by gentleness, by charming (κολακεία) him, and by all means necessary.'[27]

Thus, the church could serve as a centre of evangelism, and the primary evangelist would be the presbyter there. Chrysostom did not envision empty church buildings dotting the countryside, built with the hope that they would be used. Rather, he asked the estate owners to include a retinue of sacred workers to maintain it. 'Provide a teacher,' he says, 'provide a deacon and a priestly system (ἱερατικὸν σύστημα).'[28] The preacher firmly believed that the church officers, and primarily the presbyter, would act as a form of spiritual magnet for the community. Hearkening back to a familiar image in other sermons,[29] he described the rural presbyter in much the same terms he used for the monks of the Syrian countryside. In fact, it is almost certain that Chrysostom intended that a monk be chosen to serve as presbyter of the newly built church. Consider this depiction of the presbyter at his task: 'But think now what a thing it would be to see a presbyter, the moving picture of Abraham, gray-headed, dressed for work, digging and labouring with his own hands?'[30]

Chrysostom argues that this presbyter, who commits himself to manual labour and priestly duties, will immediately benefit the surrounding countryside. Those who have learned philosophy will come to him to be cured of it. For the villagers, 'he will serve as a director who protects them with his presence and who trains

---

night into day through your holy vigils. Do not in turn make the day into night through drinking and intoxication and erotic songs.' From *Homily on the Martyrs* (PG 50.663) as quoted in Jason König, *Saints and Symposiasts: The Literature of Food and the Symposium in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 194.

27 Chrysostom, *Hom. Act.18.4* (PG 60.147.5-9).

28 *Hom. Acts 18.4* (PG 60.147.17-18).

29 See Demetrios E. Tonias, *Abraham in the Works of John Chrysostom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014): 22, who argues (following the work of Margaret Mitchell) that Abraham serves as an 'archetypal image' for Chrysostom. In fact, Tonias includes Chrysostom's 'Sermon on the Blessed Abraham', 155-77.

30 *Hom. Acts* 18.4 (PG 60.147.46-49).

(ῥυθμίζειν) them'.[31] The countryside will become safer and more productive with a church and an elder there.

It is also apparent that Chrysostom has his eye toward making sure that his Arian competitors do not get a foothold in the countryside. The church building would be an essential tool by which orthodox Nicene Christianity was spread and preserved. Unlike the case in the city of Constantinople, where a religious fight always seemed to be brewing, country estates could be free of these problems. Chrysostom says, 'A country estate with a church is like the Paradise of God. No clamouring (κραυγή) there, no riots (θόρυβος), no enemies fighting (ἐχθροὶ διάφοροι), no heresies (αἱρέσεις).'[32]

Thus, the estate owner can look forward to a united country church engaged daily and nightly in worship to God, and all because of his generosity. Several times throughout the sermon Chrysostom references the fact that churches, unlike other buildings, do not bring in revenues. Any landowner, ancient or modern, knows that owning acres and acres of land can be expensive. The farm must bring in money. Chrysostom appeals with a utilitarian argument that not only will the countryside and villages be better off with a church, but that the church will profit the rich landowners too. He states:

> As you would do for your own bride, or for your daughter, in marriage, give the church a dowry and your estate will be filled with blessings. Won't you have all good things? Is it a minor thing that your wine-press be blessed? Is it a minor thing that God receives your crops and is the first to taste the fruit of your land? This will profit your workers with peace as well. The presbyter in their midst, to whom they must pay respect, will contribute to the security of the estate. There will be constant prayers, hymns, and assemblies through you – the offerings of each Lord's day. Just think of the wonder it will be that, unlike others who have built fine tombs so that it would said, 'So and so built this,' you have raised churches. Consider that at the coming of Christ you (the one who has built altars of God) will have your reward.[33]

Thus, Chrysostom argues that landowners who build churches will receive blessings in this life and the next. They will see the Christian faith spread, provide for constant worship to God, and see bumper crops of blessings.[34]

---

[31] *Hom. Acts* 18.4 (PG 60.148.15-16).

[32] *Hom. Acts* 18.4 (PG 60.148.6-8).

[33] *Hom. Acts* 18.4 (PG 60.147.18-33).

