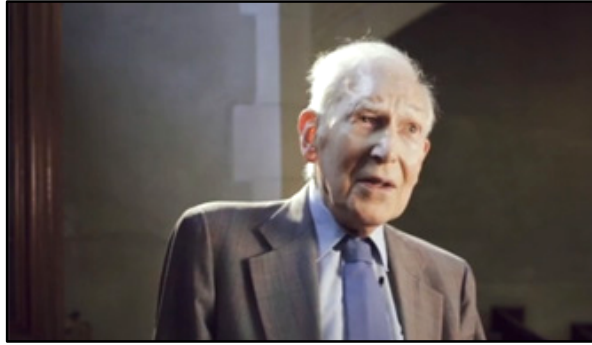


SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 17 JANUARY 2016



Meet J I Packer

“A Speckled Bird”

The son of a working-class man who was in his recollection, “unfit for major responsibility,” James Innell Packer was brought up in Gloucester, England, in an environment that hardly seemed a likely incubator for one of the greatest Christian minds of the twentieth century.

Spending his childhood fumbling to fit in, Packer’s intellectual and bookish qualities often estranged him from his peers.

“A violent collision with a bread van” served to further remove him from social acceptance.

In the incident, after being chased into a street by some schoolboys, he was hit by a van and “Lost a bit of [his] head as a result.”

From then on he recalls, he “Used to move around wearing on [his] head an aluminium plate with a rubber pad attached around the edge.”

Frustrated by being, in his words, “A speckled bird,” Packer struggled to fit in.

His opportunity to play sports, like cricket, and live actively had been dashed with the van accident.

Ultimately, he embraced his own intellectual curiosity and spent the bulk of his childhood reading voraciously.

His Blossoming Faith

Packer grew up going to church because of the habitual attendance of his parents, but it wasn’t until he was in secondary school that he began thinking seriously about the Christian faith.

By the time he entered Corpus Christi College at Oxford in 1944, his vigorous study of the Bible

and other Christian writers, including C. S. Lewis, had won his intellectual assent for Christianity.

However, Packer recalls, it wasn’t until he attended a meeting of the Oxford Christian Union that he finally made, “A personal transaction with the living Lord, the Lord Jesus.”

Packer didn’t solve his social problems by becoming a Christian, and even at college he began feeling an increased sense of isolation.

During this time he happened to start reading some of the great Puritan authors, like John Owen and John Bunyan, and found in their works the inspiration to be ordained and subsequently pursue doctoral studies.

Following Packer’s ordination in the Anglican Church, a providential scheduling mix-up on the part of a friend, changed his life forever.

Having double-booked himself for an evening, Packer’s friend asked James to speak to an audience in his absence.

This speaking engagement not only broke through Packer’s fear of public situations but also introduced him to his future wife, Kit Mullett, who was sitting in the audience.

Together they would have three children, Naomi, Ruth, and Martin and, Packer recalls, a slew of pets.

“Centred on the Lord”

Gaining respect in academic circles, Packer wrote his first book, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, in 1958.

Knowing God, his most widely read book, was published fifteen years later in 1973.

He worked to found the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI).

He surprised the academic community in 1979, by leaving his Anglican evangelical community to take a position at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Regent flourished because of his presence, growing from a tiny institution into the largest centre of theological education in its region.

Since arriving at Regent he has published a book every year.

Together his books have sold more than three million copies.

His wife Kit is quick to point out the source of his success, "His devotion to the Lord is the reason for everything he's done. His writing, his preaching, his lecturing, his living are all centred on the Lord."

Source: www.christianbook.com/html/authors/521.html/108487865

Why We Need the Puritans

J I Packer

Horse Racing is said to be the sport of kings. The sport of slinging mud has, however, a wider following. Pillorying the Puritans, in particular, has long been a popular pastime both sides of the Atlantic, and most people's image of Puritanism still has on it much disfiguring dirt that needs to be scraped off.

"Puritan" as a name was, in fact, mud from the start. Coined in the early 1560s, it was always a satirical smear word implying peevishness, censoriousness, conceit, and a measure of hypocrisy, over and above its basic implication of religiously motivated discontent with what was seen as Elizabeth's Laodicean and compromising Church of England. Later, the word gained the further, political connotation of being against the Stuart monarchy and for some sort of republicanism; its primary reference, however, was still to what was seen as an odd, furious, and ugly form of Protestant religion.

In England, anti-Puritan feeling was let loose at the time of the Restoration and has flowed freely ever since. In North America it built up slowly after the days of Jonathan Edwards to reach its zenith a hundred years ago in post-Puritan New England. For the past half-century, however, scholars have been meticulously wiping away the mud, and as Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel have unfamiliar colours today now that restorers have removed the dark varnish, so the conventional image of the Puritans has been radically revamped, at least for those in the know. (Knowledge, alas, travels slowly in some quarters.)

Taught by Perry Miller, William Haller, Marshall Knappen, Percy Scholes, Edmund Morgan, and a host of more recent researchers, informed folk now acknowledge that the typical Puritans were not wild men, fierce and freaky, religious fanatics and social extremists, but sober, conscientious, and cultured citizens: persons of principle,

devoted, determined, and disciplined, excelling in the domestic virtues, and with no obvious shortcomings save a tendency to run to words when saying anything important, whether to God or to man. At last the record has been put straight.

But even so, the suggestion that we *need* the Puritans – we late twentieth-century Westerners, with all our sophistication and mastery of technique in both secular and sacred fields – may prompt some lifting of eyebrows. The belief that the Puritans, even if they were in fact responsible citizens, were comic and pathetic in equal degree, being naive and superstitious, primitive and gullible, superserious, overscrupulous, majoring in minors, and unable or unwilling to relax, dies hard. What could these zealots give us that we need, it is asked.

The answer, in one word, is maturity. Maturity is a compound of wisdom, goodwill, resilience, and creativity. The Puritans exemplified maturity; we don't. We are spiritual dwarfs. A much-travelled leader, a native American (be it said), has declared that he finds North American Protestantism, man-centred, manipulative, success-oriented, self-indulgent and sentimental, as it blatantly is, to be 3,000 miles wide and half an inch deep.

The Puritans, by contrast, as a body were giants. They were great souls serving a great God. In them clear-headed passion and warm-hearted compassion combined. Visionary and practical, idealistic and realistic too, goal-oriented and methodical, they were great believers, great hoppers, great doers, and great sufferers. But their sufferings, both sides of the ocean (in old England from the authorities and in New England from the elements), seasoned and ripened them till they gained a stature that was nothing short of heroic.

Ease and luxury, such as our affluence brings us today, do not make for maturity; hardship and struggle however do, and the Puritans' battles against the spiritual and climatic wildernesses in which God set them produced a virility of character, undaunted and unsinkable, rising above discouragement and fears, for which the true precedents and models are men like Moses, and Nehemiah, and Peter after Pentecost, and the apostle Paul...

Excerpt from chapter 2 of J I Packer's *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Crossway Books, 1990)

A bookstall of some of J I Packer's works is available at St David's over the next month.