

J. I. Packer's Use of the New Testament for His Doctrine of Discipleship¹

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Abstract

This paper investigates how J. I. Packer, one of the most prominent Evangelical theologians of the 20th and 21st centuries, used the New Testament to build his perspective on discipleship. While a systematic presentation of discipleship is not available in Packer's works, his numerous references to the term reveal his deep preoccupation with the subject. Hence my decision to trace his steps back to the way he uses the New Testament to devise a holistic understanding of discipleship. To achieve this goal, I took several steps of my own, first to study his general view of the Bible, second to go a bit deeper in the same direction by seeing how he works with the New Testament as the fundamental source for his theology of discipleship, and then – the remaining four steps – have to do with Packer's actual use of New Testament books for his doctrine of discipleship; in this respect, I read about his thoughts on discipleship as he read about it in the four Gospels, in the epistles (Pauline and otherwise), the Acts of the Apostles, and the Book of Revelation. I also did a brief research on what I called Packer's "two pillars" of discipleship, which he identifies as the nature of and the teaching about discipleship – the former being revealed in the Gospels, and the latter in the epistles. The fact that I went beyond the Gospels and the epistles into a succinct investigation of the Acts of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation is merely a natural consequence of my original intention of

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tracing Packer's way throughout the entire New Testament for his theology of discipleship. In the end, though, this study is not merely a search into Packer's use of the New Testament for his view of discipleship, but also an opportunity to extract some essential features of discipleship which he came across as he studied each literary genre of the New Testament.

Keywords: *discipleship, New Testament, Gospels, epistles, Acts of the Apostles, Revelation*

Introduction

Packer is a theologian with a very practical focus and that is visible in his numerous books which are written in a simple and clear language. His style is engaging, and his explanations are not complicated, but what makes his books truly appealing – especially for Evangelical readers – is his constant interaction with the Bible. For Packer, the Bible is God's inerrant Word, and it is precisely this Evangelical feature of his theology that caused his books to be received by Evangelicals across the world with enthusiasm and interest. Another aspect that made him popular among Evangelicals was his preoccupation with discussing issues of general interest for his readers, and one of these is undisputably the doctrine of discipleship. This paper focuses on how Packer uses the New Testament to put together a theology of discipleship in the context of his understanding of the Bible, on the one hand, and with reference to the books of the New Testament, on the other. It must be highlighted from the start that Packer has a certain methodology in dealing with the New Testament regarding discipleship. Concretely, he believes that the New Testament bears witness to two fundamental aspects of discipleship: first, it is the nature of discipleship which one can see in the Gospels, and second, he points to the teaching about discipleship that is presented in the epistles (Packer 2005, 61). What I did in this paper was to focus on both these two genres, the Gospels and the epistles, for my take on Packer's use of the New Testament for his theology of discipleship, but I did not stop here; thus, I also investigated how he uses the Acts of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation for the same purpose.

Methodologically, I had to restrict my research to only some of Packer's books, mostly because he not only wrote a lot, but he also mentioned discipleship numerous times in most – if not all – of his books. This is why I thought I should settle on the one book that talks the most about discipleship and for this purpose, I selected Packer's *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (2005). It is in this book that he discusses the nature and teaching of discipleship as revealed in the Gospels and the epistles respectively, but he also makes multiple references to the rest of the New Testament. I also used his *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God* (1958), *Discussions: Finding God's Will* (2010), *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*

(2011), and *Knowing God* (the 2023 edition). Evidently, in dealing with these primary sources, my methodology was essentially descriptive, because I went through Packer's writings and identified the context in which he discussed discipleship with specific references to the various books of the New Testament. When it comes to secondary sources, my methodology was also analytical. Specifically, three sources helped me grasp Packer's overall view of discipleship: first, Alister McGrath's *J. I. Packer: His Life and Thought* (2020), which helped me understand Packer's "theologizing" as feature of discipleship based on the disciple's conversation with God through the use of the Bible; second, Vaughn Baker's *Evangelism and the Openness of God* (2012), from which I used the concept of evangelism to define discipleship in the context of the New Testament, and third, Jason Hood's *Imitating God in Christ* (2013), whose idea of Christification helped me comprehend the pneumatological nature of discipleship that I called "Spiritification." The third side of my scientific methodology is critical, in the sense that I not only evaluated Packer's doctrine of discipleship from my perspective but also came up with a systematic way to organize his understanding of discipleship from the perspective of his use of New Testament sources.

