



J. I. PACKER

1926-2020

Strands in Packer's Theological Influence: One Appreciation

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Abstract

This essay explores J. I. Packer's theological influence through a consideration of his many writings. It classifies his input into six strands: Luther, Calvin, and the Puritans; Scripture; Anglicanism; universalism, revivals, and the Holy Spirit; Christ's work; and the book *Knowing God*. This survey reveals that Packer used his exceptional theological mind to educate both Anglicans and other types of Protestants.

Keywords

John Calvin, Martin Luther, Puritans, Scripture, Anglicanism, Holy Spirit, atonement, doctrine of God, spirituality

This essay is an attempt to identify the theological topics and interests that J. I. Packer was concerned with as a young theological tutor and that endured throughout his life. Some of these strands made him a fortune; others caused him difficulties and heartache.

Packer was a Christian gentleman and a great theological figure. Striking in appearance, softly spoken, with every spoken word worth attention, he was remarkable, in a class by himself. Already as a young man, he seemed to have boundless theological knowledge and an appreciation of Christian

theological resources and their wisdom. For much of his life, in England and then in Canada, his influence spanned Evangelicalism, taking in both Anglicanism and to a lesser extent other Evangelical churches.

The plan of this article has pros and cons. It takes in what I think were the main theological strands, but there could have been further emphases. I shall identify these and how they came and remained during a long career that ceased only days before his death in 2020, aged 94. It will be noteworthy for its items referred to as well as those for which, alas, there was no room.

I knew Packer beginning in 1962 when he moved from teaching at Tyndale Hall, Bristol, to join the new center on Anglican Evangelical theology established in Oxford, but not again until I was briefly a colleague of his at Regent College, Vancouver.

He had been educated in Gloucester and at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. But I was not then nor am now Anglican, nor a party to Packer's private conversations in any sphere, or with his family, or with his days in England and then in Canada. So this is an effort to give an account of Packer the public figure as a writer, which I have divided, or ordered, into six strands or themes of theological issues and interests that mark his life work.

Strand 1: Luther and Calvin, and Puritans and Puritanism

In his student years Packer had encountered “by chance” a set of the writings of the leading Puritan John Owen in the basement of Northgate Hall, where the Oxford Evangelical Christians met. He was attracted by Owen's writings on indwelling sin and temptation in volume 6 of his *Works*, edited by William Goold, which chimed with Packer's self-knowledge as a new Christian rather than that of the Keswick preachers and their followers, which were useless for him in the face of his own failings. This was one impetus for the attention he gave to the Puritans at that time.

At something of a crisis time soon after my conversion, John Owen helped me to be realistic (that is, neither myopic nor despairing) about my continuing sinfulness and the discipline of self-suspicion and mortification to which, with all Christians, I am called. ... Without Owen I might well have gone off my head or got bogged down in mystical fanaticism, and certainly my view of the Christian life would not be what it is today.¹

¹ J. I. Packer, *Among God's Giants: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway, 1991), 12.

He was deeply influenced by “the Puritans,” but it should be noted that “puritan” can apply to a wide spectrum of seventeenth-century Christians. In particular it is worth bearing in mind that in 1662, most of the members of the Westminster Assembly (1647) refused the 1660 Act of Uniformity, but there was a minority that conformed to the law, accepting the restored Church of England, while their erstwhile colleagues were suffering—men such as William Gurnall (1618–1679), the author of *The Christian in Complete Armour*, and Edward Reynolds, prominent in the Westminster Assembly, who was Owen’s successor in Oxford University and who became Bishop of Norwich, leading worship in accordance with the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. While Packer relished the theology of Owen, he did not follow his independency. We shall note further evidence of the character of Packer’s unqualified commitment to the Church of England later. The state of Anglican theology in 1660 was different from that of the mid-twentieth century, notably by the presence of the Anglo-Catholic party, the “high” church, and the naturalism of radical theologians such as Geoffrey Lampe (1912–1980), Dennis Nineham (1921–2016), and Maurice Wiles (1923–2005).

In this early phase, he wrote for the student paper of Tyndale Hall, *Discipulus*, of his commitment to the Church of England and his concerns about its state.

I am an Evangelical Christian. I hold that Prayer Book Evangelicalism expresses the authentic Anglican outlook, and that the task of Evangelicals in the Church of England is no more—and no less—than to present to (the) one Church its true self . . . I suspect (I hope I am wrong) that the Evangelical cause in the Church of England today is in a more parlous state than at any time during this century. A programme of change is under way—canon law; Prayer Book revision; perhaps the Articles after that—and in this situation we Evangelicals are not saying enough to make our own outlook intelligible, either to ourselves or to others, let alone to safeguard it.

