

12-1-1951

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### Recommended Citation

Repp, Arthur C. (1951) "John Chrysostom on the Christian Home as a Teacher," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 22, Article 76.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol22/iss1/76>

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# John Chrysostom on the Christian Home as a Teacher

By ARTHUR C. REPP

**J**OHAN CHRYSOSTOM is known in the Christian Church primarily as the greatest pulpit orator of the fourth century. His excellency as a preacher, which also made him an outstanding example of the Antioch school of theology, has, in a measure, caused the Church to lose sight of his contributions to educational thought. Yet according to one authority John wrote the finest pedagogic treatise of the patristic era and developed "a method of sex instruction that is without superior in the history of education."<sup>1</sup> In spite of this high tribute, however, the church father has been either generally ignored by American and English historians of education or evaluated on the basis of limited information.

A study of John's voluminous writings gives us a fairly clear picture of his views on education, especially his concept of the home as an educational agency. Accordingly the underlying thought of John's philosophy was that education must be the means through which God's purpose in creating and redeeming mankind is to be attained, namely, the eternal life of serving and glorifying God. This viewpoint placed God in the center of John's philosophy of education, set up the goals, and determined the true values. Anything which deflected man from God's ultimate objective was harmful and lost whatever value it might otherwise have.

John believed that the realization of man's ultimate purpose could under the guidance of the Spirit of God come only through an education based on the one true source of knowledge, the Scriptures. While man's innate knowledge, reason, and experiences supplied important sources of truth, they were at best only supplementary to the Scriptures and had to be modified accordingly.

While John viewed man's education from various angles, intellectual, moral, domestic, social, vocational, civic, aesthetic, and even physical, he never viewed these as separate entities or divorced them from his underlying principle which permeated all of man's



actions. Because of their interrelatedness it is impossible to unravel them into several strands without in some way tearing the general skein. Any division of the intellectual and the moral, for example, is actually impossible except in an academic sense. Since the domestic was to serve both the intellectual and the moral training, this phase of education is even more interrelated. The same may be said of the social, civic, vocational, and aesthetic, which received only incidental emphases, and then only when they served his main interest.

Not only were the various phases of education interrelated according to John's philosophy, but he correctly regarded education to be a process which affected the entire man. Hence the Christian philosophy, as he conceived it, was not only true, but was the one and only integrating factor for the total man. His unifying principle was in every sense a *unifying* principle.

John recognized education to be a lifelong process. Throughout life man strove for the ultimate goal without ever achieving it. In fact, many of the elements of everyday living often caused sudden reverses. Hence man was constantly in need of the educator's guidance. While youth was the ideal time for the teacher because good habits were best formed during the tender years, youth and adulthood played equally important parts in the educator's program. Thus education was both a lifelong process and a continuous process since the soul, or the mind, tended always to be active.

The three educational agencies in which the church father was interested to implement his philosophy of education were the home, the church, and the school. Of these three, John believed the home to be by far the most important. His sermons and writings which dealt with education stressed chiefly this one agency, with the school and church merely as extensions or means to undergird the home in its task. The most significant of John's writings, *Vanity and the Education of Children*, deals exclusively with the home, giving directions to parents how a child, particularly the son of the upper classes, should be trained.<sup>2</sup> The sermons addressed to persons of all classes indicate that every home must be regarded as a *palaistra* for the training of children and adults.<sup>3</sup>

God gave the responsibility of training chiefly to the home, and



therefore it was a divine obligation which had to be met.<sup>4</sup> He so arranged matters that children had parents primarily in order to be trained properly. The mere fact that a man begot children did not make him a father, nor because a woman bore a child did she thereby become a mother, but when they gave their children the proper training, then, and then only, were they worthy of that title.<sup>5</sup> The neglect of the home brought the whole world into confusion and an uproar.<sup>6</sup> When temporal affairs were placed first in importance and education was neglected, parents brought untold grief upon themselves.<sup>7</sup> "For as untilled land, such is also youth neglected, bringing forth many thorns from many quarters."<sup>8</sup> When all in the home lived up to their responsibility, they were armed against all evil.

