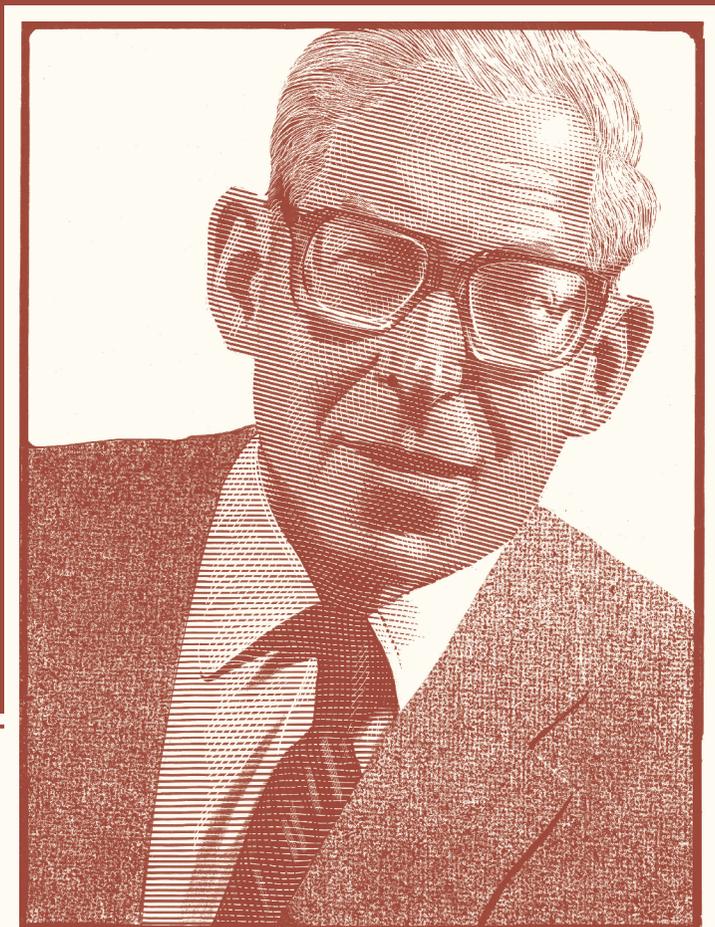


SAM STORMS



PACKER  
*on the Christian Life*

KNOWING GOD IN CHRIST, WALKING BY THE SPIRIT

“The writings of J. I. Packer have been a great help to many believers in many ways. It is therefore most welcome that Sam Storms has synthesized insights from those writings in this helpful, accessible book. I’m sure Pastor Storms agrees that the very best thing about his book would be if it encouraged readers to dive into Packer’s works themselves.”

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PACKER

*on the Christian Life*

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# PACKER

*on the Christian Life*

KNOWING GOD IN CHRIST,  
WALKING BY THE SPIRIT

SAM STORMS

 **CROSSWAY**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Packer on the Christian Life: Knowing God in Christ, Walking by the Spirit*

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To

*James Innell Packer*

*with deep affection and appreciation for a  
lifetime of devotion to the glory of God*

*The older I get, the more I want to sing my faith and get others singing it with me. Theology, as I constantly tell my students is for doxology: the first thing to do with it is to turn it into praise and thus honour the God who is its subject, the God in whose presence and by whose help it was worked out. Paul's summons to sing and make music in one's heart to the Lord is a word for theologians no less than for other people (Eph. 5:19). Theologies that cannot be sung (or prayed for that matter) are certainly wrong at a deep level, and such theologies leave me, in both senses, cold: cold-hearted and uninterested.*

**J. I. PACKER, *GOD HAS SPOKEN*, 7**

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## SERIES PREFACE

Some might call us spoiled. We live in an era of significant and substantial resources for Christians on living the Christian life. We have ready access to books, DVD series, online material, seminars—all in the interest of encouraging us in our daily walk with Christ. The laity, the people in the pew, have access to more information than scholars dreamed of having in previous centuries.

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Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor



## CHAPTER I

# PACKER THE PERSON

## A Puritan, Theological Exegete, and Latter-Day Catechist

I don't think it an exaggeration to say that I owe much of what I am as a pastor and theologian to the combined influence of a school-yard bully and an inattentive bread-truck driver. Such are the mysteries of divine providence that largely account for the remarkable spiritual influence, not only on me personally but on the whole of the evangelical world, of one James Innell Packer. I'm not alone in this assessment of Packer's impact. The readers of *Christianity Today* identified him as second only to C. S. Lewis when it came to the most influential theological writers of the twentieth century. But how did the bully and the bread-truck driver enter the picture?

For the answer to this question we must go back to September 19, 1933, and the city of Gloucester, England. J. I. Packer was only seven at the time, having been born on July 22, 1926, the son of a clerk for the Great Western Railway. It was from the grounds of the National School in Gloucester that the young Packer was chased by the bully, himself an obviously unwitting piece of the providential puzzle that would ultimately make Packer into the man we know and love him to be. Who knows what was passing through the mind of that bread-truck driver. Were his eyes momentarily distracted by some random event? Was he daydreaming? Or was he fully engaged so that the blame must be laid at the feet of young Packer himself? Regardless, the force of the collision thrust the seven-year-old to the ground, inflicting on him a serious head injury.

