Discussions in the early church regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, the relationship of the deity and humanity of Christ, the doctrine of predestination, and the consequences of Adam's sin are widely-known and well documented. The church fathers did not, however, neglect the institution of marriage or ignore its place in the life of the church. Marriage and sexuality had been a subject of importance for secular philosophers, Jewish rabbis, and Jewish ascetic groups like the Essenes for centuries. Though some maintained the importance of marriage, others taught the need to abstain from sex in order to pursue more spiritual or philosophical endeavors. In the second century, heretical groups such as the Gnostics, Marcionites, and Encratites emerged, denying the goodness of human sexuality and demanding celibacy from believers. In response, second century apologists defended the goodness of marriage. However, several factors helped popularize sexual renunciation as a path toward greater spirituality. Extra-canonical writings such as *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* and *The Acts of Thomas* gained a wide readership and glorified celibacy. The third century Alexandrian theologian Origen taught that asceticism was essential to the process of sanctification for believers, and he greatly influenced many of the early hermits who retreated into the deserts of Egypt. Athanasius’ *Life of Antony* helped promote their sacrifices and struggles to Christians in the East and West throughout the third and fourth centuries.

Despite the growing popularity of the ascetic movement, however, not everyone believed that sanctification needed to involve sexual renunciation. Although by the end of the fourth century celibacy was viewed by many as a superior path to favor with God, not everyone agreed. One Roman churchman, a monk named Jovinian, challenged this emerging consensus and articulated the belief that marriage and celibacy were equal in God’s sight. He critiqued not only celibacy as superior in God’s sight, but also the hierarchy of merit that had emerged in patristic soteriology. Though most of Jovinian’s work is lost, his ideas challenged the church to think deeply about the institution of marriage.

**CHALLENGING THE CONSENSUS**

“Marriage replenishes the earth, virginity fills Paradise.” So wrote Jerome (c. 347–420), the Bible scholar and...
ascetic of Bethlehem, in the last decade of the fourth century. He argued that marriage fulfills God’s plan to populate the earth, as Genesis 1 and 2 explain. Virginity, however, has a special place of importance in the mission of the church. In making this argument, he did not intend to denigrate marriage. “If I have called virginity gold, I have spoken of marriage as silver.” Furthermore, he argued, Jesus’ parable of the soils teaches us that while all believers bear fruit from the same soil because of the same act of sowing, the amount of fruit differs widely—some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirtyfold. Thus while marriage bears fruit for Christ, virginity bears more. In his writing on virginity and marriage, Jerome made clear that he considered virginity to be worthy of greater merit in heaven than marriage.

Jerome was not alone in his conviction that virginity bears more eternal fruit than marriage. Many contemporaries shared this opinion. Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo in North Africa, stated regarding a vow of lifelong virginity that “there is a special splendor there . . . that is not bestowed on everyone who lives forever, but only on certain ones.” While marriage should not be condemned, it also should not be made equal to the gift of celibacy. Siricius, who served as bishop of Rome from 384–399, made a similar statement in a letter addressed to several western bishops: “Assuredly we receive without scorn the vows of those marriages which we assist at with the veil, but virgins, for whose existence marriage is necessary, as being devoted to God, we honor more highly.” Ambrose (c. 339–397), the bishop of Milan, echoed that opinion in his reply letter to Siricius, “Marriage is good: through it the means of human continuity are found. But virginity is better: through it are attained the inheritance of a heavenly kingdom and a continuity of heavenly rewards.”

Jerome wrote his treatise on virginity and marriage in 393 at the request of some friends in Rome because of the popularity of a new treatise that challenged popular thought on celibacy and marriage. The new treatise was written by a Roman churchman named Jovinian, whom Jerome called “the Epicurus of Christianity.” According to Siricius, Jovinian and his followers spoke at church meetings about marriage and celibacy and garnered a significant following. Jerome marveled that Jovinian’s followers did not come only from the married laity, who might understandably be attracted to his arguments. Indeed, some clergymen and monks who were devoted to a celibate life were also convinced. Jovinian’s teachings also led to changes in his lifestyle. He was himself devoted to celibacy, but based on negative comments made by Jerome, Jovinian must have allowed himself the indulgence of eating finer foods, taken greater care in his appearance, associated freely with women, and made use of the public baths. Jerome considered all such activity to be contrary to the ascetic ideal.

