

## “TO MARRY IN CHRIST”: A THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL APPRAISAL OF JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ON MARRIAGE

JOHN D. LAING AND STEFANA DAN LAING\*

**Abstract:** *This article examines John Chrysostom’s theological and ethical/practical vision of Christian marriage, focusing on the purpose(s) of marriage, and the relations that should obtain between the spouses, drawing upon Homily 19 on 1 Corinthians 7, Homily 20 on Ephesians 5, Homily 12 on Colossians 4, and two additional homilies: How to Choose a Wife and Sermon on Marriage. Amid current evangelical conversations surrounding the nature and outworking of the marital relationship, Chrysostom offers a biblically grounded and theologically rich vision of Christian marriage, a vision from which the church may still benefit today. Within a hierarchical framework (consistent with Chrysostom’s socio-historical context), he repeatedly urged mutuality and harmony between husband and wife. By preaching that marriage exists for the purpose of mutual sanctity, and calling for balanced leadership in the home based on wifely respect and husbandly sacrificial love, John encouraged a loving and holy partnership that elevated marriage and portrayed the home as a virtuous community, resembling “a little church,” benefiting society as a whole, and ultimately transforming it into a Christian politeia.*

**Key words:** *John Chrysostom, theology of marriage, Late Antique preaching, virginity, complementarianism, mutuality in marriage, 1 Corinthians 7, Ephesians 5:21–33, Aristotle, Musonius Rufus, Plutarch, chastity.*

John Chrysostom’s teaching on marriage has been called “the best in Christian teaching ... between St. Paul and the twentieth century.”<sup>1</sup> Despite Chrysostom’s preference for consecrated virginity as the ideal Christian vocation, and his seemingly negative assessment of marriage in his early treatise, *On Virginity*, some of his later sermons offer what Orthodox theologian David Ford calls a “particularly sublime vision of marriage.”<sup>2</sup> In those sermons, Chrysostom presents a surprisingly nuanced understanding of role relationships and the responsibilities of each spouse, as compared with the prevailing views of his Late-Antique patriarchal culture, and

---

\* John D. Laing is Senior Chaplain for the Texas Military Department in Austin, TX. He may be contacted at chaplainlaing@gmail.com. Stefana Dan Laing is Assistant Professor of Divinity (Spiritual Formation) at Beeson Divinity School, 800 Lakeshore Drive, Birmingham, AL 35229. She may be contacted at stefana.laing@samford.edu.

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Roth, “Introduction,” in John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life* (trans. Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson; Popular Patristics Series 7; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986), 11. His younger contemporary, Augustine, would take up this theme of the “goods of marriage” as well, producing “the first systematic theological discussion of marriage” in his treatise, *The Good of Marriage*, composed in AD 401. See David G. Hunter, “Introduction,” in *Marriage in the Early Church* (ed. and trans. David G. Hunter; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 22.

<sup>2</sup> David C. Ford, “St. John Chrysostom’s Letter to the Italian Women,” *St. Tikhon’s Theological Journal* 1 (2003): 19.

also in light of his own earlier writings. He proved to be a strong advocate for the goods of marriage, defending it against prominent fourth-century heresies—such as Encratism, Gnosticism, and Manicheism—which denigrated marriage and sexual desire.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to defending marriage against heterodox views, Chrysostom also defined marriage that was specifically *Christian* against a diversity of prevailing views of marriage and sexuality found among the urban upper classes. Having ministered as a pastor in two cosmopolitan cities, Antioch and Constantinople, John keenly (and with dismay, even alarm) observed the sexual culture in which his congregants lived, married, and raised families. Despite the Christian turn under Constantine and Theodosius the Great, and their accompanying imperial legislative amendments, elements of paganism persisted throughout Late-Antique society, embedded in social traditions and institutions, including the institution of marriage.<sup>4</sup> Throughout his nearly two decades of preaching and pastoral activities, therefore, he effectively became an early constructor of the concept of “holy matrimony,” or as he expressed it, “what it means to marry in Christ.”<sup>5</sup> John believed this model of marriage to be vital for the transformation of Late-Antique society; indeed, it is a model worth retrieving for the contemporary church.

Our goal in this article is to show how John pursued his task homiletically by focusing on two broad emphases in his overall vision of marriage: the *purpose(s)* of marriage (John’s theological vision), and the *relations* that should obtain between the spouses (John’s practical/ethical vision). Preaching texts to be drawn upon include *Homily 19* on 1 Corinthians 7, *Homily 20* on Ephesians 5, *Homily 12* on Colossians 4, and two additional pertinent addresses on marriage: *How to Choose a Wife* and *Sermon on Marriage*.<sup>6</sup> John advanced to his congregants the ideas that marriage exists for the purposes of *mutual sanctity* through a striving for bodily and spiritual chastity, and of the *unitive love* resulting from marital consummation. His vision for spousal relation-

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Chrysostom also argued against Marcion, Valentinus, and Mani, among others, in *On Virginity*, because they went beyond the biblical teaching of virginity as a recommendation, and instead made it a requirement. John Chrysostom, *On Virginity* 3. Elizabeth Clark argues that his defense of marriage should be seen as an attempt to distance himself from the heretics: “Indeed, it was imperative for Chrysostom to uphold the goodness of marriage, amid his many criticisms of it, if he himself wished to avoid charges of Manicheism.” Elizabeth A. Clark, “Introduction,” in John Chrysostom, *On Virginity; Against Remarriage* (trans. Sally Rieger Shore; Studies in Women and Religion 9; New York: Edwin Mellen, 1983), xvii.

<sup>4</sup> See Judith Evans Grubbs, “Pagan’ and ‘Christian’ Marriage: The State of the Question,” *JECs* 2 (1994), 386.

<sup>5</sup> John Chrysostom, “Homily 20: On Ephesians 5:22–33,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Each work is found in an accessible translation (but with editorial omissions and some paraphrasing) in Roth and Anderson’s volume noted above. Other more literal translations include those by David G. Hunter (“Homily 20 on Ephesians,” in *Marriage in the Early Church*, 77–96) and Elizabeth Clark (selections from Chrysostom’s “The Kind of Women Who Ought to Be Taken as Wives,” and “Homily 19 on 1 Corinthians,” in *Women in the Early Church* [Message of the Fathers of the Church 13; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983], 36–37, 75–76). The Greek texts may be found in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*. PG 51 (“How to Choose a Wife” and “Sermon on Marriage,” more literally, “On the Apostolic saying, ‘But because of fornication, let each man have his own wife,’” 1 Cor 7:2), PG 61 (“Homily 19 on 1 Corinthians”), and PG 62 (“Homily 20 on Ephesians” and “Homily 12 on Colossians”).

ships called for balanced leadership in the home based on wifely respect and husbandly sacrificial love, thereby encouraging a *loving partnership* that elevated marriage to a level equivalent to the holiest ascetics who consecrate themselves to God and spur one another to holiness within their communities. In both aspects of John’s vision, it becomes evident that within the *hierarchical* framework of his day, Chrysostom repeatedly emphasized *mutuality* and *harmony* between husband and wife, in a way similar to but extending beyond pagan ideals of the companionate marriage: Christian marriage was an *eikōn* of Christ and his holy, loving relationship with the church. As a result, Chrysostom envisioned the home as a community of virtue, resembling “a little church,” and benefiting not only the children (who are intimately related to the parents in a three-in-one flesh union), but also society as a whole.<sup>7</sup> This idyllic portrait forms the core of Chrysostom’s broader vision to transform the Late-Antique city into a Christian society (*politeia*), one sermon at a time.<sup>8</sup> He emphasized that properly structured and related households result in a properly structured society under God, and in a proper relation to God in holiness and love.

