

J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future

The Impact of His Life and Thought

Edited by
Timothy George


Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Timothy George, editor,
J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future: The Impact of His Life and Thought,
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2009. Used by permission.

© 2009 by Timothy George

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

J. I. Packer and the evangelical future : the impact of his life and thought / edited by Timothy George.

p. cm. — (Beeson divinity studies)

Chiefly proceedings of a conference held Sept. 25–27, 2006 at Beeson Divinity School.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-3387-2 (pbk.)

1. Packer, J. I. (James Innell)—Congresses. 2. Evangelicalism—Congresses. I. George, Timothy.

BX5199.P22J26 2009

270.8'2092—dc22

2009022735

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled TNIV are from the HOLY BIBLE, TODAY'S NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. TNIV®. Copyright © 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Contents

- Preface 9
Timothy George
- List of Contributors 13
1. The Great Tradition: J. I. Packer on Engaging with the Past to Enrich the Present 19
Alister E. McGrath
 2. The Gifts of J. I. Packer: A Cool Head, a Warm Heart, and the Great Tradition 29
Edith M. Humphrey
 3. Pumping Truth: J. I. Packer's Journalism, Theology, and the Thirst for Truth 43
David Neff
 4. J. I. Packer's Theological Method 55
Donald J. Payne
 5. God Has Spoken: The Primacy of Scripture in J. I. Packer's Ministry 69
Paul R. House
 6. J. I. Packer and Pastoral Wisdom from the Puritans 87
Mark E. Dever
 7. Retrieval and Renewal: A Model for Evangelical Spiritual Vitality 99
D. Bruce Hindmarsh
 8. J. I. Packer: An English Nonconformist Perspective 115
Carl R. Trueman
 9. Packer, Puritans, and Postmoderns 131
Charles W. Colson

10. Christ without Culture 143
Richard John Neuhaus
11. On Knowing God 155
James Earl Massey
12. *Unde, Quonam, et Quemadmodum?* Learning Latin (and Other Things) from J. I. Packer 163
Timothy George
13. Reflection and Response 171
J. I. Packer

Appendix A: Bibliography of the Works of J. I. Packer:

July 1952–August 2008 187

Appendix B: A Tribute to J. I. Packer 231

Gary A. Parrett

Notes 233

Index 249

Preface

TIMOTHY GEORGE

The genesis of this book goes back to a conversation Alister McGrath and I had at Oxford about our friend, J. I. Packer, his influence on us, and the role he has played in the revitalization of evangelicalism as a living tradition within the world Christian movement. We wanted to bring together a symposium where friends, colleagues, and former students could express their gratitude and respect to him on his eightieth birthday, but we knew that Packer, with his natural British (and perhaps also Canadian?) reserve, would balk at the idea. He did. It took some time for us to convince him that this gathering was meant not only to celebrate a life well lived to the glory of God (the life of one, let it be said, who is still going strong and shows no signs of diminishment at age eighty-three), but more importantly to exalt J. I. Packer's God—the great, awesome, three-personal God of joy and grace, the God of creation and redemption we meet in the pages of the Bible and see most clearly in the face of Jesus Christ.

In time, this long-planned conference did in fact take place on September 25–27, 2006, at Beeson Divinity School on the campus of Samford University, in Birmingham, Alabama. Most of the essays in this volume were first given at that conference and retain something of the verve and color of their original presentation. Some who were invited to speak at the conference were not able to be present on that occasion, including Sir Fred and Lady Elizabeth Catherwood, whose friendship with J. I. Packer goes back to his student days at Oxford. Several other scholars have since contributed fresh material for this publication. Together, these essays present a mosaic of some major aspects of J. I. Packer's life and thought and also a prism through which we may learn

something about the future of the evangelical church—its opportunities, dangers, disciplines, and direction.