Packer held that the Thirty-Nine Articles, with other Reformed confessions, were “catholic” in that they upheld patristic Trinitarianism and Christology expressed in the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedon formula. In addition, it is in his *“Fundamentalism” and the Word of God* (1958)² that we find evidence of what I shall call his gradualism. In the chapter “Faith,” he makes clear that the ways in which people exercise faith in Christ are not in the manner of “one size fits all” but are filtered through a variety of circumstances, experiences, and temperaments in the varied character of the lives of believers. People may positively respond to the gospel in varied ways, but

² J. I. Packer, *“Fundamentalism” and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958).

with sufficient common ground that the differences are tolerable. Hence he could later operate with high churchmen like Eric Mascall and Bishop Graham Leonard. When bishops repudiated the limits of such catholic theology, as in the case of the Bishops of Woolwich and Durham and other radical theologians, they in effect denied the supernatural in Christian theology, and Packer's tentacles were quickly revealed. His name for them was "myth-men."³

This is some of what he said:

It will be asked why, if the whole Church does in fact experience the witness of the Spirit to Scripture, any Christian should ever deviate from the Bible's view of itself. The same question arises in connection with unscriptural views of any doctrine. It does not seem hard to answer. Christians fall into mental error, partly through mistaking or overlooking what Scripture teaches; partly through having their minds prepossessed with unbiblical notions so that they cannot take scriptural statements seriously. All heresy begins so Radicals who query the truth and worth of much of Scripture are yet devout Bible-readers and vigorous preachers of the Gospel, and that from texts whose credit they would deny in the lecture-room.⁴

From John Calvin he drew the shape of his own theology, and in particular the basis of Calvin's high view of Scripture, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit to God's sovereign grace. For Calvin the same Spirit that inspired the Scripture testifies also in the heart of his disciples, who feed on the promises of God in his word. Coming to have this view of Scripture's basis is part and parcel of Christian discipleship.⁵

Packer was also indebted to B. B. Warfield's work on the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture while distancing himself from Warfield's "abstract, Butlerian, anti-Deistic, and basic rationalistic" approach.⁶ Perhaps it was

³ J. I. Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer* [hereafter, *CSW*] (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1998–1999), 1:77, compare with 1:82. This set gives a wealth of articles until the seventies, while other articles of the new millennium of his career have not been collected, nor has his journalism in *The Church of England Newspaper* in England. and *Christianity Today* in North America. See, however, the book review on pages 232–34 below.

⁴ Packer, "Fundamentalism," 123–24. There are similar comments in J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1961), 119, on patience in evangelism, and a later paper, J. I. Packer, "What Is Evangelism?," in *Theological Perspective on Church Growth*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 91–105, reprinted in *CSW*, 1:243–52; comments on "conversion experience" are contributions to the same theme.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), trans. Henry Beveridge (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1.7 (68), "The Testimony of the Spirit is Necessary to Give Full Authority to Scripture." John Owen held the same view. John Owen, *The Reason of Faith*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), vol. 4.

⁶ *CSW* 3:101.

Cornelius Van Til's rejection of natural theology that gave Packer a soft spot for him. He contributed a paper to Van Til's *Festschrift*.⁷

Packer received his doctorate in 1954. His thesis was "The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter."⁸ Rather surprisingly, Packer published little about Baxter until much later in his career.⁹

In 1955, he published "'Keswick' and the Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification,"¹⁰ displaying that the view of the Christian life sponsored by the Keswick Convention was a form of perfectionism. "*Keswick teaching is Pelagian through and through*,"¹¹ he wrote, not that of the Reformed view of the believer's presence of indwelling sin and of progressive sanctification, which he had himself experienced in his early life as a Christian. It is strange that Packer has never again produced this powerful piece, though it was later reprinted in the *Free Grace Record* (now defunct), a Particular Baptist magazine edited by John Doggett.

He handled the modern charismatics with patience and grace. In the later version, his line was to present the movement as understanding the work of the Spirit as an instrument of *power* rather than of *holiness*, which he thought was the need in all the churches of Evangelicalism. In this he was following an Owenian pattern, though it was not presented in that form to his readers. However, he made a point of showing that Owen treated the gifts of the Spirit as seen in Paul's teaching to the church at Corinth and elsewhere. He gave a separate account, "John Owen on Spiritual Gifts," in one of his papers to the Puritan Conference in 1967; it was collected later in *Among God's Giants*, a testimony to the thoroughness of Owen's scope of the Spirit's work.¹²

After a curacy in Birmingham, he was appointed Tutor in Christian Doctrine at Tyndale Hall, Bristol, where he remained, on and off until

⁷ J. I. Packer, "Biblical Theology, Hermeneutics, and Inerrancy," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 141–53, one of several on hermeneutics published around this time.

