

BOOK REVIEW:

**JESUS ON TRIAL:  
A Lawyer Affirms the Truth of the Gospel**

by  
David Limbaugh  
(Regnery Press:Wash. D.C., 2014)

Reviewed by:  
Craig Parton, Esq.

David Limbaugh's recent best-selling book, "Jesus on Trial," had at least three things running in its favor before I ever cracked a page:

1. The title showed an obvious interest in legal apologetics. With "trial," "lawyer," and "truth" in the title, my legal chops were salivating to dig into a veritable 3-flower Michelin Guide feast of legal apologetics.

2. It is written by a self-described "practicing lawyer and former law professor." Good sign number two, I assured myself, as clearly this author will be familiar with the long history of lawyers interested in the apologetic task and in the application of legal and evidentiary methods to the most sophisticated secular challenges to Christian truth claims.

3. Obviously this will be concise and focused, well written and thoroughly documented—since it is 406 pages long and has over 750 endnotes and is written by a "New York Times bestselling author" and brother of the wildly popular conservative political commentator and talk show host, Rush Limbaugh.

I should never have underestimated the Shekinah glory attached to a celebrity last name and its ability to land a lucrative book contract along with a nationwide media tour to create the maximum buzz for that book. (In fact, Limbaugh's marketing "team" is one of the over 30 people and ministries that four pages of his "Acknowledgments" section pronounces a blessing on, including his "awesome children," his uncles, his aunts, his paternal grandparents, his maternal grandparents, and last but not least, his Big Brother Rush.)

What one first gets with "Jesus on Trial" is page after mind-numbing page of what has just blessed Limbaugh out of his socks from his own reading of the Bible.

It all comes from someone who sounds an awful lot like a self-taught layman who managed to string together citation after citation of sermonic statements from “awesome” pastors and equally “awesome” Bible teachers (yes, he cites his own pastor too, who is not only “extraordinary” but a “friend”). Rather than showing *any* familiarity with the over 120 works of legal apologetics since A.D. 1600 alone, Limbaugh shows exactly *zero* familiarity with *any* of them (see, for example, Philip Johnson, “*Juridical Apologists: 1600-2000: A Biographical Essay*,” found in *The Global Journal of Classical Theology*, Vol. 3, No. 1 [2002]). Believe it or not, there are over 35 historical works of apologetics written over the centuries by Christian lawyers with almost exactly the same title as Limbaugh’s book, and yet Limbaugh manages to cite *none* of them.<sup>1</sup> That would, apparently, be asking too much from a “New York Times Bestselling Author.”

Instead of showing familiarity with any legally trained Christian apologist in the past 400 years of Christian history, he instead repeatedly cites the likes of Bishop Fulton Sheen and a slug of mega-church preachers ranging from W.A. Criswell and H.A. Ironside to Charles Stanley and John McArthur. However, to his credit, Limbaugh does cite to a number of the faculty at Biola University (e.g., J.P. Moreland, William Lane Craig, and John Bloom). These men have long defended Christian orthodoxy through the development of vigorous apologetical approaches. It is just the complete ignorance of legal apologetics that is, well, unpardonable from a lawyer who should be expected to have done his homework.

I should qualify that last statement. There is *one* reference to *one* legal apologist in the 406 pages. Dr. John Warwick Montgomery gets a single citation. Limbaugh apparently has never figured out that Montgomery, an English Barrister, French Advocat, American attorney, and the leading legal apologist of the past five decades and author of over 50 books in six languages<sup>2</sup>, has litigated some of the most important religious liberty cases in the world at the International Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France. And he has obviously had no contact with Montgomery’s many recent works in the field of legal apologetics.

To be fair, Limbaugh does (after 200 pages of his pearls of wisdom about the Bible) actually present an objective apologetic and cites to a host of apologists who are professional theologians and academics. Not surprisingly, he shows great familiarity with popular apologists like Josh McDowell, Ravi Zacharias, and Lee Strobel (though Strobel, contrary to popular opinion, does not have a Juris Doctorate and is not an attorney, his apologetical work employing a journalistic style and not the approach of legal apologetics—but hey, it beats his references to Bishop Sheen and to, yes, Daniel Fuller who is—horrors of horrors—cited

repeatedly and always positively on *biblical authority* even though Fuller’s imbibing of biblical criticism is well documented<sup>3</sup>).

That said, Limbaugh is apparently totally oblivious to the staggering quantum of legal apologetics done by lawyers and judges ranging from Simon Greenleaf (Dean of the Harvard Law School in the 19th century and the greatest authority of his time on the laws of evidence) to Edmund Bennett (Dean of the Boston University Law School), Hugo Grotius (so-called “Father of International Law”), Sir Lionel Luckhoo (famous English Barrister and trial lawyer), Sir Matthew Hale (Lord High Chancellor under Charles II), Thomas Sherlock (Master of Temple Church and Bishop of London), Francis Jones Lamb (American trial lawyer), Lord Hailsham (former Lord High Chancellor of England and accomplished trial lawyer), Norman Anderson (leading English-speaking authority in Muslim law), Sir William Blackstone (codifier of the English common law in the 18th century), and a score of others.<sup>4</sup>

So, while we can rejoice that someone is getting national airtime now who moved from skepticism about Christian truth claims to ardent belief based on the evidence of the truthfulness of Christianity, Limbaugh brings nothing new to the table simply because he never integrates his profession with legal apologetics and with the defense of the Christian faith. And I think I may know why . . .

