



PROCLAIMING  
CHRIST *in a*  
PLURALISTIC AGE

— *The 1978 Lectures* —

J. I. Packer

“In 1978 J. I. Packer delivered these lectures at Reformed Bible College in Michigan then traveled to Australia to present the second series of Annual Moore College Lectures. So we have been waiting forty-five years for them to be published! However, precisely because of the long gap between delivery and publication, this book is able to challenge us powerfully about how far we have fallen from those days. These chapters remind us of vintage Packer: the calm and courteous style, the unrelenting focus on the Lord Jesus our Savior and faithfulness to the Scriptures, and an incisive perspective on the movements shaping the world in which we live as Christian disciples. This book is certainly worth reading, and I highly commend it.”

**Mark D. Thompson**, Principal, Moore Theological College

“J. I. Packer set a high standard for proclaiming the gospel of Christ. His arguments were gracious but never cowardly, strong but never strident, faithful but never repetitive. Now with the publication of his 1978 lectures, we are all enriched more deeply for ‘the defense and confirmation of the gospel’ (Phil. 1:7) in our generation.”

**Ray Ortlund**, President, Renewal Ministries

“In my youth, I was bombarded with teaching that denied the absolute uniqueness of Christ. We were told that such an assertion was based on a few proof texts which ran counter to the overall message of the Bible. At that time the writings and tape-recorded messages of J. I. Packer helped convince me that our affirmation of uniqueness was based primarily not only on a few proof texts, but upon the person and work of Christ who was the Creator’s answer to the dilemma faced by his creation. I’m so happy to see this material in circulation in a new format. The issue is even more critical today than it was in my youth. This robust exposition by Packer is both timely and powerfully convincing.”

**Ajith Fernando**, Teaching Director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka;  
author, *Discipling in a Multicultural World*



*Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralistic Age*



# Proclaiming Christ in a Pluralistic Age

*The 1978 Lectures*

J. I. Packer

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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# Publisher's Preface

## The Life and Legacy of J. I. Packer

J. I. Packer (1926–2020) was a lifelong Anglican churchman who spent the first half of his life in England and the second half in Canada but who was perhaps most popular in the United States. He is widely recognized as one of the most influential theological popularizers of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

James Innell Packer was born on July 22, 1926, in the village of Twynning in the north of Gloucestershire, England, the firstborn child of James and Dorothy Packer. His only sibling, Margaret, was born in 1929. The Packers were a lower–middle-class family with a nominal Anglican faith, faithfully attending

1 Portions of this preface are adapted from Justin Taylor, “J. I. Packer (1926–2020),” TGC, July 17, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org>. For biographies and studies of Packer, see in particular, Alister McGrath, *J. I. Packer: His Life and Thought* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020); Leland Ryken, *J. I. Packer: An Evangelical Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015); Sam Storms, *Packer on the Christian Life: Knowing God in Christ, Walking by the Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015); Timothy George, ed., *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future: The Impact of His Life and Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009); Don J. Payne, *The Theology of the Christian Life in J. I. Packer's Thought* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006).



nearby St. Catharine's Church but never talking about the things of God or even praying before meals.

In September of 1933, at the age of seven, young Packer was chased by a bully at junior school out into the street and violently collided with a passing bread van. The traumatic injury resulted in brain surgery, a three-week hospital stay, and six months of recuperation at home away from school. He had a depressed compound fracture of the frontal bone on the right-hand side of his forehead—he later compared it to the way the top of an eggshell is knocked in when hit with an egg spoon. A skilled surgeon at his local hospital was able to extract the bits of broken bone. The doctor required him to wear a black, protective aluminum plate over his injury, held in place by an elastic band. He was forbidden from playing any sports, causing the young man, already prone to being a loner, to confine himself even further to activities like reading and writing. He wore the protective plate for the next eight years, and then at the age of fifteen, refused to wear it again.

On the morning of his eleventh birthday, in 1937, Packer awoke hoping to find a bicycle waiting for him—a traditional coming-of-age gift for English boys. He had dropped hints. Instead, his parents gave him a used, heavy Oliver typewriter in excellent condition. His biographer Alister McGrath notes the spiritual lesson: "It was not what Packer had asked for; nevertheless, it proved to be what he needed. . . . his best present and the most treasured possession of his boyhood."<sup>2</sup>

That fall, in 1937, Packer transitioned from junior school to the Crypt School, which counted among its former students

2 McGrath, *J. I. Packer*, 6.

the eighteenth-century preacher and evangelist George Whitefield. Packer became the only student in his class to specialize in “classics.”