1. Discipleship and the Bible

Before delving into how Packer uses the New Testament to build his theology of discipleship, one needs to understand how he views discipleship in terms of the most fundamental aspects of his perspective on the Christian religion. For Packer, discipleship does not just happen; it must be seen within the framework of Christianity's essentials, which – in his case – consists of two crucial concepts: Christ and faith. Discipleship is forged therefore as a mandatory reality that occurs between Christ and faith. It is not just Christ and faith; it is the knowledge of Christ and the beginning of faith, because – as Packer puts it – "knowing Christ is where faith begins" (Packer 2010, 5). This is a very clear affirmation of the Christological foundation of discipleship, which cannot happen in the absence of knowing Christ; and since knowing Christ is synonymous with faith – in which case faith consists of knowing Christ – discipleship is fundamentally dependent on the reality of faith. Discipleship is an impossibility in the absence of faith because, in Packer, faith is not a feeling of some sort; faith is knowing Christ, and this is the only fact that leads to discipleship.

Greg Ogden notices this epistemological equation in Packer, namely that faith is knowledge and a genuine Christian cannot consider himself a Christian without knowing God (Ogden 2019, 102). There is also another aspect of faith in Packer – and this is highlighted by Gary Thomas: when faith comes within a person's life, it is not just there; faith is there to captivate one's entire being. In Thomas' words,

“faith governs our lives” because it emerges at “the crossroads of true Christian living” (Thomas 2003, 29).

There is another reason why Packer makes this essential connection between Christ and faith – and especially between knowing Christ and the beginning of faith – which has to do with the epistemological role of faith itself. Faith leads to the knowledge of Christ, but the actual process of knowing Christ – informed as it is by faith – does not happen in a vacuum. On the contrary, when a person believes in Christ through the active exercise of his or her faith, the reality of faith develops based on something concrete, and it is now that Packer unwraps the rest of his context for discipleship. Thus, discipleship begins and grows through “Bible study, prayer, Christian community” and then he writes “much more” (Packer 2010, 5). The “much more” part will be left aside for this argument, but the first three aspects are vital for Packer’s theology of discipleship. Why? First, discipleship cannot happen, and it cannot develop without the Bible. Any Christian who wishes to learn more about discipleship must read the Bible. Second, because the Bible cannot be understood without prayer. Since prayer helps us focus on God, Packer knows that the way we see the Bible is dependent on prayer. Third, Christians read the Bible in the context of the community of believers, which is the church, so it is vital to accept this ecclesiological context for the ongoing reality of discipleship.

Edward Gross realizes why Packer proposes the Bible as a context for discipleship through prayer and church life; it is because we live in a world whose values are opposed to those we find in the Bible (Gross 2013, 33). When one understands the opposition between faith and the world, between Christ’s values and the world’s values, one feels the need to talk about it with God; that is why Craig Hazen sees Packer’s prayer as a “conversation with God” (Hazen 2018, 146). But having a conversation with God based on reading the Bible is doing theology or, as Alister McGrath notices in Packer, “theologizing” (McGrath 2020).

2. Discipleship and the New Testament

While it is clear that, for Packer, studying the Bible is vital for discipleship, it is not just reading the Bible that makes discipleship happen; in fact, it is focusing on the New Testament as part of the Bible that helps us develop discipleship into what it should become. Packer emphasizes that, in dealing with the Bible, we must focus on two aspects. The first is reading the Bible in general because that is how our “Christian commitment” grows into genuine discipleship (Packer 2005, 61); since the Bible is God’s revelation, we cannot expect to understand God’s way of acting in the world and our experience with him if we are not aware of the content of the entire Bible. Second, focusing on the New Testament supplements our understanding of discipleship by helping us see who Christ is “as Savior God, as

model human being, as coming Judge, as Lover of the weak, poor, and unlovely, and as Leader along the path of the cross” (Packer 2005, 60). To put everything in a nutshell, the New Testament assists us in getting the whole picture of Jesus “as God incarnate” (Packer 2005, 61), by whom we understand not only the reality of death but also that of the resurrection (Packer 2005, 61).

This essential Christological thrust of the New Testament is captured very well by George Demetrios, who writes that “Packer identifies the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ as the central story of the New Testament” (Demetrios 2014, 73). That is a clear demonstration of the vital connection between the New Testament and our knowledge of Christ, in the absence of which discipleship is impossible. Also, Graeme Goldsworthy points out that, in Packer, Jesus is presented as supporting the Old Testament “as the authoritative word of God” (Goldsworthy 2000, 47) but we see that only if we read the New Testament.