### I. PURPOSES OF MARRIAGE: JOHN CHRYSOSTOM’S THEOLOGICAL VISION

In his various sermons regarding marriage, Chrysostom continuously cited two purposes for marriage: (1) chastity (the more important) and (2) parenthood. For each of these purposes, Chrysostom has a basic, physical, and pragmatic pastoral focus in addition to a higher, spiritual, and theologically dense pastoral concern.<sup>9</sup> The latter points to his exalted vision of marriage, a vision not present in his earlier writings.<sup>10</sup>

There is much scholarly debate about how to explain the variance between his earlier and later works on marriage and celibacy, and while a comprehensive examination of that discussion is beyond the scope of this work, a few remarks may be offered. Several strategies might explain the disparity between what Chrysostom says in *On Virginity* and in his sermons on marriage. Elizabeth Clark suggests that Chrysostom’s teachings on marital relations must be understood through his lens

<sup>7</sup> Roth and Anderson, 51; also cf. 76, and for extended benefits to the state, cf. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Aideen M. Hartney, *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City* (London: Duckworth, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> In his “Sermon on Marriage,” Chrysostom offers three reasons for thinking chastity the more important of the two. First, some married couples cannot conceive, but all can grow in chastity. Second, resurrection has removed a key motivation for having children (i.e. legacy/memory). Third, childbearing does not remain for the life of the marriage, but chastity does. John Chrysostom, “Sermon on Marriage,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 85.

<sup>10</sup> Some of Chrysostom’s statements in *On Virginity* do seem to contradict his homiletical teachings. For example, he notes that marriage had two original purposes—procreation and to “quench the fiery passion” of human nature, but he suggests that since the Earth was sufficiently populated in his own day, the latter is all that remains: “the suppression of licentiousness and debauchery” (John Chrysostom, *On Virginity* 19.27 [trans. Shore]). He further notes that marriage allows those “who desire to live the life of swine and be ruined in brothels” to satisfy their passions in a way that preserves their holiness and chastity (*ibid.*, 19.28). Later in the work, he argues that Paul’s words about mutual bodily ownership intend to turn men away from marriage. He writes, “To consider Paul’s words more carefully, he increases the tyranny of marriage and makes the servitude appear more burdensome” (*ibid.*, 27.38–39).

of power politics, with its imagery of authority, domination, submission, rulership, and position, and that he bends the message for the audience.<sup>11</sup> Another strategy appeals to development in his thought over the course of his ministry, possibly a shift in focus from eremitic monasticism to pastoral ministry.<sup>12</sup> Chrysostom probably wrote *On Virginité* soon after leaving the life of an ascetic behind—early in his career at Antioch, perhaps while still serving as a deacon—and his views no doubt did change over the course of his colorful career. However, Chrysostom himself believed that his more positive words on marriage were consistent with his earlier writings. He specifically refers his hearers on a later occasion to the earlier work on virginité, making no apology for its seemingly negative analysis of marriage.<sup>13</sup> Differences between them could be explained by considering his different audiences and purposes: the sermons on marriage addressed married laypeople, while the treatise on virginité addressed erroneous teachings concerning monasticism, virginité, and marriage.<sup>14</sup>

What is clear, as Robert Slesinski rightly notes, is that in the same sermons in which Chrysostom uses instrumental language to describe marriage in terms of procreation and alleviation of sexual drives, he also speaks of marriage as the image of God: “St. John’s chief merit lies in his ability to go beyond the reductionist perspective more typical of the Fathers, which would assign only an instrumental value to marriage, and concentrate on marriage as a primary good in itself whose meaning and value are precisely derived from the type of relationship that marriage is in itself before any consideration is given to the specific goods which may flow from it as fruits.”<sup>15</sup>

1. *Chastity*. When Chrysostom speaks of “chastity” as a purpose of marriage, even at a basic, physical level, he does not denigrate the sexual act or disparage

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, “Sexual Politics in the Writings of John Chrysostom,” *ATR* 59 (1977): 3–20. See also Sally Ann Shore, “Introduction,” in “St. John Chrysostom’s *De virginitate* and *De non iterando coniugio*: Translation and Commentary” (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1980), esp. 18–20.

<sup>12</sup> C. Paul Schroeder, “The Mystery of Love: Paradigms of Marital Authority and Submission in the Writings of St John Chrysostom,” *SVTQ* 44 (2000): 143–68.

<sup>13</sup> He writes: “No one should accuse me of negligently hurrying through Paul’s words about virginité. I have written a whole book about this subject in which I tried to examine accurately every aspect of virginité. It would be a waste of words to bring this topic up again. I refer you to this book if you want a more detailed discussion, and will close with one final statement” (John Chrysostom, “Homily 19 on 1 Corinthians 7,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 41–42).

<sup>14</sup> First, Chrysostom wrote against Marcion, Valentinus, and Mani, among others, because they advocated virginité for the wrong reasons (typically their faulty dualisms) and wrongly made it obligatory. Second, Chrysostom seems to argue against a group (or groups) touting the superiority of married life or even denigrating asceticism, monasticism, and devoted chastity. His unnamed opponents were possibly Jovinian or Eastern priests exposed to his ideas, who attacked the ascetic ideal. *On Virginité* should thus be seen as a companion volume to Chrysostom’s *Against the Opponents of the Monastic Life*, which was strengthened by his *Comparison of the Power, Riches, and Excellence of a King and a Monk*, where he argued that monks are more regal than earthly political leaders. Sections 16, 17, and 18 are particularly clear answers to those who argue for marriage *over against virginité* (see John Chrysostom, *A Comparison between a King and a Monk: Against the Opponents of the Monastic Life: Two Treatises* [trans. and ed. David G. Hunter; Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 13; New York: Edwin Mellen, 1988]).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Slesinski, “Marriage and Morality: Chrysostom’s ‘Homily 20 on Ephesians,’” *Diakonia* 29 (1996): 32.

