



Afterword by J. I. Packer

LELAND RYKEN

J. I.
PACKER

An Evangelical Life

“This book offers a full and balanced portrait of a diligent and faithful theologian. But because J. I. Packer’s theology has always been pastoral, practical, catechetical, and eminently readable—instead of recondite, esoteric, or merely academic—it is appropriate that this welcome volume is itself down-to-earth, accessible, and reader friendly. Leland Ryken, as a veteran student of the Puritans, is the ideal author to write about the most influential Puritan of our time.”

Mark A. Noll, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History, University of Notre Dame; author, *Protestantism: A Very Short Introduction*

“This book is a fascinating, insightful, and, to my mind, precisely accurate portrait of the same Jim Packer whom I have known for more than thirty-five years. What a joy to read this book and be challenged by Packer’s remarkable life!”

Wayne Grudem, Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

“Without a doubt, this is now the definitive, most up-to-date biography of J. I. Packer, and it deserves high praise. With the sensitivity, wisdom, and sheer humanity that a fine biographer needs, Leland Ryken allows us to see the life, mind, and heart of this quiet but highly influential man. Traversing the notoriously complex and hazardous terrain of UK and US evangelicalism with impressive sure-footedness, Ryken not only helps us understand the man and his context, but ourselves as evangelicals.”

Michael Reeves, Director of Union and Senior Lecturer, Wales Evangelical School of Theology

“A friendly portrait of a great evangelical, the man behind the headlines, full of insight into Packer’s genius as a brilliant communicator of the Reformed faith.”

Andrew Atherstone, Tutor and Latimer Research Fellow, Wycliffe Hall, University of Oxford

“It is such a pleasure to read Leland Ryken’s biography of Dr. Jim Packer. Personally, I have been deeply blessed by Dr. Packer’s writing and teaching ministry for over fifty years since, as a student, I picked up “*Fundamentalism*” and *the Word of God*. I can also testify that his *Knowing God* was most often nominated by my seminary students as a work that profoundly influenced them. To be able to read about the man himself and to understand how God gifted and shaped him has been a moving and edifying experience. This is a good book about a great man.”

Peter Jensen, Former Archbishop, Sydney, Australia; Former Principal, Moore Theological College

“J. I. Packer is chief among the cadre of impressive British thinkers who have had a shaping influence on evangelical Christianity in North America over the past half-century. Indeed, his influence girdles the globe, and it shows no sign of abating as this great theologian approaches his tenth decade. This new biography builds on earlier Packer studies, but it offers distinctive insights into the humanity and ministry of a life lived well, with grace abounding and wisdom from above.”

Timothy George, Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School; General Editor,
Reformation Commentary on Scripture

“For evangelicals, J. I. Packer stands as one of the foremost theological leaders of this generation. His writings have illuminated the minds of countless Christians with the clarity of the Bible’s teaching. He has answered our questions, provoked our thinking, expanded our understanding, and always pointed us to Christ. I’m so glad that Crossway has produced this biography of the man behind the words.”

Phillip D. Jensen, Evangelist and Bible Teacher, Two Ways Ministries

J. I. Packer

An Evangelical Life

Leland Ryken

For Crossway editors,
past and present



J. I. Packer: An Evangelical Life
Copyright © 2015 by Leland Ryken
Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Cover image & design: Josh Dennis

First printing 2015

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture references marked NIV are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-4252-7

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-4255-8

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-4253-4

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-4254-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ryken, Leland.

J. I. Packer : an evangelical life / Leland Ryken.
pages cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-4252-7 (hc)

1. Packer, J. I. (James Innell) 2. Church of England—
Biography. 3. Evangelists—Biography. I. Title.

BX5199.P22R95

2015

283.092—dc23 [B]

2015001676

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

TS 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15
14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

List of Photographs.....	7
Introduction.....	9

PART 1: THE LIFE

Early Life and College (1926–1948)

1 Childhood and Teen Years (1926–1944).....	19
2 The College Years (1944–1948).....	32

Theological Education and Ministry (1948–1954)

3 The Post-College Year (1948–1949)	51
4 Graduate Student in Oxford (1949–1952).....	57
5 Ministry (1952–1954)	68
6 Courtship and Marriage (1952–1954).....	76

Professional Life in England (1955–1979)

7 Tyndale Hall, Bristol (1955–1961).....	85
8 Latimer House, Oxford (1961–1970).....	98
9 Return to the Academic Life (1970–1972).....	122
10 Trinity College, Bristol (1972–1979).....	133

Professional Life in North America (1979 to the Present)

11 From England to Canada (1978–1979).....	149
12 Regent College (1979 to the Present)	158

13	<i>Christianity Today</i> (1958 to the Present)	169
----	---	-----

PART 2: THE MAN

14	A Portrait of the Man.....	181
15	The Little-Known Packer	201
16	What Packer's Style and Rhetoric Tell Us about Him.....	216

PART 3: LIFELONG THEMES

17	The Bible.....	243
18	The Puritans	263
19	Writing.....	280
20	Anglicanism	305
21	Theology.....	326
22	Preaching and the Minister's Calling.....	355
23	Controversy	381

	Afterword: J. I. Packer Reflects on His Life.....	413
--	---	-----

	Sources	416
--	---------------	-----

	Index	425
--	-------------	-----

List of Photographs

An Oliver typewriter, such as J. I. Packer received for his eleventh birthday	25
Corpus Christi College, Oxford University	33
St. Aldate's Anglican Church, Oxford, England, in the 1940s	38
Oak Hill Theological College, London	52
Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, England	58
J. I. Packer, around the time of his first teaching post, at Tyndale Hall, Bristol, England	87
J. I. Packer, during his tenure as warden of Latimer House	99
Westminster Chapel, London	109
Tyndale House, Cambridge, England	138
Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia	159
J. I. Packer, speaking at Clare College, Cambridge University, in July 2010	246
J. I. Packer and his wife, Kit, with Lane and Ebeth Dennis of Crossway	414

Introduction

I became acquainted with J. I. Packer as a college sophomore in 1962, when I was browsing in a Christian bookstore in my hometown of Pella, Iowa. For reasons known only to God, I was led to purchase a paperback entitled “*Fundamentalism*” and the Word of God. I am the more amazed that I found the book, because it was a thin paperback that could have easily been lost on the shelf. This became one of the most influential books in my life, with my original underlining indicating what made it such a landmark for me.

In the years that followed, my reading of Packer was sufficiently thorough that as I was completing my book *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were*, it occurred to me to ask Packer to write a foreword. Although we had never met in person, I had the audacity to write him and make the request. It is a tribute to Packer’s generosity that he agreed to write it, even though my stature as an author was modest. Furthermore, Packer did not write a perfunctory foreword, but a full-fledged essay entitled “Why We Need the Puritans” (which I was happy to see reappear in some of Packer’s own subsequent publications).

I met Packer in person as I was waiting for the promised foreword to appear. On that occasion, I served as Packer’s driver between a local motel and the campus of Wheaton College, where he delivered an address on the Puritans as part of an academic conference. His first words to me after we had exchanged greetings was the assurance that I “was next on [his] list,” meaning that he was ready to write the foreword. Packer was comically overprepared for his address on the Puritans, running out of time (apparently to his genuine surprise) after finishing his introduction. He then summarized his main points in the inimitable impromptu Packer manner.

I next spent time with Packer approximately fifteen years later, when we both served on the translation committee for the English Standard Version. During the next five years, Packer was a constant presence in my life, both in person when the committee met and by his comments in translation proceedings conducted in print.

What Kind of Biography Is This?

My goal in writing this biography was to enable my readers to know J. I. Packer and to get a picture of his varied roles and accomplishments. It is the man that I wanted my readers to encounter. I therefore rejected the model of the documentary history, which so overwhelms readers with factual data about events and people that the subject of the biography disappears from sight. I have not written a history, but a biography.

Because my goal was to present Packer the man, it quickly became evident that a strictly chronological arrangement of the data was insufficient as a format for the biography. A biography does, indeed, involve a life, so in the first part of this book, I unfold the story of Packer's life. But many aspects of Packer the man span whole eras in his life. Trying to fit them into a strict chronological framework would obscure them.