Packer was immediately rushed into surgery, where he was treated for “a depressed compound fracture of the frontal bone on the right-hand side of his forehead, with injury to the frontal lobe of the brain.”<sup>1</sup> It left him with an indentation on the right side of his forehead, still quite visible today. The accident was “thought to have damaged my brain,” wrote Packer.<sup>2</sup> More than eighty years later one can only conclude that, if anything, it served rather to stimulate what we have come to know and appreciate as one of the great Christian minds not merely of the past century but in the history of the church these past two thousand years.

The recovery was not without its inconveniences, as the young Packer was forced to withdraw from school for a period of six months. From that time until he went to university, Packer wore a protective aluminum plate over the injury. Needless to say, this was not the sort of thing that would contribute to a young man’s participation in athletics or widespread acceptance among his peers. This only reinforced his tendency to keep unto himself and thrust him into a more secluded life of reading and writing.

When he turned eleven, like most boys his age Packer anticipated a bicycle for a birthday present. But given his parents’ lingering and well-justified concerns about their son’s head injury, sending him into the streets once again did not strike them as the wisest course of action. Instead, he received an old Oliver typewriter. Once he had overcome his initial disappointment, Packer took to typing with fervor. To this day, notwithstanding the many technological advances we all now enjoy, Packer still writes all his books on an old-fashioned typewriter! I doubt that any of us who have been so richly blessed by his ministry are inclined to protest.

The Packer home was nominally Anglican, and his church attendance, though regular, was spiritually uneventful. On reaching the age of fourteen, Packer consented to his mother’s request that he be confirmed in their local church. “Confirmation, as the Church of England understands it, marks the point at which an individual chooses to affirm his or her faith on their own behalf, rather than simply rely on promises made on their behalf at their baptism by their parents and godparents.”<sup>3</sup>

The journey to genuine conversion was soon to take several interesting turns, the first of which came in conversations with the son of a Unitarian minister between their regular chess games. Packer, fifteen at the time, was

<sup>1</sup> Alister McGrath, *J. I. Packer: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 1.

<sup>2</sup> J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1992), 40.

<sup>3</sup> McGrath, *J. I. Packer*, 7.

not persuaded by his friend's arguments. The notion that Jesus was little more than an ethical model simply made no sense to him. "If you are going to deny the divinity of Christ," said Packer, "which is so central to the New Testament, you also deny all the rest of it. If you are going to affirm that the ethic of Jesus is the best thing since fried bread, well then you ought to take seriously what the New Testament says about who He is. That got me going."<sup>4</sup>

His newly awakened interest in Christianity was deepened upon the discovery of the early works of an increasingly popular author, C. S. Lewis. *The Screwtape Letters* (1943), followed by Lewis's best-selling classic *Mere Christianity* (1944), proved stimulating to Packer. So too were conversations with his friend Eric Taylor, whose own conversion experience left Packer wondering what he himself lacked and how it might be attained.

Upon his arrival at Oxford University in 1944, Packer fulfilled his promise to young Taylor that he would pay a visit to the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (the OICCU). On Sunday evening, October 22, 1944, the Reverend Earl Langston was preaching—boringly, according to Packer. But halfway through the sermon something changed. Langston

started telling at length the story of his own conversion and suddenly everything became clear. I am not a person who gets much in the way of visions or visuals, but the concept called up a picture which was there in my mind . . . that here I am outside of the house and looking through the window and I understand what they are doing. I recognize the games they are playing. Clearly they are enjoying themselves, but I am outside. Why am I outside? Because I have been evading the Lord Jesus and His call.<sup>5</sup>

At the conclusion, as was customary at such meetings, they sang Charlotte Elliot's famous hymn, "Just As I Am." And so, "about 100 feet from where the great evangelist George Whitefield committed himself to Christ in 1735, James I. Packer made his own personal commitment."<sup>6</sup>

Though he was truly born again by the Spirit of God, the struggle for Packer had, in a sense, only begun. The OICCU at that time was under the influence of what has come to be known as Keswick theology, a perspective that we will examine in some depth in subsequent chapters.<sup>7</sup> Suffice

<sup>4</sup>J. I. Packer, "The Lost Interview," by Joel Belz, [www.worldmag.org](http://www.worldmag.org), December 7, 2013.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>McGrath, *J. I. Packer*, 18.

