



Book Review by Rev. Tim Gibson

1. Biographic data:

Packer, James I. Keep in Step with the Spirit, Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H.Revell Co., 1984

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2. The Book Review:

Outline

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I. Steps To Where?

One book review of ‘Keep in Step with the Spirit’ that I came across commences as follows...

“While there is no need to treat any author as sacrosanct it is to be reckoned that Dr. Packer, author of so many excellent books, always brings to the study of any subject a clear, mature and well-reasoned presentation that today seems so sadly lacking, especially when the subject is pneumatology. In this volume, Packer, taking little if anything for granted, leads us skillfully over the rocky terrain of an often misunderstood and misapplied biblical doctrine. We have often come to expect much from this world-class theologian, and expectations do not fail us in the present

case. The spirit of this book is irenic in a sea of heated debate, and pastoral where much wisdom is called for in this present hour. It is a potent corrective to many of the excesses currently found in both the charismatic and broadly evangelical communities.”¹

As the quote above states, he does indeed bring a ‘*mature and well-reasoned presentation*’ that aims to both expose faulty notions concerning the Holy Spirit and bring the reader into focus concerning the most important aspect of the Holy Spirit’s ministry. However, I would question his ‘*potent corrective*’ as it seems to render the ‘charismatic’ aspect of the Spirit’s ministry more impotent than potent – I will explain my reasoning on this in the section entitled ‘Cracks in the Steps’.

Dr. Packer empathically states that this book is not for the casual, curious reader but for ‘*Christians who mean business with God and are prepared to be dealt with by him*’ (p13) and that it was written to help the readers implement Ephesians 5:18-21 in a practical way (p11). This is a truly noble goal and I believe Packer achieves this in part.

It appears early on in his book that Dr. Packer’s initial purpose (first step) in writing this book is to focus the reader on the main ministry of the Spirit, bringing clarity and correcting wrong foci. He writes, “*..we would appreciate the Spirit’s work more, and maybe avoid some of the pitfalls concerning it, if our thoughts about the Spirit were clearer, and that is where this book tries to help*” (p20).

His next step is to map out historical teachings on the Spirit’s ministry revealing pros and cons of each and to finally (last step) present a “*thought-out theological perspective on the Spirit’s work*” (p52), which he attempts to do in the last two chapters.

Hence, his overall purpose of writing this book is to correct faulty Christian theology concerning the Spirit (p65) and thereby avoid wrong practices due to lack of understanding and emphasis. It is written to Charismatics to help them curb excesses such as the “*concentrated quest for intense experiences, emotional highs, supernatural communications, novel insights, exotic techniques of pastoral therapy, and general pietistic pizzazz*” (p233) and to Non-charismatics to help them to not neglect the work of the Spirit thus lacking “*divine energy and exuberance in most congregations*” (p236) and be more accepting of the Charismatic movement in general (Packer affirms that the Charismatic Movement is, on the whole, of God but that it has faulty interpretations concerning it’s experiences). Indeed, it appears that a major concern of Dr.Packer here is to present a theology of the Holy Spirit that will bring Charismatics and Non-Charismatics together (pp227-228).

II. Step by Step

Let me now go through Dr. Packer’s purposes, as outlined above, step by step.

a. The First Step: Getting the Focus Right.

¹ Review of *Keep in Step With the Spirit* by: Michael L. Shrum - <http://www.ssfonline.org/resources501.html>

As I mentioned, his first step was to bring clarity concerning the Spirit's ministry. He does this in Chapter One by firstly revealing areas that have too much focus on them. These areas are **power for living, performance of ministry, purity of motives, and presentation of reality for decision**. He points out, for instance, that evangelical stress on "*supernatural sanctity through the Spirit as something real and necessary has been and always will be timely teaching*" (p. 24). Nevertheless, this is not the be-all and end-all of the Spirit's ministry in the life of the believer.