sexual desire. He takes these as natural and even God-given drives. Rather, he speaks of chastity as appropriately focused sexual desire and activity. That is, marriage provides a proper outlet for those very natural desires and can therefore protect one from sinful sexual attractions and activities. For example, in his *Sermon on Marriage*, he argues (contrary to legal allowances at the time) that married men are guilty of adultery when they have sex with women other than their wives, even if those women are single or prostitutes. He insists that the “good will” due a wife (in 1 Cor 7:2–3, “Let the husband show his wife the good will which is due”) is the faithfulness of exclusivity.<sup>16</sup> He points to mutual bodily ownership as evidence and even speaks of the husband’s care for his own body in terms of “stewardship” because it belongs to the wife.<sup>17</sup> “So,” he says, “when you see a prostitute setting snares . . . desiring your body, say to her, ‘This body is not mine. It belongs to my wife. I do not dare to mistreat it nor to lend it to another woman.’ The wife should do the same. Here there is complete equality.”<sup>18</sup> With regard to holiness, both men and women have similar needs, and both equally bear responsibility for the strength and sanctity of their marriage; this points to the spiritual meaning of chastity. The key to marital fidelity is the love forged by God in Christian marriage; a man who sleeps with another woman does not love his wife: “Just as a virtuous man can never neglect or scorn his wife, so a wanton and licentious man can never love his wife, no matter how beautiful she is.”<sup>19</sup>

These same emphases are found in *Homily 19* (on 1 Corinthians 7), where Paul exhorts his readers to consider the times and remain as they are, whether slave or free, married or virgin. Chrysostom interprets the exhortation to point to opportunities for growth in holiness, and encourages his hearers to consider both the literal, physical state (the *historia* of the text) and its deeper theological meaning (the *theoria*). He first considers slavery, and then moves to chastity.<sup>20</sup>

Just as slavery does not only refer to the physical state of being owned by another human being, but speaks to one’s spiritual state, so also virginity has a spiritual meaning. Chrysostom writes, “[V]irginity does not simply mean sexual abstinence. She who is anxious about worldly affairs is not really a virgin. In fact, he [Apostle Paul] says that this is the chief difference between a wife and a virgin.”<sup>21</sup> Chrysostom argues for this view based on the lack of reference to marriage in Paul’s teach-

<sup>16</sup> Chrysostom, “Sermon on Marriage,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 86 [PG 51:214]. This is probably Chrysostom’s free paraphrase of “Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife,” or “[Give her] her conjugal rights” (ESV).

<sup>17</sup> Chrysostom, “Sermon on Marriage,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 87.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>20</sup> He notes that slavery can help one grow spiritually in two ways. First, at a pragmatic and earthly level, it leads to humility and self-denial. Second, on a spiritual level, it is not the individual’s true estate if he is in Christ, for the believer is no longer a slave to sin and death and should live in that freedom. By way of a concrete biblical example, Chrysostom points to Joseph, who was free from enslavement to immorality, even though he was Potiphar’s slave, and contrasts him with Potiphar’s wife, who was enslaved to sexual adulterous passion, even though she was a free aristocratic woman (John Chrysostom, “Homily 19 on 1 Corinthians 7,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 35–37).

<sup>21</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 19 on 1 Corinthians 7,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 41.

ing about virgins, noting that Paul “doesn’t mention marriage or abstinence, but attachment as opposed to detachment from worldly cares.”<sup>22</sup> Chrysostom picks up on the fact that Paul’s concern with married men and women is that they may be preoccupied with worldly concerns, according to 1 Cor 7:32–34. For Chrysostom, then, there could be married women who function spiritually as consecrated virgins, and there could be virgins who function spiritually as married women, because the key has less to do with sexuality and more to do with God-mindedness. Thus, chastity within marriage is twofold: first, it has to do with how marriage can satisfy one’s natural desires and thus prevent sexual immorality, and second (and more importantly), it speaks to how marriage spurs the couple to godliness and pure love for one another. Note, though, that these two functions are not at cross-purposes. The greater godliness of the couple will create a greater love one for another, and this reciprocal love will prevent their eyes from straying. A proper loving union of husband and wife will serve as the basis for denying the allure of prostitutes and the advances of seducers.<sup>23</sup>

In his sermon, “How to Choose a Wife,” Chrysostom again affirms that marriage is for chastity (preventing immorality) by creating a godly relationship grounded in loving friendship. It would be a mistake, however, to think that he is merely speaking of meeting one’s carnal desires, though that is certainly a pragmatic concern, for he goes on to speak of Christian love as the primary mitigating factor for preventing adultery. Thus, when one chooses a wife, he should consider her inner spiritual beauty more than her physical beauty. As he notes, outward beauty can satisfy for about 30 days or so (!), but then is overcome by a poor personality; a godly woman, however, will endear herself to her husband for life. Chrysostom argues that a marriage built on Christian love will be protected from immorality because true, godly love is the best protection against temptation: “As for those (women) who radiate the beauty of the soul, the longer time goes by and tests their proper nobility, the warmer they make their husband’s love and the more they strengthen their affection for him. Since this is so, and since a warm and genuine friendship holds between them, every kind of immorality is driven out. Not even any thought of wantonness ever enters the mind of the man who truly loves his own wife, but he continues always content with her.”<sup>24</sup>

By way of example, Chrysostom points to the way Abraham sought a wife for Isaac as a model of how one should seek out a wife of character more than beauty, and he focuses on the particular wording of the text. He notes, “It is not a mere repetition when Rebecca is called a virgin twice. When Moses says, ‘She was a virgin,’ he adds, ‘whom no man had known.’ Many virgins keep their bodies uncorrupted, but fill their souls with all kinds of licentiousness .... Moses shows that Rebecca was not that kind of girl, but was a virgin in both body and soul: ‘She was

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>24</sup> Chrysostom writes, “We should seek a wife for this reason only, in order to avoid sin, to be freed from all immorality.” John Chrysostom, “How to Choose a Wife,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 99–100.

a virgin, whom no man had known.”<sup>25</sup> Chrysostom spiritualizes virginity here, arguing that Rebecca is called “a virgin whom no man had known” not only because she was literally a virgin, but also because she was a woman of godly character. She had a servant’s heart and was exceedingly hospitable, even to strangers, and although she went about the business of serving her household in public by going to the market or fetching water, she was not known to men because she kept herself pure in spirit.<sup>26</sup>

2. *Procreation.* In *Homily 12* (sermon on Colossians 4:18), Chrysostom engages in theological reflection on marriage: mystery, Christ and the church, the union of two, and the image of God.<sup>27</sup> He begins by addressing procreation as the purpose of marriage, but by this, he means the unity of husband and wife, not merely reproduction.<sup>28</sup> As proof of this interpretation of procreation, he points to the creation of Eve: “God’s ingenuity in the beginning divided one flesh into two; but He wanted to show that it remained one even after its division, so He made it impossible for either half to procreate without the other.”<sup>29</sup> As he discusses the union of husband and wife into one—the husband as head and wife as body demonstrating the unity of the two—he notes their common origin (Eve from Adam), calling them “two halves of one organism.”<sup>30</sup> This point sets up his discussion of children. A child produced in marriage is the visible/tangible connection of the man and woman, likened to a connecting bridge.<sup>31</sup> This passage is one of the most exquisite and vivid passages Chrysostom offers, and bears quoting at length:

How do they become one flesh? As if she were gold receiving the purest of gold, the woman receives the man’s seed with rich pleasure, and within her it is nourished, cherished, and refined. It is mingled with her own substance and she then returns it as a child! The child is a bridge connecting mother to father, so the three become one flesh, as when two cities divided by a river are joined by a bridge. And here that bridge is formed from the substance of each! Just as the head and rest of the body are one, since the neck connects but does not divide

---

<sup>25</sup> Chrysostom, “How to Choose a Wife,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 105.