<sup>7</sup>For an excellent history and critique of this movement, see Andrew David Naselli, *Let Go and Let God? A Survey and Analysis of Keswick Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2010).

it to say for now that this view promised a victorious Christian life solely through an act of faith that leads to total surrender. This decisive moment, in which one wholly yields and trusts the work of Christ within the heart rather than making any effort to overcome the power of sin, was considered the key to Christianity. As Packer's biographer, Alister McGrath, has explained, "The notion of 'active energetic obedience' was thus criticized as representing a lapse into legalism, and a dangerous reliance on one's own abilities."<sup>8</sup>

This not only proved unhelpful to Packer; it was deeply damaging to his spiritual growth. His increasing frustration over the inability to get past daily sins into that promised victory robbed him of the joy of his salvation. He was told that he simply needed to reconsecrate himself, over and over again, until such time that he could identify whatever obstacle stood in the way of the fullness of moral victory.

No less providential than his encounter with the bread truck in 1933 was Packer's discovery of the Puritans in 1944. We today take for granted the availability of Puritan books, largely, and at least initially, due to the publishing efforts of the Banner of Truth Trust. But such was not the case in the 1940s. C. Owen Pickard-Cambridge, an Anglican clergyman, donated his considerable collection of books to the OICCU, over which Packer was given authority as the junior librarian. Packer began the arduous task of sorting through the dusty piles of books in the basement of a meeting hall on St. Michael's Street in central Oxford. There he came upon an uncut set of the works of the great Puritan pastor and theologian John Owen (1616–1683). Two of the titles in volume 6 caught his attention: *On Indwelling Sin in Believers* and *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers*. We will have occasion to explore in some depth the effect of these treatises on Packer's life. For now, it is enough to observe that a major watershed in his spiritual development was this providential discovery. Owen's realistic and thoroughly biblical grasp on the nature of indwelling sin and the believer's Spirit-empowered battle throughout one's earthly existence set Packer free from the Keswick-induced discouragement of soul under which he had been laboring. We will return to this later.

I will not describe much of Packer's academic career, as this has been done in considerable detail by McGrath. Suffice it to say that upon completion of his work at Oxford he took a one-year teaching post at Oak Hill Theo-

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<sup>8</sup> McGrath, *J. I. Packer*, 23.

logical College in London (1948–1949). His primary responsibility was as an instructor in both Greek and Latin, although he ended up teaching philosophy as well. It was at Oak Hill that Packer discovered his gift for teaching. He was somewhat “shy and withdrawn, lacking in self-confidence; [but] as a teacher, he was seen as caring, competent and considerate.”<sup>9</sup>

Of greatest importance during this one-year tenure at Oak Hill was the establishment of the Puritan conferences that ultimately bore considerable impact not only on British evangelicalism during the 1950s and 1960s but also on a more global scale in the West. Together with his friend Raymond Johnston, they made contact with Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, minister at Westminster Chapel in London. During this year Packer was often found listening to John R. W. Stott at All Souls, Langham Place, on Sunday morning, and to Lloyd-Jones at Westminster Chapel on Sunday nights, enough to make even the most privileged of Reformed Christians salivate with envy! The relationship that developed between Packer and Lloyd-Jones, together with the formation of the Puritan conferences, was of massive significance in Packer’s personal and professional development. The first conference convened in June 1950 and met annually until the conferences terminated in 1969. Their importance cannot be overestimated. Through them, notes McGrath,

a rising generation of theological students and younger ministers were being offered a powerful and persuasive vision of the Christian life, in which theology, biblical exposition, spirituality and preaching were shown to be mutually indispensable and interrelated. It was a vision of the Christian life which possessed both intellectual rigour and pastoral relevance. It was a powerful antidote to the anti-intellectualism which had been rampant within British evangelical circles in the immediate post-war period.<sup>10</sup>

Packer then enrolled at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, with a view toward ordination in the Church of England. There he studied theology from 1949 to 1952, eventually being awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. In December 1952 Packer was ordained a deacon in the Church of England and a year later was ordained a priest at Birmingham Cathedral. He served as a curate at St. John’s, Harborne, a suburb of Birmingham, from 1952 until 1954.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 53.

There was yet another event of great import that came about, again, by a twist of God's gracious providence. In the late spring of 1952, Packer was asked to fill in at a weekend conference near Surrey. Evidently the original speaker had been inadvertently double-booked. Following his first talk on Friday night, a young nurse approached Packer and informed him that his style of preaching was somewhat similar to another that she greatly admired: Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Her name was Kit Mullett.

At the Puritan conference in 1952, Kit was present to hear Packer speak. McGrath explains what happened next:

Noticing Kit and one other woman in the audience, Lloyd-Jones complained of their presence to Packer [the attendance of females at such conferences was unexpected, though not forbidden]. At the time, they were enjoying a cup of tea in the chapel vestry, and planning the next year's conference. "They don't come here to study the Puritans!" he remarked. "They're only here for the men! I know one of them [Kit, of course], she's a member of my church." "Well, Doctor," Packer replied, "as a matter of fact, I'm going to marry her." Packer recalls that Lloyd-Jones's reply was: "Well, I was right about one of them. Now what about the other?"<sup>11</sup>

Following his marriage to Kit in the summer of 1954, Packer served as lecturer at Tyndale Hall, Bristol, from 1955 to 1961, and as librarian and then principal at Latimer House, Oxford, from 1961 to 1970. In 1970 he was appointed principal of Tyndale Hall and became associate principal of Trinity College, Bristol, from 1971 until 1979. After that he moved permanently to Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia, where he remains at the time of this writing.

