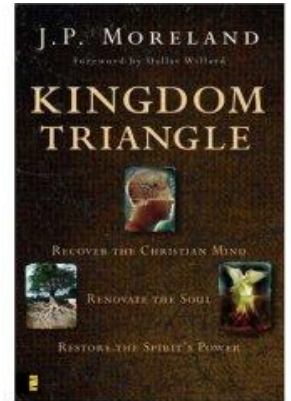


# Kingdom Triangle

By J.P. Moreland<sup>1</sup>



If I could pick out for you a few of the most formative books in my early intellectual development, J.P. Moreland's *Love Your God with All Your Mind* would be jostling near the top. I can at least commend it to you as essential reading – after C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, of course. But before you read either, I believe you should read *Kingdom Triangle*. And I think if you do read it carefully, cover to cover, you might just forgive me for putting J.P. before Jack<sup>2</sup>.

*Kingdom Triangle* offers a biblically grounded vision of Christian discipleship that unites J.P. Moreland's concern for the mind with his pursuit of the spiritual disciplines and his call for the Church to rediscover the power of the Holy Spirit. None of these emphases, of course, are anything new in themselves. As Moreland admits, the first point of the triangle will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with his writings; J.P. is well-known as a philosopher and apologist, and *Love Your God with All Your Mind* was but one incarnation of his characteristic concern for tough-minded intellectualism. It is a concern shared by many writers besides J.P. The 'spiritual disciplines' also have a well-established literary corpus and a number of contemporary advocates. And the charismatic stress on a more dynamic pneumatology is something many of the readers of this review probably share<sup>3</sup>. What is rather unusual is to see all three of these concerns coming together, without one being played off against the other.

The first part of the book is decidedly philosophical. J.P. offers a penetrating expose of the contemporary cultural milieu of the West. In the discussion that follows, Moreland identifies *naturalism*, *postmodernism*, and *Christian theism* as the three major worldviews vying for our allegiance, and concerns himself with expounding both naturalism and postmodernism in some detail. Both are exposed as pervasive, pernicious, false – but also dangerously 'thin' worldviews, lacking the resources to ground objective value, purpose and meaning, and ultimately destructive of the good life (interpreted in a classical way), plunging us into a shallow and sensate culture. 'Under the influence of naturalist and postmodern ideas, many people no longer believe that there is any ultimate meaning to life that can be known... Today, the good life is a life of happiness'. And the drive for happiness – construed simply as 'pleasurable satisfaction' – has produced a shallow culture of 'empty selves'.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations in this review are from Moreland, J.P. *Kingdom Triangle* (Zondervan, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> "Jack" was C.S. Lewis's nickname.

<sup>3</sup> This review first appeared in the *Pneuma Review*, Spring 2008.

J.P. however believes that 'we are wired for more than happiness. We are made to live for God's honour by learning how to become spiritually competent, mature members of his Kingdom and to make that Kingdom our primary concern'. Claiming the supremacy of the Christian worldview, Moreland exhorts believers to recognise the superior spiritual and intellectual resources available to them, and to start taking their faith seriously, heart and mind. 'We were made for greatness', he argues, but our present culture 'undermines both its intelligibility and achievement'. 'The only way we are going to move from our boring lives to lives filled with the drama of the Greatest story is for those who embrace mere Christianity to set aside the shallowness of their thought and the weakness of their spiritual practices, and corporately to enter afresh into the Kingdom forms of life and thought worthy of the name of Christ'.

