

## CEJ Book Symposium



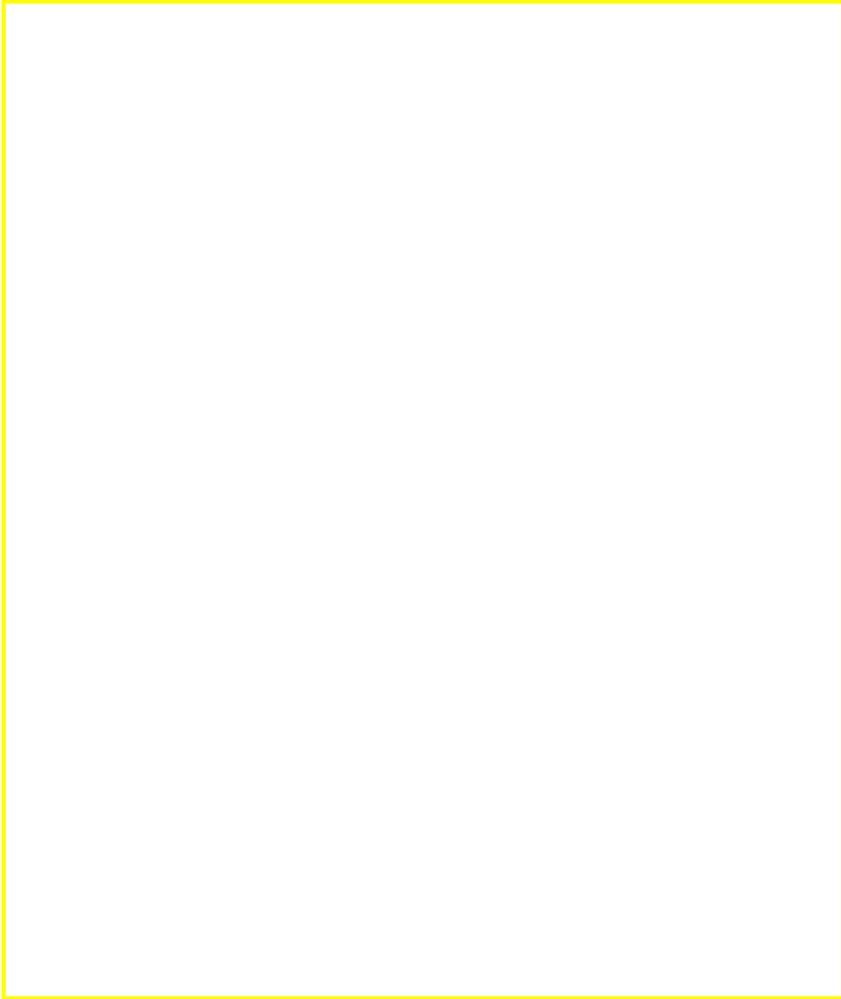
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*Kingdom triangle: Recover the Christian mind, renovate the soul, restore the Spirit's power.* By J.P. Moreland. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 2007. 237 pp. \$19.99.

J.P. Moreland's *Kingdom Triangle* won a merit award (runner-up) in 2008 from *Christianity Today* in the category of Spirituality. Readers will welcome some points, ponder others, and find a few points controversial—thus, it is a good book for us to consider for our book symposium. Moreland is no slouch concerning matters of Christian worldview. In 2004, Moreland and William Lane Craig received the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association's Gold Medallion Book Award in the category of reference works and commentaries for their massive textbook *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003, 653pp.). The term “triangle” in the title references the three main proposals Moreland offers as indicated in the sub-title: *Recover the Christian Mind, Renovate the Soul, Restore the Spirit's Power*. Our reviewers include the following:





Review by Klaus Issler, Professor of Christian Education and Theology, Talbot School of Theology, La Mirada, CA.

In this final review, I briefly summarize the lines of Moreland’s argument, and then make some comments regarding each leg of the Kingdom Triangle. His main point is that in order to effectively address the secularization crises of our culture and return to “Jesus and life in his Kingdom” (13), the evangelical church must embrace a balanced and healthy forward movement

of “recovery of knowledge and the Christian mind, renovation of the heart and spiritual formation, and restoration of miraculous power” (187).

Moreland proposes that “a three-way worldview rages in our culture: between ethical monotheism (especially Christianity), [philosophical] postmodernism, and scientific naturalism” (22). Our basic Christian conception of what counts as knowledge and truth is being assaulted in that both naturalism and postmodernism “entail that there is no nonempirical knowledge, especially no religious or ethical knowledge” (88, 97). That is, religious claims have no standing in the public square—they are regarded as mere opinion, matters of “faith” not knowledge, where faith is believing something that has no scientific or reasonable basis—or they are merely one particular community’s story of faith that has no greater value than that of any other community. “A talk show host’s feelings about her own truth regarding religious matters is just as ‘valid’ as anyone else’s” (92).