For purposes of illustration, I offer the following examples. J. I. Packer is a latter-day Puritan. It is important to chronicle the beginning of Packer's passion for the Puritans and to locate its origin in his life story. But once Packer had embraced the Puritans, they were a continuous presence in his life, and my consideration of his admiration for them could not be divided into segments that corresponded to changes in his external life. Similarly, a published history of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research in England shows that Packer was a continuous participant in the work of that fellowship for three decades. But it would have been completely artificial to attempt to match Packer's involvement with the Tyndale Fellowship to the succession of academic positions he held during those three decades. I would note in passing that biographers who attempt to fit the life themes of their subjects into a chronological flow keep stopping the flow to digress on the themes.

The only plausible organizing framework that would allow my readers to know J. I. Packer the man was a combination of chronological bi-

ography and thematic biography, and I have accordingly followed that paradigm, with an interspersed unit that paints a portrait of the man.

Every biography is an interpretation of a person, as well as a collection of information about the person. However, this biography is light on the interpretive and evaluative side. My goal was to present J. I. Packer and leave my readers to engage in as much or as little assessment as they wished. I have made no evaluations of whether Packer did the right or wrong thing in regard to his beliefs and actions. Much has been written in particular about Packer's loyalty to the Church of England when others separated from it and about his involvement in the movement known as Evangelicals and Catholics Together. Much has also been said about Packer's withdrawal from Canada's Anglican Church when others stayed within it. I had no interest in making evaluations of Packer's stand on the issues that drove these events. It strikes me that to attempt to do so would have been out of place in a biography, and a violation of the Puritan principle that a person is bound by his conscience before God.

Signposts for What Is to Follow

Many biographies end with a chapter of "conclusions," in which the author casts a retrospective glance over the material that has preceded and extracts some leading themes from the data. I chose to begin with a series of signposts so my readers can look for evidence of them as they read this biography. The following are themes that emerged as I lived with the material and that I want my readers to look for in my account.

1. *Paradoxes*. Right at the start of my research for this biography, I was handed a very useful piece of theory regarding biographical writing. It is the idea that people are paradoxical and mysterious creatures. Identifying the paradoxes is a useful framework for understanding the subject of a biography, even if the apparent contradictions remain mysterious. J. I. Packer's life embraces a more-than-ordinary number of paradoxes, including the following:

- Packer is theologically and temperamentally a Puritan, and in his college days, he was influenced by the Plymouth Brethren strain in British evangelicalism; yet he remained devoted to the Anglican Church throughout his life, and he has affiliated with movements sympathetic to Roman Catholicism.

- Packer is quintessentially British, yet he has lived nearly half of his adult life in Canada, and (to extend the paradox even further) his sphere of greatest influence is the United States.
- Packer is one of the most famous modern evangelicals, yet he has never held high-visibility positions such as prestigious pulpits or professorships at large universities.
- Packer is by nature a peacemaker and a gentle man, yet he has had a career of controversy in the sense that much of his writing has been polemical and his stand on religious issues has often made him the object of criticism.
- Throughout his life, Packer refused to bolt from the Anglican Church when pressed to do so, yet he ended up withdrawing and in effect being expelled from the Anglican Church of Canada.
- Packer loves specialized scholarship, yet most of his writing has been oriented to the general Christian public and ranks as “mid-level” work.

Paradox is thus one of the underlying themes that I want my readers to note as this book unfolds.

2. *Selfless Service*. Another unifying theme in Packer’s life is his overriding sense of calling to serve the church—both the church as an institution and as the worldwide community of Christians. At every turn, Packer has primarily accepted tasks and positions that have been helpful to Christians in their walk with God, with no concern for professional advancement. Packer is utterly devoid of concern about professional advancement. A look at the nature of his publications (both books and articles) is one way to see this. But Packer’s speaking career likewise shows his propensity to say yes to virtually every invitation that has come his way. Those who have seen this willingness to agree to speaking and interview invitations marvel that Packer has been such a prolific writer in spite of the inroads on his time that he has allowed.

3. *Quiet Service*. Despite his high visibility among evangelical Christians, much of Packer’s investment of time and ability has been behind the scenes. I was alerted to this right at the outset of my writing of this book, and I have seen it at every turn. One cannot even imagine how many meetings of Church of England committees Packer attended during his years as a semi-official evangelical representative on such panels. For several decades, Packer has not only served as an advisor to

Christianity Today, but has also critiqued every issue of the magazine, including its advertising and graphics. In fact, he has continued these critiques to the present day, even after the magazine's finances made it a voluntary activity. Again, Packer is on record as saying that his work on the translation of the English Standard Version of the Bible is his greatest scholarly achievement, but all that the public at large sees of this is the notation that Packer was the general editor of the translation.

4. *Varied Roles.* Another theme that emerges in this biography is the many-sided nature of Packer's life and achievements. The range of roles that he has filled is breathtaking. Along with this trait is his transcendence of labels. The most customary category into which I see Packer placed is that of theologian, but other categories seem equally natural to me based on my acquaintance with him: church historian (Puritan scholar), classicist, writer on topics of Christian living (implying a scope that the label *theologian* does not quite capture), academician, consultant, Bible translator, churchman, and editor.

Packer's career has been a case study of entering the open doors that God and people have placed before him. This is obvious in the academic positions that he has held (particularly in England before he moved to Canada), the books and essays he has published, and the speaking engagements he has discharged. Relatively few of the items that appear in Packer's *vita* were part of a planned program or professional path. Instead, Packer has trusted to providence in accepting invitations that were placed before him, governed by the impulse to minister to God's people. I note therefore the aptness of the title of a *festschrift* that was composed in Packer's honor: *Doing Theology for the People of God*. Packer did not enter theology for the sake of "making a scholarly contribution," as the academy tends to conceive of a scholarly career, but "for the people of God."

5. *Setbacks and Successes.* A final theme that I will flag here at the outset is the degree to which Packer has risen above calamity and disappointment to achieve greatness. One thinks most immediately of his life-changing physical injury at age seven. Packer has not held the high-visibility professional positions that most scholars of his ability enjoy, and there were setbacks in his academic career in England for which he was not responsible. Yet the world became Packer's classroom through

his writing, and the Christian world has been immeasurably enriched by his speaking in modest venues as well as prestigious ones.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the following people and to acknowledge the published sources to which I am particularly indebted. Lane Dennis, president of Crossway Books, is the “only begetter” of this biography in the sense that he asked me to write it. In turn, neither Lane nor I would have felt free to pursue the venture without the approval and help of Packer himself. In addition to the telephone interviews with Packer that I list as sources for the early chapters, every chapter in this biography bears the imprint of two days of conversation that I had with him at the Crossway offices on June 16–17, 2014. Although I have not noted this source of information in my summaries at the end of the book, I drew heavily on these conversations, which I count among the greatest privileges of my life. I also could not have written this biography without the pioneering and monumental work of Alister McGrath in his masterful book *J. I. Packer: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997). Here, too, I would not have felt free to write my biography without the blessing of McGrath, whose permission was immediately and warmly extended to me. In the acknowledgments in his book, McGrath notes that just under three hundred people (half of whom he names) gave him access to data. This primary research was invaluable to me. I also owe an immense debt to a source that might seem inconsequential compared to McGrath’s book, but that was nonetheless worth its weight in gold: “Bibliography of the Works of J. I. Packer,” in *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future: The Impact of His Life and Thought*, ed. Timothy George (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 187–230.

Part 1

THE LIFE

A biography is more than the story of a person's life, but it is not less than that. The events that have made up J. I. Packer's life to date are the starting point for understanding him and his work. We might think of them as the plotline on which the person and his activity for the kingdom of God are fleshed out.

Packer's life is promising material for a story. He has done so many different things that his life sometimes reads like an adventure story. As with any adventure story, there have been striking and abrupt shifts in location. The stakes have sometimes been very high. And there have been ups and downs.

But this adventure story is a narrative of divine providence, reminiscent of the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis and perhaps of Hamlet in William Shakespeare's masterpiece. In the most famous speech on the subject of providence in Shakespeare's play, Hamlet expresses the sentiment that "there's a divinity that shapes our ends." That is the ultimate pattern in the story that makes up Part 1 of this biography.

Early Life and College

(1926–1948)

Childhood and Teen Years

(1926–1944)

When we consider great and famous people, it is natural to think of them as having always been great and famous. After all, that is how we know them.

The J. I. Packer that we know certainly ranks as a great and famous man. In 2005, *Time* magazine included Packer in a list of “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America,” and entering the name James I. Packer on an Internet search engine yields over four million results. When we consider data like that, it is natural to believe that Packer has always been great and famous.