⁸ Published as *The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000). There are papers on Baxter in *CSW* 4, chs. 3, 15.

⁹ For example, see J. I. Packer, *Marriage, Depression, Anxiety and the Christian Life: Practical Wisdom from Richard Baxter* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 2018).

¹⁰ J. I. Packer, "'Keswick' and the Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification," *Evangelical Quarterly* 27.3 (1955): 153–67. In his *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 2nd ed. (1984; repr., Grand Rapids: Revell, 2005), 27, the author says of the 1955 article, "I gave great offense, but my point would, I think, be more widely taken today." His language then was undoubtedly brusquer and more urgent than in the gentler tone of the later book.

¹¹ Packer, "'Keswick,'" 158 (italics in the original).

¹² J. I. Packer, "John Owen on Spiritual Gifts," in *Among God's Giants*.

1970.¹³ He produced (with his close friend O. R. Johnston), a fresh edition of Martin Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* in 1957. In it the writers were not shy to ask a question or two.

Is our salvation wholly of God, or does it ultimately depend on something that we do for ourselves? Those who say the latter (as the Arminians later did) thereby deny man's utter helplessness in sin, and affirm that a form for semi-Pelagianism is true after all. It is no wonder, then, that later Reformed theology condemned Arminianism as being in principle a return to Rome (because in effect it turned faith into meritorious work) and a betrayal of the Reformation (because it denied the sovereignty of God in saving sinners, which was the deepest religious and theological principle of the Reformers' thought).¹⁴

These things need to be pondered by Protestants today. By what right may we call ourselves children of the Reformation? Much modern Protestantism would be neither owned nor even recognized by the pioneer Reformers. *The Bondage of the Will* fairly sets before us what they believed about the salvation of lost mankind. In that light, we are forced to ask whether Protestant Christendom has tragically sold its birthright between Luther's day and our own. Has not Protestantism today become more Erasmian than Lutheran? Do we not too often try to minimize and gloss over doctrinal differences for the sake of interparty peace?¹⁵

There are other later papers by him published on Luther and Erasmus.¹⁶

He and Raymond Johnston were instrumental in persuading Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the minister of Westminster Chapel, to form an annual conference, beginning in 1952, that came to be known as the Puritan Conference. Its growth was one factor in the growing worldwide interest in Puritan theology and piety.

There is also more evidence of what I called earlier his gradualism, a view of Christian conversion that it may be gradual and that it is influenced by character and upbringing. There is no standard conversion experience, but each is as unique as the converted are. In Scripture are there not disciples who did not know that there was a Holy Spirit? And could not a modern liberal call out that "Jesus is Lord"? The thief on the cross, and the teaching

¹³ The chronology of Packer's various appointments at this time and later in his career can be found in Alistair McGrath, *To Know and Serve God: A Biography of James I. Packer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1997); *J. I. Packer: His Life and Thought* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020).

¹⁴ J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, "Historical and Theological Introduction," in Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1957), 59.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

¹⁶ For example, J. I. Packer, "Luther against Erasmus," in *CSW* 4:40.

of Christ's parables, were examples of graduation of fruitfulness also. Packer would no doubt have said that in such cases we need to be careful in our judgments; after all, we are not in the place of God.

Strand 2: The Word of God

We have mentioned Packer's "*Fundamentalism*" and *the Word of God*. On Scripture's testimony to itself, he relies on Warfield, but not on what he regarded as Warfield's tendency to rationalism. In apologetics Packer relied not on the proofs of natural theology but on exposure to the good news of Jesus Christ.

It is fundamental to the nature of faith to take God's word for things; acceptance on the authority of God is the biblical analysis on its intellectual side. The first manifestation of faith is cognitive; it appears in the recognition of affirmations made by men—prophets, apostles, the man Christ Jesus, any biblical writer—as truths uttered by God. Faith apprehends their testimony to God as being God's own testimony to Himself, and receives and responds, to it as such.¹⁷

He mentions the classic Reformed hermeneutics, that Scripture interprets Scripture. He quotes the Westminster Confession:

The infallible rule of interpretation of scripture is the scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture, ... it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.¹⁸

Packer had reason to reaffirm this hermeneutical view later on in the light of some developments among his fellow Anglican Evangelicals. He cites Calvin's classic view in his *Institutes*:

They who labour to raise up a firm faith in Scripture by arguing are acting absurdly. ... For as God alone is competent to bear witness of himself in his own word, so that word will not find evidence in the hearts of men till it is sealed upon them by the inner witness of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who spoke by the mouth of the prophets, must make his way into his hearts to assure us that they faithfully delivered that which was divinely entrusted to them.¹⁹

¹⁷ Packer, "*Fundamentalism*," 117–18.

