

Knowing God

J. I. PACKER

50th ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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Foreword for the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition

J. I. Packer's *Knowing God* became a publishing sensation on its appearance in 1973. It propelled Packer to international fame, establishing him as a leading authority on what would now be known as 'spirituality', but which Packer himself preferred to call 'spiritual theology'. The book exuded freshness and vitality, opening up ways of thinking about how Christians relate to God that were deeply rooted in the Puritan tradition, but which proved intensely relevant today. The book was soon hailed as a 'classic', and reached a large and appreciative readership throughout the world.

Packer had discovered the rich spiritual wisdom of Puritan writers shortly after his conversion while he was studying classics at Oxford University during the Second World War. In October 1944, he attended a meeting organised by the University's Christian Union, and listened to a sermon that changed his life. Yet after his conversion, he began to experience difficulties in growing in his faith. In 1945, he began to read the great Puritan writer John Owen, and found his approach to the Christian life transformative. Packer would remain an admirer of the Puritans for the rest of his life, and gained a reputation as someone who was able to apply the Puritan vision of the Christian life to the new challenges Christians faced in the twentieth century. *Knowing God* is steeped in the wisdom of the past, yet able to engage today's deep spiritual questions.

After completing his studies of classics at Oxford, Packer went on to study theology, and was ordained in the Church of England. After serving as a curate in a parish in Birmingham, he found his calling as a theological educationalist. *Knowing God* was written while Packer was associate principal of Trinity College Bristol, and lectured regularly to his students on its themes. Packer taught that

‘knowing God’ consists of three basic elements: grasping who God is; applying to ourselves what God is and what God gives; and adoring God as the one who gives these gifts. *Knowing God* is a careful exposition of these three interconnected and inseparable components. Packer’s strategy was to begin by helping his readers to apprehend the reality of God; then to move on to allow them to apply these insights to their lives; and finally, to respond to God in prayer and adoration.

So why was the book so successful? It is carefully and elegantly written, presenting its ideas with the concision and clarity that came to be seen as Packer’s hallmark. Yet the success of *Knowing God* is ultimately due to something more than its clarity. People sensed that there was real depth to Packer’s writing, which contrasted sharply with the often superficial and lightweight forms of Christianity that were gaining the ascendancy in many western churches, especially in North America. *Knowing God* came to be seen as a work of theological and spiritual wisdom, helping its readers to go deeper into their faith. Time and time again, Packer – like C. S. Lewis before him – drew on the wisdom of the past to counteract the weaknesses of the present.

Knowing God is widely regarded as Packer’s best book. He wrote many more, particularly after he moved to become professor of theology at Regent College, Vancouver in September 1979. Several of these relate to applying the wisdom of Puritan writers, such as John Owen or Jonathan Edwards, to the individual’s life of faith or the ministry of churches. One of Packer’s concerns is that Christians do not go deep enough into their faith, and fail to appreciate how it can grow in wisdom and maturity, both through close reading of the Bible and the works of earlier Christian writers.

Packer remained associated with Regent College for the remainder of his life. Even after his retirement in 1996, at the age of seventy, he continued to be involved in the college’s teaching, especially through its summer schools, until shortly before his death in July 2020. In this later period, Packer became increasingly interested in how to teach Christianity effectively to a rising generation that lacked a deep immersion in the Christian tradition. In 2010, he told his friends that his ‘last crusade’ would be a call for the church to

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rediscover its lost art of catechesis. There was a need to recover both the teaching of the church, and the art of teaching within the church in which the wisdom of the past could be received and appreciated in the present. For Packer, too many modern Christians have an impoverished and diminished grasp of their faith, which can be enriched and nourished by the great legacy of the past – such as the Puritans.

In June 2016, Packer was asked what he hoped to achieve through his teaching for that year's Regent College summer school. His answer was this: 'What I shall be saying to my class, in substance, is: Look! This is the biggest thing that ever was! And we Christians, most of us, still haven't appreciated its size. We've been Christians for years and years, and yet we haven't fully grasped it.' That's what *Knowing God* is about – discovering, unpacking and applying this 'biggest thing that ever was', faithfully and reliably. The work has helped many in the past in their quest for spiritual wisdom and maturity. Perhaps this fiftieth anniversary edition will help many more in the future, as they look to put down deep roots for their faith and Christian lives.

