

AMONG GOD'S GIANTS, J. I. Packer

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This fine volume is a distillation of the author's life-long pursuit of Puritanism. The bulk of the material consists of papers originally given between 1956 and 1969 at the Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference (held at Westminster Chapel in London under the chairmanship of Dr D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones). The present reviewer had the great privilege of hearing most of them. Indeed, together with the chairman's concluding addresses (see D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans, Banner of Truth*, 1987), Dr Packer's papers were always an annual highlight. Apart from the introduction, the other items are also republished pieces, the most recent dating from 1986.

Among God's Giants must represent a pinnacle of popular scholarly publishing on practical puritan themes. It will surely establish itself as an indispensable starting point for all would-be researchers in the subject. The Puritans are presented as those 'Englishmen (some of whom eventually went to America) who embraced whole-heartedly a version of Christianity that paraded a particular blend of biblicist, pietist, churchly and worldly concerns' (p. 433). For all his scholarship, Dr Packer's concerns are far from being merely academic and antiquarian. This book has a timely, compelling and prophetic ring about it. In a scintillating and now famous typically graphic Packerian fashion, and inspired by the vivid picture of the giant Redwood trees of California, we are told that 'the mature holiness and seasoned fortitude of the great Puritans' tower over 'the stature of the majority of Christians in most eras, and certainly so in this age of crushing urban collectivism, when Western Christians sometimes feel and often look like ants in an anthill and puppets on a string' (p.11). The author demonstrates this thesis with consummate ease from puritan to puritan. Thus we are introduced to John Owen, Richard Baxter, Jonathan Edwards (yes, the American colossus was essentially 'puritan') and a host of other giants in the puritan brotherhood from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.

For all his obvious relish for the Puritans, the author's treatment is far from being merely hagiographical. We see their feats and failures, excellences and excesses, intensities and idiosyncrasies in the context of the times. The variety and range of puritan thought cannot be missed either. Indeed, while Puritanism was virtually synonymous with biblicism, so there are as many differing perspectives in puritan studies as there are schools of biblical interpretation. Thus, within certain broad biblical parameters, one can almost make Puritanism say what you like! Dr Packer does not hide his preferences: for doctrinal orthodoxy he opts for Owen rather than Baxter on that 17th century hot-potato, the nature and extent of the atonement; for pastoral practice and evangelistic zeal, Baxter is his hero; for churchmanship, Greenham rather than Cartwright is his model. For all his general enthusiasm for the book's spiritual, pastoral and practical emphases, the reviewer remains unconvinced at certain key points of scholarly doctrinal interpretation.

First, Owen and limited atonement. Packer's introductory essay to the first *Banner of Truth* edition of Owen's *Death of Death* appeared in 1958. It now reappears as 'Saved by His precious blood' (pp. 163-95). In view of the later scholarly contributions of Basil Hall, Brian Armstrong, R. T. Kendall, Tony Lane, Curt Daniel and others, one might have expected an author's 'update' in response to the well-argued thesis that

later Calvinists went beyond Calvin on the extent of the atonement, especially in the Bezan and post-Dort eras. Perhaps Dr Packer's simple reissue of his original essay indicates his continuing belief that Calvin and Owen said essentially the same thing (p. 175) and that Owen's case remains impeccably sound (p. 190). However, on a historical note arising from the author's churchmanship (p. 15), Bishop J. C. Ryle - rightly styled by Packer as 'the nineteenth-century colossus' (ibid.) - opposed exaggerated Owenite Calvinism in line with Calvin's teaching and the formularies of the Church of England. The same goes for earlier Anglican Calvinists like John Newton and Charles Simeon. While shunning Arminianism, they would surely judge Packer's passion for particular redemption as somewhat anomalous. On these and other points, the present reviewer takes issue with both Owen and the author in *Atonement and Justification, English evangelical theology 1640-1790* - an evaluation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). He leaves it to the reader to judge the validity of his contention that Packer's unmodified 1958 claim for Owen (p. 178) is simply dated. In short, Owen has now been answered.

