

BOOK REVIEW:

The Professor in the World's Court
By Boyd Pehrson

A Review of Dr. John Warwick Montgomery's autobiography,

Fighting the Good Fight: A Life in Defense of the Faith. Bonn, Germany: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2015. 288 pages. Paper. \$47.00. Also available in hardcover and paperback from Wipf and Stock.

John Warwick Montgomery's 60 plus years of research, writing and teaching on theology, law, and Christian apologetics, has earned him a fair share of admirers, as well as critics. Regular readers of his works, in recent years, have patiently waited for a particular volume—his autobiography, now delivered!

“Fighting the Good Fight: A Life in Defense of the Faith” refers to 1 Timothy 6:12, “Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses.”

This is true of the life work of Prof. Dr. Montgomery. Chiefly referred to as an “evidentialist” (a term Dr. Montgomery himself embraces), his work is only in part represented by this term. No one person has integrated more intellectual resources in defense of the Christian faith. Indeed, in his *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus* alone we find integrated all five spheres of classical philosophical investigation: Aesthetics, Epistemology, Ethics, Logic, and Metaphysics (as is found in almost all his works). Here, for instance, he utilizes analytical philosophy, patterned after Ludwig Wittgenstein's formal presentation, as a framework for a comprehensive Christian apologetic. This results in sorting out everyday difficulties of language and thought that cloud the unbeliever's mind of the Gospel's truth claims. It is not only the commonality of language that believers share with unbelievers, but, most importantly, a commonality of sin nature, the one prerequisite to the need for the Gospel—wherein salvation is found outside of ourselves through

faith in the person and work of the atoning and justifying Christ. Too often the commonalities are overlooked, in preference to withdrawing from the world, in order not to be somehow infected by it. Thus, it seems easier to “Love thy neighbor as thyself” when our neighbor is a like-minded fundamentalist hiding alongside us in a rabbit-hole of Christianity. Sadly, too often the Christian resigns their actual neighbor to hell by withdrawing their presence from sin-inspired unbelievers.

However, Christ’s Great Commission—“Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt 28:18) supersedes our fear of sin and death (which Christ has already conquered). So Dr. Montgomery has shown a path, a way to act on the Great Commission and to speak about the living revelation of the transcendent Father through his Son, in time and space, as presented in the inerrant, historical Christian Gospels. This commonality in language and in sin nature with the unbeliever allows us access to the “many infallible proofs” (Acts 1:3) whereby Christ showed himself after his death, burial, and resurrection, and also to share the reason for Christian belief, as Paul did at the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34). Dr. Montgomery’s path includes a lifetime of lectures and debates taking on the ideas of our day, along with his body of published work.

I thank God Dr. Montgomery takes the great Commission seriously. In my atheistic youth I first heard Montgomery debating Mormons on his radio show, and wittily skewering liberal clerics who went off the reservation. Unchurched, this was the first time I’d heard anything resembling intellectual assessment of the religious landscape. My only other contact with Christianity was unfortunately limited to glimpses of “Christian” television programming. I respected Montgomery’s wit and intelligence, and found his irreverent humor refreshing. About six years later, I set my foot on the path of trusting Christ and His Word. Thirteen years later I finally met Dr. Montgomery for the first time while attending his Strasbourg Academy. It was a delight to dine

with him in his adopted Shangri-La of Strasbourg, France. Convivial, gregarious, and generous with his time is how I've come to know Dr. Montgomery. His autobiography is true to the man with little patience for academic sloppiness, but strict and loving towards true students.

Montgomery's autobiography is academically and elegantly written, detached from emotionalism, sparing us the jarring self-seeking of mere memoir. In true Montgomerian style, included are copious footnotes! Though the narrative is concise and erudite, episodes and characters are revealed with graceful wit, astonishing candor, and compelling sensitivity. This delightful rendition of his life leaves the reader untaxed and justly educated for the effort.

