

2013

# What Kind of Family is Needed for 'Domestic Church'? A Mystagogy of the Family

Jana Marguerite Bennett

*University of Dayton*, [jbennett2@udayton.edu](mailto:jbennett2@udayton.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://ecommons.udayton.edu/rel\\_fac\\_pub](http://ecommons.udayton.edu/rel_fac_pub)



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

## eCommons Citation

Bennett, Jana Marguerite, "What Kind of Family is Needed for 'Domestic Church'? A Mystagogy of the Family" (2013). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. Paper 107.

[http://ecommons.udayton.edu/rel\\_fac\\_pub/107](http://ecommons.udayton.edu/rel_fac_pub/107)

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Religious Studies at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlange1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlange1@udayton.edu).

## WHAT KIND OF FAMILY IS NEEDED FOR “DOMESTIC CHURCH”?

### A MYSTAGOGY OF THE FAMILY

Is there an *ideal* Christian family, or indeed, is the term “family” even the best way to think about Christian life together, especially in relation to the term “domestic church”? When it comes to marriage and family, scholars writing about the concept of “domestic church” often do one of the following: (1) focus on Gen 1 and 2 as putting forth an ideal nuclear family; or (2) make family out to be a redeeming or eschatological vision on its own, in place of Jesus Christ. This is not a conservative or liberal problem, for people from across the spectrum make these kinds of intellectual moves, but they are very theologically problematic moves<sup>1</sup>. A focus on Gen 1 and/or 2 is a good place to begin, but often unduly suggest that family must mean husband/wife/children. Even theorists discussing gay marriage in the light of Gen 1 and 2 tend to discuss marriage in terms of the so-called nuclear family<sup>2</sup>. Yet theologically, Gen 1 and 2 limit scholarship of marriage too much because they do not take into account Christ<sup>3</sup>.

The second move of making family out to be a redeeming or eschatological vision on its own is also obviously troublesome for the way it puts too much power into the hands of human institutions. A focus on eschatology can seem helpful at first, for it makes the “kind” of family irrelevant in the face of the end of times. A person making the second kind of move seems to think, “If only we could have good families (no matter

1. I treat some of these theological problems more deeply in *Water Is Thicker than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singleness*, New York, Oxford, 2008, though my focus in that book regards what it means for married and single people to share a call to Christian discipleship. Overly idealizing “family” creates numerous ecclesiological problems in a church where almost half of adult Christians might count themselves as single in some way (never-married, divorced, widowed, etc.)

2. For commentary on this, see F.C. BOURG, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Churches*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2004. See also S.C. BARTON, *Toward a Theology of the Family*, in A. THATCHER – E. STUART (eds.), *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*, Leominster, Gracewing – Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1996.

3. Just as war theorists are sometimes too fond of quoting the Old Testament (“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”) without also quoting what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount), so too people discussing marriage can miss some of the richness of what Christians might mean by family when they focus solely on Genesis.

which type), we would have a perfect society". Thus people making this kind of move often focus on the need simply "to love each other", and to just make sure the children's needs are met. While scholars taking this view are not wrong to mention love and children's needs as necessary components of families, the very idea that there might be an "ideal" family that could correct societal wrongs can easily go too far toward making eschatological claims that only God can make<sup>4</sup>.

So the question "What kind of family is needed for domestic church?" can immediately lead toward some false ends. A few additional questions, however, help shed more light on the problem. First is the question, "When did family originate?" I suggest that the answer to this question, when the origin of the family happens, especially in relation to creation, fall, redemption and eschatology, affects how one answers the question, "what kind of family". Second is the question of *which* family is meant for Christians, for as I will suggest in this paper, Christians have more than one "family", so answering the question of what kind of family is difficult unless we know the answer to the "which" question. Third is the question of *how* church life might be related to everyday domestic life. We use the term "domestic church" but it is not entirely clear at the outset in what way "church" is domestic nor again how one's family structure might be relevant to the church. Does structure matter much? The church universal, for example, has a structure, but that structure does not resemble a "traditional" nuclear family. How would Christians know if they are patterning their lives in fruitful ways if they are trying to make use of the term "domestic church"?

