

**Anti-Intellectualism and Christianity:**  
**Practical Reflections from J. P. Moreland's *Love Your God with All Your Mind***

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AP 908: Pre-evangelism and Conversational Apologetics

April 10, 2020

## ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM AND CHRISTIANITY

### Introduction

Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland (1948-present) raises some issues about the life of the mind (apologetics) in his book *Love Your God with All Your Mind*.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is to describe my thoughts about three of his issues and connect how each issue practically relates to modern evangelism today.

### Issue 1. Roots of Anti-Intellectualism

Moreland's book *Love Your God with All Your Mind* begins with a good summary of how anti-intellectualism has emerged in the church. This topic is interesting to me because, for the past few years, I've been a teacher at a ministry called the Biblical Training Center at my local church. The purpose of this ministry is to train laypeople in areas like theology, apologetics, church history, and so forth. Over the years, I have taught classes on New Testament Surveys, The Holy Spirit and Salvation, Essentials v. Non-Essentials, World Religions, Bibliology, Ethics and Eschatology. What a blessing it has been to be at a church where so many people are interested in these kinds of classes! But we are definitely 'going against the stream' of popular Christianity today. There is a growing sense in Christian culture that 'we only want practical things' in our churches—or, worse, that anything intellectual is to be avoided because 'that's just head-knowledge!' This is all part of a growing anti-intellectual trend that many of us in apologetics feel week after week. So, it was very refreshing to see that Moreland has formally devoted all of part one to confirming that there really is a growing anti-intellectual movement in the church.

#### *The Rise of Anti-Intellectualism*

Moreland points to several events in the church that have caused the anti-intellectualism of our day. He says it first began with a Pietism movement in America with the Pilgrims in early

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<sup>1</sup> J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012).

17th/18th centuries (also known as Puritanism). Throughout my seminary studies, I've been fascinated with the Pietism movement. So, I found this naturally interesting. At first, the Pilgrims were highly educated, and they greatly valued education (as evidenced by a very high literacy rate and the fact that they built colleges). The minister was both an intellectual and spiritual authority in the community.<sup>2</sup> But something happened when men like George Whitfield and Charles Finney began their revivals. These were men who used unconventional approaches to preach the gospel. I remember from reading biographies of both men in the past that they would go into cornfields and preach, and this was looked down upon. Their sermons weren't so much focused on theology they were simpler, more emotionally engaging—and they worked! People were getting saved and there was revival. I remember reading a story of one town where the bars had to shut down because everybody had been saved. God was doing a new work, which was a positive. But the negative was that, as Moreland puts it, emphasis was taken away from “a studied period of reflection and conviction” and put on “emotional, simple, popular preaching.”<sup>3</sup>

There was also a Pietism movement in Europe which gave rise to German higher criticism. Moreland mentioned this but I'm filling in some details from memories from other studies. I'm thinking of Zinzendorf who stressed a 'religion of the heart' based on intimate and personal relationship with Christ. And then there's Philipp Spener who emphasized reading the word in devotion and simplicity. They placed more emphasis on 'feeling' over doctrine and theology. While this emphasis on practical living might sound great, it began to erode a high view of the Bible.

Moreland adds that two great philosophers emerged roughly during this time: David Hume (the father of skepticism) and Immanuel Kant (the father of agnosticism). However, American Christians were distracted with American Revivalism and European Christians were distracted with their German higher criticism. So, neither provided any substantial response to

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<sup>2</sup> Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind*, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

their skepticism/agnosticism. The church, in effect, checked out of the intellectual scene, paving way to the anti-intellectual fruit of Hume/Kant's skepticism/agnosticism.

If I could, I would add another factor that gave rise to anti-intellectualism that Moreland did not seem to mention. I would add the strong opinions of the Reformers. There wasn't just one Reformation, but a series of Reformations. The German Reformation was under Luther. Then, the Swiss Reformation was under Calvin and Zwingli. The Anabaptists led a third 'Radical Reformation' and they believed—well, that believers needed to be even more radical than their peers. They divided with their revolutionary-minded brothers over infant baptism, rejected state involvement in the church, Christian participation in wars, believed in pacifism and common ownership of property. The German and Swiss Reformers, as well as the Catholics, really didn't like the strong opinions of the Anabaptists. It is estimated that 5,000 Anabaptist men and women were tortured and executed by their 'Christian' brothers. Why? Because they held different theological beliefs. I can't help but imagine that by the time you get to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, people were tired of arguing about 'doctrine.' Someone might say, "Look at what 'doctrine' had done! We're so tired and turned off by people fighting over theological differences!" And so, we hear in our churches today things like, "It's not about *what* you know; it's *who* you know!" And, "It's not about *knowledge*; it's about a *relationship*!" People are tired of fighting.