Second, Baxter and justification. In 'The Doctrine of Justification in Development and Decline among the Puritans' (pp. 196-232), there are a number of misleading observations. Indeed, several of Packer's detailed criticisms of Baxter's views are simply wide of the mark (pp. 208-10). Again, I refer the reader to my *Atonement and Justification*, pp. 191-4, 199, for details. One may add here that to blame Baxter for having 'sowed the seeds' of several subsequent doctrinal errors (p. 210) when he vigorously opposed them during his lifetime, is like blaming Calvin for hypercalvinism, and William Wilberforce for the American civil war! Surely, Baxter was somewhat over-reactionary, his theological grasp was not infallible; it could also be said, with equal justice, that Owen's doctrines of limited atonement and imputation had a formative influence on the growth of antinomian hypercalvinism. It is my belief that had the contending parties studied Calvin's precise statements on justification more carefully (a biblical *via media* between the embattled alternatives, in fact), English puritan theology would not have resembled the disarray of a civil war battlefield. Compared with the clarity of Calvin, Owen was, in some respects, as muddled as Baxter was in others.

One also questions Dr Packer's dichotomy between Baxter's 'disastrous' theological utterances and his 'praiseworthy' practical works (pp. 208-9). For Baxter, his work was all of a piece; hence the theological features lamented by Packer are clearly visible in the practical works. In view of this, one must ask just how disastrous Baxter's theology was? After all, his preaching of universal gospel grace turned Kidderminster upside down, and his stress on a loving, working godliness produced a sanctified society. Indeed, Baxter's ministry was unique, as Dr Packer readily admits with justified enthusiasm (pp. 53ff). So, could it be that the marginalising of Baxter's theology in favour of Owen's in the 'reformed camp' partly explains the general lack of popular impact of neo-puritanism today? A much desired Baxterian revival probably demands a far greater rehabilitation of Baxterian theology than Dr Packer is prepared to accept.

Third, Greenham and churchmanship. Dr Packer's book is something of a personal manifesto. For all its inspirational virtues, it inevitably raises the question of how he could ever be party to such an anti-puritan treatise as *Growing into Union* (1970). Indeed, the book precipitated a crisis and the cancellation of the Puritan Conference of

that year. If this anomaly remains a mystery, the present work surely explains the author's continuing allegiance to 'conservative Anglicanism' (p. 15) and why secession was never an option, despite his obvious admiration for nonconformists like Baxter. Here the model is evidently Richard Greenham rather than Richard Baxter (pp. 72-4).

Greenham was a peace-loving parochial pietist of moderate puritan convictions, little interested in the more thorough reforming zeal of Thomas Cartwright and his fellow presbyterians. In fact he was sharply critical of them (p. 72). In his view, the primary need was a sound parochial ministry rather than a more reformed church order. Doubtless Greenham's priorities were correct, but arguably, 'this ought he to have done and not to leave the other undone' (Mt.23:23). Indeed, a consistent Puritan would ask, had he not yielded on the essential puritan point of scriptural authority in the typical English spirit of Cranmerian compromise and procrastination? Likewise, Packer dismisses these 'presbyterian agitators' as 'doctrinaire' (p. 70), despite the scriptural soundness of their case (ibid.) and a willingness to suffer for it. The simple fact remains that men like Greenham helped consolidate a largely unreformed diocesan and parochial system by default. They simply 'did their own thing' like independents, oblivious to the wider demands of unfinished reformation business. Besides, had Greenham done his duty, some of the more hot-headed 'Marprelate' Presbyterians might have been restrained. So, according to evidence supplied by Dr Packer himself, a rising torrent of frustrated puritan preachers had to resort to lectureships, there being no biblically constituted churches to call them (p. 75). Had Greenham and his friends shared Cartwright's conviction that 'the ministry of the Church of England was out of square' and acted accordingly, the progress of the gospel and the history of the next century and beyond - with its tragic sectarian proliferation - might have been different. Admittedly Queen Elizabeth was the chief obstacle, before whom Grindal and even Cartwright himself had to bow. Alas, England never had a reforming leader with the energy of Knox and the statesmanship of Calvin, and too few were ready to risk all for the glory of God like the Huguenots in France who, always faced by more formidable foes, were blessed from the start with a better churchmanship and a more balanced Calvinism.

My response to Dr Packer's book therefore parallels his own ambivalence about Baxter. As a presentation of practical puritanism, no praise for it can be too high. While the style is brilliant, on certain detailed theological and ecclesiological themes, I beg to differ.