Several responses to Jovinian’s teachings came rather quickly. Jerome, though living in Bethlehem, wrote Against Jovinian and sent the treatise to his contacts in Rome. Pope Siricius responded too, excommunicating Jovinian and his followers as “promoters of the new heresy and blasphemy,” and notifying a number of western bishops of this decision. Ambrose, in response to Bishop Siricius’ letter, likewise condemned Jovinian and likened his views to those of the Manicheans. The condemnations of Siricius and Ambrose must have come after Jerome received the request to write Against Jovinian, because Jerome proceeded with his argument as if the matter had not been resolved by the Church. Later in the year 393, however, and because his own treatise against Jovinian had raised concerns, Jerome wrote another letter (“Letter 48”) defending his own arguments in which he referenced the official condemnation. Finally, in 398, Jovinian was condemned by the emperor to be beaten with leaden whips and exiled to the island of Boa. His other conspirators were likewise sentenced to exile on “solitary islands situated at a great distance from each other.” Jovinian’s challenge to the consensus regarding marriage and sexuality had led to the branding of heresy, the sentence of excommunication, torture, and finally exile.

**THE TEACHINGS OF JOVINIAN ON MARRIAGE, CELIBACY, AND THE HIERARCHY OF MERIT**

Despite Ambrose’s accusation, Jovinian’s teaching was not Manichean, but it did present a significant biblical and theological challenge to the teaching regarding marriage, sexuality, and sanctification that had become pop-
ular at the end of the fourth century. Though his work has been lost, Jerome preserved a substantial amount of his argument in Against Jovinian. In this response, Jerome neatly summarized his adversary's assertions in four propositions. First, Jovinian argued, "Virgins, widows, and married women, who have been once passed through the laver of Christ, if they are on a par in other respects, are of equal merit." Second, he asserted, "They who with full assurance of faith have been born again in baptism, cannot be overthrown by the devil." Third, he explained, "There is no difference between abstinence from food, and its reception with thanksgiving." Finally, according to Jerome, Jovinian stated, "There is one reward in the kingdom of heaven for all who have kept their baptismal vow."  

**THE FIRST PROPOSITION**

Jerome's refutation makes evident that Jovinian's assertions regarding marriage, sexuality, and sanctification were heavily occupied with presenting a defense of the goodness of marriage based on his interpretation of Scripture. His defense began in Genesis 2, where God himself declares, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). Lest anyone should undermine the significance of this statement because it is merely Old Testament teaching which has been superseded by the gospel, Jovinian pointed out that Jesus himself confirmed the continued significance of marriage when he declared, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." Because Jesus has affirmed the institution which God ordained in the Garden of Eden, his command in Genesis 1:28 still applies to the Church today: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." Based upon the evidence Jerome provided, Jovinian believed both that the creation mandate was still fundamental for the Church today and that it demonstrates that marriage still plays a part in God's plan for humanity which is equal to celibacy.

Jovinian illustrated the important role of marriage in Scripture by demonstrating how many saints of the Old and New Testaments were married. He listed all of the patriarchs between Seth and Noah and commented that Enoch walked with God and was taken up into heaven. Noah and his family were the only ones saved from the flood, though no doubt many single people of marriageable age were condemned. After the flood, he pointed out, the creation mandate was reissued. He further mentions Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Samson, Barak, Deborah, Jael, Boaz, Ruth, Jesse, David, Elijah, Elisha, Josiah, and Huldah. In the New Testament, he mentioned Zachariah, Elizabeth, Peter, and the rest of the Apostles. Jovinian's point in each case was to show that individuals who performed meritorious deeds for the Lord or who played an important role in the history of redemption were married. In some cases, the individuals he cited might be just as heavily criticized for their misdeeds as praised for the important role they play. Not all of Jovinian's examples seem to work in his favor, and Jerome did not miss an opportunity to point these instances out. Nevertheless, Jovinian believed that both the Old and the New Testament present solid evidence that married people were often favored by God and served vital roles in his plan.

Furthermore, Jovinian argued, the New Testament contains plenty of instruction validating the goodness of marriage. As Jerome explained, he continued his argument by quoting Paul's injunction that younger widows marry and bear children (1 Tim 5:14), that a widow is free to marry (1 Cor 7:39), and that women are saved through childbirth (1 Cor 7:29). Furthermore, the author of Hebrews asserted that marriage is honorable and the marriage bed should be undefiled (Heb 13:4).

In Jovinian's opinion, all of this evidence should help put in context Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 7 regarding sexuality, marriage, and remarriage: "Surely we shall hear no more of the famous Apostolic utterance, 'And they who have wives as though they had them not.'" This passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians was often used to defend the position that celibacy is superior, but in Jovinian's view that interpretation of Paul's words was misguided. He concluded, "All of this makes it clear that in forbidding to marry, and to eat food which God created for use, you have consciences seared as with a hot iron, and are followers of the Maniachans." After explaining New Testament teaching, Jovinian proceeded to present evidence from secular authors in favor of the valued place of marriage, demon-
strating that the ascetical views popular in his day had never been accepted in the world and were “a dogma against nature.” Jerome probably got closer to the heart of the issue in asserting the continued importance of marriage, and concluded with examples demonstrating that marriage has been valued and honored in the secular world.