As a professor and lecturer for 60 years, the sheer variety of personalities (some worthy of a Dickens novel) encountered along Montgomery's path eventually reveal unexpected betrayals and surprising friendships. In summation, however, Montgomery quotes John Donne's famous line: "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee" (Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, Meditation XVII.) This humanely sensitive Christian evocation of the universal problem of death, was misrepresented in Hemingway, as Dr. Montgomery points out. More recently it has been inverted by the self-styled darling of the left—writer Gore Vidal, who said "Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies." True to form, Vidal resigned his longtime opponent William F. Buckley to hell upon his death, in an obituary published on March 20, 2008. Such is the spirit of our age. However, attributed to Chilon of Sparta (600 BC) is the advice "De Mortuis Nil Nisi Bonum" (i.e., "Of the dead [speak] nothing but good"). Dr. Montgomery accordingly displays respect for opponents no longer among us.

This fight of the good fight needs tactics relevant to attacks on the Gospel by the spirit of each age. Since secular revolutions began toppling monarchies in favor of "democratic" rule, war

and disorder have become exponentially more dangerous and regular. Freud and Nietzsche have become the horse and carriage of the modern zeitgeist. The currency of Christian language and thought has been devalued. Montgomery explains that engaging a culture on its terms doesn't mean we accept it, indeed we are engaging in a discussion about the relevance of these terms. The inclusion of debate is part of a zeitgeist that embraces critique! Montgomery never shied from such a challenge. His debates are now part of a cultural shift of momentum in favor of inerrancy of scripture among Christians, and early dating of the Gospels among scholars. (See, for example, the February 2016 issue of *Smithsonian Magazine*—hardly a bastion of Christian orthodoxy—which printed a catalogue of recent New Testament archeological finds, including a recently unearthed home in Nazareth and synagogue in Migdal, contemporary to Jesus' time. The artifacts tend to support Gospel narratives. The *Smithsonian* article describes the Gospels as completed between AD 70-100.)

Montgomery's colorful debates are explained in his autobiography. His approach was always tactical. He learned to use humor to get his point across, and in debate to "sharpen the issues not blur them" (p. 65). He studied his opponent "every which way," always being extremely prepared. Because the opponent is already convinced of his own ideas, Montgomery instead worked to win the audience over. As a senior at Cornell he started the whole campus discussing the validity of mutually contradictory religious ideas through a humorous critique in the campus paper. He learned early on that stirring things up provides an opportunity for discussion! He notes several of his opponents remained respectful over the years.

Particularly revealing is his description of his youth. An earnest application to academics via his mother and classroom teacher grandmother, an interest in music, an Eagle Scout, a high school Valedictorian, and a lifeguard, all demonstrate an early work ethic and care for souls.

The volume is roughly 128 pages of autobiographical narrative (including footnotes), and 130 pages of supporting documents, important trial transcripts, and personal Montgomery ephemera and photo album.

Montgomery's apologetic is inductively oriented, as much as is his adherence to the historical Lutheran Confession perspective on scripture. Montgomery has often called out scholarly sloth and pet doctrines of systemization that circumvent factual inquiry. He cites the Marburg Colloquy where Luther simply stood on the very words of scripture "This is my body, ...this is my blood." When Luther is described as petulant at Marburg, we are amazed that the same scholar treats the same Luther as a hero for standing his ground on the same principle at the Diet of Worms! Montgomery's works show no tolerance for such inconsistencies and he points us to scholars who exhibit sufficient depth exploring the realities of Luther's actions, regardless of their denominational perspective. Indeed, recent scientific inquiry has ironically been more supportive of Luther's view of the sacramental elements, than to his opponents' views! Montgomery has us consider the interconvertability of matter where elements remain the elements they are, though may be observed in different states (e.g., light and chemical photography). Shortly after Einstein, investigations of quantum-correct multi-dimensional unified field theories, and recent experimental discovery of the Higgs boson, compel us to be aware of extra spatial dimensions. This puts Luther, merely standing on the words of scripture, squarely in the more scientific light than his opponents who argued against such ideas in the sacrament on the basis of their logic. Thus, Montgomery's studied approach to, and justifiable adoption of, the historical Lutheran Confessions, has put him on the outs in a variety of academic circles. Surmounting certain Evangelical and Reformed prejudices has been a lifelong effort.

Later chapters covering Montgomery's career as Professor, Barrister, and French Avocat

are most fascinating. His degree of energy and commitment are inspiring. The overall effect of the work is a study in providence. God's grace was present at each step, and redemption is a lifelong state for the Christian. To what extent this providence is of God's mercy or due to prayer we'll not know this side of eternity. Perhaps this autobiography will be Volume 1 of several more. Let's hope so!