But, of course, this is untrue. Great and famous people are not born so, but as ordinary specimens of humanity. James Innell Packer was no exception.

Early Years

Packer was born on July 22, 1926, in the village of Twyning, near the city of Gloucester. His childhood home was in the heart of Gloucester, which is located in a region of England known as the South West, not far from the border of Wales. Packer calls Gloucester a market town. It is also a cathedral city, which means that the church has a more-than-usual institutional visibility on the local scene. Cathedral cities in

England perpetuate the external rituals of the Anglican faith, creating plenty of scope for nominal Christianity.

At the time of Packer's upbringing, Gloucester was also a rail center of some importance in England, and his father, James Percy Packer, oversaw the general office of the Great Western Railway at Gloucester. By Packer's account, his father was unsuited for major responsibility and was comfortable with the fact that his duties mainly involved dealing with such matters as lost luggage claims. The office staff consisted of only two people beyond Percy—a junior clerk and a typist. The Second World War increased the workload enormously, and at the age of fifty-two, Packer's father suffered a temporary mental collapse leading to early retirement.

The Packers were thus a lower-middle-class family, and we can say that J. I. Packer came from humble roots. In fact, a generation or two earlier, his ancestors had farmed in Oxfordshire. Throughout his life, Packer has retained what Britons call "a West Country burr," which one dictionary defines as a way of speaking English in which the "r" sound is more noticeable than in ordinary pronunciation.

People who know Packer can attest that he has never lost the common touch. One friend recounts that Packer commended a local restaurant to her with the statement: "This place has a homespun feel. That's why I like it." I recall that when the translation committee that produced the English Standard Version met in Cambridge, England, the committee members occasionally ate the noon meal in a restaurant, and Packer was faithful in making the waitress feel appreciated. Similarly, when Packer ate the evening meal in my home on the occasion of my first meeting him in Wheaton, he inquired of my wife what the main dish was called and commended her for its deliciousness.

Throughout his childhood years, Packer lived in a modest rented home. On the ground level were what former generations called a "front room" (a living room for receiving guests), a dining room, a kitchen, a pantry, and what in England is called a "scullery" (an all-purpose kitchen and laundry room). There was a piano in the front room. The upstairs consisted of three bedrooms and a bathroom. Gas lighting was replaced by electricity when Packer was six.

Packer was the firstborn child in his family, with his sister, Margaret, being born three years later. His middle name, Innell, sounds nearly

aristocratic, and the initials J. I., by which Packer became known, are immediately impressive (perhaps especially to American ears). Innell is a Packer family name, and its choice as a middle name is an endearing piece of family history. An unmarried second cousin of Packer's father bore the surname of Innell, but she was the last in a family line. Packer's father acquiesced in her request to give his newborn a middle name that would perpetuate her family name.

Packer describes his early years as uneventful. The family's house had fenced-in front and back lawns, where Packer engaged in normal boy's play. His father's employment by the Great Western Railway made steam trains a fascination to him, and one of his favorite toys was a train set. He also played with a construction kit, drew pictures, and read.

From his early years, Packer was a shy boy who did not mingle easily with his peers. When asked in his eighties what he most remembers about his childhood, he replied, "Solitariness." While Packer was a self-described introvert, his sister was the opposite. Margaret had many friends, but Packer had "very few" (his own testimony). However, Packer claims that he has "always been able to be happy on my own."

People who have written biographically about Packer all describe him as a loner, solitary, and isolated in his childhood. Packer himself has shared that when he first felt the call to ministry during his second year in college, he hesitated because he saw himself as "an odd person, somewhat solitary and, as I thought and felt, very poor at human relationships." However, he has also recorded that God "overpowered me, telling me I must trust him and go ahead."

People who have known Packer in his adult years find it hard to picture him as anything but sociable and gregarious. When the translation committee of the English Standard Version met in Cambridge, it faced a daily choice between eating a catered lunch at Tyndale House or walking to a restaurant on the Cam River. An excursion to the restaurant extended the time to a whopping two hours, but Packer was a consistent advocate of the more sociable amble and sit-down lunch.

When I noted to Packer that people who know him today find him a gregarious person, he offered two explanations for the apparent contradiction. One is that introverts "don't enjoy being introverts" and find ways to compensate and even behave like extroverts in social situations. Second, when Packer became a Christian, the words *love* and *fellowship*

became, he said, “heavyweight words” for him, and he consciously cultivated “the habit of fellowship.”

The Packer family enjoyed an annual summer holiday, and their preferred vacation was vintage British—renting a bed-and-breakfast house on the seacoast. Except for one Welsh holiday, the family regularly went to Cornwall. Packer says the family enjoyed the Cornwall coast and saw no need to vary the routine. The family traveled with “privilege tickets” that were free to employees of the train company.

When Packer’s academic ability became increasingly obvious as the years unfolded, his father was proud of his son’s accomplishments, but he did not have the background to understand them. His mother, however, grasped what was happening and continuously showed interest in what Packer was learning at school.

Packer’s maternal grandmother had been widowed in her forties and had retrained herself as a “district nurse” who visited patients. Her drive and initiative lived on in Packer’s mother, whom Packer calls “a remarkable person, clearheaded and strong-willed.” She attended a teacher training college and then had a successful teaching career at two or three schools before marrying Packer’s father. Unfortunately, she suffered from anemia during Packer’s growing-up years, an era when little help for the disease was available. She therefore led what Packer calls “a quiet life,” resting on the dining room couch between two and four o’clock every afternoon.

Packer considers his mother to be the dominant parental influence in his life. She attained what Packer believes to have been saving faith at college, but it was of an Anglo-Catholic, “high-church” nature, expressed by what the Puritans called “formalism” (performing the standard rituals of the church).

A Momentous Accident at School

In September 1933, Packer began to attend the local “junior school.” It was a difficult adjustment for the seven-year-old, who was subjected to bullying from other students. On the fateful day of September 19, a schoolmate chased Packer out of the school grounds and onto a busy street (London Road). Packer was hit by a bread van and thrown to the ground. The accident resulted in injuries that have affected Packer every subsequent day of his life.

Packer was taken to the Gloucester Royal Infirmary and rushed into surgery. The primary injury was trauma to the head. The external damage was a dent in the skull, which is a feature of Packer's physical appearance to the present day. The formal diagnosis was what Alistair McGrath (quoting the surgeon's memorandum) calls "a depressed compound fracture of the frontal bone on the right-hand side of his forehead." Naturally, there was fear of damage to the brain, but it proved to be much less severe than might have been expected.

Packer spent three weeks in the hospital and then six months at home for recuperation, returning to school near the end of the academic year. For three years after the accident, he spoke slowly and with a drawl, and he never regained any memory of what had happened immediately before and after the accident. Two years afterward, the boy who had chased Packer from the playground (named Arthur Oliver Cromwell!) identified himself, which Packer received as new information.

The injury had huge repercussions for Packer, but as bad as the accident was, it was a story of providence and grace as well, beginning with the sparing of Packer's life. But the marvel goes further. The surgical procedure that was immediately performed required the extraction of fragments of bone from inside the skull to relieve pressure on the brain. The resident surgeon in the Gloucester hospital had just returned after an extended time in Vienna, where he had specialized in this very type of surgery.

Of course, the accident was traumatic for Packer's parents, who took every possible precaution to prevent further injury to their son's head. They curbed his physical activities in the years that followed and discouraged bicycle riding. Even more confining was a black aluminum plate, held in place by an elastic band, that Packer wore on his head from the time of the accident until the age of fifteen, when, he says, he "went on strike" and refused to wear it any longer. Packer refers to his appearance while wearing the plate as that of "a speckled bird."

A Reader Is Born

Packer's solitary nature intensified in the days following the accident. He felt marginalized; though he found a niche as a good learner who would help others (even those who bullied him) with their homework, he never fully participated in schoolyard games. Reading had always

been more natural to Packer than sports. He recalls that he was a prodigious reader already at the age of four and always remained such, characterizing himself as “something of a bookworm.” In the wake of his accident, this appetite for reading only accelerated.

A year or so after the accident, Packer’s grandmother took him for a weeklong vacation to the coastal resort town of Torquay to help him recover from a bout of bronchitis (to which he was prone). The weather was rainy and unsuitable for walking on the beach. The boardinghouse where the pair stayed provided books for just such occasions. Deprived of his construction set and toy train, Packer began to read the books that were in his room.