<sup>26</sup> Chrysostom, “How to Choose a Wife,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 111. Chrysostom argues that God arranged the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca such that Laban and Bethuel noticed and happily gave her, and it was so arranged because Abraham had sought out a wife who would spur Isaac on to godliness.

<sup>27</sup> He uses Paul’s reference to his bonds in order to discuss marriage—not to suggest it is bad—but rather to speak to the seriousness of marriage and to critique the frivolity and excesses of wedding celebrations. In his earlier treatise on virginity, Chrysostom did refer to marriage as enslavement, and meant it in a negative way. He wrote, “It is like fugitive slaves who have been bound by their masters first separately, then to one another, each pair fastened at their feet by a short chain.” John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, 41.62 [trans. Shore].

<sup>28</sup> Some may argue that this is an inconsistency in Chrysostom, given the fact that he has elsewhere made procreation subservient to chastity. However, these emphases can be reconciled by appeal to context. Chrysostom here offers a sermon and not a theological dissertation, so his emphases and points come from the specific text under consideration.

<sup>29</sup> John Chrysostom, “Homily 12 on Colossians 4:18,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 75.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 76. The child is a composite of the mother and father (half of each), showing that the child is even more functional in connecting than the bridge.

them, so it is with the child. That is why Scripture does not say, “they shall be one flesh,” but that they shall be joined together “into one flesh,” namely the child. But suppose there is no child; do they then remain two and not one? No; their intercourse effects the joining of their bodies, and they are made one, just as when perfume is mixed with ointment.<sup>32</sup>

In *Homily 20* (sermon on Eph 5:21–33), he develops this concept further. In the creation of Eve from Adam’s own flesh, God illustrated the special kind of love that subsists within Christian marriage. This love is a *unitive* love in which the two become one, not merely in the sexual union, but also in spirit. To demonstrate this, Chrysostom points to the language of creation (“male and female he created them,” Gen 1:27), and of Paul (“there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” Gal 3:28). He claims that the attraction men and women feel for one another is due to the unique creation of Eve from Adam. The closeness of this connection also speaks to the mechanics of procreation—neither male nor female can produce children without the other—but it also has a deeper meaning, preventing either from feeling “self-sufficient,” and creating a desire within each for the other.<sup>33</sup> Yet this physical explanation is really a way of illustrating the special love of husband and wife, which is constitutive of who they are and of their relationship. It is a love that God creates and has “deeply planted within our inmost being.”<sup>34</sup> More than that, he argues that the procreative function epitomized in the child, who he calls a “one-flesh union of three,” symbolizes our union with Christ. Reflection upon this truth should strengthen our faith. He remarks, “The child is born from the union of their seed, so the three are one flesh. Our relationship to Christ is the same; we become one flesh with Him through communion, more truly one with Him than our children are one with us, because this has been His plan from the beginning.”<sup>35</sup>

The point is that for Chrysostom, procreation as a purpose for marriage does not merely refer to the propagation of the human race. While this is certainly a result and a good of marriage (God did say to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”), procreation has a deeper, spiritual meaning related to the special kind of love that exists within Christian marriage, and it points to the deeper theological truth about how marriage models the kind of love Christ has for the Church and the union of Christ with believers.

---

<sup>32</sup> John Chrysostom, “Homily 12 on Colossians 4:18,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 76 [PG 62:387–88]. The idea of mixed ointment and perfume is a commonplace in ancient marriage advice, encouraging a deep and intimate unity. For example, Plutarch says that spouses who truly love one another are united as inextricably as liquids which, when mixed together, are indistinguishable one from another. He further extends this intimate unity, advising, “There ought to be a mutual amalgamation of their bodies, property, friends, and relations.” In other words, they should completely and utterly share everything in common (Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* [*Coniugalia Praecepta*] 142–143.34 [trans. Frank Cole Babbitt; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962], 325).

<sup>33</sup> John Chrysostom, “Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 44.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.



3. *Conclusion.* In his discussion of the two purposes of marriage—chastity and procreation (which is to say, a one-flesh unity)—Chrysostom addressed the basic, physical pastoral concerns of preventing sexual temptation, encouraging marital fidelity, and producing heirs/propagating humanity, affirming those as goods in themselves, but he also hoped to encourage his congregants to think on a deeper theological level about marriage by offering spiritual meanings of each. Chastity within marriage has to do with husband and wife spurring one another to single-minded devotion to God. Procreation takes on ecclesiological overtones, as it concerns the union of persons in Christ, just as the church is united to Christ and congregants are united one to another. Those spiritual meanings enable husbands and wives to reflect on the mystery of their spiritual union as it mirrors the mystery of Christ’s relationship to his church (of which they are a part) and of the Father to the Son. This reflection should drive them (and us) toward godliness.

## II. THE MARITAL RELATIONSHIP: JOHN CHRYSOSTOM’S PRACTICAL VIEW OF MARRIAGE

As we retrieve Chrysostom’s theological vision and draw upon his pragmatic teaching on marriage, it is well to recall Daniel Williams’s observation that the ancient Christians were both *similis et dissimilis*: both like and unlike us.<sup>36</sup> It behooves us, then, to investigate some of the issues surrounding marriage in Chrysostom’s day as they emerged in his preaching. Some of them may be foreign to us while others are painfully familiar. Arranged marriages for financial advantage, familial wealth preservation, or extending and strengthening ties of kinship meant that the two spouses might be virtual strangers to one another (as a wife may be to a husband, “one who often has nothing in common with him”), who were then expected to set up a household.<sup>37</sup> In some cases, they were young and immature teenagers, expected to grow up into adulthood, matrimony, and parenthood in a single sweep. More often, there was an age disparity between the spouses with a very young, teenaged wife and an older man who perhaps was remarrying. In fact, John advises a husband to instruct his new young wife upon bringing her into his household, portraying the husband in the role of her teacher.<sup>38</sup> John is not the only ancient voice whose writings indicated this disparity. The first-century Platonist Plutarch (c. AD 45–120), too, had urged husbands to bear patiently with their wives’ girlish

<sup>36</sup> Daniel H. Williams, “*Similis et Dissimilis*: Gauging our Expectations of the Early Fathers,” in *Ancient Faith for the Church’s Future* (ed. Mark Husbands and Jeffrey P. Greenman; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 69–89.

<sup>37</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 53. See also Douglas O’Roark, “Close-Kin Marriage in Late Antiquity: The Evidence of Chrysostom,” *GRBS* 37 (1996): 399–411.