It needs to be said at once that the influence of J. I. Packer far exceeds the range of issues and personalities represented in this volume. In preparing the bibliography included at the end of this book we came across translations of Packer's writings in many languages: including Estonian, Hindi, and Urdu. It is a measure of Packer's modesty that he was not even aware of some of these. His writings are so voluminous that it is hard to imagine that they have come from the pen of one person. We did discover an unusual title by a certain James I. Packer, *Characteristics of Absent Father Families Receiving Aid to Needy Children in California*, done in partial fulfillment for an MA thesis in social work at the University of Southern California in 1952. After some investigation, it became clear that this was not our man. Who, then, is the real J. I. Packer?

James Innell Packer was born July 22, 1926, in Gloucestershire, England. The son of a clerk for the Great Western Railway, Packer grew up in a modest, working-class, nominally Anglican family who encouraged their bookish son by giving him a typewriter. At age seven, he survived a violent collision with a bread truck that left him physically scarred for life and something of a "speckled bird" among his student peers. Packer received a scholarship to Oxford University, where he heard the famous apologist C. S. Lewis speak and was influenced by his writings, especially *The Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity*. But it was in meetings of the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, a British version of InterVarsity, that Packer found a living relationship with Jesus Christ and committed his life to Christian service.

After teaching Greek and Latin at Oak Hill Theological College in London, Packer enrolled in Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, where he studied theology and was ordained a priest in the Church of England. Packer served as a lecturer at Tyndale Hall, Bristol, from 1955 to 1961, and as librarian then principal at Latimer House, Oxford, from 1961 to 1969. He was principal of Tyndale Hall in 1970, and associate principal of Trinity College, Bristol, from 1971 to 1979.

Having found the writings of John Owen helpful in his own spiritual life, he worked closely with Martin Lloyd-Jones to encourage a revival of interest in the Puritans and their writings. Packer's own writings, especially "*Fundamentalism*" and *the Word of God* and *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, established him as a formidable theological voice for the evangelical movement. In 1973, he published *Knowing God*, a modern theological classic.

In 1979, Packer moved to Vancouver to assume his position at Regent College, where he serves as the Board of Governors' Professor of Theology. From this base, he has had a deep and encompassing influence on many renewal movements within North American Christianity and beyond. Through his many books and lectureship around the globe, he has become a highly regarded leader in the world Christian movement. In 2000, he chaired the theological

track at the World Conference on Evangelism convened by Billy Graham in Amsterdam. He has long been associated with *Christianity Today* as a visiting scholar and senior editor. In recent years, he has garnered much attention through his participation in the movement known as Evangelicals and Catholics Together.

He also has been involved in theological conversations with Orthodox believers, charismatic Christians, and mainline Protestant theologians. In all these contexts, he has promoted a vigorous spiritual theology, faithful to the Holy Scriptures, and in keeping with the Great Tradition. Packer has been ever mindful of the maxim of Richard Baxter, on whom he wrote his Oxford doctoral dissertation:

*in necessariis Unitas,
in non-necessariis Libertas,
in utrisque Caritas.*¹

Despite his charitable spirit and his desire to foster a unitive, irenic evangelicalism, Packer has not been able to avoid the effects of the deep ruptures within the world Anglican Communion. In June 2002 the Anglican Diocese of New Westminster in Vancouver voted to approve the blessing of same-sex unions. Packer, among other synod members, saw this action as a flagrant abandonment of the authority of Scripture and walked out in protest. In February 2008 Packer's church in Vancouver voted to seek episcopal oversight from an orthodox Anglican bishop. In response to charges brought against them by the bishop in Vancouver, Packer and other evangelical clergy declared their determination to continue their ministry "under the jurisdiction of and in communion with those who remained faithful to historic, orthodox Anglicanism and as part of the Anglican Communion worldwide."² In the midst of controversy that continues to unfold, Packer has received acclaim for his courage and commitment in the face of what by all accounts must be considered one of the great tragedies in contemporary church history.