To this end, J.P. wants to raise awareness about some of the major 'paradigm shifts' that have taken place in Western thinking – shifts that have 'greased the skids from a thick world to a thin one'. The first that Moreland discusses is the demotion of religious *knowledge* to non-rational '*faith*'. It is commonly believed today that religion 'is not a domain of fact' in which one can acquire knowledge, or become expert. And unfortunately Christians have allowed themselves to be coloured by this perspective. 'Christians must stop talking about "belief" in life after death, heaven and hell', Moreland urges, 'and must reexpress their views on these and related matters as expression of knowledge of reality'. A second shift J.P. identifies is the downgrading of the good life from a life of human flourishing, 'constituted by intellectual and moral virtue', to simply the satisfaction of desire. In classical thinking, happiness was 'a life of virtue' and 'the successful person was the person who knew how to live a life well according to what we are by nature because of the creative design of God'. It involved 'suffering, endurance and patience because these are important means to becoming a good person who lives the good life'. All of this, of course, presupposed 'the availability of the moral and spiritual knowledge needed to grasp the nature of human flourishing and the journey required to achieve it'. The first two shifts are connected, then. And so are the remaining three. 'Loss of moral knowledge' has brought about a third 'shift from a view of the moral life in which duty and virtue are central to a minimalist ethical perspective', a fourth shift from a 'classical' conception of freedom as 'the power to do what one ought to do' to freedom construed as 'the right to do what one *wants* to do', and a final shift to a new understanding of 'tolerance' that is pluralist in nature and 'fosters moral relativism'. All five of these moves are the concomitants of a more substantive leap away from a Judeo-Christian worldview to a naturalist and postmodern one, proliferating a culture of 'empty selves' and producing the *Zeitgeist* that is 'killing our lives, our religious fervour, and our relationships'.

The second part of the book seeks to redress the problem, presenting the *Kingdom Triangle* – and you will have to read the book to get the details! Moreland's discussion of the 'recovery of knowledge' (the first prong of his tripartite vision) is another philosophically meaty section, discussing the problem of philosophical scepticism, defining knowledge and faith, confronting popular misconceptions in these areas, and

laying out a plan for strengthening them both. 'Appropriate faith', Moreland explains, 'is grounded in knowledge and it is as good as its object... It is on the basis of knowledge ... that one is able to exhibit the confidence in the respective object or possess a readiness to act as if the relevant proposition is true'. Among other pieces of advice, Moreland urges believers to 'be ruthless in assessing the precise nature and strength of what you actually believe and develop a specific plan of attack for improvement'.

His chapter on 'the renovation of the soul' draws on the insights of writers like Willard, Foster and Nouwen. Diagnosing four traits of 'the empty self', J.P. offers an expose on 'the art of Christian self-denial', carefully tracing out the relevant concepts and seeking to acquaint the reader with some of the 'disciplines of abstinence' and 'engagement' that disciples can purposefully employ to target areas of their lives where 'sinful habits' are residing. But Moreland is keen to emphasise that spiritual development is not something we should do solo – and goes so far as to strongly endorse the use of trained Christian therapists, counsellors and spiritual directors at the local Church.

Finally, Moreland fixes his attention upon the charismatic dimension of the Christian faith (and probably loses a few friends in the process!). Relating some of his own experiences, and pointing the reader to the current revival in the Third World for many more examples, J.P (now affiliated with the 'Third Wave') suggests that 'Western Christians have absorbed more of a secular worldview than we may like to admit'. However, whilst praising Pentecostals and charismatics for bringing 'healing, deliverance and the prophetic back to the Evangelical community', he complains that, all too often, those who emphasised the *charismata* have been 'too anti-intellectual', too 'addicted to seeking experiences', too little concerned with 'Christian counselling, the life of the mind, study, memorising Scripture'. Among other advice for becoming more 'naturally supernatural', Moreland urges Christians to gain real knowledge in this area of ministry, and to build their faith through 'study, meditation, risk, learning from successes and failures, and in related ways'. Learning to live and use the Spirit's power, as well as cultivating the inner life of the soul, and the development of the mind, were 'central to Jesus' ministry in the Gospels, in Acts, and in the first four centuries of the church'. J.P 'refuse[s] to believe it has to be an either/or'.

*Kingdom Triangle* is a book is for both heart *and* mind, the fruit of many years of thoughtful ministry, apologetic engagement and philosophical reflection, articulated with passion and erudition. It is not always easy reading. But then, why should it be? We have been lazy and simple for too long. If we are ever going to exemplify the mind and character and power of the *Messiah*, it will demand our best efforts. But that's what we were created for.