Packer then brings into sharp focus what he believes to be "*the essence, heart, and core of the Spirit's work*" (p.47), namely, that of "**presence**." He says, "*By this I mean that the Spirit makes known the personal presence in and with the Christian and the church of the risen, reigning Saviour, the Jesus of history, who is the Christ of faith*" (p.47). This presence is not the omnipresence of traditional theology, but rather, "*What Bible writers meant when they spoke of God being present with His people, namely, God acting in particular situations to bless faithful folk and thus make them know His love and help and draw forth their worship*" (p.48). The distinctive, constant, basic ministry of the Holy Spirit is to impart such knowledge so that three things continue to happen: personal fellowship with Jesus, personal transformation of character into Jesus' likeness, and the Spirit-given certainty of being loved, redeemed, and adopted through Christ into the Father's family. "*By these phenomena of experience, Spirit-given knowledge of Christ's presence ... shows itself*" (p.49).

This revelation of the Spirit's "*floodlight ministry*" (p65) has helped me much in re-focusing my understanding the Holy Spirit's ministry. Coming from a strongly Charismatic background, I have tended to focus more on the power and performance aspects of His ministry. Dr. Packer's clear teaching has helped me to see that these four aspects of the Spirit's ministry (**power for living, performance of ministry, purity of motives, and presentation of reality for decision**) are actually like four pillars of a building that need to be firmly rooted in the foundation of the main ministry of the Spirit, that is **presence**. If they are not they will surely fall and cause the building to collapse. This has caused me to critique my Charismatic experience (and that of my Church) with the question, "Does it bring glory to and reveal more of Jesus?"

One modern Charismatic song that reveals this misunderstanding of the Spirit's ministry is the song that has the Lines:

*"Father we love You we worship and adore You, glorify Thy name in all the earth.
Glorify Thy name, glorify Thy name, glorify Thy name in all the earth.
Jesus we love You we worship and adore You, glorify Thy name in all the earth.
Glorify Thy name, glorify Thy name, glorify Thy name in all the earth.
Spirit we love You we worship and adore You, glorify Thy name in all the earth.
Glorify Thy name, glorify Thy name, glorify Thy name in all the earth."*²

The first two verses can be accepted, but the last one, asking the Holy Spirit to glorify His own name cannot – as we have seen He exists to glorify the name of Jesus. If this song is sung in my Church I will change the last verse to "*Glorify **His** name in all the earth*", referring to the Spirit's "*Floodlight ministry*" (1 John 5:6; John 15:26; John 16:13-14).

Dr. Packer excellently applies this point in practical ways such as explaining the term "*Praying in the Spirit*" (from Ephesians 6:18) and commenting on the use of the Spiritual Gifts. In Charismatic circles "*Praying in the Spirit*" is normally held to be praying in Tongues (I must

² By Donna Adkins. ©1976, 1981 Maranatha! Music (Admin. by The Copyright Company)

admit that I have been guilty of limiting it to that in many statements I have made from the pulpit). However, I like Dr. Packer's statement, in the context of what he's said about the Spirit's ministry, that "*Whether it comes forth verbalized, as in prayers and praises recorded in Scripture, or un verbalized, as when the contemplative gazes Godward in love or the charismatic slips into glossolalia, is immaterial. He (or she) whose heart seeks God through Christ prays in the Spirit.*" (pp79-80). This statement helps to ensure a correct usage of Tongues and I believe is a spot on description of Biblical "*Praying in the Spirit*". Indeed, Dr. Packer goes on further to say that all "*spiritual gifts must be defined in terms of Christ, as actualized powers of expressing, celebrating, displaying and so communicating Christ in one way or another, either by word or by deed.*" (p83). This statement helps those in Charismatic circles greatly in the use of Spiritual Gifts – much of the time these Gifts are used to glorify self or simply bless others rather than glorifying Christ.

Strengthening his first step, in Chapter Two Dr. Packer gives a thorough and clear presentation of the Holy Spirit's ministry as revealed in the Bible all in the context of His "*Floodlight Ministry*". Even though I cannot agree fully with his denial of a "*two-stage, two-level affair, in which conversion is followed by a second event (called Spirit baptism on the basis of Acts 1:5 or spirit-filling on the basis of 2:4)*" (p90) – more on this in 'Cracks in the Steps'- I was very touched by his assertion that we should not ask the questions, "*Do you know the Holy Spirit?*" or "*Do you have the Holy Spirit?*" But instead we should ask "*Do you know Jesus Christ?*" and "*Does the Holy Spirit have you?*"

A tendency among Charismatics has been to speak and teach more about the Holy Spirit whereas the Holy Spirit would teach us more about Jesus Himself. Dr. Packer's keen observation that the "*all things*" Jesus refers to in John 14:26 and 16:13 that the Spirit teaches us in is actually "*all you need to know about me*" (p65). I have always seen this as "*all there is to know about anything*" – this can lead to a strong anti-intellectual stance with the attitude that we do not need to go to Theological training centers as the Spirit Himself will teach us all these things as we wait on Him (an attitude I have heard many times in Charismatic circles).