It has been my privilege to know and work closely with J. I. Packer for the past twenty-five years, only a fraction of his long and still amazingly productive career. I have seen him buffeted by adversity and criticized unfairly, but I have never seen him sag. His smile is irrepressible and his laughter can bring light to the most somber of meetings. His love for all things human and humane shines through. His mastery of ideas and the most fitting words in which to express them is peerless. Ever impatient with shams of all kinds, his saintly character and spirituality run deep. I love to hear him pray. Again and again, he has reminded us that we live our lives *coram deo* and in the light of eternity. He has taught us that theology is for doxology and devotion, that theology is always at its best "when it is consciously done under the eye of the God of whom it speaks, and when it is singing to his glory."³

1

The Great Tradition

J. I. Packer on Engaging with the Past to Enrich the Present

ALISTER E. MCGRATH

J. I. Packer identifies himself on a map of Christian possibilities using a multiple series of coordinates: he is, he affirms, “an Anglican, a Protestant, an evangelical, and in C. S. Lewis’ sense a ‘mere Christian.’”¹ The agenda underlying this volume is both honorific and analytical—setting out to celebrate the achievements of this major evangelical theological and spiritual writer (and there is much to celebrate) while at the same time asking how he helps evangelicalism, Protestantism, and what I like to call “Great Tradition Christianity” strategize for the future. Neither I nor any of the distinguished contributors will be able to do justice to Packer’s immense literary output, the quality of his theological analysis, and the shrewdness of many of his judgments in the limited space that is available to us. I shall have to content myself with scratching the surface.

I count it both a personal and professional privilege to address this topic. As one who taught historical and systematic theology for more than twenty years at Oxford, primarily but not exclusively to those who would enter pastoral ministry or serve as missionaries, I have often reflected on how difficult it is to teach theology in a way that maintains its integrity as an academic discipline while at the same time stimulating, guiding, and nourishing the

life of faith. I can only claim modest success, I think, in my attempts to do so. Yet if one speaks to students who attended Tyndale Hall, Bristol, during the 1950s; Trinity College, Bristol, during the 1970s; or Regent College, Vancouver, at just about any point during the last quarter of a century, one will hear them acclaim Packer as a master of this art. There is a popular saying in England that is partly born of cynicism and partly out of the dreadful reality of experience: “Those who can, do; those who cannot, teach.” Packer is a rare example of an original thinker with a genuine gift for teaching who confounds this piece of popular wisdom.

Packer and I also have one or two shared areas of experience. We both served as principals of leading theological colleges of the Church of England. Perhaps I should not say too much about this, save to remark that running such institutions is not particularly conducive to either one’s sanity or one’s capacity to get some serious research done. I take great comfort from the fact that Packer went on to achieve so much after moving on from such a position.

My professional admiration for Packer as a historical theologian is grounded not simply in his excellent historical analyses but in the use to which he puts history. When I first read his doctoral thesis on Richard Baxter, I was gripped by the rigor of Packer’s analysis but also sensed the importance that he attached both to the questions that Baxter was handling and to Baxter himself as an important (though far from infallible) guide to these issues.² Packer is able to popularize from profundity; his accessible accounts and applications of leading theological and spiritual themes are grounded in a deep knowledge of the issues.

While not agreeing with Packer at every point, I find in him someone whose views are so well biblically and theologically grounded, so well defended, so well articulated, and so well applied that one could wish for no better dialogue partner in wrestling with the great theological issues of our own age as well as of the past. This is one of the reasons that I suspect future generations will continue to find him a significant resource. In my view, Packer shares a combination of properties I also see in George Whitefield and Charles Haddon Spurgeon—a commitment to a clear Reformed theological position along with a personal graciousness that enables dialogue and collaboration with others.

In this essay, I want to focus above all on one topic: Packer’s distinctive and, in my view, critically important insight that evangelical theology is both enriched and stabilized by attentiveness to the past. I have chosen to focus on this topic for a number of reasons. Perhaps very obviously, it resonates strongly with my professional interest as a historical theologian. It is always nice to find someone else who thinks that the study of the past might actually be theologically useful. My second reason is perhaps equally obvious; having read J. I. Packer’s works over many years, I have noticed and respected his engagement with the past, and his capacity to enrich our own grasp of God’s glory and greatness

by a principled dialogue with those who made that discovery before we were around. But my third reason is perhaps the most significant, and it requires a little further discussion. I believe that evangelicalism as a whole needs to listen to Packer's approach to theologizing—and I use the verb deliberately—in the light of the present challenges that face the movement.

