

In Memorium

John Warwick Montgomery

October 18, 1931-September 25, 2024

Evangelical, Evidential, and Confessionally Lutheran

Christian

By: Craig A. Parton

John Warwick Montgomery

The Church Militant has lost a Lion with the death of John Warwick Montgomery. He directed that he be buried in Niederroedern in the Alsace, near Soufflenheim where he lived for over 20 years. The service was to be simple and direct--Christo-centric to the end, he ordered that no eulogy be given at his funeral and that his gravestone simply recite John 11:25-26 ("I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will never die.") But this is not his funeral and so eulogizing we shall go.

The scope of John Warwick Montgomery's contribution to the advancement of the Gospel by means of his writings, teaching and debating is colossal, and commenced with his conversion at Cornell in the late 1940's to the Fall of 2023 where, at the age of a mere 92, he delivered in

person a provocative paper on “Luther and the Authority of Scripture” at a theological conference in San Diego, California, to the summer of 2024 where he taught two courses at the International Academy of Apologetics in Strasbourg, France and published his last book this past summer (*The Art of Christian Advocacy*), also at the age of 92. His expertise ranged from Wittgenstein to Luther, Tolkien to Sherlock Holmes. He was a rare American member of both an elite culinary academy in Paris and wine society in the Alsace; who founded the first Christian law school that integrated theology, law, and apologetics; was a member of the Sherlock Holmes Society of England; held citizenship in three countries (US, UK, and France); argued cases of international import involving religious liberty and human rights before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg; debated the likes of the infamous atheist Madalyn Murray O’Hair, death-of-God theologian Thomas J. J. Altizer, and liberal Bishop James Pike; and who, at the final count, had twelve earned degrees (including advanced degrees in law, history, philosophy, and theology) from such diverse institutions as UC Berkeley, University of Chicago, Essex, Cardiff, and Strasbourg. He published over seventy books and 250 articles in eight languages, was editor of an international journal of classical theology and apologetics, and did the definitive treatment on the history of efforts to locate Noah’s ark as well as personally led two expeditions up Mount Ararat in search of the ark. With such an interesting and vast scholarly background and reputation for utterly engaging public lecturing, and with the honed polemical ability and advocacy skills of an English barrister, French *avocat* called to the Paris Bar, and American attorney licensed to practice in California, Virginia, and Washington D.C. and before the Supreme Court of the United States, John Warwick Montgomery had a staggering impact for the gospel of Jesus Christ in this modern secular era.

JWM...As Seen in 3D (Doctorates, that is)

John Warwick Montgomery was born on October 18, 1931, in Warsaw, New York, to Maurice Warwick Montgomery and Harriet Smith Montgomery. John's father owned a retail feed company, so when they discovered that young John had severe, life-threatening allergies to farm animals, he was sent to live with his grandmother, who was a believing Christian and a Fundamentalist Baptist with a very high view of Scripture and its accuracy. John attended Cornell University and majored in classics, and it was while at Cornell that he first encountered serious orthodox and evangelical theology. He was converted to Christianity in 1949. Montgomery immediately sought to determine which expression of Christianity most clearly mirrored the Scriptures, so he set the Greek text of the New Testament alongside the thirty-nine Articles of the Anglican Church of England, the Reformed Heidelberg Catechism, and the Lutheran Augsburg Confession. He concluded that Lutheranism adhered most closely to the biblical text and promptly became a confessional Lutheran. Montgomery appreciated how Lutheran theology emphasized the doctrine of justification as the central doctrine on which the church rises or falls, and early in his academic studies he decided to focus on the defense and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ while advocating for the total reliability of the Scriptures.

Montgomery finished his studies at Cornell University, graduating in 1952 with distinction and a degree in philosophy and classics. His academic studies were far from over, as he later earned an additional eleven degrees, including: a B.L.S. (1954) and M.A. (1958) from University of California-Berkeley, an M.Div. (1958) and S.T.M. (1960) from Wittenberg University, a Ph.D. (1962) from the University of Chicago, a Th.D. (1964) from the University of Strasbourg, an LL.B. (1977) from LaSalle University, a diploma (1978) from the International Institute of

Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, an M.Phil. (1983) from the University of Essex, an honorary doctorate (1999) from the Institute for Religion and Law in Moscow, an LL.M. (2000) and LL.D. (2003) from Cardiff University in Wales.