### **The Crisis of 1966 and Packer's Break with Martyn Lloyd-Jones**

A defining moment in Packer's relationship with Lloyd-Jones as well as how he was henceforth perceived in the broader evangelical world occurred in 1966. The event has been retold countless times, often with vastly divergent interpretations of what occurred and, more importantly, what it meant.<sup>12</sup> It was October 18, and the occasion was the Second National As-

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>12</sup> To gain a sense for Packer's own perspective on what occurred, as well as its aftermath, see J. I. Packer, "D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: A Kind of Puritan" (61–76), and "David Martyn Lloyd-Jones" (77–87), both in *Honouring the People of God*, vol. 4 of *The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer* (Carlisle, UK: Pater-noster, 1999). See also the account provided by his biographer, Alister McGrath, *J. I. Packer*, 116–28.

sembly of Evangelicals, organized by the Evangelical Alliance. At its core was the question “Should evangelicals concerned with doctrinal orthodoxy withdraw from denominations which publicly fail to maintain such orthodoxy, or should they try to reform them from within?”<sup>13</sup>

Lloyd-Jones had become increasingly concerned with the theological liberalism espoused by the World Council of Churches and its ever-increasing presence among certain denominations in the United Kingdom, especially the Church of England. He let it be known that the time had come for the theologically orthodox to “come out” of such denominations. In the absence of agreement on the fundamental issues of the gospel there simply can be no meaningful spiritual fellowship. In his opening address at the assembly Lloyd-Jones issued what many, if not most, understood as an appeal for evangelicals to withdraw from their mixed denominations to form a “pure church” that could unite around orthodox doctrine. Packer was not even present that night, but received the news of this event by telephone at his home in Oxford. John Stott, on the other hand, was obviously concerned that many impressionable younger evangelicals might heed the call and pull out. Immediate intervention was required, he believed, to defuse an otherwise volatile situation. McGrath summarizes Stott’s view: the “rightful and proper place of evangelicals was *within* those mainstream denominations, which they could renew from within.” McGrath adds, “It is entirely possible that Stott’s intervention was improper; he himself apologized to Lloyd-Jones subsequently.”<sup>14</sup> In any case, Stott’s action “prompted a crisis in itself, in that it exposed a major division within evangelicalism on the opening day of a conference which was intended to foster evangelical unity; nevertheless, Stott reckoned that it had to be done.”<sup>15</sup>

Packer sided with Stott, a decision that served to damage not only his friendship with Lloyd-Jones but also his reputation among many in

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Iain H. Murray has provided insight into the point of view of Lloyd-Jones in *The Life of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: 1899–1981* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2013), 375–408. For a helpful analysis of things from Stott’s perspective, see Alister Chapman, *Godly Ambition: John Stott and the Evangelical Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 90–111, as well as Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry: A Biography, the Later Years* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 65–71. See also the helpful portrayal of this event by Andrew Grills in his article “Forty Years On: An Evangelical Divide Revisited,” *Churchman* 120, no. 3 (Autumn 2006): 231–46, [http://www.churchsociety.org/churchman/documents/Cman\\_120\\_3\\_Grills.pdf](http://www.churchsociety.org/churchman/documents/Cman_120_3_Grills.pdf). For more details on the background and the aftermath, see Andrew Atherstone, “Lloyd-Jones and the Anglican Succession Crisis,” in *Engaging with Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Life and Legacy of ‘the Doctor’*, ed. Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> McGrath, *J. I. Packer*, 119.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 124–25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

Britain's evangelical community. His interpretation of the event is best summarized in his own words:

The Doctor [i.e., Lloyd-Jones] believed that his summons to separation was a call for evangelical unity as such, and that he was not a denominationalist in any sense. In continuing to combat error, commend truth, and strengthen evangelical ministry as best I could in the Church of England, he thought I was showing myself a denominationalist and obstructing evangelical unity, besides being caught in a hopelessly compromised position. By contrast, I believed that the claims of evangelical unity do not require ecclesiastical separation where the faith is not actually being denied and renewal remains possible; that the action for which the Doctor called would be, in effect, the founding of a new, loose-knit, professedly undenominational denomination; and that he, rather than I, was the denominationalist for insisting that evangelicals must all belong to this grouping and no other.<sup>16</sup>

Some believe that Lloyd-Jones destroyed evangelical unity and that Packer and Stott together followed the pathway of compromise. These judgments are almost certainly wrong. In any case, the long-standing friendship between Lloyd-Jones and Packer suffered serious damage. Whatever else may be said of the matter, Packer did not hesitate to continue to speak highly and in virtually reverential terms of the Doctor. "He was the greatest man I have ever known," said Packer, "and I am sure that there is more of him under my skin than there is of any other of my human teachers."<sup>17</sup>