Another way Moreland uses to clarify the differences among these views is by talking of “thin” worldviews—in which there is no objective value, purpose, or meaning of life (e.g., naturalism and postmodernism)—and “thick” worldviews that do affirm objective value, purpose and meaning (e.g., Christianity, Islam). Within a thin worldview, there is no objective difference between the life aims of Mother Theresa, of Donald Trump, or of Britney Spears.

The way out of this crisis is to return to the early church’s strategy in spreading the gospel. Here, Moreland relies on Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Revised ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004) who states:

highlights three factors central to the church’s explosive success in her first four centuries: (1) the church’s ability to engage in persuasive apologetics and outthink her critics; (2) the transformed character and biblical compassion of believers; and (3) the manifest power of the Kingdom of God by the Spirit through healings, demonic deliverance, and prophetic ability clearly from another realm. (cited in Moreland, p. 111–112)

These factors become then the three legs of Moreland’s *Kingdom Triangle*.

The first leg focuses on the recovery of knowledge, that the Christian church is in possession of knowledge about spiritual and ethical matters—not just mere personal opinion. Spiritual and ethical knowledge should be regarded just like other matters of knowledge that claim to be a representation of reality, such as laws of gravity and the molecular structure of water. “Knowledge provides truth about reality along with the skillful ability to interact with reality” (114). Furthermore, Christian faith or confidence in God is actually based on knowledge, not just mere commitment without any rea-

son to trust. To address certain misunderstandings about knowledge, Moreland argues that one can have knowledge without requiring absolute certainty, and that one can have knowledge of something without knowing that one knows it or why one knows it. In his critique of skepticism, Moreland proposes a “particularist” strategy to address the problem of the criterion, one technical item in epistemology.

To illustrate the need for this recovery of knowledge, permit me to share my responses to a reading of James K. A. Smith’s *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006, 156pp.), a textbook in my doctoral seminar in which students improve their book reviewing competencies (page references in the next four paragraphs are from Smith’s book). Smith is a prolific author and professor of philosophy of Calvin College, and this particular book has received various awards, including a merit award in 2007 from *Christianity Today*. In *Who’s Afraid*, Smith desires to illustrate and proclaim—not prove (65)—how the orthodox Christian church can readily embrace key teachings of French postmodern philosophers (22)—the first two being the most problematic to me—Derrida (there is “nothing outside the text”), Lyotard (postmodernism’s “incredulity toward metanarratives”), and Foucault (“power is knowledge”) (23–24). Coming from within my Christian intellectual community (CIC), it seems that Smith’s main point (particularly related to the first three of this five-chapter book) is that postmodernism’s view of knowledge—what seems like a version of a coherence theory of truth—is correct; all truth claims are socially constructed and conditioned/interpreted within a particular narrative/language game. Smith offers this proposal as an alternative to the extreme views of radical skepticism and of modernist scientism (119).

I agree with Smith’s critique of scientism’s view of knowledge (and also that the church can overemphasize the intellectual and doctrinal to the neglect of an incarnational life and community witness of the Christian story, developed in later chapters). But I was surprised by the absolutist (metanarrative? imperial?) terms Smith affirms and uses in assertions representing reality within Smith’s CIC, for example: “all” (39, 2x 42, 54, 3x 69, 75), “always” (2x 39, 54), “every” (2x 69, 2x 70), “everything” (42, 48, 51, 54), “never” (3x 38; 42), and “no” (2x 54, 2x 69, 73), illustrated here (Smith is affirming Lyotard’s thoughts):

There is *no* [italics added] appeal to a higher court that would transcend a historical context or a language game, *no* [italics added] neutral observer or “God’s-eye-view” that can legitimate or justify one paradigm or moral language game above another: If *all* [italics added] moral claims are conditioned by paradigms of historical commitment, then they cannot [italics added] transcend those conditions; thus *every* [italics added]

moral claim operates within a 'logic' that is conditioned by the paradigm. In other words, *every* [italics added] language game has its own set of rules. . . . Many—especially Christians—lament this state of affairs. . . . But is this situation as bad as we think? (69–70)

I wondered is Smith replacing the dreaded “Cartesian certainty” (17, 118, 120) with another version of certainty? Perhaps within Smith’s CIC it is permitted to proclaim universal assertions with assurance, realizing of course they are relative to this CIC.

I was puzzled by how Smith critiqued D. A. Carson who represents views from a different CIC than Smith. Since each language game has its own set of rules and “no one story can claim either universal auto-legitimation” (70), I assumed it was not important to make judgments about correct or incorrect interpretations—that they could just be *different* or *alternative* interpretations of the matter. “Carson simply conflates truth with objectivity” (43); “But this [an assertion by Carson] simply is not the case” (43, endnote #10); “Carson’s critique of McLaren on this score, particularly on questions of narrative (ibid., [*Becoming conversant with the emergent church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan], 163–66), is an epic adventure in missing the point” (74 endnote #18). And it was interesting to learn that within Smith’s CIC the gospel is *an* interpretation as are all texts, one story among others (51, 69–70, 143–51, 120–21), although within his CIC Smith himself affirms the orthodox Christian Gospel as “the true interpretation” (49).