Packer was confirmed at their family church, St. Catherine's, at the age of fourteen having never heard about conversion or saving faith.

At the age of eighteen, Packer won a scholarship to Oxford University, studying classics at Corpus Christi College. He arrived in Oxford as an awkward, shy, intellectual oddball (his own description), with a single suitcase in hand. His father, a clerk for the Great Western Railway, was able to secure for his son a free ticket for the hour-long train ride.

Three weeks later, on October 22, 1944, Packer attended a Sunday evening evangelistic sermon at St. Aldate's Church. An elderly Anglican parson gave the address. The biblical exposition left Packer bored, but in the second half, the pastor recounted how at a boys' camp he had been challenged as to whether he was really a Christian. Packer recognized himself in the story and realized he did not know Christ. Following the invitation, which concluded with the singing of “Just as I Am” (written by Charlotte Elliot in 1835), Packer trusted in Jesus Christ as Savior for his sins and as Lord of his life. He was just yards away from where Whitefield had converted in 1735.

That same year, in 1944, a retired Anglican clergyman, losing his eyesight, donated his large library to the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union. The leaders of OICCU stored them in a basement and asked Packer the bookworm if he wanted to sort through the sets, including classics from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Packer soon came across an uncut set of the writings of the seventeenth-century Puritan, John Owen. Packer noted with interest the volume on temptation and sin. He cut the volume open and devoured the contents. Years later he wrote: "I owe more, I think, to John Owen than to any other theologian, ancient or modern, and I am sure I owe more to his little book on mortification than to anything else he wrote."<sup>3</sup> Packer would go on to adopt the Puritan model of the pious pastor-scholar. In fact, he asked people to think of him as a latter-day Puritan: "One who, like those great seventeenth-century leaders on both sides of the Atlantic, seeks to combine in himself the roles of scholar, preacher, and pastor, and speaks to you out of that purpose."<sup>4</sup>

After obtaining his BA degree from Corpus Christi in Oxford (1948), he took up his first teaching post at Oak Hill Theological College in London as a tutor (instructor) in Greek and Latin (along with some philosophy). For the next three years, Packer studied for ordination at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and then did doctoral research. He was ordained as a deacon in the Church of England in 1952, then as a priest at Birmingham Cathedral in 1953. From 1952 to 1954, he served as a curate (associate pastor) at St. John's in Harborne, a suburb of Birmingham, while finishing his four-hundred-page doctoral dissertation on the Puritan Richard Baxter at Oxford University. He was awarded the MA and DPhil degrees in 1954.

3 J. I. Packer, "Introduction," *Puritan Portraits* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2012), 1.

4 J. I. Packer, "Inerrancy and the Divinity and Humanity of the Bible," in *Honouring the Written Word of God: The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer*, vol. 3 (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2008), 162.

On July 17, 1954, Packer married Kit Mullett, a Welsh nurse whom he had met after a speaking engagement in Surrey in the late spring of 1952. Together they would go on to adopt three children: Ruth, Naomi, and Martin.

The Packers moved to Bristol in 1955, where Packer served as a lecturer at Tyndale Hall. In 1961, the Packers moved back to Oxford, where for the next nine years he served as librarian and then warden at Latimer House—an evangelical research center begun by Packer and John Stott to theologically strengthen the Church of England.

In 1970, Packer returned to Tyndale Hall as principal. The following year, Tyndale Hall was incorporated into the new Trinity College, Bristol, where Alec Motyer was named principal and Packer the associate principal. The move freed Packer to have more time to write.