¹⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith 1.9 as quoted in Packer, "*Fundamentalism*," 106.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7, as quoted in Packer, "*Fundamentalism*," 120–21; see also, 125, 132, 174.

This is an instance not of fideism but of the discerning of the evidence of Scripture about itself by careful reading and the work of the Holy Spirit in heart and mind.²⁰

So the stance of the book was that of “faith seeking understanding.” Packer is following Calvin, and also Owen, in the stress of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. His early purpose in 1958 is enlarged in another book on Scripture, *God Has Spoken*, which was an enlargement of a shorter book for Anglicans to have more general appeal; after that, his work on the defense of Scripture blossomed in the United States with his work on inerrancy. The book, published in 1979, reproduced the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978), the work of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. Packer stated, “I shared in drafting it and myself subscribed to it.” This was shortly before he went to live in Canada, where his commitment to biblical inerrancy was, if anything, redoubled. In addition, there was a stress on hermeneutics based on the Bible being its own interpreter, as against it in the modern, post-Kantian sense, as was the work of his colleague Anthony Thiselton, notably in *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (1980).²¹ By then Packer was in Canada and free from the difficulties that Thiselton was making for him in the English Evangelical Anglican scene.²²

Besides this, the book on fundamentalism revealed the argumentative, polemical side of Packer’s treatment of theology. For him theological ideas have logical consequences, sometimes many of them, in the life of the reader, and it is part of the role of the theologian to trace these. Thus, such uses of the intellect in the study of the Bible by human minds are not the same thing as rationalism.

The future would see commitment to Scripture of a different kind, in connection with his work for the English Standard Version. Packer was the theological editor of its study Bible, with its 1.1 million words. That alone was an abiding achievement. It is said that after a lecture Packer was signing books and was approached by a lady who was holding only a Bible. Would he sign that? Packer paused for some moments, and then said, “I am afraid that I cannot do that, I did not write a word of it.”

²⁰ See also J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible*, rev. and enlarged ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), ch. 6.

²¹ CSW 1, chs. 10, 16. For details see McGrath, *To Know and Serve God*, 214–16. There were several papers of Packer’s at this time, e.g., James Packer, “Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority [1975],” in *Solid Ground: 25 Years of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Carl Trueman, Tony Gray, and Craig L. Blomberg (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 137–54.

²² In CSW 3:158, Packer has positive things to say about Thiselton’s book.

Strand 3: Anglican Theology

His concern for Anglican theology had been early expressed in the *Discipulus* article. This concerned him throughout his life in England for the Church of England and in Canada for wider Anglicanism. It was a source of trouble for him early in England and later in Canada. In March 1963, J. A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God* was published, and Packer, by then the Warden of Latimer House, responded in the pamphlet *Keep Yourself from Idols*. This marks his first public encounter with the anti-supernaturalism of the theological leadership of Anglican theology at that time. Worse was to follow.

It is, therefore, a grave matter when a bishop appears to be driving a coach and four through the plain and acknowledged sense of Scripture, the teaching of the Thirty-nine Articles, and the beliefs of the mass of English churchmen.²³

This concern for the popular radical theology, if the term theology was appropriate, was soon overtaken by the role he was to play in developing the Evangelical view to the ongoing conversations of unifying the Church of England with the Methodists. Latimer House, located in Oxford, was a new center for Evangelical research established under the chairmanship of John Stott. It had gathered momentum with the need to engage in publication regarding the Church of England-Methodist conversations on the prospects for unity between the two.

His attitude to joining these talks was to work on an alliance with the Anglo-Catholics to prevent the radical theologians—who were, theologically speaking, naturalists, not supernaturalists—from prevailing. He was later to write,

Thus, whatever reservations I may have about the ecclesiology, Mariology, and eucharistic teaching of such a man as my learned friend Dr. Eric Mascall, I am profoundly grateful to him for books like *Up and Down in Adria*, *The Secularization of Christianity* and *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, and I hope you are too. Should the future see a catholic renewal in the Church of England, having the same non-triumphalist, non-partisan character as has marked the evangelical renewal of the past generation, I am bold to predict both that the church will benefit and that evangelical-catholic solidarity against views which erode the supernatural in the realm of redemption will become yet stronger. Such co-belligerence will not compromise either side, and will be tactically appropriate for furthering faith in those fundamentals concerning our incarnate Lord on which we are truly agreed.²⁴

²³ J. I. Packer, *Keep Yourself from Idols* (London: Church Book Room, 1963), 1.

²⁴ CSW, 1:82.