Montgomery considered himself an evangelical, but his embrace of the evangelical label should not be confused with an acceptance of *sociological* evangelicalism so prevalent in the United States. Montgomery's formal theological commitment, training, and temperament mark him out clearly as a confessional Lutheran. His theological roots are found in Luther's Reformation and the doctrine of the freedom of the Christian rather than the revivalistic Wesleyan Methodism or pietistic and moralistic Arminianism of much of American evangelicalism.

JWM, The Battle for the Bible, and the Great Missouri Divide

In the 1970's and 80's, Lutheranism (as did many denominations) went through a series of theological conflicts centered on opposing views concerning the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. During these debates, Montgomery, a Missouri Synod Lutheran (a conservative branch of American Lutheranism) was a veritable menace to theological liberals within the Synod and anathema to so-called "moderating" Lutherans. During the 1970s, the Missouri Synod had a significant theological faction arguing that Scripture contained errors and contradictions, and in his distinctive fashion, Montgomery called out (by name) those involved in compromise, while at the same time dissecting the fatal weaknesses of their arguments (weaknesses which in many cases had been articulated and refuted centuries earlier).

As a French-speaking Lutheran without a German surname and lacking degrees from Synod-blessed schools, Montgomery was regarded with a large dose of suspicion by many in old-line Lutheran circles. Oddly enough, the most frequent criticisms of Montgomery were accusations that he was either a liberal (because he was willing to teach all manner of Christians) or an Arminian (because he valued argument as a tool for communicating the Christian message and invited non-Christians to “weigh the evidence” for the truth of the claims of Christianity). Even his own Lutheran church body has ignored his work at a time when its rediscovery would be invaluable. It was largely due to courageous polemicists such as Montgomery and Robert Preus in the late 1960s and early 70s that the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod successfully steered its seminary away from the path of theological liberalism. Yet despite Montgomery’s essential role in this theological turnaround, Lutherans by-and-large never understood, let alone embraced, Montgomery as one of their own. Of course, that assumes Lutherans have heard of him. Most have not.

Montgomery’s unique contributions to the apologetic task and his robust defense of the faith are best seen in his ability to integrate his training as a theologian, historian, philosopher, and lawyer with an unswerving commitment to the centrality of the saving message of Jesus Christ as it is contained in a totally reliable Scripture. His commitment to centering his apologetic on both the formal (Scripture and its reliability) and material (the Gospel) principles arises directly from his Lutheran orthodoxy. Montgomery’s evidential approach to apologetics is directly tied to the incarnational focus of Lutheran theology—that God became man at a specific time in history.

In summary, John Warwick Montgomery’s impact can be best understood by seeing him as an evangelical, evidential, and confessional Lutheran apologist.

An Evangelical Apologist

John Warwick Montgomery's life and work was above all *evangelical*—that is, its sum and substance was a commitment to the intellectual defensibility of the gospel, the complete trustworthiness of the record in which that gospel is found, and the aggressive presentation of that saving gospel to all people by calling for their personal commitment to Jesus who saves. The early Lutherans were called “evangelicals,” a term that comes from the Greek word *evangelion*, or *evangel*, and simply means “good news” or “gospel.” The Lutherans of sixteenth-century Germany were originally called “evangelicals” because of their emphasis on Christ's atoning death and resurrection, and this same gospel was the focus of all Montgomery's writing, lecturing, and debating. Having heard him speak and lecture hundreds of times, he never failed to deliver a lecture on human rights, gastronomy, Sherlock Holmes, analytical philosophy, or the music of J. S. Bach without discussing the implications that topic had for the proclamation and defense of the gospel.