#### *What to Do About It?*

I think we can find a practical principle here as far as how this all relates to apologetics and evangelism. First, as apologists, we need to have a healthy balance between theoretical 'head-knowledge' and practical 'spirituality.' Jesus said, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with *all your mind*.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matt. 22:37-39, emphasis mine) The biblical view of Christian growth is wholistic in that it involves the whole person—including the mind. But we humans tend to have an uncanny ability to focus on either/or. One generation emphasizes theology (to correct theological abuses of the previous generation). This gives rise to revival of practical living in the next (to correct the dryness of the

previous generation). And on and on it goes. But why can't we break this cycle by determining to make *both* an important part of our lives and ministry? We can and we should.

Second, apologists need to have more humility, especially ones with fancy degrees and formal education. There is a genuine need for humility in the church today, especially in the area of intellectual pursuits like apologetics and theology. Put plainly, there is a sense that those who are into apologetics—and the related disciplines of theology, philosophy, etc.—are arrogant and prideful. Ron Rhodes, who was co-host of the popular radio program *The Bible Answer Man* said, “Believe me, I’ve been involved in this business for decades. And I’ve got to tell you something. There’s more pride per square inch in the apologetics community than anywhere else on the planet. And it shouldn’t be that way.”<sup>4</sup> If we can make inroads with humility in the field of apologetics, then maybe we can see more churches welcoming apologetic ministries.

We need humility because we have not represented Christ well to the world. The world sees Christians as hypocrites. They (rightly) charge us collectively as being hypocritical because we preach one thing and then practice another. I wrote two papers in seminary involving corruption in the church. The first was an analysis of spiritual abuse from the Mars Hill debacle.<sup>5</sup> The second was on the lack of moral character in the church in which I summarized the erosion of morals in the ministry. Six months after I finished my second paper, a well-respected teaching pastor at my church was arrested for molesting his adopted daughter over three years.<sup>6</sup> Stories like this are not rare and they emphasize that many of us are grossly imbalanced in our intellectual/practical walks.

We also need humility because the world also sees Christians as arrogant since we believe in absolute truth. As Moreland points out, the clash between the Christian worldview and

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<sup>4</sup> Ron Rhodes, “RE505: Contemporary Cults” (lecture, Veritas International University, Murrieta, CA, 2014), lecture 4.

<sup>5</sup> Shawn Nelson, “Spiritual Abuse: Unspoken Crisis,” *Geeky Christian*, January 15, 2015, <https://geekychristian.com/spiritual-abuse/>.

<sup>6</sup> Shawn Nelson, “Does Character Matter Anymore in Ministry?,” *Nelson.ink*, November 30, 2016, <https://nelson.ink/does-character-matter-anymore-in-ministry/>.

the secular worldview is “primarily a view about knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> People used to define tolerance as believing it was ok to have a different opinion about something. But, especially with the younger generations, tolerance today means nobody is right, nobody is wrong—all views are equally valid. And if you say otherwise, then you’re intolerant (and arrogant)! So, there is a need for humility both inside and outside the church with regards to evangelism and apologetics.

### **Issue 2. The Empty Self and Mind**

I liked the discussion in chapter four where Moreland characterizes people in our modern culture as ‘the empty self.’ (But I hated the name! To me, it should be called ‘the full-of-self’ or something like that. But I understand that the net result of being full-of-self is that a person is ‘empty’ of any real substance.) Here are the points from Moreland.<sup>8</sup> (1) The empty self is inordinately individualistic. Some amount of individualism is good. But the empty-self define their goals and interests thinking only about themselves. (2) The empty self is infantile. They retain adolescent personality traits longer in life. They are preoccupied with sex, physical appearance, body image—all the things that teens seem to care about. Very interesting. (3) The empty self is narcissistic. We used to have to define what narcissism was. But now it’s so common that it needs no explanation. (4) The empty self is passive. People want to be entertained and are constantly in search of pleasure. (5) The empty self is sensual. People are no longer led by reason but by their senses. (6) The empty self has lost the art of developing an interior life. People used to value virtue and morality—inward character traits. Now they value beauty, bronze and bucks (outward image). (7) The empty self is hurried and busy. There’s a popular country song by Kenny Chesney called *Noise* which goes like this: “Seems like all we ever hear is noise. Yeah, we scream, yeah, we shout ‘til we don’t have a voice. In the streets, in the crowds, it ain’t nothing but noise!”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-106.

<sup>9</sup> Shane McAnally, Kenneth Chesney, Jon Nite and Ross Copperman, *Noise* (New York: Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 2016).