I suspect one purpose for Smith offering his proposal is to gain a hearing for the Christian Story in the public forum. Since Christianity has fallen on hard times due to its guilt by association with past discredited ways in the public eye, a version of a postmodern Christianity “could simply be a witness amid this plurality of competing myths” (70). Yet from within my CIC, the cost of giving up a robust view of knowledge that Smith’s proposal requires is too great. I am not drawn to that vision of reality. I prefer a fourth way—or better, the original way of Jesus—in contrast to Smith’s third way, and the other problematic views of radical skepticism and modernist scientism, for a legitimate way to engage in the public square: that of recovering Christianity’s contribution of knowledge, especially in nonempirical matters about God and human flourishing, as Moreland proposes in *Kingdom Triangle*. I tend to trust a truth guide such as Dallas Willard:

My hope here is to enable intellectually serious people, Christians or not, to understand the *indispensable role of knowledge in faith and life*. I also want to make it clear that *there is a body of uniquely Christian knowledge*, one that is available to all who would appropriately seek it and receive it—again, whether Christian or not. . . . When understood and accepted

as knowledge, it is objectively testable—again, in ways suitable to its subject matter—and it lays a foundation for action and character that is unequaled for human good. (*Knowing Christ today: Why we can trust spiritual knowledge*. NY: HarperOne, 2009, 7–8)

Be of good courage, my comments will be briefer for the remaining two aspects of Moreland's triangle.

While the first leg of the *Kingdom Triangle* gives attention to the "head," the second leg involves focusing on the "heart" of inner formation of the soul to counter the "empty self" syndrome of contemporary American life. Moreland's formation discussion teases us with some helpful points on the practice of spiritual disciplines that engage the body and of cultivating an emotional awareness of movements within our soul. Further guidance on spiritual formation matters can be gleaned from Evan Howard's recent state of the art treatment, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008, 496pp). Also, in the new publication *The Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care*, Steve Porter, managing editor and faculty at Biola's Institute for Spiritual Formation, addresses eight general objections to spiritual formation to "relieve Evangelical anxieties" such as it is too Catholic, it is just New Age, and it is only experiential (Fall 2008, Vol. 1, No. 2, 129–148). Porter views spiritual formation as basically being equivalent to the doctrine of sanctification.

In the third and final leg, Moreland proposes that Christians engage in a "naturally supernatural" lifestyle of praying for and welcoming the manifestation of God's supernatural power. The author recounts miracles that touched his own life, such as the disappearance of his laryngitis—from a painful whispering voice to normal speaking—moments after a few church members prayed for Moreland on a Sunday evening (prior to this healing he intended to go home and cancel his speaking engagements for that week but now he could still do them). He includes reports of supernatural occurrences in China, India, and Brazil. Moreland admits that he is still learning about this arena. Formerly he did not believe that God regularly performed miracles subsequent to the New Testament era. Other evangelicals have also adopted a naturalistic mindset that is skeptical toward the supernatural. Of course, not all claims to miracles are reliable, but do we tend to assign greater power to the devil than to God (1 Jn 4:4)? Theologian and pastor Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD) was another Christian leader who changed his views from denying the miraculous to valuing and welcoming it (see Morton Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity: In ancient thought and modern times*. NY: Harper & Row, 1973, 184–98).

I have been on a transforming journey similar to Moreland's in which my expectations for God's answer to prayer are increasing. At a dinner last

week, one of our doctoral students shared the joy of the recent conversion of his father as an answer to persevering prayer over many years. Sadly, a tragic farming accident from which he could have died prompted this surrender to God. As he lay on the orchard ground after the machine had just ravaged his lower body, he cried out to God and Jesus appeared to him in a vision, comforting him with his presence. Each conversion is a miracle. Some of us have been regularly going to the house of Jim Mohler, recent book editor of *CEJ*, to pray for his healing from inoperable brain cancer, discovered only a few months ago. Who knows what God will do, but we keep asking, seeking, and knocking, as Jesus commands us to do (Mt 7:7–8; also see Jas 5:14–18). For a biblical study about Jesus' incredible promises regarding answered prayer (e.g., Mk 11:22–24) see my chapter 4 in J. P. Moreland and Klaus Issler, *In Search of a Confident Faith: Overcoming Barriers to Trusting in God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008).

If, as Michael Green and J. P. Moreland assert, the church flourishes as a counter-cultural movement of God's Kingdom project when it embraces a recovery of knowledge, of spiritual formation, and of God's supernatural interventions in daily life, then we need to examine the Scriptures to validate these key themes, to examine our lives and respective communities regarding how well we value and welcome them, and adjust our practice and lifestyle accordingly.