He seemed to have formed a firm friendship with Mascall. Packer was appointed to the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England in 1968. It was presumably a consequence of the role he was taking in talks with the English Methodists. Alas, the first business that Packer had as a member was to consider the Thirty-Nine Articles and assent to them. The Commission, chaired then by Ian Ramsey, who died in 1972, was succeeded by Maurice Wiles, one of the current Anglican radicals. He, along with like-minded fellow members, considered the *Subscription and Assent to the 39 Articles* (London: SPCK, 1968)—or rather denied it a place—and Packer was cruelly humiliated. Throughout this period of his career, he and other senior Evangelicals routinely underestimated the political skill and determination of the radical theologians to control the theological agenda of the Church of England.

Nevertheless, a helpful way of noting Packer’s theological development in Anglican theology in the years 1964–1984 remains his periodic defense of the historic Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, notwithstanding their demotion.

His first published defense was a contribution to articles by a mixed bag of Anglicans.²⁵ In his contribution Packer dealt with “the history of the Articles, their clarity, and unambiguity, designed to be the rule of faith of every English Christian” (28).²⁶ It was intentionally minimal. There were different Anglican traditions following the devaluing of clerical subscription: the Articles were “treated as ‘articles of peace’” that described “authority, functions, and our attitude”; these traditions set out what status they should have currently, that of a faithful witness and theological identity card.

In the following years there were at least three other Packer publications on the Articles: *A Guide to the Thirty-Nine Articles Today*,²⁷ “Towards a Confession for Tomorrow’s Church,”²⁸ and *The Thirty-Nine Articles: Their Place and Use Today*.²⁹ Packer was by then a Canadian citizen, and no doubt there were other interventions. In this period, he was the busy author of *The Church of England and the Methodist Church*³⁰ and *All in Each Place: Towards*

²⁵ J. I. Packer, “The Status of the Articles,” in *The Articles of the Church of England* (London: Mowbray, 1964), 25–57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁷ J. I. Packer, *A Guide to the Thirty-Nine Articles Today* (London: Church Book Room, 1969).

²⁸ J. I. Packer, “Towards a Confession for Tomorrow’s Church,” *Churchman* 87.3 (1973): 246–62.

²⁹ J. I. Packer with R. T. Beckwith, *The Thirty-Nine Articles: Their Place and Use Today*, Latimer Studies 20–21 (Oxford: Latimer House, 1984)

³⁰ J. I. Packer, ed., *The Church of England and the Methodist Church: A Consideration of the Report, Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church; Ten Essays* (Marcham: Marcham Manor, 1963).

Reunion in England.³¹ Packer's tenacity was certainly needed.

But Packer suffered another setback in this period. During the Puritan Conference, an annual gathering of Evangelical ministers of varied denominations that had Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones as its chairman, the non-Anglicans could not comprehend Packer's efforts in the conversations, especially his alliance with the Anglo-Catholics. With the latter Packer coauthored *Growing into Union*,³² the publication of which scuttled the talks.

Even his friend Lloyd-Jones had thought it was possible to turn Packer from Anglicanism, but stung by *Growing into Union*, the Doctor and his faction abruptly terminated the meetings. A fellow Welshman and a sometime deacon of Westminster Chapel, Gaius Davies, commented,

Dr. Lloyd-Jones wrote to Packer to say there would be no Puritan Conference at Westminster Chapel in December 1970. It was effectively rather like being sent a Papal Bull, even though it did not excommunicate Packer. Thankfully Packer survived what many of us still feel was very scurvy treatment by Lloyd-Jones and his like-minded colleagues. Quickly it became that Dr. Packer was now, for them, *persona non grata*, and he was cold-shouldered and rejected by people with whom he had worked out closely.³³

This treatment did not dint Packer's estimate of the Doctor. There are at least two papers of Packer's on Dr. Lloyd-Jones, each of them laudatory. The second ends with these words:

To have known him was a supreme privilege, for which I shall always be thankful . . . He embodied and expressed "the glory"—the glory of God, of Christ, of grace, of the gospel, of the Christian ministry, of humanness according to the new creation—more richly than any man I have ever known. No man can give another a greater gift than a vision of such glory as this. I am forever in his debt.³⁴

Not a sign of a sour grape.

It was the setbacks of this period that helped Packer to form the intention to leave the United Kingdom for British Columbia, Canada, to take a teaching post at Regent College, Vancouver, where he was to spend the rest of his life from 1974 to 2020.

³¹ J. I. Packer, ed., *All in Each Place: Towards Reunion in England; Ten Anglican Essays with Some Free Church Comments* (Abington, UK: Marcham Manor, 1965).

³² Colin O. Buchanan, E. L. Mascall, Graham Leonard, and J. I. Packer, *Growing into Union: Proposals for Forming a United Church in England* (London: SPCK, 1970).

³³ Gaius Davies, *Genius, Grief and Grace*, 2nd ed. (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2001), 366.

³⁴ *CSW*, 4:87.