He began with a collection of short stories by Agatha Christie entitled *The Hound of Death*. His grandmother then lent him some of her own Christie books. In his adult years, Packer became such a zealous reader of older spiritual classics that it is natural for us to think of those books as his primary reading material. But when *Christianity Today* conducted a poll of its contributors on the ten best religious books of the twentieth century, a nomination by J. I. Packer stood out. He chose the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien, with a supporting comment: “A classic for children from 9 to 90. Bears constant re-reading.”

A Writer Is Born

While reading might be an expected result of an enforced convalescence, the path by which Packer became a schoolboy writer is less expected. That avenue was an ordinary typewriter.

Packer’s fascination with typewriters began when he accompanied his father to the railway office on Saturday afternoon “catch-up” trips. There were two typewriters in the office, and Packer was allowed access to one of them. At the age of eight, he taught himself to type using four fingers. The subject matter of his typing was highly unusual—copying poems such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Hiawatha” and Robert Southey’s “The Inchcape Rock,” although it was not the poetry but the act of typing that he found rewarding.

Packer’s passion for typing did not escape the notice of his parents, partly because it solved a problem in the making. A bicycle was the toy of choice among boys in Packer’s milieu, where receiving a bike

around the age of eleven was a virtual rite of passage. But Packer's parents were fearful of any physical activity that might further injure their son's head.

On the morning of his eleventh birthday, Packer hastened to the living room, where the family made a practice of placing birthday presents. He had given hints that he wanted a bicycle and expected to receive one. What he found was a used typewriter that seemed to him to weigh half a ton. Yet, old as it was, it had been well serviced.

If the birthday boy was disappointed, he did not let it show. He at once put paper into the typewriter and began to type. According to McGrath, the typewriter became "the most treasured possession of his boyhood." Its legacy was long lasting: to this day, Packer types his books and correspondence on a typewriter instead of a computer.

The acquisition of a typewriter gave impetus to Packer's early writing. He began to compose stories about school and space travel, two genres that youngsters of the time read in weekly publications. Packer contributed his stories to "magazines" produced by friends at school. It can be hard to pinpoint when an eventual author first contracts the "infection" of writing and publishing, but my theory is that the seeds are planted early. I have no intention of being overly dramatic when I ask what Packer's life and career would have been like if he had received a bicycle instead of a typewriter for his eleventh birthday.

Some sixty-five years later, Packer was able to see the hand of providence in his parents' decision not to give him a bicycle (he did receive a bicycle on his thirteenth birthday, when he was physically able to handle it). In this, Packer "came to discern that what he had experienced was outstandingly good parenting, though it had not felt like that at first." Packer added that he "cannot forget that the head injury became a happy providence eleven years later," excluding him from conscripted military service at the age of eighteen and enabling him to go to Oxford



For his eleventh birthday in 1937, J. I. Packer was given a used Oliver typewriter, similar to the one pictured here.

University, where he became a Christian, which Packer thinks “would hardly have happened to him in the army.”

In September 1937, not long after that memorable eleventh birthday, Packer made the transition from the local “junior school” to the Crypt School in Gloucester. The school was prestigious, having been founded in 1539, the approximate time when King Henry VIII broke with the Church of Rome and established the Church of England. Ironically, in view of Packer’s nominal Christianity at the time, but prophetically in view of what he became, the Crypt School counted among its former students the English preacher and evangelist George Whitefield.

At the Crypt School, Packer chose to specialize in “classics.” This involved the study of the language, literature, and history of ancient Greece and Rome. A double significance might be seen in this decision. First, when Packer went on to Oxford University, he again chose the track known as classics. Second, Packer was the only student in his class at the Crypt School to choose classics. It was an early indication of his willingness to travel less-trodden roads, a tendency that has led many to judge him to be “in a class by himself.”

The Religious Climate at Home and Church

Packer came from a churchgoing family, but the Christian commitment was nominal rather than genuine. The Packer family regularly attended a local Anglican church (St. Catharine’s), but Packer recounts that his parents did not require him to attend Sunday school, no one “talked about the things of God” at home, and there was no prayer at meal-times. In my conversations with Packer, he said that it was considered “in bad taste to talk religion” in his home. He recalls a three-year span in his teen years when he “wondered what is real in Christianity.” His home environment did not provide adequate answers.

In nominally Christian families in the Church of England, there is a strong impetus to perform longstanding church rituals, and this was true in the Packer family. One of the benchmarks in the Anglican Church is confirmation, a rite of initiation in which children who were baptized as infants claim oneness with Christ as their own experience based on faith in the gospel. When Packer was fourteen, his mother expressed the desire that he be confirmed. In her background lay the influence of the Anglo-Catholic (high church) revival of the nineteenth century. Packer

agreed to be confirmed, even though he did not possess saving faith in Christ and, as he says, “indeed did not know what it was.”

It was not an ordinary confirmation, however; Packer missed the application deadline, which meant he did not attend the regular confirmation classes offered by the vicar of the church. However, the church had a new curate, a young man named Mark Green, who offered to teach Packer in a one-on-one tutorial. The instruction followed a high-church path, so the focus was moral rather than spiritual. Talk also centered on preparation to receive Holy Communion, but nothing was said about personal conversion. Green recalls Packer as a “shy and reserved” teenager who was nonetheless “very receptive and attentive” to the instruction.

Religious Encounters at School

Although Packer did not receive what we today call a Christian education, the religious influence at school was important in his life. Significantly, it was in school that Packer first encountered the writing of C. S. Lewis.

A teacher at the Crypt School was in charge of Packer’s class during one time slot per week devoted to “general studies.” He needed a book that would stimulate discussion among his students. He chose the recently published *The Screwtape Letters*, thereby introducing Packer to Lewis. Lewis, who was just beginning to attract the attention of the British public, had originally published the thirty-one chapters of this book as a series of articles in a religious newspaper. The format of the book—imagined letters from one devil to another—could hardly have been more captivating to a schoolboy.

We can see in this encounter with a book authored by Lewis yet another example of divine providence. Was the teacher a Christian? Packer’s remembrance is that “it does not seem so.”

There was another religious influence at school of a more indirect nature. Packer began to play chess with the son of the local Unitarian minister. As they played, Packer’s classmate attempted to convert him to Unitarianism. The arguments struck the fifteen-year-old Packer as illogical. In Packer’s words, “Unitarianism affirms the ethic of Jesus as the most wonderful thing since ice cream and negates the divinity of Jesus as superstition.” Packer could not help wondering why, if his Unitarian

friend believed part of the New Testament, he did not believe more of it. Why deny something so central as the deity of Jesus?

This way of formulating an issue became a lifelong paradigm for Packer. For example, in a 1981 essay entitled “Is Christianity Credible?” Packer asks, with regard to such modern influencers as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, and Ernst Troeltsch: “Why, if this man believes so much, does he not believe more? but if he believes so little, why does he not believe less?”

Packer’s Anglican churchgoing had given him a rudimentary understanding of the Christian faith, though without any inner conviction regarding it. The sparring with his Unitarian friend prompted Packer to start thinking seriously about what constituted religious truth. In his own words, “My mind had been grabbed by the question, What is *true* Christianity?”

Reading the Bible was a starting point for answering that question. Lacking a Bible of his own, Packer used his grandmother’s copy of the King James Version. He read it avidly. At the same time, Packer encountered another newly published book by Lewis entitled *Mere Christianity*. Later readers of this landmark book (as influential in my own life as Packer’s “*Fundamentalism*” and *the Word of God*) know that it began as a series of fifteen-minute wartime radio talks on the BBC (British Broadcasting Corp.), which subsequently were published as three short books before being combined in a single volume in 1952. Packer witnessed the birth of the book as described, reading the trilogy as the individual books were published.

What was the nature of Lewis’s influence on Packer? He has answered that question in a series of articles and interviews. One of these articles, written in 1988 on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Lewis’s death (and after Packer had been reading Lewis for forty-five years), shows that the religious impact of Packer’s early reading of Lewis was more subliminal than direct. Packer writes that he “enjoyed *Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity* more for their manner than their matter, for Lewis’s writing style made him seem both a fellow schoolboy and a wise old uncle simultaneously.” After Packer’s conversion, Lewis seemed “more grandfatherly,” a change that Packer ascribes more to himself than to Lewis. A decade later, Packer attributed somewhat more significance to his encounter with the two Lewis books,

saying that they “brought me, not indeed to faith in the full sense, but to mainstream Christian beliefs about God, man, and Jesus Christ, so that now I was halfway there.” According to Packer’s analysis, the long-term effect of his encounter with Lewis was that he came to see the reasonableness of the Christian faith, the moral demands of discipleship, and the reality of heaven as a home.

