

Reminiscences of Packer

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I have fond memories of J. I. Packer. I cannot convey the whole of who he was, but I can give some small illustrations from personal acquaintance.

In my younger years, Packer was a famous figure afar off, who was nevertheless influential in my theological formation. His books *Knowing God*, *“Fundamentalism” and the Word of God*, and *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* had a profound impact on me.¹ But I did not know the man behind the books until later. Like many others, I was shaped by the ideas and by the evident love for God and for Christ that animated the ideas.

In November 1982, I met Dr. Packer in person for the first time. The occasion was the second summit of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI). The first summit produced the famous “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” (1978).² The second had the goal of formulating an analogous statement on hermeneutics.³ Packer was a member on the central committee that had the task of processing and refining the recommendations that came in to produce a finished statement.

The committee met into the late hours of the night. It started from a preliminary draft that included a number of articles with their affirmations and denials. Sometimes the wording was already excellent. But with some of the articles, every suggested wording felt flat.

When people saw that nothing was working, they began to look at Packer.

¹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973); *“Fundamentalism” and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958); *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961).

² “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, <https://www.alliancenet.org/the-chicago-statement-on-biblical-inerrancy>.

³ “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, <https://www.alliancenet.org/the-chicago-statement-on-biblical-hermeneutics>.

Time after time, he would come up with wording that was just right. I was in awe and grateful to God for such a gift to us. Packer was a man gifted both in theological understanding and in the craft of English expression. His unique mastery of both theology and English gave the committee what it needed. He was also self-effacing. What mattered to him was not what he himself did but what we produced together as the final wording.

Years later, I was privileged to be a member on the central committee responsible for the English Standard Version. The committee was entitled the Translation Oversight Committee (TOC), and Packer was one of the members. As in the case with the ICBI, Packer had an outsized influence. All of us on the committee had great respect for him, which grew as we saw the wisdom that he brought to the task of choosing just the right wording. Sometimes, it seemed to me, he swayed all the rest of the committee as he gave a decisive speech just before the time came to vote on a translation question.

I can still remember a particular episode that struck me. It involved an unfamiliar Greek word. The question was how best to render this Greek word in English. The members around the table were looking in detail at the standard Greek lexicons, carefully digesting their wording to discern the nuances. But Packer, without any lexicon in front of him, just started talking about the precise nuances of this Greek word. He just *knew*!

His knowledge was built on a “classical” education. He had read and digested a huge amount of ancient Greek literature. He knew intuitively how Greek worked, both lexically and grammatically. No one else on the committee had a background equal to his.

In one of the later meetings of the TOC, which took place in Cambridge, England, the committee members were invited to bring their families to Cambridge. My wife and my two boys, who were young teenagers, came. Packer, however, came alone.

Every morning we ate breakfast at the hotel restaurant. I invited Packer to have breakfast at our table. And he did. My wife and I were in awe of him. But our boys were too young to appreciate how famous and theologically influential he was. To them, he was just a friend at our table. So they had ordinary conversations with him, which he joined with delight. Our younger son in particular had a keen sense of humor, and he was soon cracking jokes with Packer. My wife and I were thinking to ourselves, “Don’t you know that this is the great Dr. Packer? How can you be so casual with your jokes?” Packer was delighted to interact with their boyish friendliness and not to have to deal all the time with people who were afraid to approach him.

Such are some of the memories that I have; such was my privilege. I met a man filled with the Holy Spirit.⁴ The Spirit shone through a quiet, humble, gracious, wise Englishman who delighted to serve the Lord and fellow human beings in the ordinary course of life as well as in the work of theology.⁵

His delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither. (Ps 1:2–3 ESV)

⁴ J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *J. I. Packer: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); Leland Ryken, *J. I. Packer: An Evangelical Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).