I discuss what I see as these prior questions by looking at the theologies of John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo. I choose these two primarily because they are so often credited with using the term "domestic church", not to mention that they have both been heavily influential on shaping Christian thought on marriage and family. In particular, I use their mystagogical sermons – the sermons through which they taught newly-baptized Christians what the church and all its practices *mean*. In relation to family, this is an important source. By the paper's end I will bring together the results of probing these three questions – when, which, how – to discuss more fully "what kind of family" in our post-modern, late liberal context.

4. I see D. BROWNING's work *Marriage and Modernization: How Globalization Threatens Marriage*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2003, as representative of this second way of thinking about marriage and family.



## I. WHENCE THE FAMILY: THE ORIGINS OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

The first origin of marriage and family happens at creation, *partly* in Gen 1 and *partly* in Gen 2. God creates male and female to be in God's image, and to *fulfill* that image by having dominion over the earth and its plants and animals, and by being fruitful and bearing children. From the second creation account, God creates particular people, Adam and Eve, for each other and it is from this second Genesis account that we have the quote about the two humans becoming one flesh. Significantly, this quote is cited in the New Testament by both Jesus and Paul: "For this reason, a man shall leave his family and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh".

Both Augustine and John Chrysostom acknowledge the fact and existence of the first origin of marriage, but they both spend quite a bit of time discussing the second origin. The second origin of marriage and family happens at the redemption in Christ and because of Christ. Scripturally, marriage and family look quite distinctive because of Christ: Jesus speaks of his disciples as his true mother and sister and brothers, and at times advocates hatred of one's biological family in the interest of being his disciple. So, Jesus rather decisively puts marriage and family in a new frame of reference. Jesus names himself as a bridegroom, though he did not seem to be married. New Testament authors use additional marriage language, such as Paul's recapitulation of the one-flesh relationship from Gen 2, when he speaks of the mysterious relationship between Christ and the Church in Eph 5,32 and its connection to Christ and the Church. In this second origin of family, Christians are asked to redescribe the first origin of family.

What difference do these two origins make? Should Christians focus on the accounts in Gen 1 and 2, or does the idea of spiritual marriage add something to that first text? Moreover, is the language in the second origin of marriage metaphorical, or even allegorical, and not indicating a present change in what those institutions look like for Christians? If one's primary view of marriage is Genesis, then one's focus will definitely be on the husband/wife couple and their offspring. If, on the other hand, one's primary view of marriage is that spiritual marriage of Christ, then one's primary view of marriage *may* be that marriage in its physical form is unnecessary. This is one way of understanding the importance of celibacy and monasticism for much of the church's teaching over two thousand years. Indeed, the term 'domestic church' in contemporary use arose at Vatican II, partly in response to a church culture that had so privileged monasticism that the possibility of marriage and family as places of discipleship was negligible.

Yet, John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo give strong evidence for a different way of viewing spiritual marriage which has perhaps been overlooked in general theologies and historical accounts of marriage and family. Their rhetoric suggests a focus on the church, first and foremost. Just as a focus on Genesis affects one's view of family, so here one's view of family as domestic church will be affected by this specific link to the church universal. John Chrysostom, for example, begins one of his early mystagogical sermons saying to those who are newly baptized, "Behold, the days of our longing and love, the days of your spiritual marriage, are close at hand. To call what takes place today a marriage would be no blunder; not only could we call it a marriage but even a marvelous and most unusual kind of military enlistment. Nor does any contradiction exist between marriage and military service"<sup>5</sup>. Two points are of note here: the first is that he takes baptism itself as a spiritual marriage, which is not metaphorical, but part of a distinctly spiritual, wholly theological vision of marriage. This is a marriage to Christ that happens in baptism, and Chrysostom goes on to detail how a spiritual marriage to Christ is quite different from a physical marriage, for a human bridegroom would be paying attention to his future spouse's physical charm and beauty, while "our Bridegroom hurries to save our souls. Even if someone is ugly, or ill-favored to the eye, or poor as poor can be, or lowborn, or a slave, or an outcast, or maimed, or burdened with the weight of his sins, the Bridegroom does not split hairs"<sup>6</sup>. The second point is to note John Chrysostom's connection between baptism, marriage, and military enlistment. He readily admits that this connection will seem strange to his hearers, but that this is not a mistaken connection. He will go on to detail further how it is that initiation into the church means joining a strange kind of community for which neither standard definitions of family nor political service alone suffices for description, in ancient as well as contemporary thought. It is both/and, and many scholars have named how the church is both *oikos* and *polis*<sup>7</sup>.