In the early 1970s, Packer approached Inter-Varsity Press about publishing a series of articles he had written in the 1960s for *Evangelical Magazine*. The publisher responded that they needed him to write on the charismatic issue sweeping through Great Britain before they would consider a book from him on another subject. As a result, he took it to Hodder & Stoughton instead, who gladly accepted it for publication. InterVarsity Press in the United States agreed to pick up the North American rights. The book was published in 1973 with the title *Knowing God*. This work, more than any other, established his international fame and went on to sell over a million and a half copies. “The conviction behind the book,” he wrote, “is that ignorance of God . . . lies at the root of much of the church’s weakness today.”<sup>5</sup>

5 J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), xiv.

In February of 1977, Packer met with R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, Norman Geisler, and Greg Bahnsen for a conference on the authority of Scripture at Mount Hermon, California. Later that year, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy was formed, which produced the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in 1978, with Sproul as the lead author.

In 1979, James Houston, who had been friends with Packer since their undergraduate days at Oxford, invited him to join the faculty at Regent College at Vancouver. Packer eventually accepted the position, which would allow him to teach without administrative duties, and his family made the transatlantic relocation. He maintained a position at the university until the end of his life, retiring from full-time teaching in 1996 and teaching part time thereafter.

In the late 1990s, Packer accepted an invitation from Lane Dennis, president and CEO of Crossway, to serve as the general editor of the English Standard Version, a revision of the Revised Standard Version, which itself was in the historic English-language lineage of the King James Bible. The ESV was published in 2001. Packer reflected in the winter years of his life on his involvement with this Bible translation: "I find myself suspecting very strongly that this was the most important thing that I have ever done for the Kingdom."<sup>6</sup>

Packer's "last crusade" was devoted to helping the church recover catechesis (instruction in the Christian faith). This work culminated in *To Be a Christian: An Anglican Catechism*—the catechism of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA).

6 J. I. Packer, comments at a banquet hosted by Crossway at the International Christian Retail Show, 2006.

Packer sometimes wondered if commentators on his theological and ministerial career had missed his personal side, including the humor that he saw in life and the twinkle in his eye. He did not want to be portrayed as a brain in a vat or a mere purveyor of theological ideas. His longtime friend Timothy George described what it was like to watch the man in action:

His smile is irrepressible and his laughter can bring light to the most somber of meetings. His love for all things human and humane shines through. His mastery of ideas and the most fitting words in which to express them is peerless. Ever impatient with shams of all kinds, his saintly character and spirituality run deep.<sup>7</sup>

In 2015, while filming a short documentary on Packer for Crossway, it came time for a final question. He was asked how he might want to be remembered someday when he was gone. He paused, in his characteristic way before answering any question (no matter how routine), took a breath, and responded:

As I look back on the life that I have lived, I would like to be remembered as a voice—a voice that focused on the authority of the Bible, the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, the wonder of his substitutionary sacrifice and atonement for our sins.

I would like to be remembered as a voice calling Christian people to holiness and challenging lapses in Christian moral standards.

7 Timothy George, "Introduction," *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future: The Impact of His Life and Thought*, ed. Timothy George (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 11.

I should like to be remembered as someone who was always courteous in controversy but without compromise.

I ask you to thank God with me for the way that he has led me, and I wish, hope, pray that you will enjoy the same clear leading from him and the same help in doing the tasks that he sets you that I have enjoyed. And if your joy matches my joy as we continue in our Christian lives, well, you will be blessed indeed.<sup>8</sup>

J. I. Packer went to be with the Lord on July 17, 2020, at his home in Vancouver at the age of ninety-three.

### **This Posthumous Book**

In 2020, Pastor Griffin Gulledge of Madison Baptist Church in Georgia, himself a PhD candidate in systematic theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, posted on his blog five black-and-white videos of Packer lecturing at Moore Theological College in Sydney, Australia, from 1978.<sup>9</sup> Crossway had the lectures transcribed and initially edited by freelance editor Karalee Reinke.

Further research on the provenance of this material reveals that Packer delivered these lectures first at Reformed Bible College (now Kuyper College) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and they were lightly revised for presentation at Moore. Though the intention was that the lectures would be published as a book, this never materialized.

8 "J. I. Packer: In His Own Words," Crossway Articles, July 18, 2020, <https://www.crossway.org>.

