ORDERED TO LOVE

RECOVERING THE ORDER OF AFFECTIONS FROM THE HOME TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

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FOREWORD BY C.R. WILEY

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To my dear wife, Hanna,
who daily teaches me more about rightly ordered love
than all the books, save Scripture itself, the world can offer.

Amor ordinatus inter omnes gentes soli Deo gloria

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Foreword

Ted Williams was noteworthy for many reasons, but here are three: He was the last man to hit .400 (1941), he left baseball to serve as a fighter pilot in World War II, and he was an atheist—an angry one.

He credited his mother for his atheism. She was a Salvation Army officer intent on saving souls. According to Ted, that meant she wasn't much of a mother. Perhaps he was unfair, but here is Williams in his own words: "My mother was strictly Salvation Army. As a result, strictly non-family . . . gone all day and most of the night, working the streets."

Something was out of order in his mother's life. I might dismiss it as something peculiar to her if I hadn't seen it elsewhere. Being in the ministry, I've seen it in the circles I swim in, particularly among the "sold out" or "radical" or "on fire" corners of evangelicalism. I don't know if there's a new way of putting it, or if it's as common as it once was. But I'm old enough to see how other people like Ted Williams turned out who've had parents like his. His atheism isn't uncommon.

I had a choice to make in the 1990s. I was working in Boston's toughest neighborhoods, mostly with recent immigrants—Haitians, Dominicans, those good folk. My wife worked in a preschool sponsored by an African Methodist Episcopal Church, and our combined income was roughly $25,000 a year. Even in those days that was pretty lean. (We were "radical" when David Platt was in middle school.)

Once our first son was born, I began to wonder about my responsibilities. Another son arrived, and shortly after that I had an unpleasant conversation with a couple of thugs in a dark alley behind the Ashmont T Station. (Did I mention one of them had a machete?) I

decided the next day, "It's time to go." I left urban ministry, and I've never regretted it.

I don't think everyone facing the circumstances I was facing should necessarily do what I did. But I do think everyone in a situation like that should ask themselves, "Are my priorities in the right order?" Another way to put it is, *ordo amoris*.

I suspect the people who've read people like Platt and Piper and respond to their calls to "radical discipleship" do so in part because of a meaning-deficit in their lives. Their lives are disenchanted and mundane and, in their desperation, they respond to calls to make a "leap of faith" with the enthusiasm of a bungee jumper. But what if they're blind to the meaning all around them? Maybe the world isn't drab at all, but suffused with eternal purpose. Maybe they'd be content to love the neighbor next door instead of traveling halfway around the world to find him.

Alex Kocman has written an important book for an audience that might have considered Ted Williams's mother to be in the same ballpark as Mother Teresa. Knowing Ted's take—and I'm not saying he was entirely fair—gives us the rest of the story. (Or at least the part we wouldn't have known without spending time with Ted while he was growing up.)

And remember—Mother Teresa's only husband was the Lord, and her only children were the ones she rescued from the streets of Calcutta. In other words, there were no children of her own waiting for her to get home to feed them.

Throughout the world, in both the East and the West (at least until recently), the demands of filial piety were taken seriously. In the Christian faith, there is only one demand that supersedes it. In most lives, most of the time, the demands coincide. Serving God reinforces our duties to parents and children. We're commanded to honor our parents ("the first commandment with a promise"), and the Lord assumed even evil people will care for their children ("if you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children . . ."). And it follows if we remember that the God who made our souls is the same God who made

our bodies and the natural affections that tie us not only to families, but even to tribes and nations.

Yet even so, the Lord and Maker of both body and soul said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

So how do we square this circle? We cannot divide ourselves, giving our spiritual affections to God and our natural affections to our families. However, we should be fully present, body and soul, to God and the people we love.

Alex Kocman's extended meditation on this theme will help you prayerfully think it through. What he has to say might not lend itself to pithy soul-stirring slogans, but it can and should help you live a faithful life and fulfill your God-given responsibilities.

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Introduction

Picture yourself from above—a single point amid widening rings of relationship. Closest are your family and friends. Beyond them, your community. Farther still, the vast mass of humanity. Now, draw a circle around yourself to mark the limits of your responsibility. How wide would you draw it? How far does your moral duty reach?

In 2019, a group of researchers asked a question that cut to the heart of our cultural divide: *What if the ever-increasing ideological rift between liberals and conservatives stems from a deeper, psychological source?* Their study, which ignited fierce debate online, explored two competing impulses: *universalism*, defined as *universalism*, or compassion for all beings without distinction, and *parochialism*, compassion for those closest and most defined.