Planning for College

Given Packer’s lower-middle-class background, it was not a foregone conclusion what he would do when he reached college age. His headmaster at the Crypt School, David Gwynn Williams, had received his college education at Corpus Christi College, part of Oxford University, and was convinced that Packer had the ability to be accepted at Oxford. Of course, a series of factors, including finances, needed to fall into place for this to happen. (Being poor, Packer’s parents had always made it clear that advanced education would depend on his getting scholarships.)

In March 1943, Packer’s last year in what North Americans call high school, the *Oxford University Gazette* published details of scholarships for classics students applying to Corpus Christi College. Oxford University scholarships fell into two categories—those for students who belonged to certain named groups (such as sons of Anglican clergy) and those that placed no restrictions on applicants (“open” scholarships). Corpus Christi College advertised two open scholarships for the upcoming academic year. Both were for 100 pounds, small by today’s standards but substantial at the time. The awarding of the two scholarships would be based on a competitive examination to be administered in Oxford in September 1943.

Packer sat for the examination over a two-day span. It was his first genuine trip to Oxford (though he had once bicycled from Gloucester to Oxford and back in a single day on one of his numerous long and solitary cycling ventures, a total distance of about a hundred miles). It is in keeping with Packer’s temperament that he returned to Gloucester thinking that his performance on the exams was undistinguished. Nonetheless, he received the Hugh Oldham Scholarship, which would enable him to attend Oxford University.

Waiting for College

Even though Packer had been accepted into college, he was only seventeen, which was considered too young to begin his Oxford education. This left him with free time, though technically he was still enrolled in his “sixth form” at school. With characteristic industry, Packer made it a year of intellectual advance. The academic distinctions that Packer received at this era of his life were a tribute to his intellectual ability, but they were also signposts that he was destined to achieve great things.

To begin, the Crypt School named him head prefect. This title is part of the school system in England, where schools sometimes name a “head girl” and “head boy.” It is partly an honorific position that signals the esteem with which the school regards the recipient, though the post brings tasks as well.

Also at this time, Packer began his lifelong process of self-education. He spent the year largely in self-directed reading, and trips to the public library were a regular feature of his life. Packer’s reading program showed not only the seriousness of his intellectual quest, but also his continuing interest in religious matters. He read Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, as well as Russian novels by Fyodor Dostoyevsky (*The Idiot*; *Crime and Punishment*; *The Brothers Karamazov*; and *The Devils*, a title more often translated as *The Possessed*). These novels with Christian premises seemed more truthful to Packer than Freud’s attempt to explain Christianity away. Packer told me that he became “a Dostoyevsky addict,” much impressed by how the Russian novelist “takes the skin off his characters and allows us to see what they are like.”

A schoolboy friendship with Eric Taylor was also an important part of Packer’s final year at the Crypt School. While Packer spent his third year in “sixth form,” Taylor made the transition to the University of Bristol. During that year, Taylor became a Christian, and he wrote letters to Packer about his new-found faith. Packer did not fully understand the letters, especially one that contained an exposition of the final verses of Romans 3, on justification by faith. Packer also was puzzled by references to “saving faith.” During the following summer vacation, Taylor and Packer had a series of conversations about the Christian faith. The discussions left Packer feeling that something was lacking in his life, but he was mystified as to what it was. Although Taylor did not lead Packer to faith, he did the next best thing by encouraging Packer

to make contact with the Oxford student group called the Christian Union.

One of the most revealing statements that Packer has made is that he went to Oxford University actually believing himself to be a Christian. The basis of that belief was that in school debates with atheists, he had found himself defending Christianity as a belief system. However, in his first year at Oxford, Packer would realize his true spiritual state and experience conversion to Christianity, after which, he has said, he was “very conscious of wasted years and was trying to catch up.”

Summary

Any Christian reading the foregoing account of J. I. Packer’s pre-college life can see it as a story scripted by God’s providence. It is nothing less than a “hound of heaven” story. Packer’s life-changing accident diverted him from dreams of being a cricket player to being a more devoted reader and a writer. He did not grow up in a believing family, but he had continuous contact with the basic doctrines of the Christian faith at home and church. He was a seeker with spiritual promptings. And he had a Christian friend who wanted him to pass from spiritual death to life. All the ingredients were in place that would lead Packer to take the step into personal faith.

The College Years

(1944–1948)

When J. I. Packer arrived at Oxford, he was doubly prepared to make the most of the experience. Academically, he had long been a serious student and possessed the intellectual spark. Spiritually, a foundation had been laid for the conversion that happened almost immediately after his arrival.

Oxford University as Packer Found It

Packer made the trip to Oxford in early October 1944, in the midst of the Second World War. He traveled by train, using a free ticket available to him as a family member of a Great Western Railway employee. With his suitcase in hand, he walked the mile from the train station to Corpus Christi College in central Oxford.

To catch the flavor of Packer's college experience, we need to assemble a picture of what Oxford was like during the war. The university bore the signs of being in crisis. The war was in its late stages, but not yet over. The Oxford student body was still almost entirely male, and most of the surviving able-bodied men were in the army. Blackouts made the city dark at night, creating a sense of a place under siege. Most colleges were carrying on at a greatly reduced level, with sections of some completely shut down.

Packer was eighteen years old, and during the war, most entering



The main entrance and Pelican Sundial (built in 1581) of Corpus Christi College at Oxford University, where J. I. Packer studied from 1944 to 1948. (Photo © Godot13. License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode>)

students of that age enrolled in six-month courses before going into military service. Packer was one of a few eighteen-year-olds who were enrolled as full-time students, expecting to be in college for three or four years. Corpus Christi College had dwindled to an enrollment of twenty-four undergraduate students, divided equally between full-time students and short-term students from the armed forces. Not only students were away at war: so were young professors. Two of Packer's professors had been brought out of retirement to teach the classics courses.

Life in the colleges was austere. Heat in the rooms was inadequate and the food poor. The heat in dorm rooms was provided by coal fireplaces, but coal was in short supply because of the war effort. The fact that the library was well heated was a mixed blessing: it encouraged study by those who were serious students, but it also attracted those in search of warmth rather than books and desks. The library was always packed, and students often had to sit on the floor.

Packer was a student in the classics track, meaning that the content of his studies was classical literature, history, and philosophy. It was a rigorous path, taking four years in contrast to the three years required for other tracks. The classics curriculum included language study, as well as reading of the great texts. One of Packer's duties within his college was to recite from memory a long Latin prayer before formal dinners in the dining hall.

The classics curriculum at Oxford University was (and remains) systematic and fixed. The program is divided into two categories, with the second building on the first. The first category occupies five terms and the second seven terms, adding up to four academic years. With three terms per academic year, the system is equivalent to what in the United States is called a quarter system, as distinct from a semester system. The first segment is mainly the study of ancient Greek and Latin. The method of education consists primarily of weekly one-on-one "tutorials" with a master or tutor, supplemented by voluntary attendance of lectures sponsored by the university at large. In a tutorial, a student reads aloud an essay he has written, which the tutor then critiques. The second part of the program consists of reading primary texts in a wide range of subjects stemming from the Greek and Roman cultures, including ancient history and ancient and modern philosophy.

Although Packer gave priority to the Christian side of life and the activities of the Christian Union, he was not impatient with the time he spent on Greek and Latin language study and the reading of masterworks in those languages. Packer had come to enjoy the Greek and Latin languages, finding that they "have their strengths and fascination," with the result that mastering and using them provided "a rather good feeling." He entered Oxford with a well-developed grasp of both Greek and Latin, giving him a head start on his college studies. By his own testimony, he "had the ability to become a classical scholar," and several professors attempted to influence him in that direction. But the bent of his being following his conversion was in the direction of Christian scholarship and ministry.