One of the most interesting themes that I discern within evangelical history during the past fifty years is its growing interest in issues of theology. The acceleration of such interest reflects a number of factors. One such factor is the existence of role models who have demonstrated the utility of theology and its capacity to illuminate and inform the life of faith. Evangelicalism has always been somewhat pragmatic in its evaluation of individuals and methods. To put it rather crudely, the core criterion used in this process of evaluation has often been: Will this work? Will this make any difference? Will this help me grow in faith? Will this help the ministry of my church? And while I would wish to enter a note of caution about these concerns, I think they must be respected. Through his writings, and especially through his classic work *Knowing God*, Packer has demonstrated the utility of theology to a rising generation of evangelicals, who had hitherto tended to see their intellectual commitment to the gospel as restricted to reading a few biblical commentaries.

Perhaps this is an idiosyncrasy on my part, but I am firmly convinced that an integral part of the walk of faith is a “discipleship of the mind.” Paul talks about renewing our minds (Rom. 12:1–4), and this seems to me to be an integral part of our conversion—the reshaping and recalibration of our ways of thinking in accordance with the patterns of reality disclosed in Christ. At this point, I would like to offer a case study, drawn from an early point in Packer's rich and varied career, which seems to me to help us appreciate his insistence on the importance of theology in relation to faith and, above all, to engagement with the Great Tradition.

The example is Packer's 1955 critique of certain aspects of the “victorious living” theology associated with the Keswick Convention.³ This critique was prompted by a specific occasion—the publication of a book promoting this approach that seemed to Packer to be seriously deficient. Packer's early love of the Puritans, which developed in the 1940s, had persuaded him that there were already approaches available to address the problems of personal holiness that were considerably more realistic than the one he found in the Keswick teaching.

Yet such was the influence of this school of thought in England at the time that Packer believed it needed to be criticized at a much deeper level—not so much its pastoral effectiveness as its fundamental theological ideas. He had no doubt that Keswick's fatal weak spot lay in the idea of the human ability to make the critical decisions necessary to facilitate sanctification. For Packer, this was an uninformed Pelagianism, based on a hopelessly optimistic view of fallen human nature. For Packer, the Keswick teaching offered an understanding

of salvation that is “attenuated and impoverished,” resting on a theological axiom that is both “false to Scripture and dishonouring to God.”⁴

Most important of all was Packer’s suggestion that a theologically naïve Pietism inevitably lapsed into a Pelagianism of this kind. “Pelagianism is the natural heresy of zealous Christians who are not interested in theology.”⁵ Although Packer later took a more conciliatory attitude toward the Keswick school,⁶ this early criticism shows his passionate awareness of the pastoral and spiritual importance of theology. Well-meaning pastoral approaches and well-intended spiritual techniques may actually harm the life of faith if they are not securely grounded in theology. It is a theme that we find throughout Packer’s writings and one that I believe is not only important in itself but of particular importance within an evangelical culture that tends to regard validation as resting on practical outcomes.

Yet Packer’s emphasis on the importance of theology does not lead him into the somewhat dry and dusty approaches to theology that treats it as essentially abstract theorizing about God. The noted American Presbyterian writer James Henley Thornwell (1812–62) had no doubt of the danger of these kinds of excessively rationalist or cerebral approaches to theology. His comments bear repeating:

It gave no scope to the play of Christian feeling; it never turned aside to reverence, to worship, or to adore. It exhibited truth, nakedly and baldly, in its objective reality, without any reference to the subjective conditions which, under the influence of the Spirit, that truth was calculated to produce. It was a dry digest of theses and propositions—perfect in form, but as cold and lifeless as a skeleton.⁷

Such an approach to theology divorces it from the realm of experience—and hence from the reality of everyday Christian life, especially among believers who did not find intellectual analysis natural or easy.