Although Packer remained in England for another thirteen years, Carl Trueman believes the events of 1966 and his break from Lloyd-Jones, together with its aftermath, had much to do with his eventual move to Canada: "In short, he had nowhere to call home: the nonconformists despised him as a traitor; the Anglicans distrusted him. The result: his move to Canada must surely be seen as much as indicating the theological and ecclesiastical poverty of Britain as any positive commentary on North America."<sup>18</sup>

Whatever else may be said of Packer, it seems highly unlikely (at least to this author) that his choice to side with Stott was due to some latent overly

<sup>16</sup> Packer, "David Martyn Lloyd-Jones," 79.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>18</sup> Carl R. Trueman, "J. I. Packer: An English Nonconformist Perspective," in *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future: The Impact of His Life and Thought*, ed. Timothy George (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 125.

ecumenical impulse. Packer has made it clear on repeated occasions that “compromise of convictions is not the way to godly union; church union is not an altar on which biblical essentials, as we apprehend them, may be sacrificed. Union of churches must rest upon manifest unity of faith.”<sup>19</sup>

#### “A Modest, Christian Gentleman”

I can’t recall the first time I met Jim Packer, but each time I was in his presence, I came away sensing that there was something of greatness in him. Of course, Packer himself would bristle at such language. He is, as Trueman aptly describes, “the classic example of a modest, Christian gentleman.”<sup>20</sup> Whatever greatness there is in him (and it is there), whatever constructive influence he has exerted on the Christian church (and it has been incalculable), he himself would attribute to the sovereign grace of God working through yet another “clay jar” (2 Cor. 4:7). In our age of Christian celebrity, Jim Packer feels oddly out of place. He is, as best I can tell, entirely devoid of self-promotion. I echo Timothy George’s assessment:

I have seen him buffeted by adversity and criticized unfairly, but I have never seen him sag. His smile is irrepressible and his laughter can bring light to the most somber of meetings. His love for all things human and humane shines through. His mastery of ideas and the most fitting words in which to express them is peerless. Ever impatient with shams of all kinds, his saintly character and spirituality run deep.<sup>21</sup>

Our concern in this book, of course, is with his theology of the Christian life. For those not familiar with Packer, perhaps the most helpful portrayal of his broader theological orientation comes from his own pen. The problem is that he rarely speaks of himself except when pressed to do so. In one place he writes, “I theologize out of what I see as the authentic biblical and creedal mainstream of Christian identity, the confessional and liturgical ‘great tradition’ that the church on earth has characteristically maintained from the start.”<sup>22</sup> But this is somewhat broad and fails to capture the essence of the man. From other statements we may think of him

<sup>19</sup> J. I. Packer, “Anglican-Methodist Unity,” in *Fellowship in the Gospel: Evangelical Comment on Anglican-Methodist Unity and Intercommunion Today* (Abingdon, UK: Marcham Manor, 1968), 26.

<sup>20</sup> Trueman, “J. I. Packer: An English Nonconformist Perspective,” 129.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy George, “Preface,” in George, *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> J. I. Packer, “On from Orr: Cultural Crisis, Rational Realism and Incarnational Ontology,” *Crux* 32, no. 3 (September 1996): 12. For an example of this, see the book on which he collaborated with Thomas Oden, *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

as a Puritan, a theological exegete, and a latter-day catechist. Here is how he himself put it:

Rather than identify myself as a fundamentalist, however, I would ask you to think of me as a *Puritan*: by which I mean, think of me as one who, like those great seventeenth-century leaders on both sides of the Atlantic, seeks to combine in himself the roles of scholar, preacher, and pastor, and speaks to you out of that purpose.<sup>23</sup>

Elsewhere he explains:

My goal [as a Christian theologian] is not adequately expressed by saying that I am to uphold an evangelical conservatism of generically Reformed or specifically Anglican or neo-Puritan or interdenominational pietist type, though I have been both applauded and booed on occasion for doing all these things, and I hope under God to continue to do them. But if I know myself I am first and foremost a *theological exegete*.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, he believes the best way to describe himself is

as a *latter-day catechist*—not, indeed, a children’s catechist (I am not good with children), but what may be called an adult or higher catechist, one who builds on what children are supposed to be taught in order to spell out at adult level the truths we must live by and how we are to live by them.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, no one who exerts such widespread influence emerges in a historical vacuum. Packer is quick to acknowledge the rich heritage that most powerfully shaped his own mind:

I am the product of a fairly steady theological growth. Starting with the sovereign-grace, pastorally developed theology of Martin Luther, John Calvin, the English reformers, and the evangelical tradition from Puritans Owen and Baxter through Whitefield, Spurgeon, and J. C. Ryle to Pink and Lloyd-Jones, and holding to this as the Western Bible-believer’s basic heritage, I have come within this frame increasingly to appreci-

<sup>23</sup>J. I. Packer, “Inerrancy and the Divinity and Humanity of the Bible,” in *Honouring the Written Word of God*, vol. 3 of *The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1999), 162 (emphasis mine).