Having established the crucial link between discipleship and the New Testament by drawing attention to the person of Jesus, Packer goes a bit further by showing that, when it comes to discipleship, we should not just read the New Testament, but we should read it in a certain way. It is important to have the entire New Testament in mind when we read for discipleship purposes, but Packer is careful to make sure that we understand that there is a certain methodology at play here, in dealing with the New Testament, when we are interested in discipleship. Thus, he writes that we should be focused on “stressing the need for constant meditation on the four gospels” (Packer 2005, 61). It is not that the rest of the New Testament is less important for discipleship, not at all; but it is vital to realize that the Gospels have this extraordinary capacity to keep our eyes set on Jesus. In Packer’s words, “gospel study enables us . . . to keep our Lord in clear view” (Packer 2005, 61), which is a rather beautiful image conceived by Packer to help us accommodate the idea that there is no true discipleship unless and until our focus on Jesus is complete and constant. This is why, in Packer, discipleship is essentially relational; there must be a relationship between the believer who reads the New Testament and Jesus, the central figure of the New Testament. We have to “hold before our minds the relational frame of discipleship to him,” Packer writes, and that is made possible by our reading of the Gospels (Packer 2005, 61).

Since the Gospels are about the Gospel, Timothy George emphasizes that, in Packer, the connection between the Gospel, as revealed by the Gospels, and discipleship was evident in his entire activity. According to George, Packer worked intensely throughout his whole life to “forge a coalition and community among gospel-centered Christ-followers around the world” (George 2009, 168). George’s “Christ-followers” are Packer’s disciples, so discipleship is when believers understand and live the Gospel as seen in the Gospels. Reid Hensarling is also aware of Packer’s connection between the “biblical gospel” and discipleship and he points out that, in Packer, the study of the Gospel leads to a stronger, healthier, and more

mature church (Hensarling 2012, 53). By implication, this is a church of disciples that reached this state – as we see in Vaughn Baker – through what Packer describes as evangelism or the preaching of the Gospel, per the New Testament (Baker 2012, 166).

3. Discipleship and the Gospels

The New Testament, however, is full of references to discipleship and Packer makes sure he covers all the types of documents in the New Testament when he discusses what discipleship entails. The four Gospels are referenced in connection with discipleship and the very first such instance is when Packer uses the Gospel of Matthew to juxtapose discipleship with Jesus’ “divine Father” (Packer 2011, 114), as in Matthew 11:25-27, for instance. A key aspect of discipleship in Packer is being aware that Jesus did not operate alone or on his own, but under the direction of his Father whose support enabled him to draw people close to him. According to Packer, the Father’s help allowed Jesus to produce a powerful impact on people whom he used to “call into discipleship” (Packer 2011, 114). It is important to realize though that discipleship is a close relationship with Jesus under the guidance of his Father (Packer 2011, 114); that is, for Packer, the essence of what the Gospel of Matthew teaches us about discipleship. The Gospel of Mark, on the other hand, extends the focus from God the Father to the people in their capacity as God’s creatures. Thus, Packer writes that a key aspect of discipleship taught by Mark’s Gospels is personal sanctification, which means that one should love not only God, but also his neighbor, as in Mark 12:29-31) because discipleship is not only a relationship, as in Matthew’s Gospel, but also a “process of change” manifested through one’s sanctification (Packer 2005, 61-62).

Knowing God in his capacity as Father not only in his divine relationship with Jesus but also in his soteriological connection to us is wonderfully depicted by Pete Alwinson who writes that Packer “hooked” him “for life in knowing God the Father” (Alwinson 2015, 28). Craig Murison and David Benson point out that, in Packer, loving one’s neighbor is mandatory according to the Bible, even if it is not an emotional feeling (Murison and Benson 2018, 85). It is rather relational, because – as disciples of Christ – Christians love God the Father and their neighbors due to their personal and genuine relationship with Jesus, as one can see in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark.

Packer notices that loving God the Father and one’s neighbor is not the whole story when it comes to defining discipleship. Thus, the Gospel of Luke comes up with a new aspect that has to do with eternal life: those who are genuine disciples of Christ not only manifest their love towards God as Jesus’ Father and their own as well as to their neighbor; they are also people who inherit eternal life as a result. When Packer reads Luke’s Gospel, he understands that discipleship is inheriting

eternal life because of loving God the Father and one's neighbor, which is quite evident in the parable of the good Samaritan, presented in Luke 25:37. The spiritual mathematics behind discipleship is simple according to Packer: loving God the Father and one's neighbor because of one's love for Jesus leads to eternal life. The story of discipleship, however, does not end here because, as Packer points out, these cannot be achieved unless Jesus' disciples lead a life of "imitating Jesus in humility, love, avoidance of sin, and the practice of righteousness" (Packer 2005, 62). According to Packer, imitating Christ is a key aspect of true discipleship, which we see in the Gospel of John, especially when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples as an example of earnest humility for them to practice among one another with sincerity and love (John 13:12-15). In Packer thus, true discipleship is imitating Christ (John's Gospel) through loving God the Father (Matthew's Gospel) and one's neighbor (Mark's Gospel), which is rewarded by God with eternal life (Luke's Gospel).