**THE REST OF JOVINIAN’S ARGUMENT**

Jovinian went further, arguing over the doctrine of baptism, the merit of abstinence, and nature of the believer’s final reward. Jerome allowed his response to the first proposition an entire book by itself, while he dealt with the final three propositions together in one book which is shorter than the first. Though Jerome spent far more time interacting with Jovinian’s view of marriage and sexuality, the other three propositions are not ancillary issues. Inevitably all four propositions tie together to present a unified argument. Jerome probably did not grasp every nuance of this argument, and if so, he missed something significant.

According to Jerome’s opening summary of his adversary’s propositions, Jovinian asserted that “they who with full assurance of faith have been born again in baptism, cannot be overthrown by the devil.” As he took up this second proposition, Jerome altered the wording of the proposition and argued that those who have been baptized can be “tempted,” not “overthrown” as he initially recorded. Jerome provided ample evidence from the Old and New Testaments that believers can fall into sin and must guard against it. This, however, was probably not an adequate response to Jovinian’s proposition. There is evidence that Jovinian also stated that believers can fall into sin, and when they do they must repent. Rather, Jovinian seems to have been arguing that something significant occurs in the life of the believer when he or she is baptized, something that goes beyond peccability.

Not knowing exactly what Jovinian said here, it is impossible to reconstruct his argument infallibly, but Jerome probably got closer to the heart of the issue in his closing comment on this proposition: “We flatter ourselves on the ground of our baptism, which though it put away the sins of the past, cannot keep us for the time to come, unless the baptized keep their hearts with all diligence.” This quote reveals a concern not simply over the presence of sin, but over the future state of believers. Jovinian evidently argued that baptism, administered “with full assurance of faith,” places believers in a state in which the blessings they experience as a result are not diminished by the presence of sin. Jovinian did believe that believers could sin, but this sin will not remove the blessings that flow from baptism. In other words, Jovinian argued for what historian David Hunter called the final indefectibility of believers rather than their personal impeccability. Those who are baptized into the Church are in a permanent state of grace.

Regarding the third point, Jerome provided more information about Jovinian’s teaching than he had about the second. Jovinian argued that abstinence from certain foods was unscriptural. Again, he found significance in the doctrine of creation. God created humanity and gave him dominion over all of the creatures of the earth, and then after the flood God gave him the right to eat not only plants, but also animals as well. In the New Testament, Paul teaches that all foods are clean if they are eaten with thanksgiving (Rom 14:20). In fact, Jovinian continued, Jesus himself drank wine and ate meat at feasts. He concluded regarding his opponents, “In abstaining from meats they please their own fancy.”

Jovinian’s fourth proposition was that “there is one reward in the kingdom of heaven for all who have kept their baptismal vow.” As Jerome took up his refutation of this proposition, he explained that Jovinian was arguing that there are only two classes of people—believers and unbelievers. Jovinian referenced Jesus’ teaching regarding the sheep and the goats (Mat 25:31-46), Jesus’ statement to the Pharisees that their father was the devil (John 8:44), the judgment of humanity that occurred in the flood, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Regarding Sodom and Gomorrah, Jovinian stated, “There is one salvation for those who are released, one destruction for those who stay behind.” Jovinian rejected the idea that believers should be divided into classes, some more spiritual than others, because the New Testament repeatedly emphasizes that all believers...
partake of the body and blood of Christ (John 6:56),
that the Holy Spirit indwells all believers (1 Cor 6:19),
and that the Church itself is one. For these reasons,
the common teaching that an ascetic lifestyle produces
greater reward should be rejected. All believers possess
the presence of Christ and are part of the same body.
Therefore all experience the same reward.

The common thread running through propositions
one, three, and four, and in reality shedding light on
the second as well, was Jovinian’s concern over baptism.
Jerome dealt with each proposition independently, but
failed to acknowledge or refute the ecclesiological argu-
ment that was central to Jovinian’s thesis.21 Marriage and
celibacy are of equal weight in the sight of God because
all baptized believers possess the same gift—the perma-
nent presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, which has been
given to the Church. All believers will experience the
same reward of eternal life because all possess the same
fruit of baptism—the permanent presence of the Lord
Jesus Christ, which has been given to the Church. Also,
because all believers have been baptized in Christ, none
has any need to abstain from certain kinds of food (which
God created as good). They have no value in attaining
extra merit before God. In Jovinian’s view, the work God
accomplished in baptism brought about a state of grace
in which the quest for merit through abstaining from
food and sex was unnecessary. Beyond that, abstaining
from the good gifts God created and gave to humanity
called the Bible’s teaching on creation—which
Jovinian argued still held relevance for the New Testa-
ment believer. Jovinian’s defense of the important place
of marriage in the church and his denial of the supremacy
of celibacy did not stand alone. It rested within a larger
argument against the need for a hierarchy of merit within
the soteriological system of the church.