One of the authors repeatedly cited by Limbaugh is Douglas Groothuis and his 2011 volume entitled “Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith.” Elsewhere I have reviewed this book and noted its drawbacks—namely, that by trying to cover every argument for Christian belief, the author loses sight of making the central case for Christianity—the death of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world and His resurrection from the dead for its justification. Instead, Groothuis displays a strange obsession with the importance of his own writings, citing his own books and articles more than he does the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, and John Warwick Montgomery *combined*. Limbaugh has clearly partaken of this same wooden cup of bad hooch, except that he takes it down to the dregs by largely ignoring the important field of literary apologetics *entirely* and never even mentioning Tolkien or Sayers. While Groothuis’s book addresses such critical apologetics topics as “The Spirituality of the Christian Apologist,” “Prayer and the Apologist,” and the importance of “hospitality and conviviality,” Limbaugh’s *magnum opus* thrills with such sermonically-oriented subjects as a list of his “Aha” Moments, Part I (followed by—drum roll please—“Aha” Moments, Part II), “Why Should We Pray?”,

“Ecclesiastes,” “Our Suffering is Not Without Recovery,” and “It’s Not Knowing About God, But *Knowing* God.”

Like Groothuis, Limbaugh has made a critical methodological error from the start. He believes that Christianity is first presented as the best explanation of all truth and that the Christian theistic worldview is verified by arguing for each of its elements one by one. By the time the reader arrives—exhausted—at the central case for Christianity (the death and resurrection of Christ), he will have slipped into a diagnosable coma by having had his apologetics attic stocked plum full with the cosmological argument, the teleological argument, evidences for intelligent design, the moral argument—together with 200 pages of Bible study material (count ‘em!) that Limbaugh has accumulated during his personal Christian experience and apparently presumes that such material constitutes some kind of apologetic in which the unbeliever should be interested. It doesn’t—and I highly doubt that any serious or curious non-Christian will be moved by it to the truth of the faith, regardless of the author’s last name.

Having heard Limbaugh waxing on about his book on a popular radio show recently, I realized that he thinks and talks like a pastor (yet claiming all the time that he is actually being “respectful” of non-Christians and is really not preaching). He does very little *persuasion* and an awful lot of admonishing to “read the Bible and it will prove itself.” The only epistemological problem with this advice is that Mormonism, Scientology, Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Islam, and Hinduism, to name but a few competing worldviews, give exactly the same advice—“read our sacred texts and you will find them self-validating.” You would think a trained lawyer would know better than to start at an obvious epistemological point of no return.

The essential problem with “Jesus on Trial” is that in attempting in some sense to be a comprehensive defense of Christianity, it is sadly not Christocentric in any sense at all. By focusing on what is secondary in terms of gospel preachment (i.e., laboring through problems in the Old and New Testaments, wading into the plethora of world views, and tediously explaining the traditional proofs for the existence of God before eventually getting to the case for Jesus Christ), the apologetic task slips into something other than presenting Jesus Christ and Him crucified for sinners. After all, even the Devil is a Theist.

“Jesus on Trial” is certainly on the side of the angels, and for that we can be thankful. It is just unfortunate that someone legally trained, and with a platform most Christian apologists can only dream about ever having, has provided no

meaningful integration and application of his profession to the challenges of secularism. An opportunity has been missed to do something extraordinary in our culture. Others far better qualified<sup>5</sup> have done infinitely better, but they, sadly, are not endowed with the Limbaugh name.

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<sup>1</sup> For a partial listing of works by lawyers on the resurrection, reliability of the Gospels, science and Christian truth claims, the trial of Jesus, miracles, fulfilled prophecy, ethics, and world religions, see Ross Clifford, *John Warwick Montgomery's Legal Apologetic* (Bonn, Germany: Culture and Science Publishers), Appendix 1 at pg. 269 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, the following books by Montgomery that integrate legal methodology in dealing with the challenges of unbelief: *Law Above the Law, Law and Gospel, Christ Our Advocate, Human Rights and Human Dignity*, and *Evidence for Faith: Deciding the God Question*. All are available through [www.newreformationpress.com](http://www.newreformationpress.com).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Fuller's acceptance of biblical criticism and his plastic stand on biblical inerrancy has been known for decades and was particularly well examined and then masterfully fileted in the book, *God's Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany Publishers, 1974), edited by John Warwick Montgomery and available at New Reformation Press.

<sup>4</sup> See Ross Clifford, *Leading Lawyers Case for the Resurrection* (Edmonton, Alberta: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology and Public Policy, 1996), which looks at a number of lawyers over the centuries who have put Jesus and the resurrection on trial.

<sup>5</sup> For a contemporary volume laying out the evidence for Christian faith and applying the legal method to the resurrection in particular, see *Making the Case for Christianity: Responding to Modern Objections* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), edited by Korey Maas and Adam Francisco.