Another tendency among Charismatics has been to give the impression that we "*have the Holy Spirit*" to order about as we want, to switch on and off as we will. Dr. Packer rightly asserts that, as the Holy Spirit is fully God and sovereign, we should allow Him to have all of us, yielding to His working in our lives. A consequence of this yielding will be that He will empower us, perform through us, purify us and present His way to us so that in all Jesus is glorified.

Chapter Three (completing his first step), entitled "Mapping the Spirit's Path: The Way of Holiness," is perhaps the most practically helpful section of the entire book. In it the reader is offered much in the way of good, solid counsel as to what it means to be "*led by the Spirit*". Certainly not to be ignored is the discussion and accurate description of the evangelical misapprehension of this very point. He rightly points out that 'Activism' is not holiness but is "*activity gone to seed through not being grounded on sustained self-distrust and dependence on God.*" (p98). Personally I was shaken back to God's reality when Dr. Packer repeated the old quote "*if you are too busy to pray, you really are too busy*" (p98). Contemporary Christianity tends to focus too much on the doing rather than the being and I believe that Dr. Packer's message to the Church today that is preoccupied with controversy, disillusioned with what has long been put to it as 'holiness teaching', thinks that talent is preempted and is insensitive to the holiness of God himself (pp100-101), is a message about coming back to real holiness as expounded by the Puritans.

In this chapter Dr. Packer asserts what this real holiness is:

1. The Nature of Holiness is Transformation through Consecration
2. The Context of Holiness is Justification through Jesus Christ
3. The Root of Holiness is Cocrucifixion and Coresurrection with the Lord Jesus Christ
4. The Agent of Holiness is the Holy Spirit
5. The Experience of Holiness is one of Conflict
6. The Rule of Holiness is Gods Revealed Law
7. The Heart of Holiness is the Spirit of Love

I believe that Dr. Packer's real purpose in writing this chapter is to put the reader back on track as to the main work of the Holy Spirit in forming the character of Christ in us, developing the fruit of the Holy Spirit, exemplified of course by love. Really he is saying that how we view holiness will shape our teaching on the ministry of the Holy Spirit and ultimately affect our practices in the Church.

It is this clear teaching about what real holiness is all about that leads us to the next step that shows how different views of holiness in the past have shaped present Charismatic views. Dr. Packer's real intent is to show that because these views had some flaws in them these flaws have been carried over into Charismatic practices in the modern age.

b. The Next Step: Showing How We Got Off Focus.

In Chapters 4 and 5 Dr. Packer moves on to his next step, that of mapping out historical teachings on the Spirit's ministry, showing how they have effected present Christian experience and presenting pros and cons of each. He does this so we can clearly identify where the Church's focus on the Holy Spirit's ministry became blurred and, in recognizing this, begin to reassess our understanding.

The modern Charismatic movement came from the ideological roots of the Wesleyan Holiness Movement and the Keswick Convention '*Higher Life*' teachings and so Dr. Packer looks at these two views on holiness, comparing them with Augustinian Holiness, which was widely held by the Church before these other two views.

Wesleyan Perfectionism and Keswick Teaching (which was a "*modified version of the Wesleyan view developed a little over a century ago to parry criticism of the claim that God's second decisive work of grace eradicates sin from the Christian heart.*" (p145)), Dr. Packer states, swerved away from the Augustinian root principle of "*God out of grace (meaning, free, unmerited love to us sinners) and by grace (meaning, the Spirit active in our personal lives) must and does work in us all that we ever achieve of the faith, love, worship, and obedience that he requires.*" (p122). There is a move away from a Calvinist to a more Arminian stance where man is responsible to enter into a second grace – sanctification.