THE TEACHINGS OF JEROME ON
MARRIAGE, CELIBACY, AND THE
HIERARCHY OF MERIT

Bishops Siricius of Rome and Ambrose of Milan both
responded to Jovinian’s teaching, but only Jerome pro-
vided a full response to his arguments. Like Jovinian’s
other respondents, Jerome asserted the superiority of
virginity over marriage as a path toward eternal merit. In
the process of making his case, however, he presented a
view of marriage that seemed to go further than placing
it at a secondary status. In fact, even some of Jerome’s
friends in Rome believed that he had articulated views
that actually undermined the goodness of marriage.
Because much of Jovinian’s argumentation was bibli-
cal in nature, much of Jerome’s response was exegetical,
beginning with an analysis of 1 Corinthians 7.

JEROME ON 1 CORINTHIANS 7

Jerome’s choice to use 1 Corinthians 7 in order to
make his case for the superiority of celibacy was not
unusual. During the Reformation, as Martin Luther
made his case for the superiority of marriage over celi-
bacy, he wrote an expository treatise on this chapter.
He explained his rationale: “My reason for this choice
is that this very chapter, more than all the other writ-
ings of the entire Bible, has been twisted back and forth
to give a strong appearance of sanctity to the dangerous
and peculiar state of celibacy.”22 Luther recognized that
advocates of celibacy frequently used Paul’s argument in
this passage to support their cause, though in his opin-
on they were twisting Paul’s words. Peter Brown, writ-
ing on the renunciation of sex in ancient Christianity,
also noted the importance of this chapter for those who
exalted celibacy, but stated that by using arguments that
were not clear, Paul “left a fatal legacy to future ages.”23
Paul’s words in this passage, even if wrongly interpreted,
were used by many to construct a view of sexuality that
led to the exaltation of celibacy. Jerome’s exegesis in this
treatise would make an important contribution to the
literature on the subject.

Interacting with the very first verse of the chapter,
Jerome made a case for celibacy that in the opinion of
many put marriage in a poor light. He quoted Paul’s

Polemical portrait of Jovinian, artist
unknown. Baroque period.
statement, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman,” and offered the following analysis: “If it is good not to touch a woman, it is bad to touch one: for there is no opposite to goodness but badness. But if it be bad and the evil is pardoned, the reason for the concession is to prevent worse evil.” The concession Jerome referred to was Paul’s statement in verse two that “because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife” (New American Standard Bible). In Jerome’s opinion, Paul followed up an important statement regarding the exercise of human sexuality with a pastoral concession: because of the reality of sexual temptation, some people will need to marry in order to prevent sexual sin outside of marriage. However, he argued, “Do away with fornication, and he will not say “let each man have his own wife.” In his judgment, something that is allowed only to prevent something worse from happening “has only a slight degree of goodness.” Jerome presented the picture that marriage is only valuable in order to prevent fornication.

Even within marriage, in Jerome’s opinion, sex is counterproductive to one’s spiritual growth. In 7:2 Paul stated that each man should “have” his own wife, which Jerome interpreted as indicating sexual activity, not simply marriage. He reconstructed Paul’s argument thus: each man should have sex with his wife, whom it would be good not to touch at all, but rather treat as a sister. However, since they married before he became a believer, the man should give his wife “her due” as a concession. Even within marriage, Jerome believed, sexual activity is not best.

It hinders prayer as well. This, he argued, was Paul’s point in verse five, in which the apostle stated that the married couple should abstain for a time and come back together by mutual consent. Paul made this argument, Jerome asserted, because “as often as I render my wife her due, I cannot pray.” Since Paul plainly instructed believers in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to pray always, this advice to abstain from sex in order to pray must indicate that sex hinders prayer. Otherwise why would the apostle suggest abstention? Though Paul clearly permitted marriage and sex within marriage, Jerome believed this was not what he thought best: “The Apostle’s wish is one thing, his pardon another.” In Jerome’s judgment, Paul thought celibacy best, and if one was already married, celibacy within marriage was best, though sex with one’s spouse was a pardonable offense.

Despite this negative assessment of marriage, Jerome believed the institution to be God-given. Paul stated in 7:7 that he wished all men to be as he was, but that God gives each his own gift. Jerome granted that “even marriage is a gift from God, but between gift and gift there is great diversity.” Why would the apostle make a distinction between gifts if one is not superior? The gift of virginity is superior, though not everyone is given that gift. Even in saying that marriage is God-given, though, Jerome had difficulty speaking of it as good. He said, “I suspect the goodness of that thing which is forced into the position of being only the lesser of two evils. What I want is not a smaller evil, but a thing absolutely good.”