David Scott explains that in Packer, Christians – especially in their capacity as God's elect – see their relationship with Jesus through this *imitatio Christi*; in Scott's words, "the elect relate to the incarnation ... in terms of imitating Christ's life" (Scott 2018, 50). By imitating Christ, his disciples head towards eternal life which, in Packer, is seen by Jonathan Bayes as "enjoyment of God" (Bayes 2010, 235).

4. Discipleship and the Epistles

Packer's use of the New Testament epistles for his doctrine of discipleship is quite complex, but – as somewhat expected – he focuses a lot on Paul's writings. Thus, he reveals that discipleship begins with the Holy Spirit, in the sense that believers receive the Holy Spirit, which is also the first aspect of becoming a disciple of Christ, as in Galatians 3:2. The second aspect of discipleship according to Packer is the believer's awareness that he or she belongs to God because of the "seal" of the Holy Spirit, as in Ephesians 1:13. There is also a third aspect of discipleship in Packer, which has to do with the believer's realization that, due to his "seal," the Holy Spirit indwells the believer, as in Romans 8:11. Packer's fourth aspect of discipleship resides in the believer's being transformed by the indwelling reality of the Holy Spirit, who makes the believer resemble "Jesus's moral likeness," as in 2 Corinthians 3:18 (Packer 2005, 61). The fifth aspect of discipleship identified by Packer is the presence of spiritual gifts within the believer which is, again, a pneumatological reality worked by the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence within the believer, as in 1 Corinthians 12, which means that "all Christians have gifts and tasks of their own within the church's total ministry" (Packer 2005, 69). The sixth, and final, aspect of Packer's theology of discipleship which I was able to see in his theology based on his use of the Pauline epistles is the awareness worked by

the Holy Spirit in the believer that he or she belongs to Christ due to his death and resurrection, as in Colossians 2:12; in Packer's words, true discipleship consists of "looking to Christ and trusting his shed blood and the promise of pardon" (Packer 2005, 59).

The transformative nature of Packer's theology of discipleship is depicted by Alistair McGrath who writes that according to Packer's reading of Paul, theology – and consequently discipleship – "changes lives" and, in doing so, it constantly is "about the renewal of our minds and, subsequently, the redirection and reinvigoration of our lives" (McGrath 2019, 112). When referring to discipleship in the context of a larger discussion that also includes a reference to Packer, Jason Hood speaks about the fact that discipleship in Paul is "Christification" (Hood 2013, 108). Nevertheless, given Packer's focus on the Holy Spirit's role in discipleship, it could be validly argued that Packer's theology of discipleship actively promotes Christification through Spiritification.

Even if the Pauline epistles are the bulk of Packer's theology of discipleship, he nevertheless goes beyond them into some of the remaining epistles of the New Testament, which allow him to elaborate more on the reality of discipleship. To begin with, Petrine's theology provides Packer with the chance to explain that discipleship is profoundly Christological. Thus, discipleship must always be strongly anchored in Christ, in his suffering, in his sinlessness, and in his capacity as shepherd and overseer of the believers' souls, all of which one can see in 1 Peter 2:21-25. For Packer, this means that discipleship is "doing the things [Christ] says," so that believers should have a "life that pleases God" (Packer 2005, 62). To support the same argument, Packer also resorts to Hebrews 12:14, another text whose Christological focus highlights some crucial aspects of discipleship, such as the believer's need permanently to focus on Jesus, his suffering, and his ascension. This unceasing Christological perseverance prompts Packer to believe that genuine discipleship is based on a "ground ... well mapped" (Packer 2005, 62) that helps him lead a life of ongoing spiritual transformation. One last epistle I was able to identify outside the Pauline corpus which is used by Packer for his theology of discipleship is 1 John 1:3. According to Packer's reading of this text, discipleship is fellowship with God, and specifically with the Father and the Son. This precision causes Packer to believe that there is a certain standard of Christian living and, in this regard, discipleship has a distinct "charter" for the "quality of Christian experience" – in other words, true discipleship is when believers "seek this experienced fellowship and settle for nothing less" (Packer 2005, 56).