Packer’s approach to theology is grounded in the Puritan tradition, that particularly English variant of Reformed theology that so often showed an exquisite sensitivity to the pastoral needs and spiritual realities of fallen human life. While his understanding of theology is perhaps best seen in *Knowing God*, I would like to single out his 1989 inaugural lecture as the first Sangwoo Youtong Chee Professor of Theology at Regent College, in which he reflected on the nature of theology and its relation to spirituality. The lecture offers an important vision of the nature of theology and above all a corrective to excessively rationalist understandings of theology that severely truncate its scope. Theology and spirituality, he argued, are intimately connected, not because of the will of theologians to try and make artificial connections with the totally different discipline of spirituality, but because theology, when rightly understood, leads into spirituality. Theology is to be understood, he writes, as “a

devotional discipline, a verifying in experience of Aquinas' beautiful remark that theology is taught by God, teaches God, and takes us to God."⁸

There is, Packer rightly maintains, a real need for systematic theology within the church, synthesizing the biblical witness to God into a seamless garment. Biblical exegesis is to be commended—and also correlated. All the data about God that exegesis has established must be brought together in a single coherent scheme. Packer commends such an enterprise but counsels against any understanding of theology that is *limited* to the cataloging and indexing of revealed truths about God. Theology cannot, and should not, be detached or dissociated from the relational activity of trusting, loving, worshiping, obeying, serving, and glorifying God.⁹ Yet reaction against an inadequate vision of theology must not lead us to reject what is right in such an impoverished account—and to construct another that is equally impoverished, yet in diametrically opposed ways. “Reaction against dry and heavy theology has made some of us woolly and wild, valuing feelings above truth, depreciating ‘head knowledge’ by comparison with ‘heart knowledge’ and refusing to allow that we cannot have the latter without the former, just as reaction against overheated emotionalism has made others of us cool, cerebral and censorious to a fault.”¹⁰

So how did Packer develop this interest in the role of tradition in theologizing? I suspect that we probably cannot point to any one defining moment when this appreciation of the significance of the theological past for nourishing the present was crystallized, although it is certainly possible to point to some landmarks in the process. One of these dates from Packer's days as an undergraduate at Oxford, studying “Greats”—Oxford's term for the literature, language, and philosophy of the classical world—at Corpus Christi College. He became a Christian a few weeks after his arrival, as a result of hearing a sermon that helped him appreciate the importance of saving faith.

Everyone who comes to faith has a certain amount of mental readjustment to do. Packer found his thinking on a number of issues undergoing significant development—for example, in relation to the authority of the Bible. He also found himself reflecting on one of the great problems of Christian spirituality: how do we deal with the ongoing presence of sin in the life of the believer? Oxford undergraduate evangelicalism in those days was heavily influenced by what is known as “the Keswick teaching,” a matter on which we have already touched. The slogan “let go and let God” was certainly easy to remember; its theological basis and practical benefits seemed rather more elusive.

I am not sure whether we can say that Packer was actively seeking an alternative; yet, there is no doubt that he found one during the academic year 1945–46. While sorting through piles of old books that a generous retired cleric had given to the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, Packer came across the writings of the great Puritan John Owen. As he flipped through the volumes, he found himself struck by the titles of some of the treatises—above all, “On Indwelling Sin” and “On the Mortification of Sin.” He began

to read them. Immediately, he found himself challenged by the realism of Owen's analysis of both the problems arising from "indwelling sin" and the means of dealing with it (which Owen termed "mortification"). This was clearly transformational for Packer. So impressed was he with the approach that he went on to type out a twenty-page précis of Owen's arguments, which he circulated to his friends.¹¹

We see here the roots of Packer's love for the Puritans, born not out of antiquarian curiosity but out of a burning conviction that there was gold in the Puritan hills. At the academic level, this led to what was easily the best scholarly analysis of Richard Baxter's soteriology; at the popular level, it lay behind Packer's superb popularizing of the Puritan vision in works such as *A Quest for Godliness*¹²; at the institutional level, it led to the establishment of the "Puritan and Reformed Study Conferences," through which Packer and Martyn Lloyd-Jones were able to shape a rising generation of clergy who were looking for serious theological roots for their ministries and preaching.