This unavoidably negative assessment of marriage was enhanced by his discussion of remarriage. At the end of 1 Corinthians 7, Paul states that a wife is bound to her husband as long as she lives, but is free to marry if he dies. However, the apostle states, “She is happier if she remains as she is,” (7:40, NAS). Jerome saw the same logic at work here that he believed was present early in chapter 7. The apostle believed that it is only advisable to marry because of the danger of fornication. Jerome argued that this applies to widows as well as virgins: “it is better to know a single husband, though he be a second or third, than to have many paramours.” Jerome’s next statement reveals much: “That is, it is more tolerable for a woman to prostitute herself to one man than to many.” He believed that sexual activity is sinful, whether within marriage or without. Commitment to one spouse within marriage, however, prevented worse evils.

**Jerome’s Theology of Sexuality**

Jovinian had grounded his positive view of sexuality and marriage theologically by arguing that sexuality and marriage were originally created by God and given to humanity. Jerome denied that sexuality and marriage were good gifts given by God for humans in paradise. He asserted that Adam and Eve were virgins in Paradise and were married only after they were cast out of the garden. Sex, therefore, was not practiced in the Garden of Eden. What then of the statement that the two shall become one flesh (Gen 2:24)? Jerome
referenced Paul’s statement on marriage in Ephesians 5:22-33 that marriage is a picture of Christ’s relationship with the Church. Jesus, though, in the flesh is a virgin. If the husband is to love his wife as Christ loves the Church, he must love his wife in chastity. Jerome furthered his argument by reflecting on the imago dei, arguing that in Christ humans are remade into the image of God. However, in Christ there is neither male, nor female (Gal 3:28). Therefore, “the link of marriage is not found in the image of the creator.” Neither marriage nor sex existed in the Garden of Eden, and sexuality has no relationship to the image of God.

Jovinian’s other key theological argument was that the Church still bore the necessity to fulfill the creation mandate to be fruitful and multiply. Given the fact that Jerome denied that God gave sex or marriage to humanity in the garden, explaining the existence and relevance of this mandate was important for his argument. He used the analogy of harvesting trees to explain God’s command. God first planted the wood so he would later have trees to harvest. The command to be fruitful and multiply served to populate the earth so that humanity, once given the gift of life, could begin to seek for eternal life. In this context, Jerome stated, “Marriage replenishes the earth, virginity fills Paradise.” Now that Jesus has come and the time is short, we have a different command given us by “A Virgin Savior.” For Jerome, virginity has replaced the creation mandate. It is preparation for eternity. After all, humans can be married only during this life. They will be virgins, however, for eternity. He summarized, “For marriage ends at death; virginity thereafter begins to wear the crown.” Though marriage was allowed because of the danger of fornication, celibacy was of greater value in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Despite the fact that Jerome did not fully appreciate the importance of Jovinian’s ecclesiological argument for his overall thesis, he did find the consequences of his adversary’s views troubling. Jovinian had denied the value of abstaining from sex and from food, argued against the hierarchy of merit, and claimed (according to Jerome), to be without sin after baptism. Jerome believed his adversary had constructed a system in which a believer could conduct himself in any manner he wished without consequences. Moreover, he had left no place for asceticism at all. Jerome complained, “If we are all to be equal in heaven, in vain do we humble ourselves here that we may be greater there.” He was convinced that the Scriptures were replete with examples promoting the hierarchy of merit. He did not seem to understand that Jovinian was not rejecting virginity in order to promote vice, but rather was articulating an entirely different understanding of the doctrine of salvation—one that had a different view of justification as a result of the efficacy of baptism, and in the process found a different place for marriage within the life of the church. Jerome had constructed a system in which sex had no place at all—except to be forgiven—and in which one who seeks righteousness must follow the path of strict self denial.

REPAIRING THE CONSENSUS: THE RECEPTION OF AGAINST JOVINIAN

The response to Jovinian was swift and definitive. A synod in Rome, led by Bishop Siricius, excommunicated him. Ambrose, leading a synod in Milan, the city where the emperor resided, did likewise, and the emperor eventually exiled him. Supporters continued to circulate his ideas for a while, but his writings did not survive antiquity and are only known to us through Jerome's refutation. Jerome's views, however, continued to draw a response from churchmen even up to the time of the Reformation.