Alister McGrath
Oxford University, 2023

Preface to the 2005 Edition

It feels like a long time since I wrote the magazine articles that became *Knowing God*. I suppose that in ordinary lifetime terms it really is. The book appeared more than thirty years ago, and the articles began to flow a decade before that. Britain was different then: steam trains were still seen on some main lines, all bicycles had mudguards and bells, TV was still a luxury, computers were unknown to the general public, and the same was true of Islam. I, too, was different: a young English evangelical, feeling my oats and wishing to make waves, I thought it was realistic to hope that in my lifetime God would bring Christians and churches en masse back to himself through a return to the Bible and the gospel. The haul however has been longer than I anticipated, and ground has been lost as well as gained. My anchor-thought today is that God remains the same though the world does not.

When I was asked to write that series of articles for an ideal reader who was impatient with religiosity but wanted to know God, the project struck sparks in my mind. The articles found their shape easily as I asked myself at each stage, 'What is the next thing to tell my ideal reader?', and the next after that, and so on, and it felt like significant ministry from the start. I did not at first envisage the series as a book in the making, and the first publisher to hear about it brushed it off; but to my amazement it has become a nurture book for the Christian world, a standby in evangelistic and devotional circles and church membership classes, and a means of blessing to all sorts of people whose profile was not that of my ideal reader at all. I have a thick file of grateful letters, which I treasure. To God be the glory.

To be sure, *Knowing God* has not gone uncriticised. What seem

to me the two weightiest criticisms, both from supporters of its basic thrust, are that it has no chapter on God's holiness, the attribute of all divine attributes, as it has been called, and that after its seven pages on the Trinity it proceeds 'as if nothing has happened' (I quote) – the implication being that the divine Trinity remains marginal rather than becomes central in all that follows. With respect, I think both criticisms err by focussing on words rather than on things. Let me explain.

Self-quotation, I know, is rated a vice, but with regards to God's holiness I cannot do better than quote what I wrote about it in my book *God's Words*:

When God is called 'holy', the thought conveyed is that of deity, and more particularly of those qualities of deity which mark out the infinite superiority of the Triune Jehovah over mankind, in respect of both powers and perfections. The word points to God as standing above and apart from men, a different kind of being on a higher plane of existence. It focuses attention on everything in God that makes him a proper object of awe and worship and reverent fear, and that serves to remind his human creatures how ungodlike they really are. Thus it denotes, first, God's infinite greatness and power, contrasted with the smallness and weakness of us men and women; second, it denotes his determination to maintain his own righteous rule, however much it may be resisted and opposed – a resolve which makes it certain that all sin will eventually receive its due reward.

I think I may fairly say that all these aspects of God's being and ways are fully brought out in chapter after chapter of *Knowing God*, even though there is no chapter on the holiness of God as such.

With regard to the Trinity, I do not know what my critic thought I should have done after explaining that God is both *they* and *he*, and that one should never think of the singular without the plural, nor vice versa, lest one fall into Unitarianism or tritheism. What I actually do is spend the rest of the book showing how the three operate as a team, trio or threesome with a single goal, namely our salvation and the perfecting of the church, and that still seems to me the best and most scriptural way to go.

Late in life I have learned the right word to describe what I am

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up to in *Knowing God*. That word is catechising; I am an adult catechist. The catechist's job is to spell out the truths, and the response to them, that constitute a Christian's identity, and to apply this directly to people's lives as evangelist, pastor, counsellor, trainer and encourager, according to the bearing of the truth itself upon them. Just as one of Molière's characters rejoiced to find he had been speaking prose all his life, so I rejoice to discover that I have been a catechist all my life, though I hardly knew it till recently. *Knowing God* is a catechism – maybe catechism plus.

The old formula for launching a ship was to break a bottle of champagne on its bow and say, 'May God bless this ship and all who sail in her.' So now I say, 'May God bless this reissue of *Knowing God*, and all into whose hands the book comes.'

J. I. P.

Regent College, Vancouver

January 2005

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Preface

As clowns yearn to play Hamlet, so I have wanted to write a treatise on God. This book, however, is not it. Its length might suggest that it is trying to be, but anyone who takes it that way will be disappointed. It is at best a string of beads: a series of small studies of great subjects, most of which first appeared in the *Evangelical Magazine*. They were conceived as separate messages, but are now presented together because they seem to coalesce into a single message about God and our living. It is their practical purpose that explains both the selection and omission of topics and the manner of treatment.