It is impossible to read Packer—or to write about him—without appreciating his deep love for the Puritans; this, I suggest, is an excellent illustration of the deeper principle of the value of tradition for today's church and today's Christians. The importance of this point is now well established within evangelicalism as a whole. The new—and, I must say, very welcome—interest in Jonathan Edwards within evangelicalism can be seen as a continuation of this tradition of engagement with excellence.¹³ Positively, it represents a retrieval and reappropriation of wisdom from the past; negatively, it represents an implicit critique of some trends within evangelicalism that cause some concern, most notably the quest for cultural significance, which can so easily, despite the best of intentions, degenerate into cultural concession.

Yet Packer's growing interest in the notion of tradition also took a more explicitly theological form. Packer has seen himself as an attentive, appreciative, yet critical participant in the great conversation about how best to articulate and defend the gospel that has continued throughout history. As he put it in 1996, "I theologize out of what I see as the authentic biblical and creedal mainstream of Christian identity, the confessional and liturgical 'great tradition' that the church on earth has characteristically maintained from the start." On this view of things, the Protestant reformation of the sixteenth century is to be seen offering "corrections" that "took place within the frame of the great tradition, and did not break it."¹⁴

I share this approach, which I believe represents an important corrective to a vulnerability within contemporary evangelicalism.¹⁵ In celebrating the movement's great strengths, it is also important to ask what can be learned to make it stronger through being more faithful. Packer's answer is, in part, to listen to others who have sought to be faithful to God in their own generations and passed down to us their insights. But what of Packer's diagnosis of the problem?

Packer sets out with clarity and compassion a concern he has about trends in his 1992 essay “The Comfort of Conservatism,” which is a highly accessible account of the potential role that tradition might play in the stabilization of evangelicalism.¹⁶ Packer’s intimate knowledge and experience of North American evangelicalism led him to appreciate the dangers of individualism, which seemed to him to engender a dangerously superficial and ephemeral form of Christianity. For Packer, tradition is an antidote against precisely such an individualism. North American evangelicalism, steeped in individualism, often seems to have no real sense of historical “belonging” or rootedness. As such, it is radically prone to destabilization. Too often, as Packer comments, the North American evangelical has been “a spiritual lone ranger who has proudly or impatiently turned his back on the church and his heritage”—a development that Packer suggests is “a surefire recipe for weirdness without end!”¹⁷ Rediscovering the corporate and historic nature of the Christian faith reduces the danger of entire communities of faith being misled by charismatic individuals and affirms the ongoing importance of the Christian past as a stabilizing influence in potentially turbulent times.

Packer articulates an approach by which he believes that what is wise, good, and true from the past can be discerned and gladly and joyfully reappropriated by today’s church. Rediscovering the historic and corporate dimensions of our faith makes the great treasures and resources of the Christian past accessible and available to the present, thus enriching the life and witness of modern evangelicalism. We are enabled, as Packer puts it, to “receive nurturing truth and wisdom from God’s faithfulness in past generations.”¹⁸

In commending the recovery of tradition as an antidote to this trend, Packer is aware that the notion is open to a series of misunderstandings. A concern for tradition is not, he stresses, equivalent to “traditionalism”—that is to say, a nostalgic and backward looking approach to the Christian faith that “can quench the Holy Spirit and cause paralysis and impotence in the church”¹⁹ by demanding that we blindly and uncritically repeat exactly what evangelicals did and said back in the 1950s, the 1920s, the 1820s, or the 1730s (or whatever period in evangelical history happens to be regarded as a “golden age” by its advocates).