Augustine speaks similarly about an alternative family instituted by Christ in the Church, but focuses instead on parent/child language rather

5. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *The First Instruction Address to Those About to Be Baptized*, in *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*, trans. P.W. Harkins (Ancient Christian Writers, 31), Westminster, MD, The Newman Press; London, Longmans, Green and Co, 1963, p. 1.

6. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *The First Instruction* (n. 5), p. 15.

7. See, for example, R. HÜTTER, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1999; B. WANNENWETSCH, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004.



than language about marriage, in relation to both the baptized and the rest of the congregation. (I discuss the possible significance of this further, below.) His use of family imagery is quite fluid: sometimes he uses the terms parents, mother, father, to refer to the older, more seasoned Christians, sometimes it is the church, sometimes it is Mary or Jesus, sometimes it is God the Father. In many of his sermons, he refers to the newly baptized as "*infantes*" and more directly, in a sermon given at the Easter Vigil around the year 412, he refers to these "*infantes*" as "freshly born children of a chaste mother" and "children of a virgin mother"<sup>8</sup>. The chaste mother he refers to here is likely the church, and he often refers to the church as mother in his sermons. In another sermon, probably given on Easter Day, he writes about the brothers and sisters in Christ who are, "in virtue of your age, parents of rebirth ..."<sup>9</sup>. From his point of view, the newly baptized are clearly children who need to recognize the different familial relationships they now have – other baptized people are now their parents in a certain sense, and so is the Church now their parent.

Both Augustine and John Chrysostom are paying careful attention to an alternate reality that new Christians enter into as they are baptized. From their ecclesial perspective, it is quite clear what sort of family is meant for the church: the strange new marriage and family of the new creation, the family entered into upon baptism, specifically the Church as Bride and Christ as the Bridegroom, and Church as Mother. Moreover, as John Chrysostom makes clear in his homily, and as Augustine makes clear in some of his non homiletic works, notably the *City of God*, this family is not confined to some sort of private sphere of domestic tasks – *this* family is deliberately connected to the political realm as a way of demonstrating the totality of this new life in Christ. Christian life cannot be simply relegated to a domestic or private sphere; the new family/political order created *when* Christ came now claims a distinctive hold.

## II. WHICH FAMILY IS MEANT?

This point leads me to my second, related question: which family is meant? The theological emphasis on marriage and family of the new creation would seem to supplant marriage of the old creation. Why would anyone need marriage and family at all, if marriage to the Bridegroom,

8. AUGUSTINE, *Sermon 223*, in *Sermons 184-229Z* (III/6), ed. E. HILL, Hyde Park, NY, New City Press, 1993.

9. AUGUSTINE, *Sermon 228*, in *ibid.*

Christ, is both our present and eschatological reality? Truly, this seems to be one of the concerns raised by some church fathers who advocate virginity to the near exclusion of other states of life. Being a physical virgin without the cares of the first family means that one is able to focus entirely on the second family, and Jerome and others were quite happy to make use of 1 Cor 7 to make just this kind of point. For my purposes in this essay, the answer to the question of what kind of family is meant showcases what are actually rather deep distinctions between Augustine and John Chrysostom. Here I find that if the first question about when the Christian's family originates makes the two appear nominally similar, the second question about which family is *meant* demonstrates that they are theologically quite far apart, and so it is whether one considers oneself an Augustinian or a Chrysostomian, so to speak, will influence how one understands the family that domestic church needs.