Dr. Packer correctly points out that one's interpretation of Romans 7:14-25 is critical in determining the correct view of holiness. He even dedicates the whole Appendix section to clearing this up (p263-270). The older Augustinian view had taken this passage at face value, saying it was Paul at the time of writing stating his wretchedness and inability to fully keep the law until Christ comes back. Wesleyan teaching saw it as Paul looking back to his pre-Christian state and Keswick teaching saw it as a Christian in the Carnal state, not living victoriously by faith in the Spirit.

I have been taught and have believed the latter view (from Keswick teaching) to be correct but, I must say, Dr. Packer's exegesis of this passage has swayed me to believe now that Paul was actually talking about his experience at the time of writing. As pointed out, Wesleyan and Keswick teachings are highly unrealistic and can lead to a "*smugness of a rather unlovely kind*" (p142). Dr. Packer's remarks about Keswick teaching leading to passivity or quietism ("*Conscious inaction*" (p156)) caught my attention. He writes, "*Passivity, which quietists think liberates the Spirit, actually resists and quenches him*" - my own theological background has a strong quietist streak and I can attest to the fact that this misguided theology does lead to many missed opportunities and a quenching of spiritual vitality. We hear the motto "*Let go and let God*" very frequently in Christian circles but we should speak out more Packer's revised (and more Biblical) quote, "*Trust God and get going!*" (p157).

Chapter 4 ends with a brilliant conclusion, drawing on the previous conclusions that the Spirit's ministry is to glorify Christ by making us more like Him, that "*when Christians ask God to make them more like Jesus, through the Spirit's power, he will do it, never mind what shortcomings appear in their theology*" (pp163-164).

In Chapter 5 Dr. Packer concludes his historical sweep by coming right up to date with a description of the Charismatic movement's distinctives and its positive (pp185-191) and negative (pp191-197) contributions to present day Christianity. He applies the Scriptural tests (1 John 4:2-3 and 1 Cor 12:3) to the Charismatic Movement and finds it passes, not with flying colours, but with some reservations! His perceptive list of pros and cons is helpful for Charismatics to see elements that need to be concentrated on and strengthened (e.g. Christ-Centeredness, Spirit-Empowered living) and ones that need to be eradicated (e.g. Elitism, Sectarianism) and also for non-charismatics to appreciate the positive contribution of the Charismatic Movement.

I found his analysis of Protestant Charismatics leaning more to the Restorationist position and the Catholic Charismatics more to the Realizationalist position to be very informative. These two views differ as to seeing New Testament Charismatic experience as what God **will** (Restorationist) and what God **can** (Realizationalist) do (p183). However, I disagree with his view that the Realizationalist view is the sounder of the two and I will say why in the section "Cracks in the Steps".

This step ends with an assertion that "*in reality, charismatic and non-charismatic spiritualities differ more in vocabulary, self-image.... than in the actual ingredients of their communion with the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit. Charismatic experience is less distinctive than is sometimes made out*" (p199).

This step has really shown us very clearly that faulty views of holiness have led to malpractices in Charismatic circles concerning the ministry of the Holy Spirit. There is a need, not to cast off Charismatic teachings as unbiblical but to retheologize this ministry and come to a clearer understanding that will bring Charismatics and non-charismatics closer together and glorify Christ, which is after all the Spirit's ministry. This brings us to Dr. Packer's last step.

c. The Last Step: Retheologizing the Charismatic Experience.

In the last two chapters Dr. Packer launches into the real thrust of what he has been aiming at from the beginning – presenting a more accurate theology of Charismatic experience.

Dr. Packer claims to have "*fully proved*" that "*the restorationist claims on which the expectations themselves have been based will not stand examination and that a different*

theological account of the Spirit's work is needed" (p219). However, I would challenge this statement and that is what I intend to do in the next section.

Although I agree with Dr. Packer in his desire in the last chapter, "Come Holy Spirit", for fresh outpouring of God's Spirit, and I even agree with his general 5 point outline of his new theology (pp222-224), I disagree in part with the way he outworks this theology and that is what I will look at in "Cracks in the Steps".