<sup>24</sup>J. I. Packer, “In Quest of Canonical Interpretation,” in *Honouring the Written Word of God*, 223 (emphasis mine).

<sup>25</sup>J. I. Packer, “Reflection and Response,” in George, *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future*, 174 (emphasis mine).

ate the patristic fathers, most of all Tertullian, the Cappadocians, and Augustine, and with them Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, and the Oxford Inklings. As a result, my discernment of orthodoxy and heresy, my insight into Christ-centered communion with God and obedience to God, and my understanding of transformation by God into the image and likeness of Christ, seem to me to have deepened. Twenty years after my conversion, I remember telling the man who at that time counseled me that honoring and magnifying Christ had become the central concern of my ministry, and forty years further on so it remains. My pneumatology, enriched to be sure by Edwards on revivals and by interaction with charismatics, is still essentially that of John Owen, and though current needs have led me to say much about the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ—crucified and risen, who is my Lord and Savior, my life and my hope—still stands at the center of my horizon—which surely is how it should always be, for all of us. My overall theological outlook has seen small adjustments but no major changes, and I thank God for the gift of consistency in holding to the things I first embraced, and embrace today, as his revealed truth.<sup>26</sup>

Packer's primary impact has come in the classroom through his training of a multitude of this generation's pastors and theologians, and especially in his voluminous writings. Indeed, as Timothy George has noted, his writings are so extensive, "it is hard to imagine that they have come from the pen of one person."<sup>27</sup> I concur with Trueman that "his writings are among the clearest and most lucid statements of orthodoxy available, lacking both pomposity and that dusty piety that so often weighs down other writers of the neo-Puritan revival."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, this has presented me with something of a challenge insofar as I find Packer's prose to be so lucid and persuasive that I often hesitate to cast myself in the role of interpreter. I have repeatedly found myself reluctant to explain Packer's points and would have preferred simply to quote him extensively. His words, more

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 173. In personal correspondence to Don Payne, Packer wrote, "My theology has no doubt broadened its base since 1947 but apart from getting clear on particular redemption in 1953 or 1954 [by reading Owen's treatise *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*] I don't think there has been any change in its structure, method or conclusions. Like Calvin, I was blessed in getting things basically right from the start" (cited in Payne, *The Theology of the Christian Life in J. I. Packer's Thought: Theological Anthropology, Theological Method, and the Doctrine of Sanctification* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2006), 73. For Payne's excellent portrayal of the historical and theological context of Packer's life and ministry, see 15–49, where Packer's self-identification as an evangelical is rooted in the events of the past 150 years.

<sup>27</sup> George, "Preface," 10. One also thinks of the countless books to which Packer has contributed a foreword. One could easily compile an entire volume of theological and pastoral reflections based solely on these often overlooked gems. Packer's first publication came in the year after I was born, 1952: "The Puritan Treatment of Justification by Faith," *Evangelical Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1952): 131–43.

<sup>28</sup> Trueman, "J. I. Packer: An English Non-Conformist Perspective," 128.

than any other contemporary theologian's, speak for themselves and hardly need explanation!

In this biographical sketch I've made much of the obvious role of divine providence in shaping this man whom so many of us have come to admire and love. I can do no better than to cite the observations of Packer's close friend Timothy George. He wonders:

Peradventure? What would have happened had that seven-year old J. I. Packer not been hit by the bread truck in 1933? Would humanity have gained a champion cricket player and lost a world class theologian? Peradventure. What would have happened had Packer, as a young Christian at Oxford, still seeking his theological bearings, reached into that bin of dusty old books and pulled out not John Owen, but a volume, say, by Jeremy Taylor or Lancelot Andrewes? Would that have lit a fire in his soul for the things of God? Or what would have happened had a beautiful young nurse named Kit Mullet not seen the visiting bachelor curate sitting alone at the lunch table after his presentation at church? What if Mullet had not struck up a conversation with that lonely fellow, a relationship that has led now to more than fifty years of marriage and three children? Did God meet J. I. Packer at the crossroads and direct him in ways that he could not have foreseen at the time? Peradventure. For Philemon 15 must be matched with Proverbs 16:33, which in none of our modern translations quite matches the beauty of the Authorized Version, "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord." Antinomies everywhere.<sup>29</sup>

### **Packer's Theological Framework for Christian Living**

For J. I. Packer, all theological reflection, to be of value, must issue in holiness of life in which the love of God and his glory are preeminent. Put another way, theology and spirituality are inseparable. This isn't because Packer and other theologians have artificially forged a connection between the two, "but because theology, when rightly understood, leads into spirituality. Theology is to be understood, [Packer] writes, as 'a devotional discipline, a verifying in experience of Aquinas' beautiful remark that theology is taught by God, teaches God, and takes us to God.'"<sup>30</sup> For Packer, theology

<sup>29</sup> Timothy George, "Unde, Quonam, et Quemadmodum? Learning Latin (and Other Things) from J. I. Packer," in George, *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future*, 164.