The classical author whom Packer "most admired" was the Greek dramatist Aeschylus, whom Packer regarded as a master of language, similar to William Shakespeare in English literature. In Packer's words,

“Aeschylus handled language in a forcible way, and I always admire writers who handle language in a forcible way.” Packer also enjoyed reading Homer, though not with the same passion with which he read Aeschylus. Among Latin authors, the historian Livy was Packer’s favorite on the strength of the vividness of his writing.

Only one professor touched Packer deeply. He was a displaced Jew named Eduard Fraenkel, affiliated with Packer’s own college (Corpus Christi). Fraenkel was a legendary classical scholar of his era whose name lives on today. Packer attended only one Fraenkel course, on the Latin poet Horace, but he was awed by Fraenkel’s extemporaneous lecturing as he roamed up and down the aisles of the classroom.

The classics curriculum bore fruit in Packer’s later life and career, and we can say with confidence that his Oxford education served him well. In his role as general editor of the English Standard Version of the Bible, Packer sometimes dazzled other committee members with his knowledge of Greek and the nuances of classical rhetoric. Additionally, he benefited from the Oxford model of individualized education and frequent presentation of essays, a model that is designed to produce a certain quality of mind, including precision of thought and expression, and careful organization of material. Packer’s writings display a quality possessed by another Oxford classics student, C. S. Lewis, namely, the ability to follow a line of thought to its logical conclusion, breaking the main topic into its constituent parts and making complex ideas clear to the general reading public.

In conversation with me, Packer described the Oxford method as “throwing a student into the deep end and seeing how he does.” For a classics student such as Packer, this was, he said, “the best education I could have had.” However, it is not the model Packer followed in his own teaching, since he realized that most students need help in learning the basic ways of philosophical thought.

I entitled this section “Oxford University as Packer Found It”; I want to end it by reversing that to consider J. I. Packer as Oxford University found him. Packer’s self-portrait as an entering college student reveals “a man of like passions such as we are” (see James 5:17), not the commanding figure that he became. Here are formulas that Packer later used when he cast a retrospective look at himself as an Oxford student:

- “. . . an immature and churned-up young man, painfully aware of himself, battling his daily way, as adolescents do, through manifold urges and surges of discontent and frustration.”
- “I was an oddity. I was bad at relationships, an outsider, shy, and an intellectual.”
- “. . . an eighteen year-old oddball, . . . emotionally locked up.”
- “. . . a shy, introverted, and awkward young man.”

This picture is so different from the J. I. Packer that we know that we need to accept the self-portrait as carrying the authority of the person who observed himself firsthand.

Packer's Conversion

As noted in the preceding chapter, Packer's school friend Eric Taylor had urged him to seek out the Christian Union (an Inter-Varsity organization) when he arrived at Oxford. It so happened that Packer did not need to do this.

Christian student groups at Oxford and Cambridge Universities were highly active in the middle of the twentieth century. The Christian Union at Oxford followed a practice of arranging social events in the respective colleges for new students at the beginning of each academic year. These were informational meetings designed to attract students to participate in the gatherings of the Christian Union of the university as a whole. Nearly everything at Oxford University is traditional, and the opening recruitment meetings of the term happened specifically on the Thursday evening before the start of the academic year. Ralph Hulme, the Corpus Christi representative for the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, contacted Packer and invited him to the introductory Thursday meeting.

I will note in passing that as I did the research for this biography, I was pushed to the limit by the dozens of acronyms that make up the history of evangelical organizations in England during the twentieth century. On my trips to Oxford through the years, I had heard references to OICCU (too oddly pronounced to reproduce it here, though “oi-kew” comes close) and to a sister organization, CICCU (“kick-you”), at Cambridge University. In the United States, we would prosaically refer to either of these groups as “the local InterVarsity chapter”!

Packer accepted Hulme's invitation, having already determined that

he would attend. The first meeting was eminently forgettable, as evidenced by the fact that the only thing Packer remembers about the event is that it failed to spark his interest!

Despite the low wartime enrollments at the University, OICCU President David Mullins (a medical student) was determined to maintain the evangelistic thrust of the Christian Union. The weekly agenda was ambitious. On the university level, there was a Bible exposition every Saturday evening and an evangelistic sermon every Sunday evening (known as “Sunday evening sermon”). Individual colleges then sponsored weekly Bible studies and prayer meetings. Packer learned about these options at the informational meeting. The first week, he decided to attend the Saturday evening Bible exposition, but not the Sunday evening evangelistic service. He did, however, attend the evangelistic service the next Sunday, October 22, 1944, a service that would change his life eternally.

The service occurred at St. Aldate’s, an Anglican church in the center of the city. It was one of the larger Oxford churches and was noted for its student ministry. St. Aldate’s is just a “stone’s throw” from Pembroke College, where bygone Crypt School alumnus George Whitefield attended college and was converted. “Dim-out” conditions were in effect, so care was taken not to allow any light to emanate from the church building. Spiritual light, however, shone within the church.

The service began at 8:15. The preacher was an elderly Anglican parson, the Rev. Earl Langston, from the resort town of Weymouth. The first half of the forty-minute sermon consisted of biblical exposition that left Packer bored. But the second half was a personal narrative of how Langston had been converted at a boys’ camp. The key component of that conversion had been a challenge posed to the youthful Langston by a camp leader, who had asked whether he was a Christian. Langston had been jolted by this question to conclude that he was not actually saved. That, in turn, led to his coming to personal faith in Christ as Savior.

This autobiographical narrative was riveting to Packer, who had entered Oxford believing himself to be a Christian. He suddenly saw his own story in Langston’s narrative and realized that he was not a believer. It was a traumatic realization that was accompanied by an imagined picture, which Alister McGrath describes as follows: “He found a picture arising from within his mind. The picture was that of



The interior of St. Aldate's Anglican Church in Oxford, England, around 1940. J. I. Packer was converted at an evening service at the church on October 22, 1944. (Photo courtesy of St. Aldate's Anglican Church)

someone looking from outside through a window into a room where some people were having a party. Inside the room, people were enjoying themselves by playing games. The person outside could understand the games that they were playing. He knew the rules of the games. But he was outside; they were inside. He needed to come in.”

Packer was particularly convicted by the latter awareness: “I need to come in.” So by the Spirit’s prompting, he came in. The sermon ended as most evangelistic services in the Oxford milieu (and more universally) did—with the preacher emphasizing the need for his hearers to commit themselves to Christ and the singing of the hymn “Just As I Am.” Packer states simply, “I had given my life to Christ.” He also recounts, “When I went out of the church I knew I was a Christian.” More than half a century later, Packer could attest, with regard to his conversion, that “I remember the experience as if it were yesterday.”

After sharing his conversion story, Langston added that he had afterward written to his parents to tell them what had happened. So when Packer went back to his room at Corpus Christi, he followed that example and wrote his parents about the step he had taken. In a return letter, Packer's mother expressed that she was glad he had found what he had found.

The preceding chapter pieced together various threads of Packer's life, and those threads all converged on the night of October 22, 1944. The foundation of belief had been laid. Packer had even defended the Christian faith on an intellectual level. What he needed was a catalyst. As is nearly always the case, the preaching of the gospel brought conviction. In keeping with the paradigm expressed in the Bible itself and Christian doctrine based on the Bible, the process of conversion began with an awareness of his lost state. Packer's friend Eric Taylor had been unable to fully show Packer that he lacked saving faith, but he had asserted the need for Packer to attain it. Nor should we miss the crucial role played by what we familiarly call a personal testimony (in this case, the preacher's).

Believing the Bible

A colleague once observed to me that before he became a Christian, the Bible seemed to him to be full of contradictions, but after his conversion, these seeming contradictions fell away. Something similar happened in Packer's life. As we reconstruct his first few weeks at Oxford, it is obvious that changes were happening to him with dizzying speed.

Packer began the life of genuine faith with his inherited view of the Bible. It was the attitude of theological liberalism, which Packer had imbibed from his nominally Christian, "high-church" background and from his random religious reading. Packer's description of his view of the Bible, as recorded by McGrath, is that it was "a mixed bag of religious all-sorts, of which one could not accept more than the general outlines." As a collection of religious sentiments, however, the Bible of course commended itself as a book of devotional reading. Accordingly, during the first few weeks after his conversion, Packer continued to read the Bible in an attitude of what he labels "partial skepticism," though some of it lit up for him in a new way.