<sup>38</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 62–63. Judith Evans Grubbs has found that Roman men married at around twenty-five to thirty years of age, while women married at around twelve to fifteen years old, or a little later (late teens). See Judith Evans Grubbs, “‘Pagan’ and ‘Christian’ Marriage: The State of the Question,” *JECs* 2 (1994): 363.

immaturity, to virtuously wean them off of excesses and luxuries, and to instruct them like a teacher of virtue in behavior and philosophical precepts and doctrines.<sup>39</sup>

In view of the widespread respect for the ideal of virginity and the celibate life as a holy and venerable Christian vocation—with Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Pelagius, Jerome, and Ambrose all weighing in with vigorous treatises on virginity, in addition to Chrysostom's own—it was not uncommon for some women to have entered into marriage reluctantly. A woman may have desired to embark on a life of renunciation, but family may have compelled her to do otherwise. This initial desire to live in sexual renunciation sometimes reemerged later in the marriage. Some women sought to persuade their husbands to agree to a celibate marriage, as, for example, in the case of Melania the Younger and her husband Pinian, who eventually agreed to the arrangement; other cases (as below) were fraught with greater difficulty because of disagreement between the spouses, drawing pastoral censure.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, by the time of Chrysostom's ministry, marriage law and social practice in the Empire had evolved in most provinces, allowing women some measure of consent to a partner, although it was still the case that the younger a woman was at the time of first marriage, the less control she could exercise during the engagement negotiations.<sup>41</sup> For example, Gregory of Nyssa mentions that his sister, Macrina, was allowed by her parents to choose perpetual virginity after the untimely death of her fiancé, although it bears noting that the initial choice of a marriage match had been arranged for her by her father.<sup>42</sup>

A final possibility in view of the common practice of deathbed baptism meant that a number of couples were “unequally yoked” (as they saw it), with only one of the partners a baptized Christian while the other was a mere catechumen (as, for example, Augustine's parents, Monica and Patricius). This situation may have had a bearing on the conjugal life of the couple in terms of the sanctity of the marital act. All of these situations produced consequences that could make or break a marriage and a household, and therefore John's congregants required biblical, firm, and accessible pastoral guidance. He found it beneficial to use images and metaphors familiar to his audience. To emphasize balanced and congenial leadership in the home, he used the metaphors of government, the body, and the literary trope of “Persuasion”; and to emphasize mutuality, John used philosophical ideals of lifelong fidelity and communal ownership, and encouraged mutual sanctity.

1. *Traditional framework, emphases of mutuality.* As Chrysostom's ministry unfolded in the two urban centers of Antioch and Constantinople, he found it useful to appeal to his congregants both in terms of their culturally familiar and classical understandings of marriage, as well as the biblical, Christological standard to which he

<sup>39</sup> Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 138.2, 139.12, 145.48, *Moralia* II (trans. Frank Cole Babbitt; LCL 222; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 301, 307, 337–41.

<sup>40</sup> Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 1–6, in *Handmaids of the Lord: Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Christian Centuries* (trans. and ed. Joan Petersen; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1996), 313–15. For examples of more complicated cases, see below, nn. 78–81.

<sup>41</sup> See Evans Grubbs, “Pagan’ and ‘Christian’ Marriage,” 364.

<sup>42</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 4, in *Handmaids of the Lord*, 54.

aspired to draw them. To these ends, Chrysostom displayed his knowledge of classical ideals and rhetorical commonplaces on marriage, drawn from philosophic and literary traditions that he may have picked up from Libanius, his teacher, and also from Christian apologists like Clement of Alexandria. He skillfully adapted rhetorical material to his biblical teachings—mainly based on Pauline writings—and by “marrying” these elements, so to speak, Chrysostom sought his congregation’s attention and trust, conveying his own sympathy towards the joys and struggles of married life, even though he himself remained in singlehood. He demonstrated real understanding of the daily tests to which marriages are put, frequently elaborating on sensitive subjects by drawing on his rhetorical arsenal, especially by the tactics of anticipating the listener’s thoughts, asking and answering conversationally their queries regarding Paul’s marital instructions. The preacher evoked and addressed realistic domestic scenarios (or as Hartney calls them “vividly painted pen-portraits”), at times convicting and admonishing, at other times appealing or persuading, but always exhorting and inspiring.<sup>43</sup>

a. *Traditional framework: government, body, and persuasion.* In his own biblical preaching, based on his exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7, Ephesians 5, and Genesis 1–2, John evidences a clearly traditional, hierarchical framework, familiar to his hearers from the culture and the philosophical tradition alike.<sup>44</sup> His exposition offers examples reflecting civic priorities, having the transformation of a city in view. He takes the husband’s headship as a given, offering as illustrations both military and political metaphors.<sup>45</sup> Portraying the husband and wife as generals, John writes, “When the generals of an army are at peace with each other, everything proceeds in an orderly fashion, and when they are not, everything is in disarray. It is the same here. For the sake of harmony, then, he [Paul] says, ‘Wives be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord,’” by which (Chrysostom says) Paul means “as part of your service to the Lord.”<sup>46</sup> Using a political metaphor from government, he says that pure democracy can never obtain; there must be an acknowledged leader to make decisions to lead the group.<sup>47</sup>

When speaking of the wife, John describes her in several ways. The wife is the husband’s body; they are joined at the neck, are members of each other, and need one another, otherwise they both suffer. However, her welfare is the head’s respon-

<sup>43</sup> Hartney, *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City*, 43. Hartney offers an enlightening chapter on “Christian Preaching and its Audience” in *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City*, chapter 3, which especially deals with the use of classic rhetorical elements in Late-Antique homilies. For example, she says, “The education of the leading preachers of this time meant that their rhetoric was so thoroughly imbued with the conventions of the classical heritage that it was second nature to them.” What is more, she explains that “the Bible becomes the new literary corpus, and Christ’s teachings the new philosophy. The homiletic form then becomes the means by which this new [Christianized] culture is transmitted” (*ibid.*, 50).

<sup>44</sup> While terms in current usage such as “complementarian” and “egalitarian” are anachronistic for a Late-Antique context, the basic outline of the complementarian position is more or less the position John describes and commends to his congregants.

<sup>45</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

sibility. John says that if the head does not care for the body, it will itself die: how foolish that would be!<sup>48</sup> The philosophers also used the metaphor of a body to describe the inextricable and interdependent union of the spouses, but described the husband's governance of the wife somewhat differently, in controlling terms. Rather than a head that cares for the body, Plutarch taught that the husband was like the soul (*hōs psychēn*), which "controls the body (*sōmatos*) by entering into her feelings and being knit to her through goodwill (*eunoia*)," so that it is "possible to govern a wife (*gynaikeos archein*), and at the same time to delight and gratify her."<sup>49</sup> John considers the spouses as ontologically and essentially equal, quite different from Plutarch's ideas, in which the wife, in a sense, lives vicariously through the husband, shadowing and mirroring him, having no feelings, friends, or gods of her own, nor is she allowed a public voice or presence.<sup>50</sup> For his part, Chrysostom describes the wife as a "secondary authority," with "real authority and equality of dignity," even though "the husband still retains the role of headship."<sup>51</sup> Speaking Christologically and exegetically, Chrysostom draws on the imagery of Christ as head of the church and the church as his body; he sacrifices for her, cleanses her, and sanctifies her. Likewise, the wife is the husband's body, and his headship entails self-sacrificial love for her, with a concerted effort to promote her chastity and holiness, imitating the model given by Christ.