The crucial importance of fellowship in Packer's thought does not escape the attention of Jerry Bridges, who acknowledges that, as far as Packer is concerned, "fellowship with God is indeed both the foundation and the objective of our fellowship with one another" (Bridges 2014, 97). I noticed the same focus on fellowship in Packer, especially in the context of who we are as believers and con-

sequently, as disciples. Since this fellowship is mediated Christologically, I wrote that, in Packer's theology, "the essence of spiritual formation," which is also the core of discipleship, consists of this "obsession with Christ ... the only healthy obsession one may entertain; if we are genuine Christians, we must always share in this spiritual obsession" (Simuț 2022, 87).

5. Discipleship and the Acts of the Apostles

One of the most interesting ways in which Packer uses the New Testament to build his understanding of discipleship has to do with his reading of the Acts of the Apostles. The first side of discipleship we can see in Packer's handling of Acts is its beginning; discipleship begins when people repent, accept baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and then receive the Holy Spirit as a gift – and that we read in Acts 2:38. Second, discipleship not only has a beginning in repentance or the dramatic change of one's mind due to accepting Christ and his forgiveness of sins, but also works as witness. In its capacity as a witness, discipleship is a manifestation of Christ's power within believers through the Holy Spirit, as in Acts 1:5, 8. In Packer's words, "Jesus had promised that when the Spirit came, he would empower the disciples for witness" (Packer 2005, 75), and that is the foundation of genuine discipleship. Third, discipleship is a continuous spiritual vocation that manifests itself in the life of the believer; as Packer puts it, discipleship can be seen in terms of a "new ministry" (Packer 2005, 75) which manifests itself pneumatologically and Christologically at the same time; this spiritual vocation, Packer explains, happens through the Spirit who glorifies Jesus (Packer 2005, 75).

Kermit Zarley mentions Packer's conviction that the twelve disciples had been converted before they experienced the Pentecost, in which case discipleship refers to spiritual cleanness, and that points to redemption, justification, salvation, and regeneration (Zarley 2015, 87). This means that the twelve disciples walked with Jesus before his death, resurrection, and ascension; even more importantly though, the pattern did not change after his death, resurrection, and ascension. Consequently, discipleship consists of walking with Jesus in the power of the Spirit. John MacArthur confirms this reality when he points out that, in Packer, the Spirit always points to Jesus (MacArthur 2013, 43). In other words, in Packer, discipleship is focused Christologically although performed pneumatologically.

In dealing with the Acts of the Apostles, especially concerning the spiritual reality of discipleship, Packer seems to admit that there are at least some aspects that remain quite unclear. For instance, he singles out "God's postponing of tongues and prophecy at Samaria till Peter and John arrived" in Acts 8:12-17 and then "his producing these phenomena in the twelve Ephesian disciples after their Christian baptism" in Acts 19:1-6 as two instances which are somewhat dogmati-

cally a bit more difficult to interpret (Packer 2005, 75). Packer goes as far as to suggest that Luke himself did not fully understand what happened in these two cases when he writes that “it is not clear that he [Luke] has any personal theology about them to offer” (Packer 2005, 75). To make things even more difficult, Packer uses a rather hilarious image when he claims that these two incidents “are matters on which Luke is poker-faced” (Packer 2005, 75). Regardless of whether Luke was baffled beyond comprehension about these two facts – having heard about the former, while perhaps having witnessed the latter himself) – it is rather evident in Packer that discipleship happens because of the Holy Spirit and has conversion as its starting point: “the expectation that the Spirit’s full ministry to Christian would begin at conversion is clear throughout Acts” (Packer 2005, 75). In either case, however, it is the preaching of the Gospel, that is the message about Jesus, which made the difference between how people were before and how they were after they heard about Jesus. In this sense, discipleship in Packer is about “the full ministry that Jesus foretold” and the preaching thereof as celebrated throughout the entire New Testament (Packer 2005, 75).

In other words, discipleship is about preaching all there is to know and share about Christ according to the New Testament; Donald Ekstrand thus notices that, in Packer, discipleship is “to be mature,” “to have a mature relationship with Christ in which we worship, trust, love, and obey him,” and to develop a fresh and true vision of Jesus Christ which is based on refusing to preach “a distorted Christ” (Ekstrand 2012, 448). According to Packer, there is no true discipleship in the absence of the preaching of the Gospel; this is why Rober Solomon shows Packer’s staunch belief in “the importance of evangelism and mission” (Solomon 2020).