In his treatise on virginity, John Chrysostom clearly names spiritual virginity as the eschatological reality that all Christians shall see in the future; in fact, he goes so far as to suggest that the present time is not a time for marrying but for being a virgin. He writes, "the resurrection stands at our door ... the young girl, so long as she remains at home with her mother, is occupied with childish cares"<sup>10</sup>. This, in turn, influences how he understands marriage and family at its first origins, for John believes that virginity was the state of Adam and Eve at creation. Marriage (and sex, with it) were created as a byproduct of the fall as God's safeguard for enabling Adam and Eve and their children to remain in some sort of graced state even if fallen. He writes, "Do you perceive the origin of marriage? Why it seems to be necessary? It springs from disobedience, from a curse, from death. For where death is, there is marriage. When one does not exist, the other is not about. But virginity does not have this companion [of death]"<sup>11</sup>. Because of this, true virgins are able to have a foretaste of the eschatological banquet even here on this earth. While John deems marriage to be something good in this life, it is also not capable of pointing us toward what our lives will look like when we see heaven; it points only back toward marriage in its first origins and, unhappily, toward fallen nature. In the present time, then, it is the virgins who are revealing the eschaton to us; marriage and family are redeemed to a better state than after the fall, but nothing more can be done for marriage. The only frame of reference for Christians in relation

10. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *On Virginity*, in *On Virginity/Against Remarriage*, trans. S. RIEGER SHORE, New York, Mellen, 1983, LXIII, 1.

11. *Ibid.*, XIV,5.



to marriage is the one that the church has with Christ, which we do not see now, but will see eventually – when all of us as spiritual virgins will eat at the wedding feast of Christ. Physical marriage and sexual procreation, however, are entirely of the created order and bear only metaphorical comparisons to the spiritual wedding feast we shall know at the end of time.

By contrast, Augustine is not so certain that marriage was a stop-gap measure after the fall; rather he thinks that marriage was created and that even some sort of procreation (what exactly, he is not willing to determine) was possible in the original Genesis account, as he suggests in detail in his work *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*. In stark contrast to John Chrysostom he writes, "I still cannot see what could have prevented their also being wedded with honor and bedded without spot or wrinkle in paradise, God granting this right to them if they lived faithfully in justice, and served him obediently in holiness"<sup>12</sup>. The fact that Augustine understands marriage as the original state at the first origin of marriage and family has significant bearing on how he understands marriage in relation to the eschaton. In his treatise on virginity, in contrast to John Chrysostom's, Augustine frequently refers to the virgin as married in Christ. Moreover, the chaste virgin woman is not categorically better than a married woman solely because of her state of life; rather, it is virtue that makes the difference in a good married life or a good virginal life<sup>13</sup>.

Earlier, I noted that Augustine does not often refer to the baptized in relation to marriage but in reference to parent/child relationships. He reserves the discussion of marriage largely to a discussion of ecclesiology, mirrored in Mary herself, and this, too, is significant for how he understands marriage and family. In a Christmas sermon he marvels at the paradoxes Mary offers in her own life: "Let us celebrate with joy the day on which Mary bore the Savior, a married woman the creator of marriage, a virgin the chief of virgins; Mary who both had been given to a husband, and was a mother not by her husband; a virgin while with child, a virgin while breastfeeding"<sup>14</sup>. He follows this discussion of marriage with a discussion of the "virgin holy Church" which is yet the

12. AUGUSTINE, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, ed. J. E. ROTELLE, Hyde Park, NY, New City Press, 2002, IX, 3, 6.

13. See AUGUSTINE, *On Holy Virginity*, in *Marriage and Virginity*, trans. R. Kearney, ed. D.G. HUNTER, Hyde Park, NY, New City Press, 1999, 20, 20, for example, where Augustine speaks of Susanna and the virtuous life.

14. AUGUSTINE, *Sermon 188*, in *Sermons 184-229Z* (III/6) (n. 8).



Bride of the Bridegroom<sup>15</sup>. This in itself would not be significant except for the fact that in the same sermon he very clearly links Mary's own marriage to the paradoxical status that all baptized members of the church share: "How could [the church] be a chaste virgin in so many communities of either sex, among so many, not only boys and girls, but also married fathers and mothers? How, I repeat, could it be a chaste virgin, except in the integrity of faith, hope and charity? Hence Christ, intending to establish the Church's virginity in the heart, first preserved Mary's in the body"<sup>16</sup>. In marveling at Mary, he marvels at the fact that the married, and those who have had children, and those in monastic communities, and the very young, can somehow hold eschatological witness and be chaste virgins even though they are married. This fact happens in the church and because of the church's own married state. In the treatise on virginity, he writes similarly: "On the other hand, the Church as a whole, in the saints destined to possess God's kingdom, is Christ's mother spiritually and also Christ's virgin spiritually, but as a whole she is not these things physically. Rather in some persons she is a virgin of Christ and in others she is a mother, though not Christ's mother"<sup>17</sup>.