Montgomery's evangelical focus is particularly evident in his public presentations. There are three things one could *always* be sure of when attending a Montgomery lecture. First, he prepared like a trial lawyer operating in front of a jury. Montgomery had a keen awareness of his audience and had a powerful gift of being able to articulate advanced content to any level, whatever the topic might be and regardless of whether there were six hundred people, sixty people, or six people in attendance. Second, Montgomery ensured that the case for the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Christ's perfect life, atoning death, and verifiable resurrection) always found its way into his presentation and emphasized the *extra nos* character of that evidential case. Third, his presentations were always at the highest level of scholarship and had such academic rigor that one could confidently invite a skeptic without the least apprehension. One

can still advise someone to read or listen to Montgomery with the same confidence one has when recommending they read C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Any non-Christian in the audience was respected, not talked down to, and not subjected to "in group" Christian lingo. Modern-day American evangelicalism could benefit from a rediscovery of this apologetic acumen, an approach that combines rigorous research, clarity in message, breadth of application, and upholds the utter centrality of the gospel as the intellectually credible center in dialogue with unbelief.

The Reformers referred to the gospel as the "material principle of all theology." Recognizing the centrality of this good news, Montgomery argued that a gospel contained in a text with errors and contradictions is intellectually indefensible. If the texts that give us the gospel (that is, the Holy Scripture, sometimes known as the "formal principle of all theology") cannot be trusted in what they say about what the Temple in Jerusalem looked like, how can they be trusted when they speak of the heavenly Jerusalem? Montgomery saw the logical landmines created by neo-orthodox theologians and "mediating evangelicals" as they sought to maintain what Montgomery regarded as a hopelessly unbiblical contradiction—an *inerrant* gospel residing in an *errant* Scripture. Montgomery gave no place to those who sought to undermine the sole theological foundation of the canonical Scriptures. He viewed those who replaced inerrancy with "infallibility" and "partial inerrancy" as existing on the same theological continuum with those willing to give up the faith altogether. As an evangelical apologist, Montgomery encouraged modern evangelicals to rediscover total confidence in the gospel and to recover a vigorous and intellectually defensible ground for that gospel in a totally reliable Scripture.

An Evidential Apologist

Montgomery utilized an evidential and fact-driven approach in his defense of the saving gospel and the record that contains it. His best-known work, *History, Law, and Christianity*, presents a “historical-legal” apologetic that was utterly innovative and sets him apart from other contemporary apologists. This work sets forth several tests to determine the reliability of the New Testament gospels. Montgomery builds on these tests and presents a tight evidential progression that culminates by proving the case for Christianity under legal standards of evidential probability.

The outline for the historical-legal argument progresses through a series of four propositions. First, Montgomery asserts that the gospels are reliable historical documents or *primary source material*. Virtually all scholars (even non-Christians) admit that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written within fifty years after Christ’s death, and most agree that John was written within sixty-five years after Christ’s death. Objectors can verify this in any credible encyclopedia. Second, in these reliable records Christ claims to be God in human flesh (see Matt 11:27; John 12:45; John 10:30; Matt 16:13–17). Third, Christ’s bodily resurrection is described in great detail in all four gospel accounts. Fourth and finally, Christ’s resurrection proves his claim to be God. Of course, a corollary of this argument is as follows: If Christ is God, whatever he says is true, and Christ stated that the Old Testament was infallible (Matt 5:17–19) and that the coming New Testament (written by apostles or close associates of apostles) would be infallible as well (John 14:26–27; John 16:12–15; Acts 1:21–26).

The flow of Montgomery’s legal defense of the faith arises from his training as an English barrister, American attorney, and French advocat and flows naturally from the groundbreaking work of professor Simon Greenleaf of the Harvard Law School. Following Greenleaf’s approach,

substantive or material presuppositions are kept to the absolute minimum. The least quantum of data is *assumed* (only presuppositions of form, such as assuming the objectivity of the external world, the inferential operations of induction and deduction, the meaningfulness of language, the validity of the law of noncontradiction) so that the maximum amount of data is capable of being *discovered*. In the historical-legal apologetic presented by Montgomery, inquirers are invited to investigate the claims of Christianity contained in the New Testament documents as they would any other work of antiquity and to apply probability reasoning—that is, reasoning used by all of us every single day to negotiate our way through life.

The importance of Montgomery’s legal or juridical emphasis in apologetics can be seen in at least three applications. First, in the concept of probability reasoning; second, in his use of the principle of the “burden of proof;” and finally, in his insistence that a *verdict* be rendered and that the historical case elevates one beyond mere intellectual acknowledgment or even assent to the claims of Christ into a personal *fiducia* or trust that the work of Christ is for that specific person.