6. Discipleship and the Book of Revelation

Although I have not been able to find many references to discipleship as explained based on the Book of Revelation in Packer’s works, I did manage to identify one instance in which he explain discipleship concerning the Book of Revelation. The larger context is a discussion about zeal, which Packer sees as a fundamental feature of genuine discipleship. To briefly summarize Packer’s discussion, he believes that zeal should characterize Christian discipleship simply because first, Christ himself displayed a fervent zeal during his ministry, and second, Christ’s disciples demonstrated their zeal throughout their ministries up to the point of their death, usually by martyrdom. Among Packer’s examples of spiritual zeal, Paul features prominently as a disciple of Christ who faced “prison and pain” with an unwavering commitment to his Lord (Packer 2023, n.p.). Thus, in Packer, zeal goes hand in hand with discipleship because zeal is indeed one of the core characteristics of Christ’s followers in their capacity as disciples. Packer’s reference to the Book of Revelation, however, occurs when he discusses spiritual zeal and divine jealousy.

In this respect, he mentions Revelation 3:15-16, a text that is addressed to the church of Laodicea and its lukewarm or indecisive attitude towards Christ and Christian life. In this context, Packer explains that zeal is the opposite of apathy, and a true disciple of Christ should always be zealous for the Lord (Packer 2023, n.p.).

As a key feature of discipleship in Packer's theology, zeal is also spotted by John Steinreich, who writes that zeal should always be associated with "joy, prayerfulness, worshipfulness" because "it certainly reflects the attitude and action of both Christ and the early disciples in their faith" (Steinreich 2016, 110). Andrew McGowan emphasizes another aspect of zeal as discipleship in Packer when he points out that zeal should always be directed towards faith, not towards rationalistic explanations of faith, as one can see in the works of certain theologians, such as A. A. Hodge and Louis Berkhof (McGowan 2008, 115).

For Packer, the Book of Revelation seems to be sufficient for his theology of discipleship even if it discloses only one characteristic of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. And since this one feature, identified as zeal, is seen as the antonym of apathy, Packer warns that it is not only zeal that matters (Packer 2023, n.p.); the issue is a bit more serious than that because God's jealousy is directed against any form of passivity, or lack of interest and enthusiasm. Genuine discipleship in Packer goes contrary to indifference and disregard regarding Christ. Those who believe in Christ must always lead a life of zeal, enthusiasm, and passion for Christ as Lord and Savior. Why is zeal so important for Packer? The answer is not complicated: zeal is crucial because it speaks about a person's attitude towards Christ not only with respect to what happens now but also to what is to come in the church's future. Thus, in Packer, zeal is synonymous with hope (Packer 2023, n.p.). Zealous disciples are believers whose lives are full of hope and especially of eschatological hope; disciples must be full of zeal because they not only live for Christ – they also live hoping to see Christ face to face. One last aspect: for Packer, zeal is important because it goes hand in hand with repentance, as in Revelation 3:16, where the apathetic church of Laodicea is urged not only to be zealous but also to manifest repentance. In other words, zeal is the conscious awareness that one needs to constantly renew one's mind for Christ; genuine discipleship thus is characterized by zeal as enthusiasm for the Lord, caused by a permanent renewal of one's psyche in conscientiously following the Lord, loving him, and taking decisions for him (Packer 2023, n.p.).

Robert Solomon warns that Packer's understanding of zeal is neither fanaticism and wildness nor irresponsibility and selfishness. On the contrary, Packer's zeal is merely an attitude of reverence, humility, and commitment to Christ which encompasses one's entire life (Solomon 2022, 227). When we see discipleship in terms of zeal, we understand – together with Christian George – that believers can

live along these lines only if they comprehend “the importance of biblical theology” (George 2006, 172), one of Packer’s life-long pursuits.

7. Evaluation: The Two Pillars of Discipleship

As I mentioned in the introduction, Packer builds his doctrine of discipleship while focusing on the Gospels and the epistles: while the Gospels reveal the nature of discipleship, the epistles contain the teachings about discipleship. In other words, according to Packer, the epistles represent the theory about discipleship and the Gospels the practice of discipleship (Packer 2005, 61). Whether Packer did intently consider the remaining literary genres in the New Testament – the Acts of the Apostles and Revelation – as fundamentally important for his doctrine of discipleship is a fact, I was unable to ascertain, even if I did manage to single out some features of discipleship based on his use of Acts and Revelation. What is important though, has to do with Packer’s perspective on discipleship, which is based on two pillars: the teaching or the theory about discipleship, to be found in the epistles, and the nature of the practice of discipleship, as revealed in the Gospels. These two pillars, Packer warns, are equally important for discipleship because they both produce a complete perspective on what discipleship is and how it works in the church (Packer 2005, 61). One should never split the teaching from the nature of discipleship because the theory can never replace the practice.