Although Regent College is not an Anglican college, there was a set of options in the MDiv curriculum for those Presbyterians and Anglicans intending to enter the ministry to take an appropriate course. For Packer there were places to exercise his concerns in Anglican theology.³⁵ Saint John's Shaughnessy was a church in which he could continue pastoral work.

There were periods when Packer was challenged about Canadian Anglicanism. The bishop of the diocese in which Saint John's Shaughnessy was situated adopted a policy that permitted same-sex marriages. For the first time in his career Packer left his local church and by implication Anglicanism. This was publicized widely due to his article "Why I Walked" in *Christianity Today*, a periodical with which he became closely connected after coming to Canada. In it he wrote,

Why did I walk out with the others? Because this decision, taken in its context, falsifies the gospel of Christ, abandons the authority of Scripture, jeopardizes the salvation of fellow human beings, and betrays the church in its God-appointed role as the bastion and bulwark of divine truth.

My primary authority is a Bible writer named Paul. For many decades now, I have asked myself at every turn of my theological road: Would Paul be with me in this? What would he say if he were in my shoes? I have never dared to offer a view on anything that I did not have good reason to think he would endorse.

In 1 Corinthians we find the following, addressed, it seems, to exponents of some kind of antinomian spirituality:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (6:9–11, ESV).

To make sure we grasp what Paul is saying here, I pose some questions.

First: What is Paul talking about in this vice list? Answer: Lifestyles, regular behavior patterns, habits of mind and action. He has in view not single lapses followed by repentance, forgiveness, and greater watchfulness (with God's help) against recurrence, but ways of life in which some of his readers were set, believing that for Christians there was no harm in them.

Second: What is Paul saying about these habits? Answer: They are ways of sin that, if not repented of and forsaken, will keep people out of God's kingdom of salvation.³⁶

³⁵ His lectures on Anglican Theology, given at Regent College, have recently been published as J. I. Packer, *The Heritage of Anglican Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

³⁶ J. I. Packer, "Why I Walked: Sometimes Loving a Denomination Requires You to Fight," *Christianity Today* 47 (January 21, 2003): 47–48.

He was later renewed as an Anglican minister via ordination by the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON).

Packer's subscribing to "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" in 1994 brought accusations from some that he was selling out to Rome. There was misunderstanding on both sides. Packer had forgotten that he was a public figure, and his critics no doubt took his joining as an opportunity to put his "off the record" chats on the record; they were not prepared to give him that sort of personal liberty.

During this period of trouble, he continued teaching at Regent College, fulfilling numerous invitations to conferences and seminaries, and advising *Christianity Today*, which involved regular travel. This spawned a joke from his students: "What is the difference between God and J. I. Packer? Answer: God is everywhere, but Packer is everywhere except Vancouver!"

Strand 4: Universalism, Revivals and Revivalism, and the Holy Spirit

We shall begin this section by looking at Packer's emphasis on evangelism, beginning with *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, published in 1961. The occasion of the book was a meeting of the University of London Inter-Faculty Christian Union in which the stress on divine sovereignty led to the charge that belief in it hampered evangelism. There is literary evidence that Packer's rise as a Calvinist worried the work of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (IVF), which had an outlook that encompassed all sorts of Evangelical commitment among students. Packer thought it important to comment:

It must not be thought that in all the points with which I deal I am trying to lay down some sort of "I.V.F. orthodoxy". The limits of "I.V.F. orthodoxy" are set out in the Fellowship's doctrinal basis. ... On the subject now to be dealt with, it may well be that some members of the Fellowship will think differently from the present writer. Equally, however, an author has a right to his own opinion, and he cannot be expected to conceal his views when he believes them to be biblical, relevant, and (in the strict sense) edifying.³⁷

The topic of universalism has several sides to it. There is the clear teaching of Scripture of the uniqueness and sufficiency of the work of Jesus Christ about which the universalism of radical Anglican theologians had little or nothing to say. For example, John Hick, a radical theologian who, though not an Anglican, made his views clear in the title of his book, *The Myth of*

³⁷ Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 8; see also, e.g., *CSW* 3, chs. 16, 17, 21.

God Incarnate (1977).³⁸ Besides this, the trends in the culture and media, whenever the topic came up, had become more and more universalistic.

Against this, Packer's own attitude to evangelism had been made clear in his lucid exposition of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. However, it was something of a surprise to find that when he brought the two together, he had the idea that the result was antinomy, with its associations with Kantian philosophy.