9 Griffin Gulledge, "J. I. Packer's 1978 Moore College Lectures," *Contra Mundum*, <https://griffingulledge.com>.

In the course of these lectures, there are some sections of the lectures (as documented at relevant sections in the notes in this book) that were repurposed from previously published articles, in particular one of the lectures that Packer delivered at Dallas Theological Seminary in April of 1972 as part of the W. H. Griffith Thomas Memorial Lectures and a lecture delivered in July of 1973 at Tyndale House, Cambridge, on the logic of penal substitution. We are grateful to all of these institutions for their cordial cooperation.

The lectures in this book constitute a narrative that begins in eternity past, culminates in the cross of Calvary, where both the person and work of Christ are expounded, and then applies the good news to our own day.

Packer begins by noting that the Jews required signs and the Greeks sought wisdom—and today intellectuals seek wisdom and liberals seek needs—but we have a different and better story to tell, the story of Christ crucified and risen. This many-stranded story—of God's kingdom, people, mediation, victory, Son, and image—is the true story that must be proclaimed today for all to hear.

In the second lecture, Packer looks at the humanity of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, the only way to the Father and thus our only hope. Packer describes and refutes the modern humanitarian views swirling in the 1970s.

Packer's third lecture turns from Christ's humanity to focus on his divinity as eternal God, suffering servant, and incarnate Son. He considers the kenosis theory of Christ emptying himself of his attributes and finds it wanting before proposing his own understanding that seeks to take into account all of the biblical witness.



The fourth lecture moves from the person of Christ to the work of Christ, glorying in the wonderful exchange. Packer works through various categories of the cross—sacrifice, ransom, redemption, and propitiation—before expounding in greater depth the categories of substitution and satisfaction.

Finally, in the last lecture, Packer looks at the uniqueness of Christ. As with all of the other lectures, he first sets forth theological truth—looking at the cross from the angles of the purpose, person, event, truth, witness, preaching, claim, and need. He then sets his sights on three challenges to the uniqueness of Christ: pluralism (all religions save); Roman Catholicism (anonymous Christians will be saved); and universalism (all will be saved).

The lectures are vintage Packer. With the apostle Paul, he gloried in the cross, boasting in it alone, and was convinced that its proclamation was essential in every age, especially our pluralistic one. Though these lectures bear the marks of their age, delivered forty-five years ago, the message is eternally relevant. We have sought to edit them with a light hand, adding subheadings and citations, as well as smoothing out the prose as required for its written form. We have resisted editing it so heavily that it loses some of its original flavor as oral addresses.

Throughout his nearly seventy years of public ministry, in the classroom, at churches, and through his writings, Packer stressed the importance of knowing and praying to and communing with the triune God. He called for the church to take holiness and repentance seriously by walking in the Spirit and fighting against indwelling sin. He defended biblical authority and championed the cause of disciple-making catechesis. And he reintroduced

multiple generations to his beloved Puritan forebears, whom he regarded as the Redwoods of the Christian faith.

He saw himself as “a voice that called people back to old paths of truth and wisdom.” His entire life was spent resisting the idea that “the newer is the truer, only what is recent is decent, every shift of ground is a step forward, and every latest word must be hailed as the last word on its subject.”<sup>10</sup> Though he was willing to address and engage the controversies of his day, he wrote, “I should like to be remembered as one who pointed to the pasturelands.”

May the lectures captured in this book point you to the pasturelands as you walk with the Good Shepherd who is the Savior of the world.

10 J. I. Packer, “Is Systematic Theology a Mirage? An Introductory Discussion,” in *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 21.



# We've a Story to Tell

*We Preach Christ Crucified*

## The Antithesis of the Gospel

The apostle Paul set forth his gospel to the Corinthians:

We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block [*skandalon*] to Jews and folly [*mória*] to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1:23–24)

In so doing, Paul put his gospel in antithesis to two first-century forms of intellectual self-assertion:

Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom. (1 Cor. 1:22)

Two attitudes reveal this self-assertion: by the *questions* that they asked about the gospel and by their *reactions* to the gospel. By these, the questions and the reactions, you shall know them.

*The Unreasonable Skepticism of Jews Requiring Signs*

There was the attitude first of the Jews. The Jews required a sign, says Paul. What does that mean? That the Jews were hard-headed realists, unwilling to advance a step beyond evidence? No, it means nothing of the kind. It means that the Jews were showing themselves unreasonable skeptics. The sign, which the Jews required in those days, was a type of evidence that we may describe as miracles and magic to order.