Dewey Mulholland writes about Packer’s perspective on the nature of discipleship, which is not about pleasing the people, but about pleasing God; it is not about following the people, but about following Jesus. And, in the end, it is not about gaining what people like, but about gaining what God has to offer, especially divine and spiritual blessings (Mulholland 1999, 109). The teaching about discipleship in Packer is presented by Hal Stewart, who describes it as a “mission to make disciples;” in this respect “disciple-making is the intentional passing on of the biblical faith to another person” (Stewart 2017, 113). Stewart also believes that, in Packer, the theory of discipleship can be adequately explained as “God’s mission with evangelistic and disciple-making understanding” (Stewart 2017, 113).

Having warned that when it comes to discipleship, theory, and practice must always be considered together, Packer explains why the teaching about discipleship and the nature of discipleship must never be separated from one another. Divorcing the two, Packer says, is a very bad sign (Packer 2005, 61) mostly because focusing on the theoretical aspects of discipleship can lead to a loss of interest in what it means to follow Jesus and “have fellowship with the Lord Jesus in person” (Packer 2005, 61). Conversely, too much focus on being with Jesus on a very personal and singular basis will, most likely, generate an attitude of disinterest towards other people; and that can result only in ignoring the disciple’s funda-

mental duty to make other disciples. Packer, however, is convinced that keeping theory and practice together concerning discipleship is possible if we do not lose sight of the fact that true discipleship is anchored in one's new birth and repentance (Packer 2011, 158). When we understand that there is no discipleship without the new birth and repentance – that is without a genuine beginning of faith and an equally authentic life of faith – our discipleship will be no less than ardent (Packer 1958, 13).

The ardent nature of discipleship in Packer was captured by V. M. Liew, who mentions it in the context of Christian worship as a way of life (Liew 2014). This means that, according to Packer, discipleship – very much like worship – is a way of life for all Christians who accept not only to be followers of Christ but also people who urge other people to follow Christ. There is a catch here though, as we read in Cameron Anderson: we can follow Christ only if and when we read about him in the Bible, in his Word, which means that discipleship is legitimate only when based on the Bible (Anderson 2016, 153). And it is straight from the Bible that Packer learns about discipleship and it is in the Bible that he sees its two pillars: the nature of discipleship in the Gospels and the teaching about discipleship in the epistles, together with a whole lot of other crucial features of discipleship that he finds in the remaining books of the New Testament.

Conclusion

This paper was about providing a systematic perspective on how Packer builds his theology of discipleship by using the New Testament. Although it is quite evident that Packer himself may not have consciously thought about these aspects, I was able to identify and trace some concrete steps that lie at the very foundation of his enterprise.

Packer's first step in building a theology of discipleship based on the New Testament is to offer his view of the Bible because it is in the Bible that we read about faith, specifically about faith in God and in Christ as his Son. Faith leads to knowing Christ and knowing Christ is what discipleship consists of ultimately – and all these aspects are found in the Bible. Second, Packer narrows down his perspective from viewing the whole Bible to focusing on the New Testament, which – as we have already seen – contains vital information about the nature of discipleship in the Gospels and the teachings related to discipleship in the epistles. My contribution resides primarily not in investigating the Gospels and the epistles, which I did anyway, but rather in going beyond these two literary genres to see how Packer discusses discipleship regarding the Acts of the Apostles and Revelation. For Packer, the New Testament is important because it reveals Christ not only as God, Lord, and Savior – alongside other vital aspects of his being and work – but also as the central figure of all its books. Third, Packer's discussion of the Gospels

reveals that discipleship has quite a lot of facets: in Matthew, discipleship has to do with knowing God the Father; in Mark, discipleship is linked to loving people; in Luke, discipleship leads to eternal life, while in John, discipleship resides in imitating Christ.

In dealing with the epistles, Packer understands that discipleship must be defined as a radical pneumatological transformation of the human being who is indwelled by the Holy Spirit due to Christ's work – and that's Paul's perspective. The rest of the New Testament epistles focus on discipleship as a mandatory process of leading one's life by Christ's example. The Acts of the Apostles inform us how discipleship can and should be lived as life in the Spirit as believers take the message of Christ to unbelievers and, in doing so, mature in faith. In the Book of Revelation, Packer sees that discipleship has a certain standard; in this respect, discipleship should be zealous and ardent for the sake of Christ, who lives in believers through the Holy Spirit.