We must remember that Moreland's discussion of the 'empty self' is in a book titled *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul*. So, chief among these problems is the loss of the mind in culture today. Empty-self-syndrome could be called a symptom of the real problem (that we've lost our minds!). Later, in chapter six's "Evangelism and the Christian mind," Moreland quotes a newspaper columnist who drives home the point of just how far we have fallen intellectually:

Many studies have shown how ignorant our high school and even college graduates are of *basic knowledge* that was once taken for granted... going step-by-step from evidence to conclusions have given way to emotional rhetoric and automatic responses to buzzwords and visions.<sup>10</sup>

*So What?!*

The qualities that characterize the empty self are having an impact upon the church. The church does not identify or celebrate Christian intellectuals anymore. Sermons are more geared towards fun and entertainment. Christian bookstores are filled with self-help books. And so forth. But it also has an impact on how we do evangelism. Moreland has also witnessed a seismic shift in evangelism. The empty self problem impacts how we witness to those outside the church.

In the last quarter of a century I have seen a slow, steady erosion of apologetical reasoning and argument as part of the texture of our evangelism. Instead, evangelism is increasingly associated with the things [the columnist above] bemoans: rhetoric, Christian buzzwords, and an overdone appeal to felt needs.<sup>11</sup>

David Geisler, like Moreland, argues that culture has changed, and people are not as receptive to an encounter where Christians present 'the truth' unilaterally. The modern empty self (again, I hate the name) needs a more interactive approach. They might not want to hear what you have to say about God, and they might not have the ability/desire to follow a truly rational argument. But they, in many cases, are willing to share what *they* think about spiritual things. That is, if the environment is safe. The believer can make every attempt to minimize the unbeliever's defenses

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<sup>10</sup> Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind*, 145, emphasis mine.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

by being genuinely polite, warm and cordial. They can be strategic in asking questions that will surface doubts in their worldview. And if done right, it will hopefully give the unbeliever a desire to learn more. This is the gist of Geisler's book, *Conversational Evangelism*.<sup>12</sup> Twenty years ago, David was greatly influenced by Moreland's book, and it became a key reason for writing his own book.<sup>13</sup> I wonder how much of the psychology of the empty self played in David Geisler developing a new evangelism strategy to reach the next generation. I would imagine it had a big impact—because if the empty self is true, then it really presents a challenging barrier which requires a fresh, new approach to doing evangelism.

### **Issue 3. Refurbishing the Church**

I was surprised with how practically minded Moreland got at the end of his book. (Philosophers are known for their theoretical knowledge not practical know-how!) What is the solution to the problem of anti-intellectualism in the church and a more effective approach to evangelism? Since I'm actively involved in church ministry at my local church, and I have personally witnessed the same problems Moreland describes, what is his answer? I honestly expected him to say something like, "We need more churches to provide Sunday School classes like the Biblical Training Center!" However, he did not. What he put at the top of his list surprised me.

First, he said, "No senior pastors"! Really!? That's how we solve the problem of anti-intellectualism in the church? That's how we bring good old-fashioned reason back into evangelism? I thought he was just using some kind of 'shock and awe' rhetoric device. But as I read through his argument, he makes a strong point. He argues the New Testament teaches there should be a plurality of elder/pastors; there should not be a single senior pastor (Acts 14:23;

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<sup>12</sup> David Geisler and Norman Geisler, *Conversational Evangelism: Connecting with People to Share Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> "Over 20 years ago, I (David Geisler) read this book (*Love Your God With All Your Mind*) and the insights in this book became one of the keys as to why I started my own ministry and why I wrote the Doctor of Ministries topic that was converted partly into my book *Conversational Evangelism*." See syllabus for Joseph Holden, "AP908: Pre-evangelism and Conversational Apologetics" (Veritas International University, Santa Ana, CA, April 2020).



20:28; Philippians 1:1; Hebrews 13:17).<sup>14</sup> In his view, “the emergence of the senior pastor in the local church is one of the factors that has most significantly undermined the development of healthy churches.”<sup>15</sup> He says that the senior pastor model we see today (maybe we should call it the celebrity pastor model) produces a church that strokes the egos of the senior pastor and builds a large audience of passive (empty self) Christians. He argues that the only way to flip this upside down is to do away with the senior pastor position completely and have an elder board made up of pastors who get equal facetime teaching in front of the church. In his opinion, no single individual should preach more than twenty-six Sundays during a year (this is half a year).<sup>16</sup>

Second, these pastors would each have different gifts and passions. Each should focus on developing leaders in their area of interest (evangelism, counseling, teaching, missions, etc.) Usually the senior pastor emphasizes the things that they care about, and this is imbalanced. By decentralizing (and trusting that God can put together a well-rounded team of pastors), all the priorities of the church become well-rounded (including the more intellectual areas like Christian education).