These examples briefly give the sense of how Augustine has quite a different theological view than John Chrysostom: for Augustine the entire church is *both* spiritually married *and* virgin, and within that one might see physically married people, or physical virgins, each of whom are capable of witnessing to and participating in the Church's eschatological marriage to Christ, and yet also capable of bearing eschatological witness about virginity. This relates, in part, to his understanding of the prelapsarian view of marriage in Genesis, to his eschatological vision of marriage, and to the fact that he sees in the church a partially realized eschatology, where we experience now partially what we shall know fully at the eschaton.

To the question I raised about which family is meant, then, it becomes clear that for John Chrysostom, the family that is meant is solely the spiritual family that the baptized enter in Christ. Physically married people who become baptized and therefore oriented toward marriage with the Bridegroom understand marriage with the Bridegroom imperfectly, and through example of the physical virgins present in the church. For Augustine, on the other hand, the family that is meant is both/and: the first family of origin and the second family of origin, for they are caught

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. AUGUSTINE, *On Holy Virginity* (n. 13), 6, 6.

up together in the eschatological love song of Christ for his bride, the church. For Augustine, the family that is meant takes on far greater significance and meaning than depicted in Genesis, for now physically married people can be virgins; virgins can be married, and all of them are caught up together in the same life in Christ in the Church. The first origin of the family is a referent to the second, which is both like and unlike the first.

### III. HOW IS EVERYDAY DOMESTIC LIFE RELATED TO DOMESTIC CHURCH?

We come then to the third question I raised at the beginning about how everyday domestic life might be related to domestic church. One's view of this will have everything to do with one's answers to the earlier questions posed. For John Chrysostom, whose focus is on virginity as the ideal, his exhortations for Christian daily life tend not to focus on familial obligations (aside from the occasional exhortation to a wife to be obedient to her husband). Rather he focuses on helping Christians develop virtues, and a way of life that keeps us safely in the bonds of marriage with the Bridegroom. As Enrico Mazza suggests in his discussion of mystagogy, Chrysostom proposes a program of Christian living "inspired by the monastic ideal" and gives a vision of married life that looks monastic-like<sup>18</sup>; for example, he preaches to the neophytes that they should "gather at dawn to make your prayers to the God of all things ... let each one approach his daily task with fear and anguish and spend his working hours in the knowledge that at evening he should return here to the church, render an account to the Master of his whole day, and beg forgiveness for his falls ... If we give priority to the spiritual, we shall have no trouble with material things, since the loving-kindness of God provides us with abundant comfort in these matters. But if we grow careless of the spiritual and are eager only for material things and, taking no account of the soul, we continually involve ourselves in what concerns our daily life, we lose the spiritual things"<sup>19</sup>. In another instruction to the neophytes he says, "A song is a great comrade. You will cause no damage by this but you will be able to sit at your work as if you were in the workshop of a monastery. For it is not the fitness of a place but the rigid

18. E. MAZZA, *Mystagogy: A Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age*, New York, Pueblo, 1989, p. 114.

19. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Eighth Instruction*, in *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions* (n. 5), pp. 19 and 20.



discipline of our character that will provide us with quiet"<sup>20</sup>. Chrysostom's monastic ideal precludes much mention of marriage and family. To be sure, John Chrysostom preaches elsewhere about physical marriage and how Christians may choose and find good spouses that will help them live as better disciples. Interestingly, these marriages end up looking much like his exhortations toward a more monastic life: he counsels "'Because of the temptation to immorality let each man have his own wife.' [1 Cor 7,2] [Paul] does not say, 'Because of the relief from poverty,' or 'Because of the acquisition of wealth,' but what? In order that we may avoid fornication, restrain our desire, practice chastity, and be well pleasing to God by being satisfied with our own wife: this is the gift of marriage, this is its fruit, this is its profit"<sup>21</sup>. And elsewhere: "If the bridegroom shows his wife that he takes no pleasure in worldly excess, and will not stand for it, their marriage will remain free from the evil influences that are so popular these days"<sup>22</sup>. "He is truly rich who does not desire great possessions, or surround himself with wealth, but who requires nothing"<sup>23</sup>. The best marriages are ones that adhere to a kind of monastic austerity, but that also enable spouses to be as free as possible to follow God.

