

A Display of God's Glory: The Christian Family and the Order of Love



WE NOW LIVE IN THE AGE OF MORAL REBELLION, SEXUAL ANARCHY, ENDLESS EXPERIMENTATION, AND BIRTHRATES THAT IMPLY STERILIZATION. WE HAVE TURNED THE ORDER OF THE FAMILY INTO PANDEMONIUM AND, HAVING SOWN THE WIND, WE NOW REAP THE WHIRLWIND.

By R. Albert Mohler Jr.

Books for children tell the story. Look back just a few decades and children's literature is constant on the theme of the family. Family order and family structure are fundamental. So fundamental, in fact, that father and mother and brother and sister are essential to almost every story or absolutely clear as background realities. In larger stories we gain an uncontested picture of the extended family. There are grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins and assorted relations who help the child to know who he is, and to whom he belongs.

Fast forward to recent times, and books for children feature two daddies, two mommies, gay uncles ("guncles"), and any number of innovations. Other families include a variety of blended options, which may or may

not require any connection by marriage. That most basic institution of human life, marriage, has been the focus of intense cultural transformation and manipulation to serve the cause of sexual revolutionaries. If they can redefine marriage, they redefine the family. And if they can redefine the family, they will transform the entire society. This is the battle that matters most, and the revolutionaries know it.

When the society around us defined marriage and the family in biblical terms, the inheritance of centuries of Christian influence was clear. Common grace and holy Scripture revealed and affirmed marriage as the monogamous union of a man and a woman, fully open to the gift of children and prepared to prepare those children for productive adulthood, which would mean taking their own places as the mothers and fathers of the future.

But the age of the commonly shared understanding of marriage and the family is now over. We now live in the age of moral rebellion, sexual anarchy, endless experimentation, and birthrates that imply sterilization. We have turned the order of the family into pandemonium and, having sown the wind, we now reap the whirlwind.

In the wake of all this, Christians have been forced to recover fundamental forms of Christian thinking and make new arguments, even to ourselves and our own children, that reinforce what we know to be true about marriage and the family. When the culture agreed with us, such forms of thinking had gone into eclipse but always there for use when needed. Well, these forms of Christian thinking are urgently needed now, and Christians must waste no time recovering them. If not, we will lose all grounding and follow society's path to corruption. So, how do we recover those lost principles and way of understanding?

The impulse to go backwards in time is understandable, for many of us can remember a time when the society around us largely agreed with us. But nostalgia will not do, if only because that older consensus has broken apart precisely because it is no longer held together by truth. If the family is just a social convention, then the revolutionaries can have it. If nostalgia is all we have on our side, we do not stand a chance. Thankfully, the foundation of Christian thinking is not nostalgia or a simple hunger to return to the past.

To the contrary, we must go much further back, all the way to God's creation of the cosmos. Our Christian impulse is to turn to holy Scripture, and that is absolutely right. But the Bible directs us back to creation, and an understanding of Creation Order is absolutely foundational.

All true Christian thinking begins with the one true and loving God, and the Bible opens with God creating the heavens and the earth. Creation displays the glory of God, and the order of creation reveals the order of God's glory. The Creator loves what he has created, and he creates what he loves. In the very first chapter of the Bible, the opening chapter of Genesis, Scripture reveals that on the sixth day God created human beings in his own image: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27).

[1] The man and the woman are created in the image of God, setting them apart from all other created beings. They are created male and female, man and woman, and this is integral, fundamental, and clear in God's plan. Having made them, God then blessed them and assigned them dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and "over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen 1:28b).

But there was a prior command, and that command is, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28a). The command is for a man and a

woman to marry and then to reproduce successive generations of image-bearers who will fill the earth with God's glory. In some sense, God gave a reproductive charge to all his creatures. They also fill the earth to God's glory, but they cannot fill the earth with God's image-bearers. Only humans may do that, and that is our first and most fundamental charge.

The Bible does not just imply an order for the family; it commands such an order. Our task is to obey the Creator and to obey his commandments, and in creation order, those commandments start with a man and a woman in the covenant commitment of marriage, bringing fellow image-bearers into the world as children.

Properly understood, everything else follows from this basic teaching of creation order. Marriage, later defined as a covenant union, is there. Male and female as objective categories are there. We do not decide or discover our sex or gender, for it is revealed in our bodies. The organs that make us male and female are fully present as promised, and with the body and its promise comes an assignment and a destiny. It is a boy or it is a girl. All it takes is eyes to see. The boy is the promise of the man, and thus the promise of husband and father as well as son. The girl is the promise of the woman, and thus the promise of wife and mother as well as daughter. Marriage and the pledge of procreation are implicit in our creation as man and woman. Identities are complementary male and female assignments with promises, not impositions, experiments, or impositions. They are gifts.