Chrysostom seems to indicate that some men in the congregation were gloating that their wives were being instructed to submit to them (or grumbling that their wives fell short of the preacher's proposed ideals), so he gave the husbands further advice about how to handle less-than-ideal situations. In doing so, he acknowledges (as surely the philosophers did, too) that the realities of married life frequently disappoint one's highest ideals. He argues that of the two commands given to wife and husband (obeying and loving, respectively), the more difficult command is "loving." "And what if my wife refuses to obey me? a husband will ask. Never mind! Your obligation is to love her; do your duty!"<sup>52</sup> What if the husband does not show love? John continues, "Even when we don't receive our due from others, we must always do our duty."<sup>53</sup> As an example, John cites Eph 5:21, emphasizing each spouse's allegiance to Christ's lordship.<sup>54</sup> He continues, "A wife should respect her husband even when he shows her no love, and a husband should love his wife even when she shows him no respect. Then they will both be found to lack nothing, since each has fulfilled the commandment given to him."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 142.33, 323.

<sup>50</sup> Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 139.11, 139.14, 140.19, 142.31–32.

<sup>51</sup> Chrysostom, "Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33," in *On Marriage and Family*, 57.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, many complementarians would group Eph 5:21 with the foregoing section, but John groups it with 5:22–33. Whereas the emphasis of egalitarians in including verse 21 with the section on the husband-wife relationship is on mutual submission, John's emphasis is on each spouse's "reverence for Christ," out of which flows each one's fulfillment of the direct command given to him or her.

<sup>55</sup> Chrysostom, "Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33," in *On Marriage and Family*, 54.

What if the wife nags the husband, or mocks, belittles, or ridicules him? John answers with a “pen-portrait” in the context of a marital spat about wealth. He admonishes,

A wife should not say to her husband, “You unmanly coward! You timid, sleepy dolt! I know a man from a low-class background, who has amassed a fortune by taking risks and travelling abroad. His wife wears gold and goes out on a pair of white mules. She rides everywhere, surrounded by a crowd of slaves and a swarm of eunuchs. But you stay put and live a useless life!” A wife should not say this or anything like this. . . . If a husband hears words like these, he should not resort to threats and violence because he is the authority. No, . . . he should offer words of persuasion (*logismois anapeitbetō*) and never extend a hand in anger, for this sort of behavior is not appropriate for a free soul. There should be no threats or insults or abuse.”<sup>56</sup>

Rather, Chrysostom says the husband should help her understand “true wealth” and “the heavenly philosophy (*tēn anō philosophian*)” of a modest and temperate life together.<sup>57</sup>

The ideal expressed here of resolving conflict through peaceful means rather than force or violence finds a secular counterpart in Plutarch’s advice to newlyweds. As he invokes the help of gods traditionally associated with marriage, such as Aphrodite, Hermes, and the Muses (kindlers of desire, beauty, and artistic sense), he also invites the help of the Graces (*tas Charitas*) and Persuasion (*Peitbo*); the Graces lend beauty and harmony to conjugal life, while *Peitbo* should encourage “married people . . . in attaining their mutual desires by persuasion and not by fighting or quarrelling.”<sup>58</sup> The pleading tone evinced in Chrysostom’s imagined dialogue reflects Plutarch’s ideals about the effectiveness of Persuasion to resolve disagreements. While Plutarch’s emphasis on desire, beauty, harmony, graciousness, and mutual understanding expresses noble ideals, it nonetheless falls short of the theological heights of Chrysostom’s marital vision. As Christ loved the church and won her submission “not with threats or violence or terror, or anything else like that, but through His untiring love,” so a husband should treat his wife.<sup>59</sup> “There is no influence more powerful than the bond of love, especially for husband and wife,” John continues. “One’s partner for life, the mother of one’s children, the source of one’s every joy, should never be fettered with fear and threats, but with love and patience. What kind of marriage can there be when the wife is afraid of her husband? . . . Suffer anything for her sake, but never disgrace her, for Christ never did this with the Church.”<sup>60</sup> These sentiments leave no room for spousal abuse of any

<sup>56</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 20 on Ephesians,” in *Marriage in the Early Church*, 89–90 [PG 62:144]. Roth and Anderson’s translation is paraphrased and less precise: “A wife should never nag her husband: ‘You lazy coward, you have no ambition! Look at our relatives and neighbors; they have plenty of money. Their wives have far more than I do.’ Let no wife say any such thing; she is her husband’s body, and it is not for her to dictate to her head but to submit and obey” (*On Marriage and Family Life*, 59–60).

<sup>57</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 20 on Ephesians,” in *Marriage in the Early Church*, 89–90 [PG 62:145].

<sup>58</sup> Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 138, 301.

<sup>59</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 46.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 46–47.

kind, whether verbal, physical, emotional, or spiritual: the command to love in all applicable ways is required equally of husbands and wives.

b. *Mutuality: fidelity, community, and sanctity.* In the very same classical sources elucidated above, strong emphases of mutuality emerge, illustrating what ancient society considered the highest ideal of marriage—a companionate friendship.<sup>61</sup> This model of a (not-quite-equal) friendship had been set forth by philosophers stretching back to Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. For example, the Stoic Musonius Rufus (c. AD 30–62) affirmed in marriage “a partnership of interests” and “sympathy of mind and character,” although he clearly expected men to lead society.<sup>62</sup> A near-contemporary of the apostle Paul, Musonius offered an eloquent vision of reciprocity of spousal love and unity in words approximating the apostle’s:

But in marriage there must be above all perfect companionship and mutual love of husband and wife, both in health and in sickness and under all conditions, since it was with desire for this as well as for having children that both entered upon marriage. Where, then, this love for each other is perfect and the two share it completely, each striving to outdo the other in devotion, the marriage is ideal and worthy of envy, for such a union is beautiful. But where each looks only to his own interests and neglects the other, or, what is worse, when one is so minded and lives in the same house but fixes his attention elsewhere and is not willing to pull together with his yoke-mate nor to agree, then the union is doomed to disaster and though they live together, yet their common interests fare badly; eventually they separate entirely or they remain together and suffer what is worse than loneliness.<sup>63</sup>

In fact, Musonius’s teachings on the marital ideal beautifully anticipate Peter Brown’s assessment that in the second century under the Antonine dynasty, “The *concordia*, the *homonioia* of the good marriage was now brought forward ... to act as a resonant new symbol of all other forms of social harmony. ... As a result, the married couple came to appear in public as a miniature of civic order. The *eunoia*, the *sumpatheia*, and the *praotes* [gentleness] of the relations of husband and wife echoed” the relationship of love and loyalty intended to exist between a man and his city.<sup>64</sup> Plutarch offered a hierarchical model of marriage, but he also strongly affirmed the ideal that marriage is enjoyable in itself and not merely physically pleasurable. The “household (*oikon*)” can be harmonious, Plutarch writes, like a well-tuned instrument, through “reason (*logou*), concord (*harmonias*), and philosophy (*philosophias*).”<sup>65</sup> Within this friendship, these writers envisioned sexual fidelity for life (although Plutarch wavers somewhat), a flourishing common life in which all aspects are shared (including one’s own self), and progress in virtue. In addition, the compan-

<sup>61</sup> Hunter, “Introduction,” 6–9.