In *A Preface to Christian Theology*, John Mackay illustrated two kinds of interest in Christian things by picturing persons sitting on the high front balcony of a Spanish house watching travellers go by on the road below. The 'balconeurs' can overhear the travellers' talk and chat with them; they may comment critically on the way that the travellers walk; or they may discuss questions about the road, how it can exist at all or lead anywhere, what might be seen from different points along it, and so forth; but they are onlookers, and their problems are theoretical only. The travellers, by contrast, face problems which, though they have their theoretical angle, are essentially practical – problems of the 'which-way-to-go' and 'how-to-make-it' type, problems which call not merely for comprehension but for decision and action too.*

Balconeurs and travellers may think over the same area, yet their problems differ. Thus (for instance) in relation to *evil*, the balconeur's problem is to find a theoretical explanation of how evil

* John A. Mackay, *A Preface to Christian Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1942).

can consist with God's sovereignty and goodness, but the traveller's problem is how to master evil and bring good out of it. Or again, in relation to *sin*, the balconeer asks whether racial sinfulness and personal perversity are really credible, while the traveller, knowing sin from within, asks what hope there is of deliverance. Or take the problem of the *Godhead*; while the balconeer is asking how one God can conceivably be three, what sort of unity three could have, and how three who make one can be persons, the traveller wants to know how to show proper honour, love and trust towards the three persons who are now together at work to bring him out of sin to glory. And so we might go on. Now this is a book for travellers, and it is with travellers' questions that it deals.

The conviction behind the book is that ignorance of God – ignorance both of his ways and of the practice of communion with him – lies at the root of much of the church's weakness today. Two unhappy trends seem to have produced this state of affairs.

Trend one is that *Christian minds have been conformed to the modern spirit*: the spirit, that is, that spawns great thoughts of man and leaves room for only small thoughts of God. The modern way with God is to set him at a distance, if not to deny him altogether; and the irony is that modern Christians, preoccupied with maintaining religious practices in an irreligious world, have themselves allowed God to become remote. Clear-sighted persons, seeing this, are tempted to withdraw from the churches in something like disgust to pursue a quest for God on their own. Nor can one wholly blame them, for churchmen who look at God, so to speak, through the wrong end of the telescope, so reducing him to pigmy proportions, cannot hope to end up as more than pigmy Christians, and clear-sighted people naturally want something better than this. Furthermore, thoughts of death, eternity, judgment, the greatness of the soul, and the abiding consequences of temporal decisions are all 'out' for moderns, and it is a melancholy fact that the Christian church, instead of raising its voice to remind the world of what is being forgotten, has formed a habit of playing down these themes in just the same way. But these capitulations to the modern spirit are really suicidal so far as Christian life is concerned.

Trend two is that *Christian minds have been confused by the modern*

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scepticism. For more than three centuries the naturalistic leaven in the Renaissance outlook has been working like a cancer in Western thought. Seventeenth-century Arminians and Deists, like sixteenth-century Socinians, came to deny, as against Reformation theology, that God's control of his world was either direct or complete, and theology, philosophy and science have for the most part combined to maintain that denial ever since. As a result, the Bible has come under heavy fire, and many landmarks in historical Christianity with it. The foundation facts of faith are called in question. Did God meet Israel at Sinai? Was Jesus more than a very spiritual man? Did the gospel miracles really happen? Is not the Jesus of the gospels largely an imaginary figure? – and so on. Nor is this all. Scepticism about both divine revelation and Christian origins has bred a wider scepticism which abandons all idea of a unity of truth, and with it any hope of unified human knowledge; so that it is now commonly assumed that my religious apprehensions have nothing to do with my scientific knowledge of things external to myself, since God is not 'out there' in the world, but only 'down here' in the psyche. The uncertainty and confusion about God which marks our day is worse than anything since Gnostic theosophy tried to swallow Christianity in the second century.

It is often said today that theology is stronger than it has ever been, and in terms of academic expertise and the quantity and quality of books published this is probably true; but it is a long time since theology has been so weak and clumsy at its basic task of holding the church to the realities of the gospel. Ninety years ago C. H. Spurgeon described the wobblings he then saw among the Baptists on Scripture, atonement and human destiny as 'the down-grade'; could he survey Protestant thinking about God at the present time, I guess he would speak of 'the nose-dive'!

'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls' (Jeremiah 6:16). Such is the invitation which this book issues. It is not a critique of new paths, except indirectly, but rather a straightforward recall to old ones, on the ground that 'the good way' is still what it used to be. I do not ask my readers to suppose that I know very well what I am talking about. 'Those like myself',

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wrote C. S. Lewis, 'whose imagination far exceeds their obedience are subject to a just penalty; we easily imagine conditions far higher than any we have really reached. If we describe what we have imagined we may make others, and make ourselves, believe that we have really been there'* – and so fool both them and ourselves. All readers and writers of devotional literature do well to weigh Lewis's words. Yet 'It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak' (2 Corinthians 4:13) – and if what is written here helps anyone in the way that the meditations behind the writing helped me, the work will have been abundantly worthwhile.

J. I. P.
Trinity College, Bristol
July 1972

* C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Collins Fontana, 1963), 128.