<sup>30</sup> Alister McGrath, "The Great Tradition: J. I. Packer on Engaging with the Past to Enrich the Present," in George, *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future*, 22-23.

“cannot, and should not, be detached or dissociated from the relational activity of trusting, loving, worshiping, obeying, serving, and glorifying God.”<sup>31</sup> “One way of judging the quality of theologies,” he explains, “is to see what sort of devotion they produce.”<sup>32</sup>

The overall sense Packer has for the nature of Christian living is captured beautifully, and humorously, in his book *Hot Tub Religion*. When searching for an image or metaphor or analogy to summarize the approach of many to Christian living today, Packer landed on the experience one has in a hot tub! Set aside for a moment your struggle with the image of J. I. Packer in a hot tub and let him make his point. As he sat in a hot tub for the first time, it struck him that the experience

is the perfect symbol of the modern route in religion. The hot tub experience is sensuous, relaxing, floppy, laid-back: not in any way demanding, whether intellectually or otherwise, but very, very nice, even to the point of being great fun. . . . Many today want Christianity to be like that, and labor to make it so. . . . [To this end many] are already offering occasions which we are meant to feel are the next best thing to a hot tub—namely, happy gatherings free from care, real fun times for all. . . . [Thus] when modern Western man turns to religion (if he does—most don’t), what he wants is total tickling relaxation, the sense of being at once soothed, supported and effortlessly invigorated: in short, hot tub religion.<sup>33</sup>

He goes on to say that the feelings generated by a hot tub are okay; in fact, they are great! And relaxation and soothing emotions and exuberant celebrations are all permissible within biblical Christian experience.

But if there were no more to our Christianity than hot tub factors—if, that is, we embraced a self-absorbed hedonism of relaxation and happy feelings, while dodging tough tasks, unpopular stances and exhausting relationships—we should fall short of biblical God-centeredness and of the cross-bearing life to which Jesus calls us, and advertise to the world nothing better than our own decadence. Please God, however, we shall not settle for that.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> J. I. Packer, “On Covenant Theology,” in *Celebrating the Saving Work of God*, vol. 1 of *The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998), 19.

<sup>33</sup> J. I. Packer, *Hot Tub Religion* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1987), 68–69.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

But Packer is no killjoy! He repeatedly insists that happiness plays an essential role in Christian experience; indeed, he asserts that “real enjoyment is integral to real godliness.”<sup>35</sup> But it “comes from basking in the knowledge of the redeeming love of the Father and the Son, and showing actively loyal gratitude for it. You love God and find yourself happy. Your active attempts to please God funnel the pleasures of his peace into your heart.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, what Packer advocates is genuine “joy” and not hot tub pleasures. We desperately need to hear his point that joy is always deeper than and never dependent on physical, financial, and emotional pleasure, and how damaging it is ever to equate the two.

Clearly, then, he resists the sort of happiness or pleasure or even joy that comes from egocentricity, which he defines as “unwillingness to see oneself as existing for the Creator’s pleasure and instead establishing oneself as the center of everything. The quest for one’s own pleasure in some shape or form is the rule and driving force of the egocentric life.”<sup>37</sup> Jesus, on the other hand,

demands self-denial, that is, self-negation (Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23), as a necessary condition of discipleship. Self-denial is a summons to submit to the authority of God as Father and of Jesus as Lord and to declare lifelong war on one’s instinctive egoism. What is to be negated is not personal self or one’s existence as a rational and responsible human being. Jesus does not plan to turn us into zombies, nor does he ask us to volunteer for a robot role. The required denial is of carnal self, the egocentric, self-deifying urge with which we were born, and which dominates us so ruinously in our natural state.<sup>38</sup>

Packer’s Reformed orientation comes to light when he insists that God’s ultimate end in his dealings with his children is not simply their happiness but his own glory. The purpose of the Christian life is God’s glory, not ours. “He does not exist for our sake, but we for his.”<sup>39</sup> Some object to this. Such folk, he acknowledges,

are sensitive to the sinfulness of continual self-seeking. They know that the desire to gratify self is at the root of moral weaknesses and shortcom-

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–71.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

ings. They are themselves trying as best they can to face and fight this desire. Hence they conclude that for God to be self-centered would be equally wrong.<sup>40</sup>

Is their conclusion valid? No, says Packer. His explanation deserves careful consideration:

If it is right for man to have the glory of God as his goal, can it be wrong for God to have the same goal? If man can have no higher purpose than God's glory, how can God? If it is wrong for man to seek a lesser end than this, it would be wrong for God, too. The reason it cannot be right for man to live for himself, as if he were God, is because he is not God. However, it cannot be wrong for God to seek his own glory, simply because he is God. Those who insist that God should not seek his glory in all things are really asking that he cease to be God. And there is no greater blasphemy than to will God out of existence.<sup>41</sup>

In other words, "for us to glorify him is a duty; for him to bless us is grace. The only thing that God is bound to do is the very thing that he requires of us—to glorify himself."<sup>42</sup> This is why "the only answer that the Bible gives to questions that begin: 'Why did God . . . ?' is: 'For his own glory.' It was for this that God decreed to create, and for this he willed to permit sin."<sup>43</sup>