Let thy home be a sort of arena, a place of exercise for virtue, that, having trained thyself well there, thou mayest with entire skill encounter all abroad.<sup>9</sup>

Education in the home was the duty chiefly of parents, and the use of pedagogs was only supplementary.<sup>10</sup> God had taken great care for the training of children, planting in human nature "that strong love which with an irresistible power inviteth parents to provide for them."<sup>11</sup> While fathers were inclined to be concerned more with their business and their amusements and leave this task to the mothers and slaves, John admonished them: "Let everything be secondary with us to the provident care of our children," a lesson which the rich and the poor must learn.<sup>12</sup>

Christian mothers, it seems, were ready to accept the responsibility of their daughters, but were somewhat remiss with their sons. John was emphatic in his reminder that they had the same responsibility in the education of boys. God made no distinction between the sexes. The pains which a mother suffered in bearing children were more than recompensed by a virtuous life which followed a good training. Though the authority and responsibility lay chiefly with the fathers, mothers had a greater opportunity to educate because they were constantly at home, while the fathers had to care for their business.<sup>13</sup> The mother's influence, as John envisioned it, was in marked contrast to a Greek society and morality which knew little of a mother's influence and where sons were taken from them at an early age.<sup>14</sup>



When it became necessary to choose a pedagogue or a nurse, parents were in duty bound to take great care to choose such as were able to lay a good foundation.<sup>15</sup> John lamented the fact that parents were often careless in their choice. With some bitterness he told his congregation:

If we have set a tutor [pedagogue] over a child's soul, we take at once, and at random, whoever comes in our way. And yet than this art there is not another greater. For what is equal to training the soul and forming the mind of one that is young? For he that hath this art, ought to be more exactly observant than any painter and any sculptor. But we take no account of this, but look to one thing only, that he may be trained as to his tongue. And to this again we have directed our endeavors for money's sake. For not that he may be able to speak, but that he may get money, does he learn speaking; since, if it were possible to grow rich even without this, we should have no care even for this.<sup>16</sup>

When God designated parents as the chief educators of children, He gave them both the responsibilities and the rights to carry out their obligation.<sup>17</sup> They had the authority to set up rules and see to it that they were enforced. The father who was the chief authority in the home was like a king who must govern the child.<sup>18</sup> God required children to obey parents and respond to their wishes and admonitions.<sup>19</sup> They owed this obedience and honor in payment for their being brought into the world.<sup>20</sup>

While this authority was mixed with love, it must be stern when there were infractions. There was no purpose in setting up rules in the home if they were not enforced.<sup>21</sup> Since the father's purpose was to teach the son self-discipline, he must be quick to mete out punishment and yet be loving when his rules were kept, rewarding with praise.<sup>22</sup> It was not always necessary to inflict the rod, for there were many other ways of disciplining.<sup>23</sup> If, however, the parent had threatened, he must carry it out, for threats were proper only when the child believed that they would be enforced. "Punish him," John advised parents when the son was disobedient,

now with a stern look, now with incisive, now with reproachful, words; at other times win him with gentleness and promises. Have not recourse to blows constantly, and accustom him not to be trained by the rod; for if he feel it constantly as he is being



trained, he will learn to despise it. And when he has learnt to despise it, he has reduced thy system to nought. Let him rather at all times fear blows but not receive them.<sup>24</sup>

Where a home was properly conducted and the children were well trained, many blessings and joys abounded.<sup>25</sup> Such children brought praise from others, increased the mutual love between parents and themselves, and enabled the children to serve their parents in old age.<sup>26</sup> Above all, God held such parents and children in high esteem and honor.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, when parents neglected their children, they were worse than murderers, inviting the wrath of God. He held them personally responsible for their neglect and on Judgment Day would ask them pointedly why they were guilty when He had set them up as teachers, had given them the children while "still tender" when they could be molded, and had clothed them with authority and power. Parents could not hope for forgiveness when they were guilty of such neglect.<sup>28</sup>

The education of girls was the special care of mothers, who were so to train them that they could leave their father's house to marriage as combatants from the *palaistra*, "furnished with all necessary knowledge."<sup>29</sup> Since older girls were generally kept away from men, this task fell naturally upon mothers and perhaps a female slave.<sup>30</sup> John said to them:

Mothers, be specially careful to regulate your daughters well; for the management of them is easy. Be watchful over them, that they may be keepers at home. Above all instruct them to be pious, modest, despisers of wealth, indifferent to ornament.<sup>31</sup>