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Book review for THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY

FREEWILL OR PREDESTINATION: The Battle over Saving Grace in Mid-Tudor England, D. Andrew Penny

Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, New York:

Boydell & Brewer Ltd for the Royal Historical Society,
Studies in History 61, 249pp., #35.00

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Students of the age-old controversy over freewill and predestination will know that in the post-Reformation period, Arminius merely hit the headlines. Here in England during the 1590s, proto-Arminian views had been advanced by the Frenchman, Peter Baro, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge. In this well-researched and fascinating volume, Dr Penny shows that opposition to Genevan theology was well established by the reign of Mary Tudor. This occurred under the leadership of a group of 'freewill men' who, in Lollard fashion, appealed to their English Bibles against the orthodoxy of the pro-Calvinist ecclesiastical establishment of the Edwardian years.

Employing a thorough and detailed examination of known sources and untapped local records, the author describes the often heated intellectual warfare over predestination and freewill which developed between reformed and radical personalities, men who were thrown together in the London prisons during the Marian reaction and eventually burned for heresy. We are introduced to familiar figures of the English Reformation such as John Bradford, John Philpot, Nicholas Ridley and others, and less familiar names like Henry Harte, John Trewe, John Barry and their associates.

Dr Penny leads us with great skill through the minefield of historical issues associated with the English radicals. The combined influence of Lollard, Anabaptist and Erasmian ideas produced something of a homespun challenge to the Genevan orthodoxy established during the reign of Edward VI. Men from Kent and Essex who had fallen foul of the repressive legislation of the Henrician and Edwardian eras, possessed of little education but considerable natural talent, opposed the great scholars of the English Reformation. United in their common opposition to reactionary Romanism, the reformed and radical elements had plenty of opportunity during their shared imprisonment to debate the theological issues at the heart of the Reformation. Dr Penny's careful analysis of the issues has implications for the character and impact of English Calvinism and the development of the Anglican via media. He asks 'whether it is too much to see the English freewill movement of the mid-Tudor years as a genuine part of the tradition of moderation and compromise which came to characterize both the Elizabethan Settlement in religion (as exemplified by the Thirty-nine Articles - surely neither exclusively Catholic nor Calvinist) and the Restoration Church of the next century' (pp. 215-6).

The author shows that the very tendencies which produced an exaggerated ultra-Calvinist shift within 'English Calvinism' in the 1590s were also exhibited in the King's Bench prison in the 1550s. While the freewill radicals were clearly a part of an anti-Calvinist tradition, the reviewer is somewhat uncertain about the author's evaluation of the Calvinist establishment and the precise contribution, if any, made by the radicals to a policy of moderation. For instance, what is meant by the 'growing extremism of the Calvinist stance' (p. 215) during Edward's reign? Without questioning Calvin's influence in England, it is certain that the period of Calvinist extremism began two years after Edward's death when Theodore Beza unwisely attempted to popularize a high-profile doctrine of predestination in 1555.

Ultra-orthodox shock waves were not felt in England for several years; yet Calvin's profound reverence before the mystery of predestination and election, his belief that the human will is free from compulsion and his affirmation of universal redemption are all reflected in the 1552 Prayer Book and the Forty-two Articles of 1553. So what extremism are we meant to acknowledge? Furthermore, these moderating features were embodied in the Elizabethan settlement of 1559-62 with negligible change. The only significant changes involved modifications to the more Calvinist features of the 1552 Holy Communion service.

While any version of Calvinism is extreme to an Arminian, the simple fact remains that official Edwardian Calvinism was already 'moderate' by later standards. Whatever was said in the Kings Bench prison debates seems to have had little or no influence on a situation which neither demanded nor produced any official theological changes. What tends to undermine the author's implied claim for a moderating influence of the imprisoned radicals on the Anglican via media is that genuine Calvin-like features of moderation were already in place on the eve of the Marian reaction, several months before the imprisonments commenced. The Elizabethan settlement simply reaffirmed a position which actually dated from Edward's final years. The freewill radicals merely demonstrate an ever present, long-standing antipathy towards Augustinianism going back to the Pelagian controversy. Notwithstanding the combined freewill protest of Roman, Erasmian and Anabaptist factions in the 1550s, the only serious reaction to Calvinism occurred with the advent of Bezan ultra-Calvinism in the 1590s.

