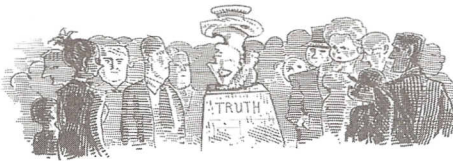


Jonathan Aitken



A Theologian of Reformed Convictions

J.I. PACKER, venerated by many as the greatest Protestant theologian of modern times, turned 80 this summer. His first public engagement as an octogenarian was to lead a retreat at Laity Lodge, a renowned spiritual center created in the beautiful hill country of West Texas under the leadership of Howard E. Butt. I was at the same retreat, sharing (in a small way!) the teaching to the retreatants with the legendary Dr. Packer. As this was my first long encounter with the great man, it was a marvelous opportunity to learn from him, to get to know him, and now to reflect on him in this column.

In a recent cover story on the world's most influential evangelicals, *Time* magazine gave Packer star billing, describing him as a "Theological Traffic Cop" and a "Doctrinal Solomon." Allowing for the journalese, these labels are fair. For Packer is generally regarded as the wisest of arbiters when it comes to sifting theological wheat from evangelical chaff. Although far too few theologians are willing to accept the processes of either sifting or arbitration as part of their vocation, nevertheless the best and brightest of them in the Protestant firmament would surely find it hard to quarrel with this credo of Packerism:

I see evangelical strength desperately needing to be undergirded by Reformation convictions, other-

wise the numeric growth of evangelicals, which has been such a striking thing in our time, is never likely to become a real power, morally and spiritually in the community, that it ought to be. I mean by Reformation truth a God centered way of thinking, an appreciation of His sovereignty, an appreciation of how radical the damage of sin is to the human condition and community, and with that an appreciation of just how radical and transforming is the power of the Lord Jesus Christ in His saving grace.

The theme of God's saving grace featured strongly in Jim Packer's talks at Laity Lodge. The one that touched me most deeply was his hour-long exposition of John Chapter 4, which tells the story of the Samaritan woman who meets Jesus at the well of Sychar. Slightly to my surprise, it was Packer's humanity that held my attention long before we reached his theology. For in quiet Bible teacher mode he fleshed out the character of *the Lady* at the well (as he courteously called her), portraying her with moving sympathy as he emphasized her isolation and her vulnerability to which Jesus responded with such gentleness and firmness.

Isolation, vulnerability, gentleness, and firmness have all had their part to play in the life story of J.I. Packer. Son of an English railway clerk, he went to high

school in the cathedral city of Gloucester. At the age of seven he was chased out of the schoolyard and into the path of an oncoming bread van. He suffered horrendous head injuries whose scars are still visible. He had to wear a steel plate over the damaged area of his forehead for the next ten years. Unable to play sports, he became an isolated schoolboy who withdrew from much of ordinary teenage life, compensating for his vulnerability by immersing himself in his studies. Alone with his books and his second-hand typewriter (a rare possession for a boy in wartime Britain), he won a scholarship to Oxford, where he read Greats or classics. Influenced by C.S. Lewis, he became a committed Christian in 1944. He studied theology at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, where his thesis on the Puritan writer Richard Baxter won him a first. After being ordained, he served as a Church of England curate in Birmingham, where he met and married a free-spirited Welsh hospital nurse, Kit Mallet. Together they decided that theological education was where the Packer future lay, so Jim became a tutor at a seminary in Bristol, Tyndale Hall. During his early years as an academic, he wrote two books that established his reputation and had a seminal influence on the still small and often scorned British evangelical community. *Fundamentalism* and *The Word of God* (1958) and *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (1961) were Packer classics that in the words of his biographer Alister McGrath, revealed the author as “a statesman within the evangelical constituency” and “a theologian of reformed convictions with that rarest of abilities—communication skills.”

PACKER ACHIEVED international recognition as a Christian communicator when in 1973 he published *Knowing God*. He hoped it might become a respected study guide for a small readership of the reformed faithful. To his surprise the book became a global best-seller, translated into 15 languages. It is still required reading for conservative evangelicals, particularly among Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and serious Anglicans. You soon understand where Packer is coming from when in the foreword of *Knowing God* he unsheathes his theological sword to attack two insidious trends of contemporary Christianity. Trend one, says Packer, is that “Christian minds have been conformed to the modern spirit.” Trend two is that “Christian minds have been confused by the modern skepticism.” He cuts through the easy believism of doctrinal compromise with the rallying call of the Prophet Jeremiah,

“Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is and walk in it and you will find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16).

It follows from such a prospectus that old-fashioned firmness of Biblical truth is central to Packer-

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ism. He is at his uncompromising best on topics such as the Wrath of God; Goodness and Severity; and the Jealous God. It is not easy these days to find a fashionable, fill-the-seats church pastor preaching on any of these doctrines which Packer upholds. For example, he regards our willingness or unwillingness to contemplate God’s severity as the litmus test of whether or not we are committed to our faith: “If we would truly know God and be known of Him,” writes Packer, “we should ask him to teach us here and now to reckon with the solemn reality of his wrath.”

Reckoning with the wrath of God is strong meat for many 21st-century Christian believers whose spiritual digestive tracts have become weakened by post-modernist junk food. Yet although the way Packer presents his teaching is fearless, he is light years away from the dinosaurish preachers of fire and brimstone fundamentalism. Not only is he open to new theological ideas and sometimes willing to endorse them courageously (his pioneering support for the Evangelicals and Catholics Together movement is one such example), he is a gifted and gentle pastor as well as a profound Biblical scholar and theologian. This combination makes him a past master of putting across the message of Gospel truth with warmth, humanity, humor, sympathy, and understanding.

From his North American base as Professor of Theology at Regent College, Vancouver, J.I. Packer at 80 has acquired iconic status as the keeper of the conservative Christian conscience. I regarded my week of working in harness with him at Laity Lodge as one of life’s great spiritual and educational experiences. So did most of the retreatants. Don’t miss J.I. Packer as an author or preacher if he comes your way. ☞

Jonathan Aitken, The American Spectator’s *High Spirits* columnist, is most recently author of *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed* (Doubleday). His earlier books include *Nixon: A Life*.