Among many families of the Orient it was customary to segregate the daughters in their own quarters, bolted from intruders and restricted at all times from going out. Even relatives were forbidden to visit them lest the girls' modesty be sullied.<sup>32</sup> John was doubtful whether this was the best way. He recalled that Rebecca went out to the well to water the flock and still remained chaste. Perhaps girls should get out at times and not always remain in their quarters. "Our young women rarely go to the market, and then always with servants, and yet they often fall."<sup>33</sup> This observation was somewhat in contrast to his own opinion previous to the experiences of his Antioch ministry. Then he felt that it was good



for girls to be kept close at home, for they were relieved of the temptation of being compelled "to the gaze of men."<sup>34</sup>

In general the training of girls was to be the same as that of boys except that they were to be taught how to manage a home.<sup>35</sup> John stressed that they were to be protected both from a society which was ready to ensnare them and against themselves because of "the passionateness of their own human nature."<sup>36</sup> Mothers were admonished to be exemplary in every detail and to be mindful that their daughters would imitate their behavior. Hence he enjoined them: "Be a pattern to thy daughter of modesty, deck thyself with that adorning, and see that thou despise the other [external beauty]; for that is in truth an ornament, the other a disfigurement."<sup>37</sup>

Education was more than keeping children alive and free from starving as the common people were accustomed to believe.<sup>38</sup> The home, as John conceived it, was responsible for the moral and domestic training and such basic knowledge which was necessary. The best way in which such training could be carried on was in a Christian environment, for thus the abstract moral concepts became meaningful.<sup>39</sup> If this were generally done, there would be no need for laws and courts.<sup>40</sup>

John suggested that the natural experiences of a normal home should be supplemented by contrived experiences to strengthen the emotional bonds. For example, he cited with approval how affectionate parents who saw that their little children were being weaned away by friends of their own age caused "their servants to enact many fearful things, that by such fear they may be constrained to flee for refuge to their mother's bosom." By such experiences children were to learn the love and security of their parents.<sup>41</sup> Similarly a child should be taught patience by being crossed by a member of the family or a slave "so that he may learn on every occasion to control his passion."<sup>42</sup>

A correct parental attitude would make children more ready to accept the parent's standard of values and regard the acquisition of virtue far more important than the accumulation of wealth, power, and knowledge.

The proper attitude which a child should acquire must not be limited to things and to abstractions, but should extend to persons. For example, children should not be free to injure slaves. They



should deport themselves toward them as to their brothers. When a child insulted a slave, particularly the pedagogue, he must be punished in the same manner as he would be if he had injured a free born.<sup>43</sup>

John placed great emphasis upon the devotional life of the family to supplement the teaching in the church and to strengthen the moral and religious ties of the home. He suggested that daily prayers be conducted, especially before and after each meal. Such prayers prevented disorderly conversation, drunkenness, and gluttony.<sup>44</sup>

On days when there was a public worship the meal should in a particular way become a devotional period. John recommended that the family sit down to a double meal, one of meat and drink and the other of spiritual food. To make the public service more effective in the daily life of the family, the father should take out his Bible and read the section which the pastor had treated in the sermon. With the mother, children, and the slaves gathered about the table, the father should "rehearse" the sermon. The other members of the group should ask questions on points not understood, and all should apply what had been said to their immediate situations. The slaves, too, should be allowed to point out how members of the family had been guilty of the sins against which the preacher had warned.<sup>45</sup>

At times the father should review only a part of the sermon and allow his wife or one of the children to finish it. This encouraged them to remember what had been said. Questions directed by the parents to the children and the slaves, John declared, would add to the learning situation.<sup>46</sup>

Such discussions could continue the rest of the day and be supplemented by group singing.<sup>47</sup> In the event that the father had to return to his business he should at least discuss the sermon with the family.<sup>48</sup>

Home devotions conducted in this manner would make the public worship more meaningful, prepare the family for the next service, and give the minister confidence that he was actually accomplishing something.<sup>49</sup> A day spent in religious discussions would bring pleasant dreams to all.<sup>50</sup>

John further urged that before attending the public service,



the family should read that section of the Bible which was to be treated in the sermon in order to prepare their understanding and facilitate the task of the preacher.<sup>51</sup>

As may be imagined, not everyone accepted John's advice. Parents believed that children would not understand their discussions. Once John answered this criticism:

Let no one tell me that our children ought not to be occupied with these things; they ought not only to be occupied with them, but to be zealous about them only.<sup>52</sup>

Particularly the fathers felt that it was expecting too much of them and was a waste of time to have such extensive devotional periods. They were quickly reminded that they did not consider it a waste of time to discuss the races or to take the children to the theater. School lessons were usually discussed. In fact, parents seemed to find leisure for everything else except God's Word.<sup>53</sup>

On days when there were no public services, part of the meal should be devoted to Bible stories skillfully told by the father and followed by a question period. John emphasized that the meaning must be clarified by drawing parallels to the times and be strengthened with an application to their immediate life.