It is fascinating to discover that in the course of their debates with the freewill radicals, some of the English reformers lacked the theological balance evident in Calvin and Edwardian Calvinist orthodoxy. Unfortunately, what is no more than a passing reference to the key fact of Calvin's moderation is not brought to the reader's attention until quite late in the book (p. 181). Hitherto, the author shows no awareness of the now well-proven distinction between Calvin's theology and the later high Calvinism of Theodore Beza. One would have appreciated some detailed discussion on this point, if only to dispel the book's early impression that Calvin and Geneva represent a 'hard-line' and 'extreme predestinarian' position (pp. 17-18). Indeed, for all his exegetical rigour in formulating a biblical doctrine of predestination - inevitable, mysterious yet noncoercive, Calvin fell short of several of the proto-Bezan positions adopted by some of the English 'Calvinists' in the 1550s. According to Dr Penny, the radical John Trewe 'regarded the suggestion that Christ had not suffered 'for all men' as horrendous,' (p. 151). In this instance Calvin would be the ally of the radicals rather than the reformed; the fact that he could say that 'Christ is in a general view the Redeemer of the world' (Sermons on Ephesians, 1973, Banner of Truth, p. 55) serves to remind us of the importance of defining Calvinism precisely in a book like this. Otherwise, a caricature of Calvinism is seen to justify too easily an equally questionable alternative, both positions being guilty of destroying the balanced biblicism Calvin always pleaded for. Indeed, it is possible to find statements in Calvin which, from an 'ultra-reformed' perspective, sound embarrassingly 'Arminian'! While Calvin would have taken issue with a number of the English radicals' proto-Arminian views (and worse), he would have warned the reformed against the dangers of ultra-orthodox exaggeration. His balanced stance on predestination, rooted in the mystery of God's secret and revealed wills, never detracted from the biblical paradox between election and universal grace. While

Calvin rarely resorted to the arguably proper though somewhat defensive 'sufficiency-efficiency' distinction, he was perfectly happy to say: 'God commends to us the salvation of all men without exception, even as Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world' (Comment, Gal. 5:12). In this respect, even the 'moderate' John Bradford and Nicholas Ridley (cf pp. 120, 133), are marginally suspect. However, the Forty-two (later Thirty-nine) Articles, which Ridley prepared with Cranmer, and the Book of Common Prayer may be judged authentically 'Calvinist' in their affirmation of universal atonement. Hence, with our terms carefully defined, Dr Penny has no need to deny that the Elizabethan settlement was 'Calvinist' (p. 211).

Despite the heated exchange between Luther and Erasmus over freewill, many of the humanist's theological observations (pp. 89-95) find equivalent moderation in Calvin. For the Genevan genius, the freewill issue was also largely a question of definition. Having stressed the need for special regenerating grace, he affirms with Peter Lombard that a man's volitions are free from compulsion but ultimately conditioned by his nature. Thus Calvin can affirm that 'man is said to have free will...This is perfectly true: but why should so small a matter have been dignified with so proud a title? An admirable freedom! that man is not forced to be the servant of sin...' While he regrets the abuse of the term 'freewill', discouraging its use on that account, yet moderate Calvin concludes: 'If any one chooses to make use of this term, without attaching any bad meaning to it, he shall not be troubled by me on that account' (Inst. II.ii.7-8). Other matters apart, the English radicals could hardly quarrel with that (p. 176)!

On a lighter note, the main controversy charted by this stimulating and provocative book is not the only one which continues to trouble the waters! The relatively untaught radicals were suspicious of the academic expertise of the reformers (pp. 53, 78, 150). Thus learning was a liability! The reformers were also criticised by their cell-mates for 'gaming' and other amusements (p. 149); reformed relaxation was simply unspiritual. What was worse, the reformers were in a 'no win' position: this lax life-style was the product of predestinarian theology (p. 150)! Like their theology, the radicals' super-spirituality is alive and kicking. Indeed, is nothing new under the sun? All in all, on matters mysterious and mundane, we are indebted to Dr Penny for opening a window on a little known episode in the English Reformation. His valuable book contributes to a debate which shows no sign of subsiding.

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