Against Jovinian drew a strong response in Rome as soon as it was put into circulation. Peter Brown commented that it "acted as an inspiration and an irritant." There were some militants who agreed with Jerome in looking askance at marriage. A group of "holy brothers at Rome," probably fellow ascetics, were the ones who had requested the treatise initially. However, an old contact of Jerome's, a senator named Pammachius who had been involved in the Jovinian controversy within the church, was the one who became concerned over the negative reaction of the public toward the treatise. In an effort to spare further controversy and prevent Jerome unnecessar y grief, he withdrew as many copies from circulation as possible and wrote to Jerome seeking clarification. His intention, stated plainly in a letter, was to counteract the continued support Jovinian enjoyed even after his exile. Augustine was particularly concerned that Jovinian's supporters boasted that Jovinian could not be answered by praising marriage, but only by censuring it. In response Augustine published his own defenses of marriage and virginity, treatises that articulated the goodness of marriage while maintaining the superiority of celibacy in earning merit before God.

Augustine opened his treatise by distinguishing himself from Jerome, as Ambrosiaster had, regarding human sexuality. In Augustine's opinion, God created humanity as "a social entity" producing all humans, including both sexes, out of one man. His intention was to create the bond of kinship, and he created a strong union in husband and wife, which produces children as its fruit. Though he conceded at this time that he did not know the nature of human sexuality, its relationship with the doctrine of creation, and the place of sex in the life of the clergy. Unlike Jerome, Ambrosiaster taught that human sexuality was part of God's original blessing to humanity before Adam and Eve's fall into sin. Moreover, neither the Fall nor its consequences could be used to denigrate sexual relations between husband and wife. In fact, the mandate to be fruitful and multiply is still an important part of God's mission for humanity, he argued. Because of this, sex within marriage has an important place in the church. However, in keeping with the practice of the Old Testament priesthood to abstain from sexual relations during their period of ministry, Christian priests should abstain from sexual relations because they approach the altar regularly. Even in arguing for a celibate clergy, however, Ambrosiaster differed from Jerome, who had soteriological reasons for abstention. Since he published his works anonymously, though, maintained a low profile, and never offered a full and systematic treatment of the institution of marriage, Ambrosiaster's work, while significant, left little lasting impact.

The contribution of Augustine, however, is another story. Augustine wrote his treatises On the Excellence of Marriage and Holy Virginity around 401, about eight years after Jerome's treatise. As David Hunter pointed out, the Jovinian controversy allowed Augustine the opportunity to articulate his theology of marriage and sexuality that had begun to develop in earlier writings. His intention, stated plainly in Retractions, was to counteract the continued support Jovinian enjoyed even after his exile. Augustine was particularly concerned that Jovinian's supporters boasted that Jovinian could not be answered by praising marriage, but only by censuring it. In response Augustine published his own defenses of marriage and virginity, treatises that articulated the goodness of marriage while maintaining the superiority of celibacy in earning merit before God.
how human procreation occurred before the Fall, he was confident procreation was part of God’s intention. Even after the Fall, the procreation mandate continued to be good, being fulfilled by the Old Testament Patriarchs without sin. In fact, he argued, they never let their natural enjoyment of it proceed to the point of “irrational and sinful passion.” Further, they possessed the additional motive that the messiah would come from their seed. Human sexuality, therefore, was created good and had its place in God’s plan.37

He also articulated three reasons why marriage is good, the first of which is producing children. As he had explained regarding the original created state of humanity, God created humans to bond and to produce fruit from their union. Therefore, procreation is good, and when husband and wife engage in sexual relations for the purpose of procreation, that act is good as well. Secondly, Augustine argued, marriage is good because it produces faithfulness. Husband and wife are faithful to one another and to God by keeping themselves from sexual relations with other people and by making themselves available to one another in order to avoid immorality. These efforts help to promote chastity. Thirdly, Augustine spoke of marriage as a sacrament similar in nature to the sacrament of ordination. Both are irrevocable, both are instituted for a purpose, and both bring blessing.38

Despite believing in the goodness of human sexuality and of the institution of marriage, Augustine differed with Jovinian and agreed in part with Jerome by asserting that virginity was still superior. Like Jovinian, Augustine believed that the patriarchs of the Old Testament ought to be commended for their faithfulness in marriage. They were producing the seed from which the messiah would spring. The messiah, however, has come, and in this present age “it is certainly better and holier not to set out to have children physically, and so to keep oneself free from any activity of that kind, and to be subject spiritually to only one man, Christ.”39 Virginity is still superior, though virgins are not necessarily more holy simply because they have dedicated themselves to virginity. They must live in obedience to God in other respects as well. Augustine certainly disagreed with Jovinian over the place of virginity with respect to merit, but he did not agree with Jerome completely. He declared emphatically, “Therefore marriage and fornication are not two evils, one worse than the other, but marriage and abstinence are two good things, one better than the other.”40 This comment was clearly directed at Jerome, who despite his affirmation that marriage was God-given still spoke of it as less than good.