Montgomery helps us understand why lawyers have been more inclined to do apologetics than say dentists or street cleaners. It’s not only because Scripture is so intertwined with law but because Christian truth claims cry out for verification. Montgomery dedicated his energy to establishing that the testimony of biblical witnesses are not subject to the hearsay objection, but they stand up to the most rigorous cross-examination. Whether he is applying the parol evidence rule or the principles supporting the admittance into evidence of any ancient document, the biblical documents are, simply put, the best attested works of all antiquity.

A Confessional Lutheran Apologist

Montgomery's apologetic is both evangelical and evidential *because* it is confessionally Lutheran. His apologetical efforts focus on the perfect life and atoning death of the Jesus who suffered under Pontius Pilate. As a confessional Lutheran, Montgomery's approach was centered on the gospel of Jesus Christ. From his earliest lectures in Lutheranism and the defense of the biblical gospel, Montgomery remained a faithful proclaimer of Christ crucified for all and maintained an unflinching commitment to the truth of the Christian faith (as expressed in the confessional documents of the Lutheran Reformation), to Luther's freedom of the Christian in Christ (who has set us free from the law of sin and death), and to the Lordship of Christ over all intellectual and cultural life. His apologetical work flowed directly out of his commitment to the insights of the Lutheran Reformation. Yet what sets Montgomery apart from other serious confessional Lutherans is that he was not only an apologist and a contagiously zealous defender of the faith but also an *evangelist*. For Montgomery, there is ultimately no tension between being a serious follower of the insights of the Lutheran Reformation, a zealous advocate of Christ crucified for unbelievers, and a proclaimer of "many infallible proofs" that demand a personal verdict.

John Warwick Montgomery consistently defended the total trustworthiness of Scripture and incorporated innovative techniques from other disciplines to accomplish this. The insights of analytical philosophy and legal argumentation are present throughout his works defending the inerrancy of Scripture. Similarly, his defense of the gospel found in Scripture also benefitted from his training in legal argumentation. His development of a legal-historical case for Christ, beginning with the factual assertion of the primary source quality and general reliability of the

gospel records, is unique among apologists. His unrelentingly evidential and legal approach to defending Christ crucified sets Montgomery apart from many modern apologists whose focus is on proving “mere theism.” Montgomery was led to pursue legal training later in life, and he did this for the explicit purpose of integrating legal reasoning with the defense of the central claims of the Christian faith. Today, the *International Academy of Apologetics, Evangelism & Human Rights* in Strasbourg, France, has influenced a generation of apologists, many of whom are lawyers and judges who have attended the Academy and have obtained Fellow or *Diplome* status.

Montgomery’s significant impact on apologetics did not prevent him from engaging in robust public debates with renowned secularists or from having an active career litigating some of the most influential human rights cases at the European Court of Human Rights. He defended the freedom to preach the gospel in Greece (outside of the influence of the Orthodox Church), as well as more recently defending the practice of religious freedom by Christians in Moldova.

Montgomery’s contributions can be generally characterized as focused on the gospel of Christ for both the tough and the tender-minded. For the tough-minded individual, he offers an impressive body of legal, historical, philosophical, and evidential apologetical writings that will be of critical value for future defenders of the faith for generations to come. For the tender-minded—those more interested in literature, art, music, and aesthetics—he offers works that speak to how the gospel fulfills the deepest longings of the fractured human heart. His works on the power of compelling allegorical and mythical stories, such as those presented by C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams and reflected in the “transcendent” life of Sherlock Holmes, highlight the apologetical possibilities inherent in the so-called “archetypes of the collective unconscious.”

John Warwick Montgomery was an evangelical, evidential, and confessionally Lutheran apologist, a defender of the faith for all people and for all seasons. The *raison d'être* for the degrees, the books, the debates, and his tireless contribution to the defense of the faith was not his pursuit of an esoteric idea or an intellectual chess game to win human souls. Rather, it was a life lived *sub crucis*—under the cross—and dedicated to the aggressive and apostolic defense and presentation of Christ crucified for sinners and raised again for their justification.

To obtain the full version of this obituary with comprehensive footnotes and a bibliography, go to the website for the International Academy of Apologetics, Evangelism and Human Rights located at <https://www.apologeticsacademy.eu/>.