Each of the 131 participants was asked to map the outer edge of their moral concern across sixteen concentric circles ranging from the self to family, friends, nation, all life, and even inanimate objects. When plotted, the results told a striking story: conservatives tended to stop somewhere between close and distant friends, while liberals extended their sense of duty to include every living thing—even plants, trees, and alien life.[1]

Five years later, the side-by-side image of these radically divergent heatmaps—even unaccompanied by a caption—became popular on the right as a meme to diagnose any situation in which loyalty to abstract, distant universals was commended at the cost of duty to one's

1. Adam Waytz et al., "Ideological Differences in the Expanse of the Moral Circle," *Nature Communications* 10, no. 1 (2019): 1–12, accessed March 7, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-12227-0.

own. American interest in foreign wars and fretfulness over grand-scale environmental issues were both implicated in this critique. The meme struck a nerve amid a presidential election year in which one party's rally cry was "America first." *Have we, as a people, forgotten to tend to our own house first?* many wondered—and still do. *Should our focus be more local than global?*

Such considerations did not fade from public consciousness after the election. The following January, not long after the inauguration, newly minted Vice President J.D. Vance, in a post on the social media platform X, cited the historic Christian doctrine of the *ordo amoris*, or order of love, in defense of the Trump administration's conservative stance on illegal immigration. Defending comments he had made in an interview, Vance said, "You love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country. And then after that, you can focus and prioritize the rest of the world."[2] Commentators were quick to opine, critiquing Vance's use of the doctrine. Yet the effect was that, in an ironic twist for a secular age, within the news cycle following Vance's statements, the U.S. political discourse shifted from arguing over *whether* Christian theology should inform public policy to *how*.

Numerous other examples could be cited as indicators of the cultural shift that is causing Americans—including Christians—to reconsider foundational questions, from "What is a nation?" and "What does it mean to be an American?" to "What duty do I have, if any, to foreigners?" and, among evangelicals, "Should the church really be focused on international missions while our own country is in such spiritual need?"

I used the word "reconsider" deliberately in the last sentence. These questions, by their very nature, are not new, nor are they exclusively political. Considerations of moral proximity lurk below the surface of every political debate, every public program, every household economy, every Scripture, and every sermon. The real question beneath all these

2. The Associated Press, "What Is 'Ordo Amoris?' Vice President J.D. Vance Invokes This Medieval Catholic Concept," *AP News*, February 6, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/jd-vance-catholic-theology-migration-e868af574fb2e742c6ed3d756c569769.

questions is "Whom am I to love?"—or, as the lawyer asked the Lord Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). The way we answer such questions of orthopraxy lies, together with the backbone of creedal orthodoxy, at the core of Christian discipleship.

At first blush, the answer seems no more complicated than that which we are catechized as children—"All my fellow men are my neighbors."[3] This is, in essence, the biblical response—supported not only by Scripture's teaching on love but also by the global scope of the Great Commission mandate (Matt. 28:18–20). But *how* is such love for all fellow image-bearers expressed? Since we are all limited by time, space, finances, and our own finitude, how are we to enact the virtue of charity? Such is the concern of the *ordo* as classically understood. Yet for contemporary Protestants and evangelicals, these questions arise with particular urgency, falling at the intersection of family, church, nation, and mission.

The nexus of these issues is of great personal interest to me. I came of age spiritually and theologically in an environment in which younger Christians were called by prominent voices not to "waste their lives" and to live for Christ with "radical" abandon.[4] Such exhortations were—and are—important rejoinders to the excesses of comfort and materialism that persist in the American church. I credit these challenges to prioritize service to the Lord with setting me on a trajectory toward not only ministry in the local church but engagement with missions. The Lord, in His providence, allowed me to taste cross-cultural ministry in both of the states in which we lived as a young, married couple, as I built relationships with unbelievers of various stripes, visited a local *masjid* and broke bread with Muslims to explain the gospel to them, hosted Muslims in our home, and led cold-contact evangelistic teams to various public places. These formative experiences ultimately led me to ministry with the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism

3. Question 39, *A Catechism for Boys and Girls*, The Reformed Reader, accessed September 22, 2025, https://www.reformedreader.org/ccc/acbg.htm.

4. I am referring, of course, to John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); and David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2010).

(ABWE), directing long-term missionary mobilization efforts. Yet it was not only what I was taught through books, podcasts, and sermons in this stage of life that shaped me, but what I was *not* taught. Those messages calling for fervent missionary zeal were largely unaccompanied by biblical wisdom concerning such comparatively mundane themes as work, marriage, childrearing, financial stewardship, or contentment in the ordinary—needed lessons in one's twenties. Consequently, as "normal" life set in, our family grew, and the spiritual highs and lows of parachurch ministry in a college town gave way to the steadier rhythms of local church life, I experienced years of guilt due to my failure to attain to my own self-imposed pietistic standards.[5] Today, I frequently wonder whether listening to a broader range of pastoral voices earlier in my young-adult years might have set me on a better footing now as a married father of four learning important principles of parenting, education, and household economy for what seems like the first time. And, having spent years discussing my experience with others in my generational cohort, I suspect my experience is not unique.