III. Cracks in the Steps.

This section is not intended to tear down all the excellent things Dr. Packer accomplishes in this book, nor is it meant to come across as if I totally disagree with his retheologizing. Indeed, I don't agree with many of the extremes of the Restorationist position. However, I do want to challenge several conclusions Dr. Packer has made that he claims totally discredits the Restorationist position. I especially want to state that I find his conclusions concerning Baptism in the Spirit and the spiritual gifts to rob these experiences of their substance and relegate them to merely embellishments on top of the Christian cake that may or may not be present dependant on the taste of the one partaking of it. I think that they are not merely embellishments but vital ingredients of the cake!

It must be said that the strengths of Dr. Packer's writing are that he comes across as balanced, benevolent and brave. Balanced in that, even though he's had negative experiences personally in the Charismatic movement (see especially his testimony in pp157-158), he remains objective and looks at the pros and cons of all sides. Benevolent in such statements as *"I do not for one moment suggest that there is no spiritual substance to these expectation-shaped experiences"*(p219) where he does not cast off things due to personal prejudice. Brave in that he is not afraid to tackle controversial topics head on such as he does in Chapter 4. These things are commendable. However, there are a few cracks that I perceive in his final step of presenting a new practical theology on the Charismatic experience.

Firstly, he jumps too quickly to the conclusions that Spirit Baptism and the operation of spiritual gifts cannot be the same today as it was in the time of the book of Acts. This is hinted at early on in the book in Chapter 2 where he practically uses 1 Corinthians 12:13 on its own to prove Baptism in the Holy Spirit is something that happens at salvation. It is not sound hermeneutical practice to use one solitary verse to prove a point, as Dr. Packer seems to be doing here.

In Chapter 6 the first question he asks concerning Spirit Baptism is *"Can it be convincingly denied that 1 Corinthians 12:13 (NIV) "We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body...and we were all given one Spirit to drink" refers to one aspect of what we may call the "conversion-initiation complex" with which the Christian life starts, so that according to Paul every Christian as such is Spirit baptized?"* (p202).

This question in itself, and indeed all of his *"Can it be convincingly denied"* questions that follow, can be quite misleading. In the first place you could equally ask the question, *"Can it be convincingly proven"* with the same answer, *"surely not!"* Also, in the case of the first question you cannot relate this statement to Spirit Baptism in the same way we can with Mark 1:8; Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16 and John 1:33. Although the same word 'en' is used in the Greek it is not in the same word order or sense as the passages mentioned and it could be validly argued that it is the body into which one is baptized in 1 Corinthians 12:13, the Spirit playing a vital part. This could then actually be referring to a baptism into the body that indeed happens at new birth

but is not the same as Spirit Baptism and cannot therefore be used to show that Spirit Baptism occurs at conversion.

Likewise, it cannot be convincingly proven that the two-step experience of the disciples in Acts (conversion then a later baptism in the spirit) does not continue today. We see that the Church in Corinth experienced spiritual gifts that were seen to be signs of one's baptism in the spirit so why is it unreasonable to think that these gifts did not continue into the church age and indeed still continue today? Didn't Peter say that this promise was for the early church, their children and also to "*all who are afar off*" (Acts 2:39)? Actually, any one of these questions cannot convincingly be proved or denied and there are many excellent arguments for both sides. Therefore, I do not push my viewpoint too strongly, but feel that Dr. Packer has jumped rather rashly to his series of "*Surely not*"!

Personally, I feel that much of the rejection of this two-step approach (a distinct experience of Baptism in the Holy Spirit following conversion) is that Baptism in the Holy Spirit has been related to a victorious living motif in Charismatic holiness teaching. Somehow, teachings have been propagated that say Baptism in the Holy Spirit makes one a better and more holy Christian. However, Jesus' promise of the initial outpouring on the disciples on the day of Pentecost was for the purpose of enduing them with power for witnessing (Acts 1:8) glorifying Jesus and manifesting His presence in edification of the Church and evangelism. It seems that this experience was an external one that empowered one for ministry but had nothing to do with personal holiness or spirituality. At new birth the Holy Spirit starts the process of maturity and sanctification (making one more holy) but gives no special power for service.

