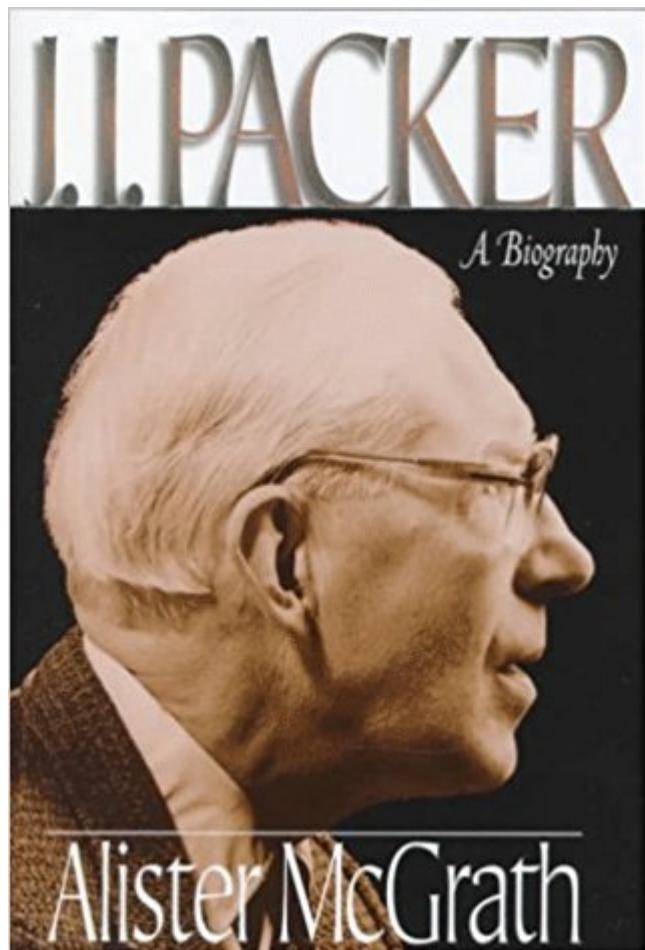


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# J.I. Packer: A Biography



## **Synopsis**

His books have sold over three million copies worldwide and Christianity Today readers named him one of the most influential theological writers of the 20th century. Now J.I. Packer's life and ministry are examined in this admirable biographical work.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

McGrath is always worth reading, but for my money McGrath on Packer is one of the best things he has produced to date. I cannot remember when I have enjoyed a book more, but then I am biased! Let me explain. Jim Packer is one of the four or five individuals who have most profoundly shaped my life and ministry - I am an Episcopal priest, by the way. But this book is more than the telling of one man's story. McGrath weaves his biography around the development of theology in the post-World War Two period with breathtaking skill. It tells the story of the worldwide regeneration of evangelical Christianity in the second half of this century - evangelicalism in general, Anglican evangelicalism in particular. I first met Jim Packer when I was a seminarian and was immediately attracted by his solid, no nonsense approach to theology. He introduced me to the theological methodology of the Puritans, an approach to believing that seemed unruffled by the fads and fancies that sweep the Christian world, fashions that so often knock it off its feet. Jim is a man, I discovered, who loves God, loves the Scriptures, and applies his immense intellect to sharing that delight with others. I never thought I would ever be able to do more than admire him from a distance. Then in the early 1970s we moved to Bristol in the West of England, and the Packers