If God's glory is the ultimate aim of all Christian living, God's love for sinners in Christ is its sustaining power. It is this redemptive love that

generates and sustains the love to God and neighbor that Christ's two great commandments require (Matt. 22:35–40). Our love is to express our gratitude for God's gracious love to us, and to be modeled on it (Eph. 4:32–5:2; 1 John 3:16). The hallmark of Christian life is thus Christian love. The measure and test of love to God is wholehearted and unqualified obedience (1 John 5:3; John 14:15, 21, 23); the measure and test of love to our neighbor is laying down our lives for them (1 John 3:16; cf. John 15:12–13).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>44</sup> J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 181–82.

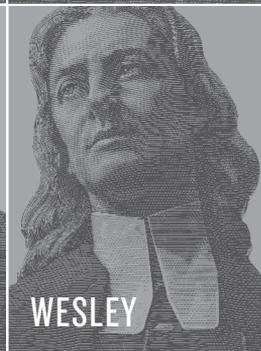
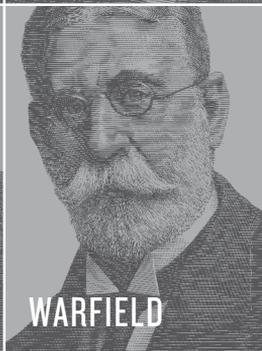
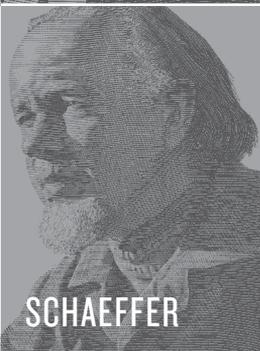
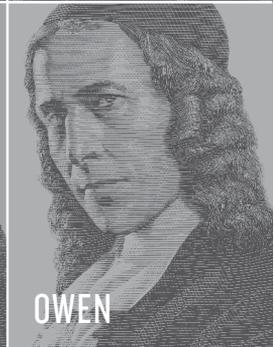
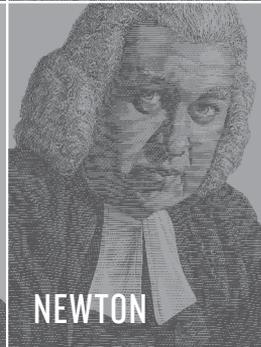
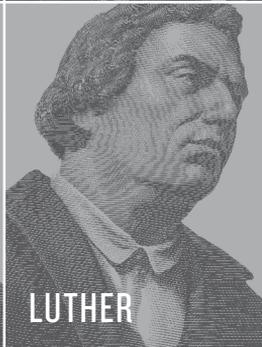
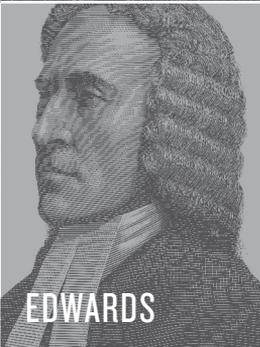
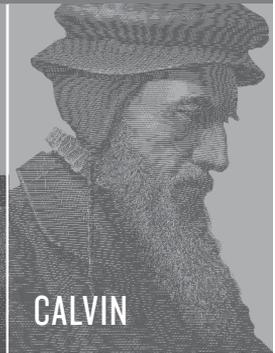
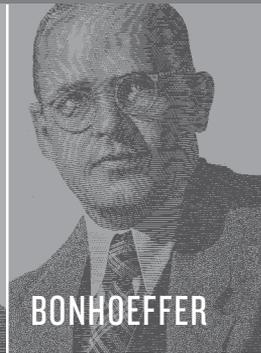
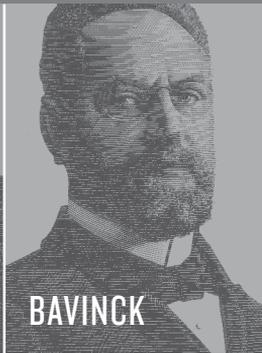
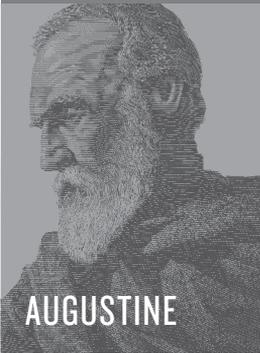
The Christian life for Packer can largely be summed up in the single word, *piety*, which in his writings is typically used as a synonym for godliness and holiness. Today the word *spirituality* is more commonly seen, and Packer himself is often found using the two interchangeably. Whereas *spirituality* may encompass virtually all forms of religious devotion, including those not governed by biblical standards, he yet defines it as “the study of godliness in its root and in its fruit.”<sup>45</sup> That will be the focus of our attention in the remaining pages of this book.

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<sup>45</sup> Cited by Payne, *The Theology of the Christian Life in J. I. Packer's Thought*, 11.

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