Third, sermons must be overhauled. He sees a typical weekend service following a ‘filling station approach.’<sup>17</sup> People come, hear an entertaining and practical message and get filled up for the week ahead. But, as he shows elsewhere in his book, Christians are ill-equipped for evangelism because they don’t even know the basics about their own Christian faith. So, they need to be stretched regularly to learn something new through weekly sermons (as opposed to just being encouraged in areas they’re already familiar with). His first idea deals with how to transform the audience from passive to active. People should not just show up to a message on Sunday. But before a series begins, they should be told to read books, commentaries or other

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<sup>14</sup> Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind*, 221.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 221, 222.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

materials. There should be reading assignments before Sunday's message that get them prepared, already thinking about the topic. On Sundays, supplemental material should be included with the sermon notes. There should be study exercises on the last page of the outline, recommendations on things to further reflect upon, and a bibliography of books for where people can get more info. At the end of a teaching series, minicourses could be developed and people should be encouraged to attend not just for fellowship, but to learn.

He suggests something else that I find interesting. Every now and then there should be an effort to "pitch a message to the upper one-third of the congregation, intellectually speaking."<sup>18</sup> The trend today, according to Moreland (and I would tend to agree) is to try to 'dumb down' messages because pastors feel theology is irrelevant or not practical enough. But this dumbing down effect is dumbing down our churches, our culture and our world. Periodically handling intellectual topics is a good, practical way to reverse the trend. I would add here that it's important to have the right pastor for this. Some speakers can take something simple and make it confusing. Others can take something confusing and make it simple. I think that when intellectual messages are preached correctly, people will understand what's being said. And it will create a real desire to explore deeper things. People will also see that there is no false bifurcation between 'head-knowledge' and 'heart-knowledge.' Once people see/understand the Christian worldview with their mind (they see what is true), they will more likely cleave to what is good with their will. But I think there's a big problem with pastors/speakers trying to explain deeper things, not doing a very good job (aka, are boring), and people walk away feeling like it wasn't worth their time. I think that's a shame because if it is done correctly, I think any topic can be made interesting.

Moreland also has some good ideas regarding church libraries. For example, churches should have a large church library (not just self-help books), make it easy for people to know

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<sup>18</sup> Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind*, 226.

about the library (bringing books out onto tables in highly visible areas on Sunday), and regularly insert book reviews into the bulletin.

Towards the end, he finally gets to what I thought he was going to address as his first point for refurbishing the church, and that is Sunday schools and study centers. I agree with him that most churches today seem to be more interested in enfolded members (bringing into a time of fellowship) rather than educating them.<sup>19</sup> He feels there's a need for these kinds of Sunday School classes but there should also be parallel classes that have a distinctly educational focus. These require more active participation and greater commitment. People might need to register and pay for classroom instruction. A syllabus is given, homework is expected to be turned in, etc. In other words, people don't just passively attend (no empty selves!) but are required to be actively engaging their minds.

*What Does This Have to Do with Evangelism?*

What does all of this have to do with evangelism? It is very interesting to me that one of the greatest Christian philosophers of our day, J. P. Moreland, would finish his book with such practical advice. It really drives home to me that the problem of the anti-intellectualism of our day has very deep roots which go back to seismic shifts in our culture since the rise of Pietism. At the end of the day, we Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century find ourselves in a much different world.

There are two big questions as I see it. The first big question is, how does the church witness to this generation that we find ourselves in? J. P. Moreland seems to take the approach that we should 'bring up' the unbeliever. What I mean is this. After he shows the intellectual vacuum of our day, he proceeds to give a crash-course on logic in chapter five. With a proper foundation for logic/reasoning, he moves through the typical rational proofs for God in chapters seven and eight (cosmological, teleological and moral arguments). He then (as a good classical apologist) moves to historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection in chapter nine. In other words, his approach seems to be that we train the church first *how* to think and from there, how to

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<sup>19</sup> Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind*, 228.

*communicate* good arguments for Christianity to this current generation. But in terms of reaching unbelievers where they are at *currently* (the anti-intellectual empty self who rejects absolute truth, doesn't want to be preached at, etc.), the Moreland book is a bit lacking in this area in my opinion. This is probably the same conclusion David Geisler came to twenty years ago when he read Moreland's book. And that's probably why he felt the need to directly address this topic in a new book, *Conversational Evangelism*.

The second big question is, how do we begin to reverse the anti-intellectual trend we see today? This second question is best answered by J. P. Moreland's book *Love Your God with All Your Mind*. He provides some very wonderful, practical advice on how to begin reversing this trend. Of course, such a refurbishing of the church would take an enormous effort, and it is doubtful whether it could/would succeed in today's megachurch celebrity-celebrated environment. But perhaps now, more than ever, people are becoming more aware of the pitfalls of the megachurch model (e.g., Mars Hill, Willow Creek, etc.). Now might be the perfect time to promote the ideas offered by Moreland in our local churches.

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