Packer began to attend the Saturday evening Bible expositions

sponsored by the Christian Union. Doing so required him to give up the opportunity to play clarinet in a jazz band that he had joined. The turnaround in Packer's attitude toward the Bible occurred six weeks after his conversion. It happened at the Saturday evening meeting, when "an eccentric old man from Cambridge" gave an exposition of a chapter from the book of Revelation (Packer believes that it may have been Revelation 12—in my view, very promising material). At the beginning of the meeting, Packer retained his longstanding liberal skepticism about the Bible; at the end, he believed that the Bible is God's Word about the world and God himself, and that it expresses the truth about every reader of the Bible. Packer later said, "I can still remember the feeling of surprise—and gladness—as I left the meeting because I knew that *I knew* that the Bible is the Word of God."

Completing the Academic Program

Two stories unfolded during Packer's years at Oxford. One was the spiritual journey—the life of faith. The other was the academic life of the mind. It would be wrong to set these two stories up as rivals. They both carried God's approval, and both were important to Packer's future life and ministry.

Packer's academic success was of the very highest order. In his second year at Oxford, he took his first public examination. He achieved what is known as a "first" or "the first class" in Oxford and Cambridge circles. This means "first-class honors" and is equivalent to the U.S. *summa cum laude*. Bruce Harris, who arrived at Oxford as a student two years after Packer matriculated, recalled that Packer's academic achievements and intellectual brilliance were already legendary among students. In his lifestyle, Packer was what I call "a serious student." He split his life between studies and Christian service, and did not take time to socialize in the Common Room. His head injury prevented him from participating in sports, but he would not have had time for it anyway.

Packer's final examinations came at the end of his time at Oxford, in the spring of 1948. He was expected to receive what at Oxford is called a "double first"—first-class honors in two subjects on the same set of examinations. Packer did not quite make it, being awarded second-class honors in both ancient history and philosophy.

Even to this early point, as we have seen, Packer's life was a case

study in seeming setbacks that God used for good. We can see this in such a small detail as his housing during his time at Oxford. Four-year students at Corpus Christi were ordinarily allowed to live on campus for three years, but they needed to find off-campus housing for the additional year. Although Packer looked forward to being in his familiar room for his third year (1946–47), the influx of returning soldiers into the student body led college officials to allot Packer’s room to a new student. Packer managed to find a room in a house on Lincoln Road, off the busy Abingdon Road leading south from the city center. Thus, for his last two years in college, Packer enjoyed the scholarly advantage of having a living room (“front room”) and an upstairs bedroom for his own use. The daily walk to college and the Bodleian Library took thirty minutes, and I can easily picture Packer making the walk. When the ESV translation committee met in Cambridge, Packer regularly chose a fast thirty-minute walk between the Arundel House Hotel and Tyndale House (site of the committee work) over an available van ride. To this day, I can see the seventy-year-old Packer in the first wave of walkers, setting a lively pace and conversing the entire way.

Church Affiliations during the College Years

It is common for Christian college students to find their weekly religious affiliations something of a problem. The options include spiritual nurture from a student group and some type of Sunday experience at a local church. Usually, multiple groups and churches compete for the allegiance of students. Packer’s post-conversion religious experience in Oxford followed this familiar pattern.

As Packer sized up the church situation in which he found himself, he began with disillusionment regarding the Anglican Church, in which he had been raised. That church had let him down. He had grown up in the church, yet nothing had been clearly said about the need for conversion and personal union with Christ. Packer had left his Gloucester Anglican parish as a latter-day Nicodemus—a stranger to what was best in his own tradition, not even knowing the basics of the new birth. Yet, despite his disillusionment with the Anglican Church, he did not entirely abandon his connections with it after his conversion. In fact, he stated in a 2014 conversation that he “never thought of leaving the Anglican Church on a permanent basis.”

Given the uneasy state of his alliance with the Anglican Church, also known as the Established Church, we can discern two threads in Packer's church affiliations at Oxford, both of them signposts for paths that he has taken throughout his life. If we are looking for broad labels, we might call them Anglicanism and what historically has been called the nonconformist tradition in England, including an evangelical parachurch strand, encompassing organizations such as the Christian Union.

As is still true today, there were two evangelical Anglican churches in the vicinity of the college in center city Oxford. It has always seemed a little unfortunate to me that they are so close to one another (one block apart). The two churches are St. Ebbe's and St. Aldate's. In Packer's day, as today, the two churches represented distinctly different styles within evangelicalism.

In the mid-1940s, St. Ebbe's was characterized by what Americans call fundamentalism—a rigidly conservative orientation (in Packer's phrase) suspicious of culture and disapproving of “worldly” practices. Packer found the preaching style cool and detached. According to McGrath, Packer regarded St. Ebbe's as “a cold and unwelcoming place.” Packer recalls that attendance at St. Ebbe's during his first two years in college was so low that the church was “very empty” at worship services. St. Aldate's was more attractive to Packer. The preaching was ardent. During Packer's first year at Oxford, he sometimes attended St. Aldate's with his Corpus Christi Christian Union representative, Ralph Hulme.

During the first two years following his conversion, Packer gravitated toward the local Plymouth Brethren assembly, located off Cowley Road on the outskirts of the college part of Oxford. The content of the preaching was biblical and substantial, in contrast to the preaching at St. Aldate's. Several leaders in the Christian Union were Plymouth Brethren people. Two of these became very important in Packer's life—James Houston (one of the founders of Regent College in British Columbia and its first president) and Donald Wiseman (who became a noted archaeologist and also played an important role in the history of Tyndale House in Cambridge).

However, starting in his third college year, Packer attended St. Ebbe's, where an interim minister and then a long-term minister had

rejuvenated the church. The long-term minister, Maurice Wood, was a commanding figure who attracted students to St. Ebbe's (Wood later became principal of Oak Hill Theological College in London and then bishop of Norwich).

Packer's attendance at Anglican churches during his college years had an effect that proved prophetic of Packer's later life: it made him suspect in the eyes of non-Anglican evangelicals. The Oxford Christian Union at that time was, in Packer's estimate, "an extremely conservative evangelical organization." When Packer was nominated as a candidate for the Executive Committee of the Christian Union, the suggestion was dismissed because Packer then attended St. Aldate's, which was considered theologically "unsound" by the senior members of the committee (a stigma that was less true of St. Ebbe's).

The Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union

The church loyalties sketched above were supplemented by Packer's involvement in the Christian Union, which today we would call a parachurch organization. Having been converted through the work of the student-led group, Packer stayed active in its work throughout his years at Oxford. He became involved in *daily* prayer meetings sponsored by the Christian Union. According to McGrath, Packer in later years has had "no hesitation in affirming that he gained all his spiritual nurture from the OICCU at this stage," a verdict that Packer confirmed to me.

An organization this important in Packer's life deserves further attention. What kind of group was it? It was an evangelical melting pot. Prominent in the leadership were Plymouth Brethren students who were committed to an understanding of the Christian life known as the Keswick view of holiness (see below). But this does not mean that evangelical Anglicans were absent from the group. In fact, Packer was among those Anglicans.

What was the spiritual tenor of the group? Lady Elizabeth Catherwood (daughter of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and a student at Oxford when Packer was there) remembers it as being "pietistic and not strong doctrinally—cheerful but not very profound." Lady Catherwood believes that the Christian Union that she knew could fairly be characterized as "anti-intellectual."

Perhaps this explains why a group of four or five intellectually inclined students spontaneously generated an informal supplemental group of their own. They met at a local restaurant on Wednesday nights after the missionary prayer meeting of OICCU. The group was comprised of Elizabeth Lloyd-Jones and another woman, along with Packer, O. Raymond Johnston, and sometimes an additional male student. This group discussed issues of the Christian life. Lady Catherwood remembers the group as “a great mix” in which everyone brought something to the table. She brought a superior biblical knowledge, whereas Packer brought a philosophical temperament that asked what the biblical data meant. Lady Catherwood recalls Packer being “by nature a philosopher,” someone who “had a very sharp mind in getting to the basis of an issue,” and someone of whom it could be said that “everything he said was interesting.” The meetings of the group were intellectually invigorating, “but also very touching.”

In addition to the Plymouth Brethren influence in the OICCU, there was a group known as the “Bash campers.” This movement had been formed by the Rev. Eric Nash, who organized summer camps known as the “Varsity and Public School” camp. Admittance to the camps was limited to boys who attended what in the United States would be called private schools or “college prep schools,” which in England were known as public schools. The students at these schools were boys from privileged and wealthy families. Packer says these upper-class boys knew that they belonged to an aristocracy of talent from which future leaders would come.