In the generations that followed, Augustine’s writings became massively influential. The theologians of the medieval era valued adherence to the authority of the orthodox teachers of the Church because they were viewed as having been faithful to the teachings of the apostles. They were certainly capable of independent critical reflection, but typically shunned theological novelty. Medieval libraries were filled with collections and compilations of the works of patristic authors, most notably Augustine.41 The North African church father was often the starting point for theological discussion, even if his name was never mentioned. In this context, Augustine’s treatment of the sacraments became the standard basis for reflection during the middle ages. Thus, his treatment on marriage was often a key point of reference.

Jerome’s Against Jovinian did not disappear, however. Despite the uneven reception of this work in Rome during Jerome’s lifetime, he was a prolific and widely respected author who had produced the Vulgate, commentaries on Scripture, biographies of famous ascetics (Lives of Illustrious Men), and numerous controversial writings. In fact, as patristic scholar Rousseau has pointed out, “his letters and Lives offer the most significant corpus of ascetic literature in the West” during this period.42 Against Jovinian had originally found an audience that received its message warmly, and this was no less true later in history. This is evident from a comment by Martin Luther, who because of his own views on marriage was regarded as a new Jovinian. Luther complained regarding his adversaries,

Indeed, just as one disputation gives rise to another, these ungodly people will shout that I am Jovinian and they will bring Jerome’s argument against Jovinian, in which he defended celibacy, to bear against me. They will think that I have never read Jerome. They think that it is enough just to have read him; they never think it necessary to form some opinion about what they have read.43
Luther’s adversaries responded to his critique of celibacy by citing the words of Jerome. They were aware of them and accepted them, but in Luther’s opinion did so without any apparent critical reflection.

Others of the Reformation era did reflect critically upon Against Jovinian. Erasmus, the Catholic humanist, embraced the superiority of marriage even before Luther did and echoed some of Jovinian’s arguments found in Jerome’s refutation. He criticized Jerome, who in his opinion abused marriage. His efforts to exalt marriage brought him censure from French Catholic theologians.44 Luther’s associate, Philip Melanchton, roundly criticized Jerome, whose abusive language about marriage he found “by no means worthy of a Christian.”45 John Calvin, while likewise rejecting Jerome’s ideas, was more gracious, concluding that Jerome suffered from the defect of allowing himself to be “hurried away into great extravagancies” during the heat of conflict.46 Jerome’s views on marriage and celibacy, then, were well known and found both enthusiastic admirers as well as ardent detractors—both Protestant and Catholic.

Jovinian, on the other hand, was well known as a heretic, and his arguments recorded by Jerome were public knowledge. The Council of Trent, condemning both the Protestant Reformers and the views of Jovinian, declared, “If anyone says that the married state excels the state of virginity or celibacy, and that it is better and happier to be united in matrimony than to remain in virginity or celibacy, let him be anathema.”47 The Catholic Church stood by its condemnation of Jovinian, despite the protests by reformers on both sides. However, despite some obvious affinities with Jovinian, Luther refused to identify himself with a man whose arguments have come to us incomplete. Jovinian was a man who stood against the consensus of his generation on celibacy and the hierarchy of merit and who paid the price for it. That mantle was picked up again during the Reformation by reformers on both sides, but they could not claim much of Jovinian’s work for themselves. Their views on righteousness before God, justification, baptism, marriage, and sexuality emerged largely from their own interaction with Scripture, not from Jovinian, though he evidently touched on each of these issues in a way that led to his condemnation.

ENDNOTES
1 For background on secular views regarding marriage and sexuality as well as the development of Christian views during the centuries prior to the Jovinian Controversy, see Peter Brown, Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Ancient Christianity (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Richard Finn, Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World, Key Themes in Ancient History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); David G. Hunter, Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 87-129.
Jovinian denied the humanity of Jesus. Jovinian's teaching. 'Jovinian's teaching. The Jovinian controversy, argued that Ambrose’s accusation was "a rather obvious and deliberate distortion of Jovinian's teaching." There is no evidence that Jovinian denied the humanity of Jesus. On the other hand, Jovinian's concerns about the distortion of the value of virginity provided clear and sufficient motivation for him to question the validity of the virginitas in partu teaching. See David G. Hunter, Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity, 22-24.