For the whole point of an antinomy—in theology, at any rate—is that it is not a real contradiction, though it looks like one. It is an *apparent* incompatibility between two apparent truths. An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand by side by side, seemingly irreconcilable.³⁹

And he goes on to compare antinomy with paradox. The puzzle is that all this seems unnecessary; as he points out, if there are verses in Scripture where the two are brought together, that would suffice. And there *are* such verses, as in Luke 22:22, “For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man to whom he is betrayed,” and Acts 2:23, “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”⁴⁰

It has not been possible to find any other place in which Packer uses this argument again when dealing with the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. Had he wished to, he could have given a Puritan answer to the problem, say, that to be found in Edward Elton's exposition of the ninth chapter of Romans, *The Mystery of Godliness Opened* (1653). Nevertheless, his modest book has become a standard treatment of evangelism since its appearance.

Within the walls of Regent College, Packer was challenged by his view over the ordination of women⁴¹ and his denial of universalism. In fact, this topic engaged him throughout his career. Early on he was challenged by conditional immortality, a position represented by some of his fellow Evangelical Anglicans in England, such as John Wenham and later by Philip Edgcumbe Hughes.

Packer seems to have spent time on other factors that get in the way of communication of the gospel of any kind, as with the growing belief in universalism. In 1971, before his move to Canada, he had given the Payton Lectures at Fuller Theological Seminary on universalism and later on in

³⁸ Packer, *CSW* 3, chs. 3, 4.

³⁹ Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴¹ *CSW* 3, chs. 13, 16.

lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary, published in *Bibliotheca Sacra* in 1972–1973.⁴² During his time at Regent, he took part in his defense of the traditional view of divine retribution in the face of arguments for conditional immortality.

Packer shared his thinking on revival and revivals in shorter writings.⁴³ These perhaps bear the marks of the thinking of Dr. Lloyd-Jones, who held that the remedy for the contemporary malaise is not education or organization but revival, a sovereign act of God the Holy Spirit “refreshing” the people of God, the means of which was the combination of word and Spirit. The other factor was his critique of what he called Charles Finney’s revivalism: Revival cannot be organized; rather, it is a refreshing of God’s sovereign grace.

As far as the work of the Holy Spirit was concerned, Packer wrote of his internal witness and guidance as the source of holiness, indwelling, and gifts. The wave of charismatic phenomena from the 1950s required appropriate new research.⁴⁴ His book *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, with its critical stance on perfectionism and semi-Pelagianism, was in line with his 1955 critique of the Keswick movement, and it was probably the weightiest book during his time in Canada, the first edition appearing in 1984 and a second edition in 2005. The argument of the book is to pose the question: What is the Holy Spirit for? His answer, in a Packer alliteration: not for power (e.g., Keswick) or performance (e.g., gifts of various kinds) but presence.

By this I mean that the Spirit makes known the personal presence in and with the Christian and the church of the risen, reigning Savior, the Jesus of history, who is the Christ of faith . . . what the Spirit is doing all the time as he empowers, enables, purges, and leads generation after generation of sinners to face the reality of God. And he does it in order that Christ may be known, loved, honored and praised, which is the Spirit’s aim and purpose of God the Father, too. This is what, in the last analysis, the Spirit’s covenant ministry is all about.⁴⁵

Those who trace Packer’s relationship with Owen will recognize a similarity to the theme of the latter’s *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* (1647),⁴⁶ that holiness is not a matter of practicing the virtues (as the Restoration

⁴² Cf. in particular, J. I. Packer, “The Way of Salvation, Part II: The Problems of Universalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130.517 (1973): 3–11; “The Way of Salvation, Part IV: Are Non-Christian Faiths Ways of Salvation?,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130.518 (1973): 110–16.

⁴³ *CSW* 2, chs. 7, 8, 9 and *CSW* 4, ch. 4.

⁴⁴ How much this work required can be seen, for example, in the scope of his forty-page paper, “Theological Reflections on the Charismatic Movement” (*CSW* 4, ch. 12).

⁴⁵ Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 42.

⁴⁶ John Owen, *Discourse on the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, ed. Goold, vol. 3.

theologians taught), but an inward renovation in faith and love in accord with John 16:5.

Strand 5: The Work of Christ

Naturally, the person and work of Christ were central to Packer’s conception of evangelism. Christology figured in two other separate productions, his “Introductory Essay” to the Banner of Truth republication of John Owen’s *Death of Death*⁴⁷ and his Tyndale Biblical Theology Lecture, “What Did the Cross Achieve?” (1973). The first is a defense of the view that Christ intended the salvation of the elect only and so was a “definite” atonement. He could have met Owen’s view while writing his doctoral dissertation, but it did not register with him then. The second is, in my view, the most finished and learned account of the satisfaction of the substitutionary death of Christ that Packer endeavored. Though published separately, the two themes were connected, as Packer shows in the footnotes of the Tyndale paper as he had in *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*.⁴⁸ The scope and tone of his Tyndale lecture give the reader an idea of how a systematic theology from Packer might have looked had he produced one.