The second temptation which had been put to our Lord Jesus Christ in the wilderness had taken the form of an invitation to provide miracles and magic to order. Remember how the devil tempted the Lord basically saying, “Throw yourself down from a pinnacle of the temple and get up unhurt at the bottom, and you’ll wow them” (cf. Matt. 4:5–6)? That was the essence of the temptation. And Jesus had refused it. He was not gathering support, not gathering followers, on that basis. And so we read that when “the Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him, he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, ‘Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.’ And he left them” (Mark 8:11–13).

These requests are really skepticism masquerading as interest. At bottom, it’s an attitude of unwillingness to believe. What is being demanded? Miracles and magic to order is something that it is arrogant and arbitrary to demand in a situation where abundant signs had already been given. That’s what we have to grasp. In the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ—as those who watched it saw it and as it was reported by the apostle Paul to

the Corinthians and others—abundant signs had been given already.

Do you remember how, in the opening verses of Matthew 11, we are told of the messengers who came from John the Baptist, languishing in prison, to ask the Lord Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Matt. 11:3)? And this was John’s question.

Some of the things that Jesus had been doing, and even more perhaps things that Jesus had *not* been doing, had surprised John. John’s idea, based on the way that God had prompted him to herald the coming Messiah, was that as soon as Jesus’s ministry began, catastrophic things would begin to happen: acts of judgment, acts of traumatic import for the life of the nation.

Jesus had not been ministering in that way. Hence the question, Are you he who should come? The one “whose fan is in his hand” to “purge his floor” (Matt. 3:12 KJV), or are we to look for someone else?

And do you remember how Jesus replied to John’s question? The message that he sent back through John’s disciples was this: “Go and tell John what you hear and see—the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (Matt. 11:4–5). Go and tell John that those things are happening and say to him, “Blessed is the one who is not *offended* by me,” or caused to stumble (11:6). It’s a word from this same root from which *skandalon* comes. Blessed is he who should not be caused to stumble at me. Blessed is he who discerns the meaning of the signs that are being given in my ministry and is prepared to trust me concerning those matters where I happen to fulfill these expectations.

But the signs that had been given were the decisive ones. For what Jesus meant for John to pick up was this: that here was being fulfilled what Isaiah long ago had prophesied. We know the words well. They're in the thirty-fifth chapter of the prophecy, and Handel set them to memorable music in the *Messiah*. "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened," Isaiah had predicted, "and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing" (Isa. 35:5–6 KJV). That's how it shall be in the day when God visits his people to bless them.

Yes, the signs had been given. And a further sign was to be given. Jesus refers to that in the opening verses of Matthew 16, where again we find him asked for a sign. "The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, . . . 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah'" (Matt. 16:1–2, 4). And elsewhere he'd interpreted that reference "as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40). And after that, not. After that, alive again.

The sign of resurrection was to be given to confirm the witness born by those miraculous healings and works of mercy that Jesus did during his three-year ministry in Galilee. The signs *had* been given. That's the point to grasp.

But the Jews who heard the stories still sought a sign. They wouldn't accept the signs that had been given, because they'd not been given to order. The Jews, you might say, demanded to call the shots, to specify what signs should be given and where. They wanted to make God, as it were, dance to their tune. This

is frivolous skepticism. It's an expression of dispositional unbelief. *Can't* believe, in this situation, means *won't* believe.

The Jews unreasonably required signs. Many signs had been given, which already they were ignoring. Jesus put his finger on dispositional unbelief, resolute skepticism, when at the end of his story of the rich man and Lazarus, he said this, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31). I don't think that needs any explanatory comment from me.

### *The Invasive Intellectualism of Greeks Seeking Wisdom*

The Greeks, Paul continued, seek after wisdom. What does that mean? Is the quest for wisdom a sign of great and superior intelligence? Doubtless the Greeks themselves would have insisted that it was, for they regarded themselves as folk of great and superior intelligence. But we have to say no. This request for wisdom is not that. It is a mark rather of invasive intellectualism, which is something rather different.

What was the wisdom that they asked Paul to provide? What they were seeking was a type of communication to which they were accustomed and in which they were interested. And probably there are two things in mind here as Paul speaks.