Packer is quite clear that a concern for tradition does not violate the evangelical emphasis on the sole and supreme authority of Scripture. Tradition serves in a ministerial mode and does not rule magisterially. It is there to help and to guide, not to command. “Scripture must have the last word on all human attempts to state its meaning, and tradition, viewed as a series of such human attempts, has a ministerial rather than a magisterial role.”²⁰ In the end, all interpretations of Scripture must be judged in the light of Scripture itself, recognizing that the church—including evangelicals—has misunderstood the Bible on occasion in the past. “We are all beneficiaries of good, wise, and sound tradition, and victims of poor, unwise, and unsound traditions. This

is where the absolute ‘last word’ of Scripture must sort the wheat from the chaff. Hence, the apostle Paul’s counsel: ‘. . . test everything; hold fast what is good’ (1 Thess. 5:21 ESV).”²¹

Tradition, for Packer, is thus something that must be judged. It can too easily shape our readings of Scripture, highlighting some ideas and obscuring others. All Protestants, Packer reminds us, stand within traditions—whether Anglican or Baptist, Pentecostal or Dispensationalist, Reformed or Lutheran, Methodist or Mennonite—that open our eyes to some things and close them to others. “All traditions function as blinders, focusing our vision on some things at which we have been taught to look constantly and that we therefore see clearly, but keeping us from seeing other things that other traditions grasp better.”²² There is an important corollary of this: Christians of different traditions should talk to each other so that we can help each other eliminate our blind spots and ensure that the totality of Scripture is illuminated and applied to life and thought.

As a historian, Packer is aware how tradition predisposes us to read the Bible in certain ways without realizing how that seemingly “obvious” or “self-evident” interpretation of the Bible actually gains its power or plausibility from tradition. A time-honored way of reading the Bible is not necessarily right. Perhaps just as importantly, Packer points out how past controversies cast their long, lingering shadows over contemporary readings of the Bible. Many Protestants, Packer suggests, have reacted against Roman Catholic sacramentalism in such a way that they mistrust the sacraments and deny their importance in practice.

Engaging properly—that is, positively and critically—with tradition opens the way to proper biblical interpretation and theological reflection. Packer suggests that there are three ways in which this process can take place.

1. *By liberating us from our own thoughts.* We need to be challenged by alternative perspectives. “We need the discipline of learning with the saints, past and present, in the ways noted above, to counterbalance our lopsidedness and to help us break out of the narrow circle of our own present thoughts into a larger vision and a riper wisdom.”
2. *By being set free from being locked into today’s ways of thinking.* Packer argues that attentiveness to the past liberates us from “chronological snobbery” and alerts us to the richness of past readings of Scripture. “Keeping regular company with yesterday’s great teachers” opens our eyes to wisdom that is otherwise denied to us.
3. *By setting us free from the limitations of our own traditions.* Developing his earlier argument, Packer stresses that “the tradition that shaped us had a narrowing as well as an enriching effect on us.” Illustrating this from his own Anglican heritage, Packer urges his readers to value what

is good yet identify what is weak—and that means listening to other perspectives, past and present.²³

We see here an approach that has much to offer evangelicalism. It encourages a process of respectful yet critical dialogue with the past, determined as a matter of principle to learn from the wisdom of the past, while being liberated from mechanical and wooden repetition of its judgments. Its vision of theology is corporate rather than individualistic, yet creates space for individuals to make a difference in how the community perceives and articulates its foundational beliefs and judgments. It is rigorously grounded in Scripture on the one hand, while taking into account the long history of faithful Christian engagement with the Bible on the other. Perhaps it seems paradoxical to look backward before moving forward. But it is an important corrective to our natural tendency to rush ahead, act precipitately, and make snap judgments. Packer's vision of theology will challenge those whose spiritual hunger leads them to the theological equivalent of fast food outlets. Yet we must ask ourselves, in all seriousness, whether the prefabricated, processed, and predigested approaches to theology that are so often encountered within the evangelical world really can sustain it as it confronts the future.

I end with an apposite reminiscence. When I was researching my biography of Packer some ten years ago, I received many letters from former students at Tyndale Hall, Bristol, who had been taught theology by Packer during the late 1950s. Some described how they would ask him theological questions over breakfast. The answers, they recall, took some time in coming. Why? Because Packer insisted on showing them how he arrived at his answers. He refused to give short, snappy answers, instead going through the process of explaining how one might arrive at an answer in the first place. As those students realized, they were being taught how to think theologically—how to *theologize*, as Packer would have it. We need to learn from this in an age in which people want to learn the answers without the inconvenience of going through the reflective process that led to them in the first place.