The gifts come to fullness, and with that fullness comes the promise and duty of procreation and the glad welcome of children. Those children are to be raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and they are to be seen as both a gift and an obligation. Christians understand that children are to be loved and protected and corrected. They are to be raised by

Christian parents whose marriage is itself a demonstration of the covenant bond, and they are to be presented with the gospel and taught the Holy Scriptures.

The rightly ordered family is not merely a matter of biblical truth and Christian duty, for it is also an incubator of faith and a nursery of the gospel. It displays the glory of God in a fallen world and, though imperfect, it is both a testimony to truth and “a haven in a heartless world.”

By God’s design, the natural family is the central unit of human society, and that society is to respect marriage and protect the family from intrusion and subversion—and that includes the intrusion and subversion that may come from the modern state. To state such clear biblical truths is to ignite controversy in this age, but every functional human society has recognized a duty to honor marriage, encourage procreation, and respect the integrity of the family. The modern secular state is failing at all of these duties. Yet, even as the world around us defies reality at great cost, the Christian church must not join in that defiance.

Oddly enough, an important principle of Christian teaching on these questions emerged in recent months when the concept of the “order of love” hit some headlines, sparked by a comment by Vice President J. D. Vance. Speaking of a ranking of priorities, the vice president referred to Augustine and his notion of the “order of love” (*ordo amoris*) or “rightly ordered love.” We live in an age marked by distorted love that recoils in horror at the very idea that love could be wrongly ordered. But, as Augustine wisely observed, Christians must “observe right order even in our love.”^[2] Right order means that love of God must be our primary and our highest love. Beginning with any other love leads to disaster. But, after love of God, we are to love those who are lovingly created in his own image, and that means all human beings. As our Lord famously taught,

every living person is our neighbor, and we owe respect and proper love to every fellow human being.

At the same time, ordered love also comes with ordered responsibility and personal relationships, with marriage and family at the top of that earthly order. God ordered his covenant nation and the church to honor father and mother. Parents are charged to care for their children, to provide for them, to nurture and discipline them in the gospel. We are to love all humans, but we owe covenant duties to our spouse. We are to honor the image of God in all persons, but we are to honor our own parents, and we are to care first for our own children. The order of love extends to larger kinship, grandparents and grandchildren, aunts and uncles, and cousins and beyond. Proximity becomes a vital principle, for a man who does not provide for his own household “has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim 5:8). As Rusty Reno states rightly, “We’re to love with greater devotion those for whom we have greater responsibility.”[3]

Our own family is not the limit of our love, for we are to extend love, concern, and care to as many as we can. But we owe our first duty to those directly in our care, starting with parents and children. We are also called to love and help others, but that cannot be honorably done if we do not first love and care for those first assigned to us. The principle of ordered love underlines the truth that if marriage is not respected, nothing else in society will be respected. If the natural family is not honored, nothing else will be honored. Those who insist that love is not ordered become the agents of disordered love. And, make no mistake, disordered love is now celebrated in our society. Christians understand why that spells inevitable disaster.

The controversy over ordered love reveals something of the confusion and corruption of the age, but it also points to a wonderful opportunity for Christians. When we live by rightly ordered loves, beginning with love of God, and when we are good stewards of creation order given by the Creator, we simultaneously reap the blessings of God in marriage, family, children, and the larger circle of family love, even as we reveal the glory of God's design. We extend that love, in right order, to our brothers and sisters in Christ in the local church, to whom we owe particular duties, and then to the larger family of Christians around the world. Beyond the family and the church, we owe our first duty to fellow persons and families in our own neighborhood and community. Obeying Christ, we understand that no border limits our duty, but we owe our primary duty to those assigned to us. Otherwise, everything falls, and human society fails.

In this strange and challenging age, we have to push hard against the modern concept that marriage and family are subject to redefinition by the sexual revolutionaries. We are called to show the world what it means to welcome children into the world and find unspeakable joy in the home, even in the sweet but strenuous task of raising children. We are to show the Creator's glory in this world even as the culture around us sinks into confusion and dissolution. Our love of Christ compels us to seek and display the glory of God in the ordered love of the Christian family.

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotation will be from the New International Version.

[2] Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chap. XV, sect. 23, page 680.

[3] R. R. Reno, "JD Vance is Right about the 'Ordo Amoris,'" Compact, accessed April 25, 2025, <https://www.compactmag.com/article/jd->

vance-is-right-about-the-ordo-amoris/.

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