Secondly, some of Dr. Packer's arguments are largely based on assumptions grounded in experience. For example, he denies that charismatic healing ministries today can be convincingly equated with the healing gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:28 based on the fact that the healing ministries he has observed have not met the Apostolic standards (healing directly with word or touch, healing instantly, raising the dead etc. (See p213)). However, these same patterns of healing have been reported in the modern day Charismatic Movement, especially in third world countries in Africa, India, South America and South East Asia. On mission trips that I have personally been involved with we have experienced such healings as were reported in the Gospels and in the book of Acts. Modern Pentecostal history is also full of accounts of such healings and miracles and just because some have been exposed as being fraudulent or misrepresented does not rule out that there have been true demonstrations of such spiritual gifts. The Seven Sons of Sceva (Acts 19:14) are an example that such things occurred in the early Church.

Lastly, Dr. Packer's relating Tongues to singing meaningless songs in the bathroom (p224) or a child's made up language reduces it to a simple, natural relaxation technique and robs it of all its prophetic meaning. Indeed, his view of Spirit Baptism, if it occurs after conversion, as a simple reawakening of our conscience towards God and not "*strictly experiences of receiving the Spirit*" (p226) seems more akin to Buddhist Enlightenment and again robs the experience of its true meaning and fullness. Dr. Packer places a purely natural interpretation on these experiences and, although he states they are all right and beneficial to the Christian, reduces them to optional embellishments in our Christian life. This view is a result of detaching present day Charismatic experience from the early Church experience and saying that the two do not tally. However, as I have shown, there is no convincing proof to show this and therefore this conclusion cannot convincingly be made.

IV. Next Steps:

The main message that I take away from reading this fine book by J.I.Packer is that the central ministry of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Christ and make Him known. In the light of this there are very practical steps that I need to take in my own ministry in Church of Singapore (Bukit Timah). Being an Independent Charismatic Church we do pray for the Baptism in the Holy Spirit and encourage the spiritual gifts including speaking in Tongues.

Firstly I must examine myself to make sure that my Charismatic experience lines up with this truth – when I pray in Tongues I do it to glorify Christ, when I move in the other spiritual gifts I do so that Christ may be known. This means that I must reject all elitist thoughts and move in love, especially to non-Charismatic brothers and Sisters. In all things I must ask, “Does it bring glory to and reveal more of Jesus?”

Secondly, from the pulpit and in times of teaching and discipleship I must be very careful to present Charismatic experience in the light of the Holy Spirit’s “Floodlight Ministry”. That is, I must teach Baptism in the Spirit and the spiritual gifts in the context of the Holy Spirit’s ministry of glorifying Jesus.

Another message that I take away from this book, as I’ve already mentioned, is that Romans 7:14-25 declares Paul’s experience at the time of writing and not that of a carnal Christian as I had previously thought. This shift of understanding needs to be dwelt upon and I need to seriously consider all implications of this shift.

Previously, when I held the latter view, I came to the conclusion that, because one can move from being a ‘carnal’ Christian to a ‘spiritual’ Christian by simply claiming full spirituality by faith in the power of the Spirit, it is possible to become spiritually perfect in this life. Experience has shown me that personal failures and shortcomings will always remain this side of heaven, prompting me to accept Dr. Packer’s exegesis of Romans 6,7 and 8 and be more realistic in my Christian experience. This will affect my personal Spiritual walk and also the way I teach and preach in my Church.

An offshoot of this is that I will not spend so much time in ‘quietist’ activity (waiting for my faith to be realized by “*letting go and letting God*” which often leads to passivity) but will take Dr. Packer’s more Scriptural advice to “*Trust God and get going!*” and this I must teach the Church congregation to do to also.

V. Concluding Step:

In conclusion, Dr. Packer presents in this book an excellent call to the church to refocus on the real work of the Holy Spirit, that is to glorify Jesus and “*make known the personal presence in and with the Christian and the church of the risen, reigning Saviour, the Jesus of history, who is the Christ of faith*” (p47). He correctly traces the historic path whereby the Church became sidetracked in this understanding and rightly calls for a retheologizing of Charismatic experience. However, I cannot agree fully with his retheologizing, as there is not a convincing argument against the two-step experience of the early Christians continuing to modern times and he seems to make Charismatic experience a mere optional embellishment, stripped of all true power.