Augustine would not disagree with John Chrysostom on the necessity of virtue and they would agree with each other that virtuous living is ultimately more important than state of life. Because of Augustine's view of the church as married and virgin, both physically and spiritually, however, the kinds of domestic churches that he sees possible are greater in number. For example, in a letter to a widow named Juliana, Augustine mentions "holy widowhood" as similar to living a life of vowed virginity or monasticism, so that Juliana's holy widowhood is a distinctive kind of household. It is not a traditional family, for Juliana lives with at least one other widow, but still, hers is a household that gets the designation "domestic church" and not the more traditional "nuclear family". This, combined with Augustine's sense that virgins are married, and married people are virgins, suggests a rather more expansive sense of what households might look like. That is to say, theologically we cannot and should not have a chokehold on a certain view of marriage and family in order to rightly understand creation, anymore than we need a chokehold view of vowed singleness in order to rightly understand the eschaton. In other

20. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Twelfth Instruction*, in *ibid.*, p. 38.

21. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *How to Choose a Wife*, in *On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. C.P. Roth - D. Anderson, Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986, p. 99.

22. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homily 20*, in *ibid.*, p. 60.

23. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homily 21*, in *ibid.*, p. 69.

words, physical marriage does not *need* to point toward redemption of creation and physical virginity does not need to point toward the eschaton because both are pointing toward both, together. We do not need those as distinctive and separate forms of daily households in order to rightly understand the economy of God's salvation. The small, local, everyday households of which we are a part are thus intimately wrapped up with the church's own eschatological witness, and this is highly appropriate, since we are all, married, widowed, virgin, single, monk, members of the Church, part of the marriage to Christ.

#### IV. COMMENTARY ON CONTEMPORARY FAMILY

I am more an Augustinian than a Chrysostomian, though I do, in fact, find John Chrysostom's vision to be fruitful at many points. But it is the expansiveness of Augustine's vision about marriage and family that I want to focus on as I now bring this whole conversation into contact with our twenty-first century question about "what kind of family is needed for the 'domestic' church". First and foremost, I want to suggest that the term "family" in the question does not do very much work, for from the vision I have discussed here, a primary Christian vision of family is, quite simply the church. I prefer to use the term household, or perhaps "daily household" or "local household" as the advertisement for this conference suggests, because local household is a term that is more in line with the kind of witness the Christians have, regardless of whether they are married with children or virgins.

The term "household" has its own difficulties, though, because it seems so general as to be entirely non-specific. Indeed, my discussion might seem to be particularly appropriate for a theological account of households in a post-modern world. Some scholars on the family have noted a curious aspect of late modern/postmodern context, namely that one of its chief characteristics is precisely a heightened focus on family structure and what it means to be family. Indeed, the questions we are asking at this conference mark us as postmoderns. The focus on family that many scholars, religious and not, have noted, stems strangely from a keen need to shape one's own destiny, and a desire for autonomy and individuality. This drive for individuality in turn derives from technological revolutions and consumer culture, both of which appear to offer an array of choices, rather than a set guided path for how to live life<sup>24</sup>.

24. For a discussion of late modernity from a sociological point of view, see M. KLETT-DAVIES, *Going It Alone: Lone Motherhood in Late Modernity*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007,



Ultimately, people living in a late liberal, post-modern context want to choose their own family structures in such a way that they “work” for being autonomous, individual people. Thus, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas writes about Filipina women and others leaving behind children in the Philippines to travel thousands of miles to work as nannies caring for other peoples’ children, partly out of the necessity of needing to make money for the family<sup>25</sup>. Thus one of the central white Western arguments, in both secular and ecclesial politics, has been about the possibility of gay marriage. Thus we have concepts like surrogate motherhood, “snowflake adoption” (adoption of frozen embryos used in IVF treatment), and *deliberately* single parenthood. Like many concepts, family in contemporary culture stands out as a fluid and constructed institution, to the point that there is an un-marriage movement consisting of people who no longer see the point of maintaining marriage or family.

