



CONCISE THEOLOGY

BY J.I. PACKER

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There is something marvelous when a person skilled in a matter does it well. The snug-fitting boards fashioned by a carpenter and the newborn wrapped and settled by a nurse are beautiful things. In like manner, J. I. Packer's *Concise Theology* is a beautiful thing. Anyone who has read theology or tried to explain it knows the difficulty of summarizing truth without being overly simplistic. Packer's skill is a great service to the church and edifying to Christians.

The goal of *Concise Theology* is to present biblical doctrines in a succinct and accessible way. Packer writes in his preface, "Remembering that the Lord Jesus Christ called those he wanted fed *sheep* rather than *giraffes*, I have aimed to keep things as simple as possible" (xii). The book contains a brief engagement with 94 theological topics, each explained in 2-4 pages. Each topic is introduced with a heading, a summary phrase, and a relevant Bible verse.

Packer writes from the standpoint of a Reformed, Evangelical theologian. The book avoids needless controversies, soapboxes, and personal hobby horses. At the same time, it doesn't shy away from allowing Scripture to speak against the grain of the age and against beliefs that endanger the church. At almost 30 years old, this book has begun to stand the test of time.

Packer has a way of stating the truth that gets to the heart of the matter with sticking power. Addressing the topic of 'Creation,' he writes, "To say that he created 'out of nothing' is to confess the mystery, not explain it" (21). Addressing the topic of 'Works,' he writes, "The truth is that, though we are justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone" (160).

There are three things that I appreciate about *Concise Theology*.

Brief and Accessible

I appreciate how the brevity of the chapters makes theological topics immediately accessible. After reading the chapter on 'Session' out loud to my family, my wife remarked, "Wow, that's it? That was so good." Christ's session was explained in two pages. After reading the chapter on 'Transcendence,' one of my teenage sons remarked, "That blows my mind!"

Packer writes,

God is limited neither by space (he is everywhere in his fullness continually) nor by time (there is no 'present moment' into which he is locked as we are). Theologians refer to God's freedom from limits and bounds as his infinity, immensity, and transcendence...As he upholds everything in being, so he has everything everywhere always before his mind, in its own relation to his all-inclusive plan and purpose for every item and every person in his world. (28)

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Each topic is deep yet accessible.

Theology as Worship

I appreciate the commitment to apply theology as worship. Packer writes in the book's preface, "Theology is for doxology and devotion—this is, the praise of God and the practice of godliness...Theology is at its healthiest when it is consciously under the eye of God of whom it speaks, and when it is singing to his glory" (xii).

This commitment continues throughout the book. Addressing 'Illumination,' he writes, "The way to benefit fully from the Spirit's ministry of illumination is by serious Bible study, serious prayer, and serious response in obedience to whatever truths one has been shown already" (155). And addressing 'Creation,' he writes, "Realizing our moment-by-moment dependence on God the Creator for our very existence makes it appropriate to live lives of devotion, commitment, gratitude, and loyalty toward him, and scandalous not to. Godliness starts here, with God the sovereign Creator as the first focus of our thoughts" (22).

Scripture References

I also appreciate the many references to Scripture. These references provide both a Scriptural backing for what is formulated as well as a starting point for deeper study. Addressing the topic of ‘Salvation,’ Packer poses the question, “What are believers saved from?” (146). His answer is a single sentence with twelve references to Scripture.

Due to the book’s stated goal of brevity, readers should be aware that it doesn’t read like a book but more like articles in a theological dictionary, each addressing a distinct topic and packed with Scripture references. One way to approach the book is to read one brief chapter each day, privately or with others. Reading too many sections in one sitting will jump readers from one topic to another, which might not be as beneficial. Individuals can use the many Scripture references as a great way to open the Bible and discover where these topics are taught.

As marvelous as it is when a person skilled in a matter does it well, *Concise Theology* leaves us not marveling at Packer’s skill in formulating theology but at our Creator and Savior God. It whets our appetite to know him better. It is this God—his salvation, his grace, and his purpose— that we were created to know and worship.

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