The “Bash campers” were an evangelical branch of the broader social phenomenon of British upper-class values and lifestyles. Nash called them “the best boys from the best schools.” They, too, were a group within the Oxford Christian Union. David Mullins, the student president of the OICCU from 1943 to 1946, was a Bash camper. Likewise, Wiseman, who overlapped with Packer at Oxford, claims that during their time there, the Christian Union was “under something of a ‘Bash’ influence.” Lady Catherwood and Packer both affirm that they were aware of not belonging to this group of insiders and that they were viewed as “not measuring up” to the Bash standards. Lady Catherwood concludes that the Bashers were “a divisive element” in the Christian Union—a group that “did a great deal of good and a great deal of harm.”

Puritanism and the Keswick School

The affiliations noted above give us the external story of Packer's religious development during his time at Oxford. But much was going on in Packer's spiritual life beyond those affiliations. The story of this internal life anticipates important themes in Packer's later life. Two encounters in particular were especially formative—Puritanism (as encountered in books) and a pietistic association known as the Keswick movement.

The history of Packer's interaction with the Puritans is the subject of a later chapter in this biography. All that we need to note here is that the Puritan influence began early—at the end of Packer's first term in college in December 1944. Being a devotee of the idea that all education is ultimately self-education, Packer resolved not to cease studying simply because the academic term was over. So when he went home for Christmas vacation, he resolved to learn more about George Whitefield, who had attended the same school in Packer's native Gloucester where Packer himself had been a student. Packer went to the public library and checked out a two-volume biography of Whitefield. He later called his reading of this biography a milestone in his spiritual development.

Two permanent influences flowed from this landmark experience. One was the Puritan theology of Whitefield. The second was Whitefield's transdenominational orientation. Whitefield *was* an Anglican, but we rarely think of him as such. Rather, we think of him as transdenominational. In America, we might think of him as a mainstream evangelical—the way we think of Billy Graham. Whitefield became a role model for Packer in highlighting the ecumenical advance of the gospel.

Packer's encounter with the Puritans had a lifelong influence on him, evident in both his thinking and his career as a speaker and writer. By contrast, the second significant encounter that he experienced in the year following his conversion produced a rejection rather than an embrace. This encounter was with the movement known in England as the Keswick view of the Christian life, which goes more particularly by the label "victorious living" (also known as the "higher-life" experience). To understand what all this means, we need to conduct a brief historical inquiry.

Keswick is a town in the Lake District of northern England. It became important to British evangelicalism (with spillover influence in America) starting in 1875. The most visible institutional "scaffolding"

for the movement was an annual summer convention held in a tent in Keswick. For people who remember or still attend an annual “summer camp,” we might think of the Keswick convention as a high-octane version of that evangelical institution. The Keswick conference has attracted “big name” evangelical speakers throughout its history, right to the present day. The conference has been important to missionaries and laypeople, but it also attracted the allegiance of British university students in the middle of the twentieth century, and this is how the movement entered the life of the newly converted J. I. Packer.

The keynote of the Keswick teaching was the promise of a deeper spiritual life (or “victorious Christian living”) for people who followed its principles. This, in turn, was part of a long Christian tradition known as the quest for personal holiness. The promise held out was a version of triumphalism, or conquest over sin in one’s life, along with the prospect of a closer walk with Christ. The path to such triumph was full surrender to Christ, with the implication that people who did not experience freedom from sin were deficient in this surrender. The favored motto by which to express this surrender was “Let go and let God.” The other model of the quest for holiness—a resolved obedience to follow God in the spiritual warfare between good and evil—was dismissed by the Keswick school of theology as a form of legalism. In the Keswick view, instead of being a long obedience in the same direction, the Christian life took the form of continuous consecrations and reconsecrations, and the genre of the “consecration sermon” became a standard part of the picture.

The victorious-living view of the Keswick movement was prominent among students at Oxford in Packer’s time there. It did not have the approval of the local Anglican churches (including St. Ebbe’s and St. Aldate’s), but it was the dominant strand in the student-led Christian Union. Packer could not possibly avoid the impact of the Keswick view. It precipitated the first emotional and theological crisis of his newly found faith, and throughout his life, he has criticized the Keswick view of holiness with unusual vehemence.

The nature of the crisis can be described as follows. Packer knew himself to be a genuine Christian, wholly committed to follow Christ. He wanted the peace that the Keswick people dangled in front of him. So he reconsecrated himself as the paradigm encouraged him to do.

However, in his words: “It didn’t work and that was a deeply frustrating and depressing thing. . . . In fact, it was driving me crazy.” Packer claims that he felt like the “poor drug addict” whom he once saw trying to walk through a brick wall, as well as like someone who kept “missing the bus.” He experienced all of this as “an immature and churned-up young man.” He later subjected the experience to a mature understanding and offered this critique of the Keswick view of sanctification: “It offers a greater measure of deliverance from sin than Scripture anywhere promises or the apostles themselves ever attained.” According to McGrath, Packer came to believe that “the Keswick teaching encouraged believers to expect too much and too little”—too much in terms of freedom from sin in this life and too little in terms of the need to advance in the daily spiritual battle against evil.

The destructive effects of the Keswick philosophy remained a permanent theme in Packer’s life and writing. He first took aim at Keswick theology in an oft-cited article published in 1955 (see the notes at the end of this book). In 1979, Packer compared himself to a child who has been burned and thereafter dreads the fire, in the same sentence describing his “hatred of the cruel and tormenting unrealities of overheated holiness teaching” as something “that remains in his heart to this day.” In 1984, Packer claimed that if one takes the Keswick paradigm seriously, “it will tend not to help you but to destroy you.” As recently as an interview in 2004, Packer restated the account of his tumultuous encounter with the Keswick view in college and his critique of that view as not teaching the truth about the need for repentance, thereby producing “a quite misleading account of the Christian’s inner life.”

Obviously Packer’s negative encounter with Keswick triumphalism was a traumatic experience that permanently affected him. The corrective came in the form of Packer’s encounter with the Puritans, especially (at this early stage) John Owen. This encounter also set a direction for the rest of Packer’s life, as we will see in the later chapter devoted to the history of Packer’s assimilation and advocacy of the Puritans.

Summary

College is a life-transforming experience for most young people, but it was preeminently so for J. I. Packer. We might think of his Oxford experience as a series of forks in the road. At the first fork, Packer

turned from nominal Christianity to genuine faith. Then, almost immediately, he turned from skepticism about the Bible to belief that it is God's authoritative Word. Packer gained a firm foundation in the evangelical church scene and (more important) the Christian Union, but while standing on that foundation, he needed to decide between the Keswick theology of victorious living and the Puritan theology of repentance. Finally, no one drifts into academic success; Packer's seriousness about the intellectual life as a classics student was a deliberate choice.

Theological Education and Ministry

(1948–1954)

A PORTRAIT *of* One of Evangelicalism's Most Important Figures

“Ryken, as a veteran student of the Puritans, is the ideal author to write about the most influential Puritan of our time.”

MARK A. NOLL, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History, University of Notre Dame;
author, *Protestantism: A Very Short Introduction*

“This book is a fascinating, insightful, and, to my mind, precisely accurate portrait of the same Jim Packer whom I have known for more than thirty-five years. What a joy to read this book and be challenged by Packer’s remarkable life!”

WAYNE GRUDEM, Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

“Without a doubt, this is now the definitive, most up-to-date biography of Packer, and it deserves high praise. Ryken not only helps us understand the man and his context, but ourselves as evangelicals.”

MICHAEL REEVES, Director of Union and Senior Lecturer, Wales Evangelical School of Theology; author, *Delighting in the Trinity*, *The Unquenchable Flame*, and *Rejoicing in Christ*

“A friendly portrait of a great evangelical, the man behind the headlines, full of insight into Packer’s genius as a brilliant communicator of the Reformed faith.”

ANDREW ATHERSTONE, Tutor and Latimer Research Fellow, Wycliffe Hall,
University of Oxford

“To be able to read about Packer himself and to understand how God gifted and shaped him has been a moving and edifying experience. This is a good book about a great man.”

PETER JENSEN, Former Archbishop, Sydney, Australia; Former Principal, Moore College

BIOGRAPHY

 **CROSSWAY**

www.crossway.org