So, my own naming of “domestic church” as an expansive household appears to have confluences with post-modern visions of family, as its expansive nature seems unfixed and malleable, much like current perceptions about family. Indeed, I am aware that the danger in my own work is that the family appears to be nothing much at all, that any collection of baptized people living together under one roof, so long as they are baptized, might count as a “local household”. May schools or groups of prisoners count as “domestic church”? May Christian college roommates thrown together by sheer force of the university’s housing lottery count as “domestic church”? There is much, indeed, that I find problematic about post-modern questions about marriage and family, and I would prefer to offer a distinctive Christian witness for daily living rather than go along with the flow of fluid contemporary views of family.

Toward the end of showing that my account of expansive local households in relationship to the Church as Household of God might have intelligible boundaries, I suggest here three such boundaries. First, I suggest that one way to mark a household as capable of bearing witness to Christ is for Christians to examine the extent of that household’s ability to refer both toward creation *and* the eschatological reality of Christ’s marriage with the Church. It is no mistake that monks arranged their own small

especially chapter 3. See also B. WATER’s work in *The Family in Christian Social and Political Thought*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, particularly chapter 2.

25. See R.S. PARREÑAS, *The Care Crisis in the Philippines: Children and Transnational Families in the New Global Economy*, in B. EHRENREICH – A. HOCHSCHILD (eds.), *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, New York, Holt, 2004.

households in reference to both: referring to each other as mother, father, brother, sister; thinking of themselves as spiritual children of God; carrying out the domestic tasks necessary to any household. In the United States, one particular contemporary form of household that might be assessed in this way is the self-named "New Monasticism movement", a movement largely comprised of evangelical Protestants who insist on allowing both physical marriage and physical virginity to be present in their houses as marks of Christ's discipleship. Part of the importance of both of these is the fact that these are vowed, or semi-vowed communities, in much the same way that marriage is vowed. Thus, too, married couples who seek adoption might be squarely named as domestic churches because they have a referent in the Genesis account of marriage, but also in an eschatological vision of Christians as adopted sons and daughters. Surrogate motherhood and deliberately single parenthood, on the other hand, are more difficult to provide referents. And as a totally opposing institution, a boarding school would be highly unlikely to provide that kind of theological referent. It is the Church, as the Bride of Christ, that ultimately must be able to make that distinction, given the close relationship that local households have with the ecclesial household.

My second boundary relates to the point I made earlier about John Chrysostom and Augustine's views of the baptized entering a new marriage in the church. They were quite careful to delineate that marriage and family never represent the entirety of what it means to be church; both bring in political non-familial relationships as well. The significance of this point is that the church does not need the local household to be a substitute church or mini-church on its own, nor should Christians expect local households ever to give entire witness to the reality of creation, the redemption, or the eschaton. Daily households, such as they are, cannot take the expansiveness of their eschatological reality too far.

A third boundary comes from the fact that both John Chrysostom and Augustine were also quite careful to say that no one state of life should be an end in itself: virtuous living wins out over a particular state if it is lived poorly. Virtue and Christian discipleship, then, provide another boundary and the discernments about whether virtue and Christian discipleship are being practiced happen through the Christian communities of which one is a part.

Ultimately, though, it is the partially realized eschatological reality of marriage and family that means there are more ways of living out "domestic church" that are acceptable witness to the kingdom of God, and some of those forms are, according to Paul, better witnesses than the original form of marriage and family was. To that end, the church can



and should wrestle theologically with the question of what are acceptable forms of "family" beyond notions of "nuclear family", in favor of discussing the variety of forms of life (monasticism and nuclear family among them) that enable us to live as disciples of Christ in his Church.

300 College Park  
University of Dayton  
Dayton, OH 45469-1530  
USA  
jbennett2@udayton.edu

Jana Marguerite BENNETT