I believe the development of my own thinking with respect to ordinary life and spirituality, or nature and grace, is a microcosm of a conflict facing the American church. Among theologically conservative, Bible-believing Christians, particularly of the Reformed variety, there seem to be at least two distinct musical keys in which the symphony of Christian living may be played; in one pit is an orchestra tuned to the pitches of missions, evangelism, outreach, and advocacy, while an opposing band is calibrated to the frequencies of marriage, family, children, politics, work, and business.

Often this plays out along denominational lines. For instance, consider the widely circulated quip that Presbyterians seem to have all the

5. When I use the term *pietistic* negatively in this sense, I do not refer to *piety*, or godliness, itself. Piety, expressed in loyal devotion to God, is essential to the Christian walk. Rather, by pietistic, I refer to movements and modes of spiritual practice in which subjective experience is exalted as the standard of Christian faithfulness. The Dutch theological Herman Bavinck saliently critiqued pietism in this sense when he observed that it sees the "essence of sanctification . . . [as consisting] in abstaining from ordinary things." See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, trans. H. Bolt and J. Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 3:567–568.

babies while Baptists seem to do all the evangelizing. This jab resonates as humorous because there is a ring of truth to it; many of us can likely cite from personal memory examples of Baptist churches prodigious in missionary sending or Presbyterian congregations profligate in breeding. On one level, this phenomenon reveals the wisdom of God in ordaining the unique cultures and subcultures of each Christian group and movement, with all their idiosyncrasies, such that, taken together, they all reflect the full range of Christian expression befitting the universal church. Indeed, there is much we can say in praise of this rather catholic perspective.[6] Each local church or association of churches will, after all, inevitably be marked by their own unique emphases.

But this division reflects more than a difference in emphasis. In a real sense, it exposes deep philosophical differences in our understanding of the shape of Christian discipleship and of God's work in the world. Returning to the earlier analogy, if the two orchestral groups attempt to play the same symphony together but in different keys, the result will be literal cacophony. Or, even more dramatically, it is as though there is a great gulf fixed between two tribes within conservative evangelicalism in terms of their conception of the Christian life—one that rallies to the cause of evangelism, church planting, and international missions, and the other that devotes itself to matters concerning marriage, family, children, and work. Many denominational lines exist within Christendom for good reason over matters of doctrine or polity, but it ought not be the case that believers who are aligned in all or most issues of first importance would fracture over differing emphases with respect to shared duties. Our enemy revels in such needless division, and its effect is the hollowing out of our own discipleship.

I have detected a pattern with regard to the writing projects I undertake: Each of them has been an attempt at *synthesis*. When Chad Vegas and I cowrote *Missions by the Book*, we sought to demonstrate the harmony between our commitment to robust confessionalism and the

6. I use "catholic" not in the sense of referring to Roman Catholicism but in the sense of true catholicity, or universality; as Christians, we confess one universal, or catholic, church in which God regards all true believers in the world as His covenant people.

missionary imperative, arguing that one need not check his systematic theology at the proverbial door to proclaim and contextualize the gospel among the nations.[7] In *Striving for the Faith*, I aimed to show that the missional life, far from being a modern construct, is identical with the vision of the ordinary Christian life itself as set forth in the book of Philippians.[8] Uniting those two works is the driving impulse to take two frameworks or systems that appear to be in tension or outright contradiction and dig beneath the surface to seek the common root at their base.[9] This book follows a similar methodology. My purpose in this short volume is not to undermine or dismantle one framework or the other—neither the conception of Christianity as essentially missional nor the contrary vision emphasizing the local, the familial, and at times the political. More than enough has been written concerning the points in which these schools of thought differ, and in the days in which we live, serious action is desperately needed in both realms. Instead, my intent is to recognize the genuinely good fruit borne on each of these trees and show that, in their healthiest forms, they stem from the same vital, biblical principle—*love*, ordered aright—and that if we root ourselves in love we too can bear such fruit and enact the command of our Lord in the world to make disciples, from the home and hearth to the ends of the earth.

7. See Chad Vegas and Alex Kocman, *Missions by the Book: How Theology and Missions Walk Together* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2021).

8. See Alex Kocman, *Striving for the Faith: A Journey through Philippians for Life on Mission* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2025).

9. Reflecting upon my intellectual development, I think that this synthesizing impulse came from years of heavy John Piper content consumption, who has described a similar drive in his own handling of Scripture. He writes: "If the Bible is coherent, then understanding the Bible means grasping how things fit together. . . . Only when we are troubled and bothered do we think hard. And if we don't think hard about how biblical affirmations fit together, we will never penetrate to their common root and discover the beauty of unified divine truth." See John Piper, "Brothers, Let Us Query the Text," *Desiring God*, January 1, 1995, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/brothers-let-us-query-the-text.