Some sought philosophical speculations on the world and life and things, speculations based on flights of audacious reason. Others were doubly seeking the kind of *gnosis*, inside knowledge, that was offered by the mystery cults. That too was often called wisdom in the first century AD. What it consisted of was the provision of occult secrets giving supernatural power, putting the adherent of the mystery cult in the know regarding all kinds of



what were supposed to be spiritual mysteries, making him feel therefore that he was one of the spiritual elite.

And these were the two types of wisdom that they were asking Paul to provide. What are we to say of the Jews and the Greeks? As Paul describes them, they correspond to well-known and familiar types. Here are attitudes that are very far from dead.

You have met the man who says, "I want scientific facts. I want scientific proof before I'll believe." And he reserves the right to designate what he will regard as scientific proof, and what he will not regard as scientific proof. That man is the spiritual successor of the Jews.

Similarly you have met the man who says, "I am a man of reason. I am guided by reason. I steer by truths of reason. Whatever you have to say to me, you must present to me as a truth of reason, or I shan't take it seriously and you can't expect me to." And that man is the spiritual descendant of the Greeks.

### *We Preach Christ Crucified*

Neither the Jew-type nor the Greek-type is willing to take things from God by revelation. This was the controversy that the gospel raised and that Paul in his testimony had to pursue constantly in the world to which he went. For Paul went proclaiming what 1 Corinthians 1:18 calls the "word of the cross." "We preach Christ crucified," he said (1:23).

Now, this certainly was a startling thing for any man to say. The Christ—that's a title, an office title as Presbyterians would say—is God's anointed world ruler, the one whom Paul in the first ten verses of this chapter had referred to no less than six times as "the Lord Jesus Christ":

- *Jesus*, the personal name;
- *Christ*, the office title; and
- *Lord*, the standard title in the ancient world given to folk who ought to be worshiped.

And Christ, says Paul, we preach as crucified. That is, we proclaim that he was executed as an outlaw. Because it was only the outlaws who were crucified in the ancient world. Capital punishment was given for grave offenses and civil rebellion.

You can see how paradoxical and startling that sounds. You can see too how humbling a message it is, as Paul explains it. For if you asked Paul what it meant that Christ the anointed world ruler whom God had designated was crucified, his reply was that “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). There was no way in which man could be brought to God, save that the Christ should die for man’s sins.

Every man has sins that need to be forgiven, and no man by his own endeavors can put those sins away. But when Paul preached his message of Christ crucified, his word of life and hope for the world immediately gave offense to the Jews. First, it cheapened their own private messianic hopes. Second, it suggested that God was weak in allowing the Messiah to go to the cross. Paul speaks ironically of “the weakness of God” (1 Cor. 1:25), obviously echoing the things the Jewish critics said about his message. It does make God appear weak, and it does focus on the putting away of sin, which to the ordinary Jew (trusting as he was in the sacrifices offered in the temple) seemed simply an irrelevant message.

Similarly, when Paul preached of Christ crucified to the Greeks, it seemed nonsense, and they said so. Paul is obviously

echoing ironically what the Greeks said when he speaks of “the foolishness of God” (1 Cor. 1:25). This is a very silly story, said his Greek critics. And to them too the message of the putting away of sin by the death of the Messiah seemed irrelevant to their own felt needs. So they rejected the message, and Paul says, “This is the reaction of ‘those perishing’” (cf. 1:18). When he uses that word, his language is clinical rather than emotional. He’s using the word because it expresses the thought that he wants to convey, that which is perishing (according to the dictionary meaning of the Greek word *epilume* that’s being used here) is that which is becoming incapable of its intended function. And that is the thought here: that men who were made for fellowship with God are showing themselves incapable of it and confirming themselves in that very incapacity by their resolute rejection of the word of the cross.

But Paul contrasts the negative reaction of those who are perishing with the positive reaction of those whom he describes as “called” (1:24), “who are being saved” (1:18). To them he says, “The message is the good word of Christ, ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God’” (cf. 1:24). The power of God for part of the message is the proclaiming of his resurrection and his reign, and his power in the regeneration of sinners, and his power in the world is to see it at his return. And the message of Christ crucified is a proclamation of the wisdom of God, for, as Paul goes on to say in verse 30, Christ of God is made to us believers

- *wisdom*, meaning the way to God, and
- *righteousness*, a just justification that only divine wisdom could have devised, and

- *sanctification*, which in this verse certainly means a covenant relationship or a means of covenant relationship with God. (It means that, before it means anything else.)
- And so *redemption*, for salvation from sin.