Evidence that he had “bedded down” with American and Canadian Christian leaders was the publication in 2008 of *In My Place Condemned He Stood*.⁴⁹ This collection contains the two Christological pieces for which Packer was best known, “Penal Substitution Revisited” and “The Heart of the Gospel” (a chapter from *Knowing God*), as well as writings by Mark Dever, Ligon Duncan, R. Albert Mohler Jr., and C. J. Mahaney. It was dedicated to John Stott.

Strand 6: Knowing God

Before his migration for Canada, Packer was an editor of the new English periodical *Evangelical Magazine*, to which he regularly gave chapters on Christian doctrine. Writing these chapters must have been a release from the stress of the issues that seem to have dogged him, several at a time.

⁴⁷ J. I. Packer, “Saved by His Precious Blood,” introductory essay to John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ: A Treatise in which the Whole Controversy about Universal Redemption Is Fully Discussed* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1959).

⁴⁸ J. I. Packer, “What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974): 43, n. 40; *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 67, n. 3.

⁴⁹ J. I. Packer with Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

And he turned these briefish pieces into a book of twenty-two chapters, *Knowing God*.⁵⁰ It “circled the globe,” as Packer put it, becoming a best-seller, with sales of over a million, first in the United Kingdom and then in North America. It is important to note its foreword on the angle of the book. He called it a “devotional” work⁵¹ because it was intertwined with what the Puritans called application, not a work of systematic theology. He distinguished between its approach to the knowledge of God, his character in the lives of his people, and what he called the heart of the gospel: the propitiation, the adoption into the family, and the leadership of God through the temptations and trials of our pilgrim lives. The style is conversational, relaxed, and yet sharp and clear, full of precise and serious inferences and applications.

At the beginning, Packer stated that the tone was that of a traveler with the biblical text opened before him rather than of an observer. Like his mentor Calvin, he used the language of accommodation. Such accommodation was an instance of divine condescension, his coming down to us. Such a style was patristic and that of a favorite of Calvin’s, John Chrysostom, as well as that of Augustine of Hippo.

Clearly, this is what he liked best, extolling the glories of Christ. Sometimes he gives the impression that he alone thinks like this—a consequence of his intensity—while in fact he gives a *tour de force* of Reformed theology and piety. In it he discloses himself as well as his Savior—not knowing about Jesus so much as knowing him.

“Are you Reformed?” he asks. He stresses the transcendence of God and reiterates the argument that depictions of Christ are idolatrous. Pictures of Jesus put us in control,⁵² making God a thing we depict or speculate on, activities akin to each other. He emphasizes the place of “mystery” and God’s incomprehensibility,⁵³ including that the believer possesses the internal witness of the Spirit.⁵⁴ There are sessions on limited atonement (“What Did the Cross Achieve?”),⁵⁵ divine immutability and impassionedness,⁵⁶ God’s wisdom and ours,⁵⁷ and other divine attributes. We also find disconcerting applications,⁵⁸ his stress on God’s covenant and his people as his

⁵⁰ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 50, 54, 59.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 61–63.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 161–80.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 67–72.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 81–82.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 227–27.

covenant partners,⁵⁹ the divine promises,⁶⁰ and Bible studies (Ecclesiastes and Romans 8).⁶¹ He also expounds on divine judgment,⁶² goodness and severity (brilliant, cf. Rom. 11:22),⁶³ adoption,⁶⁴ grace and predestination,⁶⁵ trials,⁶⁶ limited atonement,⁶⁷ perfectionism, and the method of grace.⁶⁸ In chapter 21, we encounter his gradualism once again. He elaborates on Christian snobs and other phenomena of the modern godless mind and of modern theology.⁶⁹ Another chapter deals with the education in discipleship of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.⁷⁰ A bonus is hymns of grace that adorn the second half of the book, epitomizing its themes, Augustus Montague Toplady linking arms with Charles Wesley, “the poet of the new creation,” inviting the reader to sing along with its author.⁷¹

Packer used to say his style was “packed”: “Packer by name and packer by nature,” he confessed. It is no good trying to do justice to the essence of a book when every time it is picked up the reader finds something new in it.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do is to recall in a few words the tireless theological energy, ability, and courage of this talented Reformed theologian, uncommon among his contemporary Anglican colleagues, the most talented theological mind that I ever met, and the contexts in which he worked, with its tensions and opportunities. He was, of course, instrumental in educating his generation in the Reformed faith, not only his fellow Anglicans but what might be called Protestant dissenters as well. Many of them relished his preaching and lecturing to them as well as his writings.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 114–15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 93–97, 232–54.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 125–33.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 223–24.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 122–23.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 221–29.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 200–203.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 56, 63, 184.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 82–86.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, 119–24, 133, 175, 179, 189, 194–95, 209, 220, 225, 229, 240, 249, 252.