In the end, I went back to the nature of discipleship revealed by the Gospels and the teaching about discipleship seen in the epistles, which I consider the two pillars on which Packer builds his theology of discipleship. The nature of discipleship is important because it represents the practice of discipleship; knowing what to do as disciples of Christ is a crucial aspect of living as believers and followers of Christ. Then, the teaching about discipleship is equally important because it shows how we should understand discipleship especially as we live it in the power of the Spirit. Packer warns that these two pillars, the nature or practice of discipleship and the teaching or theory of discipleship should never be separated from one another. He has a very strong reason for his warning: parting these two pillars leads inevitably to a life that lacks the authenticity of faith in Christ, who taught his disciples not only what following him entails theoretically but also how following him should be lived practically daily.

In the end, here is a very short list of what I perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of Packer's dealings with the New Testament as he speaks about discipleship. I was able to gather three aspects that I consider strengths of Packer's approach. One strength of Packer's use of the New Testament for his theology of discipleship is the fact that he tends to use the New Testament rather broadly when he identifies the building blocks of discipleship. Another strength has to do with the fact that his use of the New Testament for his theology of discipleship takes into account the entire Bible as God's revelation. Yet another strength resides in his determination to keep theory and practice, doctrine and applied spirituality, in a close relationship which makes his approach not merely holistic, but also powerfully knit together. Regarding possible weaknesses in Packer's methodology, I should perhaps mention that he does not seem to use all the books of the New Testament for his theology of discipleship – or it may be the case that I have not yet been able to spot every occurrence of the notion of discipleship in conjunc-

tion with biblical verses from the sources, especially epistles, that I believe Packer did not deal with. Another possible weakness – although “weakness” may be too strong a word to describe it – is that Packer, despite his extensive use of Scripture and especially of the New Testament, does not seem to use specialized biblical commentaries to back his position. I realize this may be too much to ask from a dogmatic historical theologian, which Packer indeed was as a scholar, but it is an aspect I noticed as I browsed through his works. The last issue which I find a bit problematic is that Packer has not provided us with a unified and systematized theology of discipleship; what we have are various references to discipleship scattered across his works but there is no integrated perspective on discipleship that Packer himself could have provided.

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Corneliu C. Simuť

Packerovo korištenje Novoga zavjeta u njegovu nauku o ućeništvu

Sažetak

Ovaj ćlanak istražuje naćin na koji je J. I. Packer, jedan od najistaknutijih evanđeoskih teologa 20. i 21. stoljeća, koristio Novi zavjet kako bi izgradio svoje gledište o ućeništvu. Premda nam Packer u svojim djelima nije pružio sustavan prikaz ućeništva, brojne reference vezane uz taj pojam otkrivaju njegovu duboku preokupaciju ovom temom. Stoga sam odlučio pratiti naćin na koji je koristio Novi zavjet s namjerom konstrukcije holistićkoga razumijevanja ućeništva. Kako bih ostvario ovaj cilj, poduzeo sam nekoliko vlastitih koraka. Prvo sam proućio njegov općenit pogled na Bibliju, zatim sam zagrebao malo dublje u istom smjeru, istraživanjem naćina na koji je koristio Novi zavjet kao temeljni izvor svoje teologije ućeništva. Preostala ćetiri koraka istražuju Packerovo stvarno korištenje novozavjetnih knjiga, što će nam iznjedriti njegov nauk o ućeništvu. Vezano uz to, proućavao sam njegove misli o ućeništvu prateći njegovo istraživanje ove teme u ćetirima Evanđeljima, Poslanicama (Pavlovim i drugim), Djelima apostolskim i Knjizi Otkrivenja. Ujedno sam ućkratko istražio ono što nazivam Packerovim dvama stupovima ućeništva, koje istiće kao narav ućeništva i ućenje o ućeništvu – prvi stup nalazimo objavljen u Evanđeljima, a drugi u Poslanicama. Ćinjenica da sam otišao izvan Evanđelja i Poslanica u ćratko istraživanje Djela apostolskih i Otkrivenja prirodna je posljedica moje izvorne namjere da pratim Packerove korake u cijelomu Novom zavjetu u svrhu izgradnje teologije ućeništva. Na kraju, ova studija nije samo istraživanje Packerova korištenja Novoga zavjeta kako bismo razumjeli njegovo gledište o ućeništvu nego i mogućnost da izvućemo neke osnovne odlike ućeništva na koje je naišao dok je proućavao svaki književni ćžanr Novoga zavjeta.