Christ is made to us all those things in the sense that we have them all in him. This is the wisdom of God *par excellence*, says Paul, for this is God in Christ providing us with all that we need for that life for which we were made and for which sin has unfitted us.

So Paul in this passage, as often elsewhere in his writings, draws out the antithesis between faith and unbelief, between the reaction to the gospel of those who are alive and to whom therefore it comes as a savor of life for life, and those who are spiritually dead, to whom therefore the gospel comes as a savor of death unto death.

### The Antithesis of the Gospel Today

The point I am laboring to make sets the perspective that we shall be exploring throughout this book, namely, that *the antithesis continues*. It continues as the gospel confronts the modern world. And it continues, alas, as the gospel confronts a great deal that goes on in the modern church. For the spiritual descendants of the Jews and the Greeks of Paul's day have got into the modern church, at least in principle and in their thought-forms. The movement that used to be called *liberalism* or *modernism* and is now frequently called *radicalism* in Christian theology manifests the same pride of mind.

I stress here that I'm speaking of the intellectual method of the movement rather than the motives of any particular individuals caught up in it. I'm speaking not of individuals but of ways of

thinking. The movement, I say, manifests the same pride of mind, the same arbitrary skepticism, the same invasive intellectualism as you saw in the Jews and the Greeks of Paul's day. Still we have the arbitrary skeptics who believe that they're in a position to tell us that such realities as incarnation and resurrection cannot be. And we shall be making reference as we go along to that unhappy book, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, published by a number of English university theologians in 1977, which is just one of the latest expressions of this position. But its title, as you see, tells all at this point.<sup>1</sup>

*Intellectuals Seek Wisdom*

Evasive intellectualism refuses to take seriously the fact that God has revealed himself in history and insists on turning Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the gospel into an idea, a myth, a symbol, a memory, an image, an influence, which refuses to allow that his status is that of a divine, personal Savior.

Those who do their thinking within the line set by this movement are obliged in consequence to change the Christian message so that it's no longer an invitation from a living Savior in the terms of Matthew 11:28–29: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls." No longer can they think of becoming a Christian in the terms in which Paul spells it out in 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10, where he says that the Thessalonian converts

1 The book, edited by theologian and philosopher of religion John Hick (1922–2012) was published one year prior to Packer's lectures at Moore. All of the contributors were professors at Birmingham, Oxford, or Cambridge.

“turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

No, their gospel is rather a matter of, “Come unto an influence within the church,” than it is a matter of, “Come to a living Savior and a mighty Lord.” They reconceive the Christian mission. Inevitably and inescapably they must do this, as it’s not so much the task of introducing folk the world over to Jesus Christ the Lord, as it’s a matter of going out to the other religions to enrich them. That was the nineteenth century way of envisaging the Christian mission. You take insight from the world of Christian thinking to make Buddhism into better Buddhism, Hinduism into better Hinduism, and so on.

### *Liberals Seek Needs*

The counterpart of that, in this late twentieth century, is the reconceiving of mission in terms of *humanization*, going out in order to identify with the secular ambitions and desires and concerns of the nations and to help them forward in their desires for political liberty, economic stability, and so on. (You will know that there’s a great deal of thinking of this kind in the World Council of Churches.) And all this is opposed to the preaching of the living, reigning Christ crucified and alive forevermore.

And the message is no longer presented in the terms in which Paul presented it to the Philippian jailer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Jesus, according to this “gospel,” is an example and an influential memory in the church, but precisely not a living Savior and friend here and now in the present tense. And in the church, we have to fight the conflict

constantly with liberalism, just as we have to fight the good fight against unbelief in the world.

Well, this is the situation into which these lectures of mine are being offered. What we are going to do together, God enabling us, is to rethink and to restate the essential gospel, the scriptural gospel, in the light of some of these modern trends, in the light of some of these latter-day modern movements. We are going to look at alternatives to scriptural positions; we are going to consider what can be said in favor of them and what has to be said against them. I hope we may through God's grace keep the gospel from being overlaid with misbelief in our own minds and equip ourselves to proclaim the gospel all the more clearly to others.