<sup>62</sup> Musonius Rufus, “What is the chief end of marriage?,” *Lectures and Fragments* 13B.2, 5 (trans. C. Lutz).

<sup>63</sup> Musonius Rufus, “What is the chief end of marriage?,” *Lectures and Fragments* 13A.4–6.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Brown, “Late Antiquity,” in *A History of Private Life*, vol. 1: *From Pagan Rome to Byzantium* (ed. Paul Veyne; trans. Arthur Goldhammer; Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1987), 248.

<sup>65</sup> Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 138, 300–301.

ionate marital ideal was culturally reinforced and promoted by the imperial family and the aristocracy, as numismatic, literary, inscriptional, and artistic evidences attest to the ideal of “Concordia” or harmony and friendship in marriage, exemplified by imperial and elite noble couples.<sup>66</sup> Chrysostom supported these ideals as worthy and admirable, and familiar to his audience; he then built upon and presented them in specifically Christian ways that superseded the highest pagan ideals of virtue.

Within the traditional biblical framework laid out in texts such as Genesis and the Pauline epistles, Chrysostom issued several strong messages of mutuality, as observed above. Clearly equal reciprocity existed in matters of sexual availability and fidelity; John even expresses surprise at “so much equality” here “introduced” by Paul (1 Cor 7:3–4), in his injunction that the spouses exercise reciprocal ownership of one another’s bodies.<sup>67</sup> John speaks sharply against the sexual double standard of his day (despite the philosophical ideals), undergirded and condoned by laws which did not define as adultery men’s dalliances with women of low social standing, like servants or prostitutes.<sup>68</sup> “Do not tell me about the laws of unbelievers,” he says, “which drag the woman caught in adultery into court and exact a penalty, but do not demand a penalty from the married men who have corrupted servant girls. I will read to you the law of God, which is equally severe with the woman and the man, and which calls the deed adultery.”<sup>69</sup> Both husband and wife were to preserve their own chastity for the sake of their spouse, who is the true “master” of the other’s body. “The wife,” he insists, “has no power over her own body, but she is her husband’s slave—and also his ruler.”<sup>70</sup> John concludes that “where holiness and chastity are at stake, the husband has no greater privilege than the wife.”<sup>71</sup> In classical society, a man who was sexually faithful to his wife was regarded as admirably virtuous, since the law allowed him other sexual options; Chrysostom’s preaching made lifelong sexual fidelity a required standard rather than a praiseworthy exception, and this due to the union of husband and wife in Christ.

John turns next to reciprocity and equality in financial matters. In expounding upon this topic he combines a common philosophical trope on marriage with his understanding of Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor 7:3–4. Musonius insisted that husband and wife should regard “nothing as peculiar or private between them, not even their own bodies;”<sup>72</sup> while Plutarch cited Plato’s teaching that “the state (*polin*) is prosperous and happy in which the people hear ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’ most rarely uttered” and concludes, “much more should such expressions be eliminated from

<sup>66</sup> Brown, “Late Antiquity,” 1:248.

<sup>67</sup> Chrysostom, “Sermon on Marriage,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 87.

<sup>68</sup> Chrysostom’s stance here represents one of the few elements that feminists find praiseworthy in John’s writings, e.g., Elizabeth Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations* (Studies in Women and Religion 1; New York, Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1979), 6–7. Judith Evans Grubbs, “Pagan’ and ‘Christian’ Marriage: The State of the Question,” *JECs* 2 (1994), 386.

<sup>69</sup> Chrysostom, “Sermon on Marriage,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 86.

<sup>70</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 19 on 1 Corinthians 7,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 26–27.

<sup>71</sup> Chrysostom, “Sermon on Marriage,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 88.

<sup>72</sup> Musonius Rufus, “What is the chief end of marriage?,” *Lectures and Fragments* 13A.2.

the married state (*ek gamou*).<sup>73</sup> Rather, each partner should “sympathize” with the concerns of the other for mutual strengthening and so “the co-partnership may be preserved (*koinōnia sōzētai*).”<sup>74</sup> Drawing on Plato’s dictum, Chrysostom insists that any talk of “mine” and “yours” should be eliminated from Christian marriage, for if even one’s body is not one’s own, how can one claim one’s own money? “Listen carefully,” John admonishes, “all married men and women: if you cannot call your body your own, then you certainly cannot call your money your own.”<sup>75</sup> Elsewhere he suggests the following response by the husband if his wife speaks in these terms: “If she says the word ‘mine,’ ask her, ‘What things do you call yours? I honestly don’t know what you mean; for my part, I have nothing of my own. How can you speak of ‘mine’ when everything is yours? ... I am yours!’”<sup>76</sup> Such proprietary discourse in terms of “mine” and “yours” is, according to Chrysostom, “cursed and abominable” and “comes from the devil.”<sup>77</sup>

Finally, the spouses are equally responsible for one another’s holiness. If one spouse (e.g. the wife) wants to abstain sexually for spiritual reasons, it should be by mutual consent. Although she intended growth in holiness, if there is no mutual consent, she will have, in effect, reduced the sanctity of the household rather than enhanced it: she will have undermined holiness and produced instead resentment and conflict, and potentially even sin. “What good is all the fasting and continence?” John asks. “No good at all; it has broken love to pieces.”<sup>78</sup> We may compare John’s remonstrance with that of other bishops like Pelagius and Augustine, who wrote to women in their congregations, upbraiding them for engaging in some form of renunciation without spousal consent. Pelagius’s addressee, Celantia, had made a vow of continence without the consent of her husband, and the bishop conveyed deep concern for exposure of Celantia’s husband to adultery, which violates a vow more binding than that of abstinence.<sup>79</sup> Augustine’s correspondent, the aristocratic matron Ecdicia, offers a poignant example of a still more tragic situation. It appears Ecdicia had made vows of renunciation (poverty and chastity) on her own, and after the fact, persuaded her husband to join her, which he appears to have done somewhat grudgingly. She had also disbursed some of their property as alms, without her husband’s knowledge or consent, and had given away her lavish wardrobe, adopting the austere dress of a widow. This behavior displeased her husband, and in addition, unable to bear up under the vow of celibacy in marriage, he also committed adultery (to get back at her, as Augustine suspects).<sup>80</sup> Augustine’s rebuke centers fully on 1 Corinthians 7, and he counsels Ecdicia, for her own sake as well as the welfare of their son, to “think earnestly about recovering him [i.e.