5 Jerome's own advice on how to live the ascetic life is found in a letter to a young virgin named Eustochium. Here Jerome advised a young aristocratic woman who has chosen the life of an ascetic to avoid eating fine foods, avoid the company of married aristocratic women, prefer only the company of female ascetics, and even avoid the speech patterns that he viewed as pretentious which were popular among wealthy Roman women. See Jerome, "Letter XXII." Jovinian's conduct obviously did not follow this pattern of ascetic living, which led to the epithet Jerome gave him, "the Epicurus of Christianity," who is "wanton-in his gardens with his favourites of both sexes," (Against Jovinianus 2.36). J. N. D. Kelly is surely correct to interpret Jovinian's actions more neutrally than Jerome has presented them. See J. N. D. Kelly, Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies (London: Duckworth, 1975), 180.
6 Siricius, "The Letter of Pope Siricius to the Church of Milan."
7 Ambrose, "Letter 44," in Saint Ambrose: Letters, 230. Manicheans held to a docetic Christology, denying that Jesus took on flesh. In Ambrose's letter to Siricius, Ambrose focused his attention upon defending the physical virginity of Mary, even after the process of giving birth to Jesus, a doctrine known as virginitas in partu. Jovinian denied this teaching, and in refutation Ambrose accused him of Manichaeism. David G. Hunter, who has written the definitive work on the Jovinian controversy, argued that Ambrose's accusation was "a rather obvious and deliberate distortion of Jovinian's teaching." There is no evidence that Jovinian denied the humanity of Jesus. On the other hand, Jovinian's concerns about the distortion of the value of virginity provided clear and sufficient motivation for him to question the validity of the virginitas in partu teaching. See David G. Hunter, Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity, 22-24.
8 Quoted in David G. Hunter, 243.
9 Jerome, "Against Jovinianus," 1.3. Jerome makes no mention of Jovinian's views regarding the integrity of Mary's physical virginity during the process of giving birth. Kelly suggests that this might be because, unlike Ambrose, Jerome did not have a significant problem with Jovinian's views. See Kelly, Jerome, 185-6.
10 Against Jovinianus 1.5 is the main locus for Jovinian's biblical arguments regarding marriage and celibacy.
11 Jovinian, quoted in Jerome, Against Jovinianus 1.5, in St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works, 349. For an analysis of Jovinian's accusation that his opponents were exhibiting the Manichean heresy, see Hunter, Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy, 130-170.
13 Jerome, Against Jovinian, 2.1, 387. Jerome's original wording is almost certainly an accurate record of Jovinian's words. David Hunter argues that Jerome either did not understand Jovinian's point about baptism, or by altering the wording he allowed himself to take on an issue he could easily refute, even if it was not exactly what Jovinian was teaching. See Hunter, Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity, 36. Jerome's paraphrase of "overthrown" surely indicates an unwillingness to deal with the essential issues raised by Jovinian in this proposition.
14 Hunters, idem, 36-37.
17 At the beginning of Against Jovinian, Jerome assessed his adversary's style of rhetoric in an effort to discredit the quality of his work. Jerome was unimpressed with the rhetorical quality of the work, but by navigating what he viewed to be the confusing rhetoric, he concluded that "[Jovinian's] object in proclaiming the excellence of marriage was only to disparage virginity;"
Jerome, Against Jovinianus, 1.3, in St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works, 347. This is, in fact, not at all the case. Jovinian’s object was to disparage the hierarchy of merit, not specifically virginity, Jerome either misunderstood or misrepresented Jovinian’s motivation, and thus misunderstood or misrepresented his central thesis.

22 Martin Luther, Luther’s Works, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973), 283.

23 Peter Brown, Body and Society, 55.


25 Ibid, 1.9, (NPNF 2.6, 352).

26 Ibid, 1.14, (NPNF 2.6, 358).

27 Ibid, 1.16, (NPNF 2.6, 359-360).

28 Ibid, 1.16, (NPNF 2.6, 360).

29 Ibid, 1.24, (NPNF 2.6, 364).

30 Ibid, 1.22, (NPNF 2.6, 363).

31 Peter Brown, Body and Society, 377.

32 On Pammachius’ relationship with Jerome, see David Hunter, Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity, 24-26.

33 Jerome’s cover letter to Pammachius is “Letter 49.” The actual defense, also addressed to Pammachius, is “Letter 48.”

34 For a discussion of Ambrosiaster’s differences with Jerome, see Brown, Body and Society, 377-378; also Hunter, Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy, 159-170.


36 Ibid, 15.

37 Augustine, The Excellence of Marriage, 1.1, 2.2, 16.18.

38 See Augustine’s summary of the three goods of marriage in The Excellence of Marriage, 24.32.

39 Augustine, The Excellence of Marriage, 24.32, in Marriage and Virginity, 57.

40 Ibid, 8.8, 39.

41 For more on Augustine’s influence on medieval theology, see Jaroslav Pelikan, The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300), 9-17.


44 David G. Hunter, Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity, 6.


46 John Calvin, Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians, trans. by John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 20:222.