The mothers were urged to join in by telling parts of the story or by praising the children when they answered correctly. After the story had been told on successive occasions, the children should relate the stories themselves. After they knew them, they would be happy when they recognized them as they were read during the church service.<sup>54</sup>

The education of the child must begin with infancy, for then the mind could best be impressed with good principles which could not readily be effaced.<sup>55</sup> The little child needed to hear wholesome conversations,

for from its tenderness it readily stores up what is said; and what children hear is impressed as a seal on the wax of their minds. Besides, it is then that their life begins to incline to vice or virtue; and if from the very gates and portals one lead them away from iniquity and guide them by the hand to the best road, he will fix them for the time to come in a sort of habit and nature, and they will not, even if they be willing, easily change for the worse, since this force of custom draws them to the performance of good actions.<sup>56</sup>



Even the name of the young child was considered by John to be an important influence in his life. He deplored the custom of naming children after their relatives or friends. It was still worse when they practiced the heathen custom of lighting candles and giving each one a name, and then naming the child after the candle which burned longest. Instead, children should be named after Biblical characters, the martyrs, or the bishops. The name of righteous persons would encourage the children to pattern their lives after them, and so the saints would continue to live and come into the homes of Christians.<sup>57</sup>

The father should be a companion to his boy and spend some time taking walks with him or sitting down for a little talk on some serious topic, "drawing him away from all childish folly." "For," John tells the father, "thou art raising a philosopher and athlete and citizen of heaven."<sup>58</sup>

John's idea of home training may be summed up in his own words to the father who should take his cue from the painter or the sculptor when considering his role as educator:

Like the creators of statues, do you give all your leisure to fashioning these wondrous statues for God? And, as you remove what is superfluous and add what is lacking, inspect them day by day, to see what good qualities nature has supplied so that you will increase them, and what faults so that you will eradicate them? And, first of all, take the greatest care to banish licentious speech; for love of this above all frets the souls of the young. Before he is of an age to try it, teach thy son to be sober and vigilant and to shorten sleep for the sake of prayer, and with every word and deed to set upon himself the seal of the faith.<sup>59</sup>

John conceived the home also as a place for the training of adults, for education was a continuous process. Here again the father had the chief responsibility. He must continue to teach his wife in attaining a more noble life and to share with her the benefits of the church service.<sup>60</sup> However, much of this was to be a mutual teaching, for the wife should also help the husband to improve his habits when this was necessary.<sup>61</sup>

While John did not believe that a woman should teach in public, she did have this opportunity in her home.<sup>62</sup> In such cases where the husband was pious and showed the same in his life, it was not even proper for the wife to teach him at home.<sup>63</sup> This did not



mean, however, that she could not teach a husband when he was remiss in his habits or when he was a heathen. In such cases, because the husband was not living up to his responsibility as the head, it was the woman's task to teach the ways of Christianity.<sup>64</sup>

The instruction of the adults in the home included the slaves. "Teach them to be religious," John advised.<sup>65</sup> Since the slaves had no other opportunity except that given by their masters, the husband and the wife must see to it that this responsibility of ownership was conscientiously carried out.<sup>66</sup>

John had no delusions about the strength of the Christian home of his day. He was aware that it was decadent because of encroaching Hellenism, fatalism, and immorality, yet he did not suggest that the Church or the State should set about establishing a new type of school. Because he conceived the home's influence as potentially the most important environment for good, he employed every device he could think of to place the home on a firmer footing. Using the pulpit as a platform for adult education, he instructed parents in the training of their children. By means of sound instruction, the inculcation of good habits, the erection of acceptable standards and a consistent life of Christian philosophy, children should receive the major portion of their education under the direction of their parents. In the home every phase of education could normally be rooted with success. John's views on the importance of the home as an educational agency and his stress on domestic training were among his finest contributions to education.

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in the home. These sermons include: "Matthew, Homilies V, XI, XXXXIX, LIX, LXXXI," LVI and LVII; "Ephesians, Homily XXI," LXII; "John, Homilies III and XXV," LIX; "2 Corinthians, Homily XV," LXI; "Sermon on Anna, I and III," LIV; "1 Timothy, Homily IX," LXII; "Sermon on the Selection of Widows," LI. Hereafter Migne's edition will be referred to as *MPG*.

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