

James I. Packer. *Pointing to the Pasturelands: Reflections on Evangelicalism, Doctrine, and Culture*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021.

One of the most well-known Evangelicals of his generation was James Innell Packer. Or even of several generations, for he lived a long life and remained active till he was very old. He died in 2020 at the age of almost 94 years.

This book republishes columns and articles that Packer wrote for *Evangelical Today*. The period from which the writings stem spans more than thirty years. Packer's first contribution to *Evangelical Today* was in 1985, and the last included in this book is from 2008. The editors ordered Packer's writings for *Evangelical Today* into three groups. First, there are his columns. There are twenty-seven of them: short pieces, just a few pages long. Each column touches on a specific issue, often ending in a pun or a beautiful sentence and leaving you smiling for a moment and with the pleasure of enjoying Packer's linguistic competence. Here is an example from chapter 19, "A Fan Mail to Calvin," starting thus: "Dear John, this is a fan letter, naked and unashamed, one that I have long wanted to write, even though for obvious reasons I cannot mail it to you."

Next, there are nineteen articles. Every article fills nine or ten pages, and thus this forms the book's longest section. In some of these articles, Packer explains important or controversial decisions he made in his life. Chapter 41, for example, is an article explaining why he signed the statement "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." Chapter 45, "Why I Walked," gives his argument why he, being a synod member, walked out of the synod of the Anglican Diocese of New Westminster when it authorized the bishop to produce a service for blessing same-sex unions. Other articles reflect on vital themes in Packer's theological life. Chapter 42, "Thank God for Our Bibles," deals with his lifelong effort to give the Bible its central place in the Christian religion. In chapter 43, Packer reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of C. S. Lewis's person and writings.

The third section, called "Good Questions," contains eleven topics. Here, Packer answers questions that readers of *Evangelical Today* asked him. He explains why the dead cannot be converted (ch. 47), he reflects on whether it was God who died on the cross (ch. 48), and he defends the view that all sins are not equal (ch. 56). This section demonstrates what made Packer so unique. His answers are short, vivid, often convincing, and admirably simple. It is not difficult to remember them and to make them your own answers if you (as a pastor, a teacher, a parent) come across these same questions yourselves.

One might wonder what the editors' goal was in publishing this book.

Did they want to give the reader just more of Packer? Do they expect all readers who once met Packer in his books to read everything he ever wrote? Or is the book meant as an introduction to Packer for those who have not yet read any other of his books? Is it an accessible compilation that aims to win the reader to this Anglican writer's style, elegance, and clarity? One online review was very critical of this publication—not because of its content but because of its purported goal. However, I do not share such a critique.

This book makes clear why Packer became such an influential Evangelical. What made the average reader so appreciate him? In addition to his warm and lucid way of writing, his mastering of the theological field that made him renowned among scholars, and his deep commitment to Reformed theology, which he helped to revive; there was also his ability to value persons and to analyze positions in the theological and cultural landscape. Packer possessed the astonishing ability not only to see the headlines and the details but also especially to distinguish them.

A marvelous example is found in the book in Packer's description of C. S. Lewis:

His brand of Christianity was conservative Anglicanism with "catholic" (non-Roman!) leanings; hence his nonpenal view of the Atonement, his nonmention of justification, his belief in purgatory, his praying for the dead, and his regular confession to his priest. His conversion was a return to a boyhood faith lost two decades before. ... A standard-issue evangelical? Hardly. But he was a Christian thinker and communicator without peer on three themes: the reasonableness and humanity of Christian faith; the moral demands of discipleship; and heaven as home, the place of all value and all contentment. (28–29)

The ability to give such short and very precise characterizations is rare. Packer thus made it clear that his appreciation for persons and opinions was always well informed and that at the same time, he was glad about what he saw as good and worthy. And in those cases in which he was critical, the reader can be sure that the criticism was adequate.

Reading this book, I realized how important Packer's Anglicanism was for such a stance. Packer would definitely not have had the influence and the importance he actually had on global Christianity if he had been a Congregationalist, a Presbyterian, or a Baptist. Packer needed to appreciate the central Christian themes where they were still present so he could be and remain an Anglican. To be and to remain Reformed, Packer needed to stress the specific themes of the doctrine of Scripture and the doctrine of grace. Balancing between both poles made him the Packer he was. I think that the relevance of this book lies here: not only to entertain readers or give

them spiritual food but also to encourage them to strive for the balance that was so characteristic of Packer.

It is interesting to realize how often Packer writes about himself. Many columns and articles are not adequately understandable if you do not know who the writer was. However, never are his writings self-centered. It is precisely with this personal touch that the reader recognizes that Christian theology is not an objective set of statements, not an academic subject, not a handicraft for money, and not a proof of orthodoxy, but a way of life that is both universal and personal. With a variation to the last sentence in Packer's column on Lewis, we might say, "Thank you, Mr. Packer, for being you. I wouldn't have missed you for the world."

GERT VAN DEN BRINK

Academic Staff Member, Church history, and Lecturer in Philosophy
Theological University Apeldoorn, The Netherlands

Iain H. Murray. *J. C. Ryle: Prepared to Stand Alone*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016.

These words flowed from the pen of John Charles Ryle (1816–1900) in his book *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century* (1885; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1978):

The celebrated lawyer, [William] Blackstone, had the curiosity, early in the reign of George III, to go from church to church and hear every clergyman of note in London. He says that he did not hear a single sermon that had more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero, and that it would have been impossible for him to discover, from what he heard, whether the preacher were a follower of Confucius, of Mohamet, or of Christ! (15)

Ryle's opening chapter lays out the historical context of his own ministry by giving his insight into the condition of the Anglican Church into which he was born, in which he would serve, and in which he would pass into glory. "Sermons everywhere were little better than miserable moral essays utterly devoid of anything likely to awaken, convert, or save souls" (14). This gives one the spiritual temperature of the day. For as we learned in our homiletics classes, when there is a mist in the pulpit, there is a fog in the congregation. Church leadership provided little better direction, for as Ryle says,

the majority of the [Anglican] bishops, to say the truth, were more men of the world. They were unfit for their positions. ... Let me also add, that when the occupants of the Episcopal bench were troubled by the rapid spread of [George] Whitefield's