became personal friends and neighbors when for several years we lived at opposite ends of the same short street. One of the treats of those years was occasional chats with Jim over tea or coffee, conversations that were to play a fundamental role in the direction my own life and ministry. In 1975, a few days after my younger daughter was born, a mid-morning coffee conversation with Jim set in motion the circumstances that led us across the Atlantic Ocean little more than a year later. A few years later the Packers followed, settling in Vancouver, where Jim became Professor of Theology at Regent College. From McGrath I discovered that Jim had made up his mind to move to North America when the right thing was offered at about the same time he was persuading us to hop "The Pond." He obviously played his cards very close to his chest! But I digress. McGrath presents Packer in a multi-faceted manner. Not only does he trace Packer's life with great care; he also shows the process of his theological development. He pays significant attention to the substance of his teaching as well as his pedagogical method. More than this, Jim Packer is presented as a man with an innate sense of strategy. He came to faith when a freshman at Oxford. Evangelicals were then a tiny despised minority in the Church of England. During much of the next half century he was to play a major role shaping their journey to intellectual and ecclesial leadership in the English church. Although one of the primary architects of evangelical renewal in Britain, Packer can arguably be said to have had more influence on the healthy development of biblical Christianity on the western side of "The Pond." On moving to Vancouver in 1979, Jim was well positioned to place a major role on the evangelical scene in Canada and the USA, as well as in North American Anglicanism. While McGrath explains the part he has played in Canadian Anglicanism, nothing is said of the small but significant role he has played in the Episcopal Church where, since the 1870s, evangelical Christians have been a tiny minority. Few who were at the Three Rs Conference in Orlando in 1985 will forget his description of "the convergence of the saints" as evangelicals, catholics, and charismatics sought to make common cause. Convergence is, perhaps, one of Packer's great themes in the last 20 years. He thinks of himself as "a great tradition Christian," seeking mutualities between Evangelicals, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox. He has little time for that false face of ecumenism that has sought unity by sweeping significant theological differences under the rug. His approach to theology and debate reflects the robust theology of the Puritans in which he has soaked himself over the decades, since discovering their treasures in a musty library in Oxford when an undergraduate. Believing with all his heart that bad theology does untold damage, Packer has used his incisiveness to constantly prod Christians beyond sloppy theologizing. McGrath believes that James Innell Packer, the son of a minor railway clerk from Gloucester, has made a lasting contribution to the progress of the Christian faith in the 20th

Century. He tells us that he "offers a judicious counterbalance to the anti-intellectual and unhistorical trends in evangelicalism, affirming the importance of theology, tradition and historical scholarship as tools for the consolidation and stimulation of the evangelical vision" (p. 281). Certainly, for those of us who have come under his influence, Jim has modeled to us a theological method that refuses to be careless, unthinking, parochial, or small-minded. He has shown us that a healthy faith is one that engages what Hercule Poirot called "ze little gray cells," and that the church will not be renewed if the mind is not renewed. Do I have criticisms of McGrath on Packer? Yes. Criticism number one is that it is not long enough! There are occasions when something is touched upon but never properly savored. I would also have loved a great deal more on Packer's alliance with Eric Mascall and Bishop Graham Leonard in the late 1960s, to oppose the abortive Anglican-Methodist union scheme in England. I would also have liked more on the strategic importance for English Christianity of the Keele congress of Anglican Evangelicals in 1967, and the part Packer played in formulating it. I suspect that this biography is the first of many over the next generation or so that will explore the unique contribution of Jim Packer both to the world Anglicanism and to the cause of orthodox Christian theology. I think it entirely possible that history will conclude that Packer could be put alongside C. S. Lewis, John Stott, and Michael Ramsey, as one of the major Anglican contributors to the changing face of Christianity in the last century of the second millennium.

The book is well done, and author McGrath takes a sympathetic and supportive view of this renowned writer and teacher. Virtually nothing about Packer's personal, family life, but that is just as well. His professional life is well covered. And, as always, when you learn just how universal the experience of maltreatment by fellow Christians. As a church elder, I can testify that you generally find a better class of people in your average biker bar. Sad. Interesting read for a personality that bridges the time of Lewis and Lloyd-Jones and today.

McGrath knows his British ecclesiastical history of the past half century and records the important place that J.I.P. had in it, until his crossing of the Atlantic to make his considerable Holy Spirit gifts available to a broader segment of the Body of Christ. A fascinating study - written in a readable form - even when dealing with the lofty heights of Oxford and Church of England infighting.

While I generally find Alister McGrath very engaging he seems lacking in his ability to capture the reader in writing a biography. Surely, the task of summarizing the life of the great J. I. Packer would be a daunting task, but McGrath does not seem up to the task.

I really enjoyed the book. Very revealing and informative about his life and spiritual foundation. Our men's small group is studying "Knowing God;" the biography will add depth to the discussions.

This book is a must read for anyone interested in the life, ministry, and teaching of J.I.Packer.

Great man of God.

Writing the biography of a man who can read it must be challenging. Probably for that reason in particular, I didn't find this biography to be that great. First, the author is extremely adulatory. There is not a word about any fault Packer may have (and as a mortal man, surely he must have some). The greatness of Packer seems to be the thread that ties the book together. Nor is there any light shed upon the secret of his "greatness": what of his daily life, habits, personality, struggles? I didn't feel at the end as if I really knew the man. The perspective is that of an outsider commenting on the externals--the public actions, the published works, the prepared statements, guarded personal conversations--not that of a close friend revealing the inner man of a spiritual giant (such as Bonar's biography of McCheyne). If, like me, that is what you are hoping for, I believe you will be disappointed.

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