<sup>73</sup> Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 140.20, 311–13.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 312–13.

<sup>75</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 19 on 1 Corinthians 7,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 27.

<sup>76</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 62–63.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>78</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 19 on 1 Corinthians 7,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 28.

<sup>79</sup> Pelagius, “Letter to the Matron Celantia,” in *Marriage in the Early Church*, 97–101.

<sup>80</sup> Augustine, “Letter 262, To Ecdicia,” in *Women in the Early Church*, 65–68.



reconciling with her husband], if in truth you want to belong to Christ.”<sup>81</sup> For his part, in order to reduce these sorts of conflicts, John discouraged marital celibacy, and instead encouraged spouses who wanted to live in (ascetic) holiness to mutually edify one another by attending church together and discussing at home what they heard in the readings and sermon: “If your marriage is like this,” he says, “your perfection will rival the holiest of monks.”<sup>82</sup>

2. *Conclusion: Constructing holy matrimony through harmony, friendship, and Christ-like love.* By fleshing out the marital ideal in such practical terms, John builds on the philosophic tradition, which portrayed an ideal marriage as a friendship between partners, their relationship characterized by harmony (*harmonias*), and like-mindedness (*homonoia*).<sup>83</sup> Chrysostom repeatedly used the terms “harmony” and “like-mindedness,” and indeed, his developed situations and advice to each partner resonated clearly with this positive view of marriage, effectively buttressing these philosophical and cultural ideals with scriptural support, and even superseding them.<sup>84</sup> Throughout his discourses on marriage, John repeatedly reinforced the ideas of “peace and harmony” in the home and a “warm and genuine friendship” between the partners.<sup>85</sup>

### III. CONCLUSION

John is a valiant constructor of Christian marriage within a varied context of theological heresies, radical ascetic tendencies (like the elevation of the ideal of consecrated virginity), aberrant ascetic cohabitation (such as the *subintroductae*, celibate women or virgins who shared a dwelling with a monk), arranged marriages for financial advantage, and ecclesiological drift toward pagan cultural mores. He was firmly convinced that “the love of husband and wife is the force that welds society together ... when harmony prevails [when men sacrifice for love and wives submit], the children are raised well, the household is kept in order, and neighbors, friends, and relatives praise the result. Great benefits, both for families and states, are thus produced.”<sup>86</sup> Here John insists on the benefits to the state of strong family structures, including strong marriages, a variant of the ideas of Aristotle, who “viewed marriage as the foundation of the republic and the prototype of friendship.”<sup>87</sup> Aristotle wrote that every state is composed of households, and every household has at its core a marriage of husband and wife, growing in virtue and bonded by children (future virtuous citizens).<sup>88</sup> Musonius continued this line of thinking as he discussed life in community, the virtue of helping one’s neighbor, and prioritizing the city’s

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>82</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 62.

<sup>83</sup> David Hunter, “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>84</sup> Some aspects of Musonius’s ideas run contrary to the scriptural and Chrysostom’s view, i.e., sex is instrumental—for procreation—and celibate marriage is the ideal; see Hunter, “Introduction,” 9.

<sup>85</sup> Chrysostom, “How to Choose a Wife,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 98, 100, 114.

<sup>86</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 44.

<sup>87</sup> John Witte, “The Goods and Goals of Marriage,” *Notre Dame Law Review* 76 (2001): 1023.

<sup>88</sup> Aristotle in Witte, “Goods and Goals,” 1023–24.

welfare, not only one's own. He portrayed the household as a "rampart" for the protection of the city. "But the first step toward making his home such a rampart is marriage," Musonius writes. "Thus whoever destroys human marriage destroys the home, the city, and the whole human race."<sup>89</sup>

Chrysostom is also, in a sense, waging a culture war on several fronts. First, he does not allow a mindset of domination and abuse against women, nor does he validate a cultural allowance for male sexual privilege. It is the "law of God" that governs Christian sexual behavior, not the allowances granted by the secular government. Second, he denounces in the strongest terms the instrumentality of financial gain through marriage, "using" the spouse to grow wealthy and/or advance socially.<sup>90</sup> Third, he rejects a mindset which depreciates and denigrates honorable Christian marriage, and which perpetuates a heretical view of marital sex as an act tainted by sin and inordinate desire (as the Manicheans, Gnostics, and Encratites mentioned at the outset). Fourth, he remains painfully and convictionally relevant toward his parishioners, urging them to behave counterculturally in their domestic lives, because the effects will ultimately be far-reaching in the public domain.<sup>91</sup>

In John's vision of marriage, only when husband and wife are "bound by the power of love" can true harmony obtain.<sup>92</sup> Although he adapted as homiletical material some of the marital ideals of his day, his vision was not primarily based upon even positive ideological elements of his contemporaries. Rather, he taught that a Christian marriage should be patterned on Christ's loving actions and the church's loving response. Ultimately for Chrysostom, marriage was not politically motivated and not about civic duty. It was spiritual at its core and thoroughly theologically grounded. He believed that when Christian spouses set aside the self and prioritized the other, they exhibited a spiritual love that approximates spiritual birth: just as Eve was created from the side of Adam and is physically united with him, so the church sprang from the side of Christ, a spiritual birth producing salvation as well as spiritual union with Christ. This new birth is not fleshly but spiritual (John 1:13) and must be reflected in Christian marriage, which is an image (or "icon"; Gk. *eikōn*) of Christ and the church. Marriage (and weddings, the beginnings of marriage) among Christians must be embarked upon with due sobriety, giving clear indication that each spouse loves and treasures the other in as unselfish and sacrificial a way as that evidenced between Christ and the church.<sup>93</sup> At wedding feasts, it is not "ancient custom" which should prevail, especially if those customs lead to sin and are inappropriate, therefore undermining more than celebrating Christian marriage;

<sup>89</sup> Musonius, "Is marriage a handicap for the pursuit of philosophy?," *Lectures and Fragments* 14.11.

<sup>90</sup> Chrysostom, "Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33," in *Marriage and Family Life*, 49; "How to Choose a Wife," in *ibid.*, 96. This argument has been used by evangelicals in the past to insist on the traditional family as key to a strong and stable society; unfortunately, in recent years the redefinition of marriage has resulted in the loss of the traditional family unit, and evangelicals' own patterns of divorce have undermined the usability of that argument.

<sup>91</sup> Chrysostom, "Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33," in *Marriage and Family Life*, 44.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>93</sup> See a particularly incisive critique of weddings among Christians in Chrysostom's day in his "Sermon on Marriage," in *Marriage and Family Life*, 81–88.

rather, the preacher exhorts, “let them have Christ in their midst,” like the celebrants at the wedding in Cana.<sup>94</sup> “This, then,” John says, “is what it means to marry in Christ.”<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 81–82.

<sup>95</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22–33,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, 54.