[34] Chris L. de Wet, *Preaching Bondage: John Chrysostom and the Discourse of Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oakland, California: University of California Press,

4. Conclusion

Now we return to the chief puzzle presented by this homily. Why did Chrysostom seem to go against his general theme of helping the poor directly by asking rich Christian landowners to build churches instead? Before offering potential reasons for this somewhat counter-intuitive advice, it is important to recognise that Chrysostom was almost certainly not making a universal pronouncement requiring the rich to solely help the poor by means of building churches. Such a declaration would cut across his clear advocacy for other means of charity in later sermons. Instead, we should appreciate that this sermon is focused on rich landowners who presumably neglected to take seriously their duties toward their dependents in the countryside. The statement 'Better there than there' (βέλτιον ἐκεῖ, ἢ ἐνταῦθα) offers the hint that these estate owners were more consumed with spending their money, and perhaps providing charity, in the city than thinking of the rural poor. And when they did spend money in the countryside, it was on the very things which Chrysostom attacks – mausoleums, baths, courtyards, fairs, and festivals, none of which could offer meaningful help to countryfolk.

Firstly, it could be that Chrysostom was showing an appreciation for the difference between the urban and rural poor and their needs. Since voluntary poverty was to Chrysostom a desirable state, he was less concerned with equity between the rich and poor, and more with the fact that tenant farmers, villagers, and country labourers were only one bad harvest away from dire consequences.[35] In the event that the farms did not produce their fruit, countryfolk would turn somewhere for help.[36] The nearby estate church, to Chrysostom, could provide the anchor for their spiritual wellbeing and be a centre of charity.

2015): 87-88 notes that agrarian societies were concerned with the ability of a given deity to provide fruitful crops, so Chrysostom's appeal includes assurances that the Christian God who will indeed provide a bountiful harvest.

[35] For a discussion of the plight of peasant workers in the Roman world, see Peter Garnsey and Greg Woolf, 'Patronage of the Rural Poor in the Roman World' in *Patronage in Ancient Society*, ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (London: Routledge, 1990): 153-70.

[36] Rich Christians had a myriad of choices of ways to help the poor via the church. Richard Damian Finn shows that the fourth- and fifth-century Roman Empire provided several opportunities for charity by means of 'episcopal almsgiving', which included giving money to the bishop for special collections, alms boxes, tithing, holding agape feasts, providing food at martyr shrines, and building hospitals and hostels. See R. D.

Secondly, Chrysostom's advice anticipates the important way that Christianity spread to rural areas by means of monks and monasteries. Chrysostom's poignant picture of the priest-monk who would inhabit the estate church fits with the scholarly consensus that it was often these faithful ascetics who were able to introduce Christianity to countryfolk in the fifth century and beyond. While he does not envision building a monastery *per se*, in any formal sense, he does expect that the 'the moving picture of Abraham, gray-headed, dressed for work, digging and labouring with his own hands' will have a powerful effect on the people in the area. In this sense, Chrysostom is inviting the wealthy estate owners to join in a programme for the evangelisation of the countryside. They would build the churches, and the monks would take care of the rest. The monks could provide the clerical oversight of the church at little expense, as Trombley aptly notes: 'A manpower shortage certainly existed for Christianizing the countryside, and a greater financial investment would certainly have attracted more personnel. Monks had fewer needs and were thus cheaper. They also provided hard-line catechization.'[37]

Lastly, it may be that Chrysostom saw a utility in the construction of estate churches that went beyond mere concern for rural residents and wealthy landowners. It is clear that the change in Christianity's fortunes under Constantine paved the way for the church to come into possession of wealth, property, and influence in a manner unthinkable in the previous centuries. In one sense, Chrysostom was already overburdened with his pastorates in Antioch and Constantinople and with all their administrative tasks, but, in another, he would welcome the ability to shape the church of the countryside by appointing priests of his choice to ensure that his vision of pious orthodoxy was being promulgated.[38] Any estate owner who wished to follow his advice would surely do so by donating the money to the church and allowing Chrysostom to direct the construction and appoint the presbyter there. Further, the erection of a church on an estate would then put the property under the church's oversight to a degree and give the bishop a

---

Finn, *Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire: Christian Promotion and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

37 Trombley, *Hellenic Religion*, 94.

38 This would also help counteract any heretical estate churches, which were also present in Chrysostom's day. See John Philip Thomas, *Private Religious Foundations in the Byzantine Empire* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987): 31-32.

potential voice in its use. While Chrysostom himself would have eschewed the wealth associated with large landholdings,[39] he would have gladly accepted the opportunity to broaden the church's influence and promote Nicene orthodoxy at the same time.

[39] The large landholdings of bishops came to be such a problem within half a century of Chrysostom's death that the Council of Chalcedon in 451 (Canon 26) required that all bishops entrust management of their properties and concurrent earnings to a clerical steward (οἰκονόμος). Canons 2 and 3 also dealt with the potential corrupting power of a bishop's wealth. See Richard Price and Michael Gaddis, *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, *Vol. 1* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005): 48.