

J.I. PACKER AND THE EVANGELICAL FUTURE: THE IMPACT OF HIS LIFE AND THOUGHT.
EDITED BY TIMOTHY GEORGE. GRAND RAPIDS: BAKER ACADEMIC, 2009. [ISBN: 978-0801033872]

CHRISTOPHER S. NORTHCOTT
AUCKLAND

The collection of essays comprising *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future* represents a portion of the widespread gratitude and respect that Packer has earned as a leading evangelical statesman of the past half-century. The writers include friends, colleagues and former students who variously pay tribute to his role in revitalising evangelicalism. Each of these selects an aspect of Packer's life and thought as a means for considering where the future may lead Evangelical Christianity—in the words of the editor—its “opportunities, dangers, discipline and direction” (p. 10).

Most of those who pick up this book will be admirers knowing Packer only as an author but who want a wider view of this writer that shows us the man, his ministry and his method, which have made his literary efforts so influential in our time. Readers will not be disappointed, although the contributions are not uncritical. Many insights into the makings of this evangelical giant are presented in this volume, both in the biographical snippets that arise from time to time, and in the personal stories that the writers share of their experiences with him. With regard to his ministry, a good deal of his work for the cause of the gospel is analysed and extolled—a worthy offering for those desiring to emulate his efforts. Additionally, for those more mechanically minded, there are several opportunities for examining the ‘inner workings’ of Packer's theological method—what may be called the ‘engine’ that has driven and guided his service to Christ throughout his long life.

Not all of the contributors are uncritical in their praise of Packer; although they are nonetheless drawn from the large number of those grateful for his ministry. Donald Payne's article on Packer's theological method perceives some inconsistencies in his approach to theology. For example, he notes that despite his affirmation of the christocentricity of theology, most chapters of his *Knowing God* lack this element save for the very end of each subject (p. 62). Another that Payne notices is Packer's apparent reservation concerning the role of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics. While claiming that the Spirit is essential in authenticating the Bible as God's word, as well as in applying it, Packer seems to lapse into a “tacit, anthropocentric rationalism” when it comes to the actual work of exegesis (p. 64).

These criticisms must be weighed more fully by any reader who cares to investigate them, although this writer does not think they should cause too much concern. With regard to the first criticism, it should be remembered that *Knowing God* is only a brief introduction to understanding God and the way we may understand him in relation to ourselves. Relating the subject of each and every chapter to Christ is doable (and done), but to be done thoroughly (without tediously covering every single step in one's theological tracks) would take more space than what Packer probably wanted his book to contain, since it was meant

for a lay audience. It is better to acknowledge that what Scripture reveals about the character of God before the arrival of Jesus, can still be understood apart from Jesus, although it should always be used to point ahead to him—which is what we find to a greater or lesser extent towards the end of each chapter. Furthermore, the studies on God (part II of *Knowing God*) should be considered with the concluding section (part III) of the book, which bring together all that has been learned about God for the climax of the achievements of the gospel and what it means for living as Christ's younger brothers and sisters in the family of God.

As for the second criticism, it should be wondered what exactly it is that Payne does expect. Critical biblical scholarship has shown that one can indeed study a biblical text and grasp what it *meant*, without having the slightest inclination toward recognising it as an authoritative word from God that ought to affect their life in some way in the present. To criticise Packer's hermeneutical method for omitting any involvement of the Spirit in the actual work of exegesis seems to be an unnecessary search for loose threads. If one's exegetical work is prayerfully framed by an acknowledgement that the Spirit has made one submissive to the Bible and will guide one's application of it, should not the effort of the mind be considered sanctified, even if (according to Packer) the Spirit is not directly involved here? A proposal by Payne on how to otherwise bridge this gap would have been welcome.

The final chapter of *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future* is a response from Packer himself to the contributions made at the conference on which this book was based (pp. 171-85). A great part of his concern in this chapter has to do with the legacy which he will leave behind. As he sees it, evangelicalism suffers for a lack of literature and ministry which aims to educate adult believers. There is plenty of basic and devotional literature available aimed at young people and new believers, and plenty of higher level books and institutions for clergy and ministerial students, but not much in between. He notes that such "in between" teaching was not common in his earlier years, and that if anything it has decreased since then.

Given that Packer makes much of this issue in his response to the papers presented concerning him and his ministry, one should wonder if the contributors missed a central goal of his lifelong efforts as an adult catechist. His books are typically written to this end, and the "Puritan and Reformed Study Conferences" which he (together with Martyn Lloyd-Jones) established sought to strengthen evangelicalism by reconnecting it with its intellectual heritage. A contribution which outlined and assessed Packer's efforts and accomplishments in reinstating catechistic ministries in the evangelical movement would have been a welcome addition to the book. Such a chapter would no doubt promote the kind of catechistic ministries that Packer hopes to leave as his legacy.

J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future set out to consider how Packer's life and ministry has shaped evangelicalism, and how this shaping might continue into the future. The latter part of that goal should have been developed further, as a means to advance the ambitions of the man these essays seek to honour. However, the picture they do provide of Packer will give encouragement to the thoughtful and intentional reader to take up the challenge where Packer is leaving off.