### **The Story of the Gospel**

The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to the first of the series of questions that we'll be exploring. What sort of a message, what sort of good news, what sort of a communication is the gospel anyway? What sort of instruction is the word of the cross, the proclaiming of Christ crucified?

I could answer that question by saying the proclamation is essentially the declaring of a series of doctrines. I have in fact answered the question that way in print before now. If you look at my book, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, you'll find me saying that the preaching of the gospel, the message of the gospel, concerns five realities, all themes of Christian doctrine: (1) God and his holiness, (2) man and his sin, (3) Christ, his cross and his atonement, (4) faith and repentance, and (5) the Holy Spirit and new life.<sup>2</sup>

2 J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1971).

Putting it that way, I would be answering the question by saying the gospel is an orthodoxy. And that answer would not be false. What are doctrines? They are distillations of scriptural lines of thought for teaching purposes. The Latin word *doctrina* means teaching. As such, doctrines are, so to speak, ring fences around the reality of God at work. Creeds and confessions are similarly ring fences around the reality of God at work, and in that they consist of Christian doctrines. Within the area marked off by the ring fence, one must look, one must dig, one must explore, if one is going to grasp the truth.

Outside that area, whatever notions one finds will not be the truth. Doctrines are needed to circumscribe the truth. Doctrines are given us by God the teacher himself. Doctrines are necessary in the church because God has given doctrines to the church—God himself through his messengers has taught us the truth. Therefore, doctrines must be formulated, and doctrines must be valued. For God himself has become our teacher. What is in the Bible is doctrine and so it should be presented.

I say these things in order to convince you, if such convincing were necessary, that I am not in any sense against doctrines. In England, I find myself in many circles something of a speckled bird by reason of my enthusiasm for doctrines. But yet, what I want to say here is that to answer the question, “What sort of message is the gospel?” by saying, “The gospel consists of doctrines,” would be a limited answer because doctrines as we receive them and as we preserve them and as we state them are defensive, often abstract, as formerly static. We have to remind ourselves that we are not saved, nor do we come to know God simply by being orthodox and being able to rattle off the doctrines. In my book *Knowing*



*God*, I make rather a song and dance about that too. That there is a difference between knowing about God and knowing God. Knowing *about* God is only the means to knowing God, just as knowing *about* a person in this world is hopefully the means of subsequently coming into a relationship with them based on an awareness and an understanding of who and what they are.<sup>3</sup>

I don't want to answer the question by saying, "The gospel is essentially a proclaiming of doctrines"—true though that answer would be. I prefer, for now, to answer the question like this: What sort of communication is the gospel? Answer: It's a story. It's a story told about God. Ultimately, inasmuch as it's a matter of revelation, it's a story about God told to us by God. It's a story in which God through his spokesman bears witness to himself. The theme of the story is precisely the living God at work—in this world, in the past, in the present, and in the future. It's the story of what God has done, is doing, and will do.

### *We've a Story to Tell*

Here I note that in the Scriptures, and also in what I'm saying now, the word *gospel* is a concertina word, sometimes used with a narrower range of meaning, as when the concertina is closed up, and sometimes used with a wider range, as when the concertina is opened. Christ crucified is the heart of the matter, whether the word *gospel* is used in the narrower or the broader sense. In the narrower sense, the gospel means the area covered by those five doctrines that I mentioned just now, and the work God has done as men's Savior on the cross, and that he does in bringing men

3 J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (orig. 1973; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023).

through faith to know him now, and that he will do as he leads men on in that life that the Holy Spirit gives.

Taking the word *gospel*, however, in the broader sense that it also bears in Scripture, it signifies nothing less than the whole counsel of God, that whole divine plan that began in eternity and will only be completed in eternity. From eternity to eternity the plan of salvation will not be completed until the church is perfect in glory.

I am using the word *gospel* now in the wider sense rather than in the narrower sense, with scriptural precedent for what I am doing. The gospel, as I'm saying, is essentially a story, a narrative about God.

We may learn this way of looking at the matter from our hymns. Hymns take us again and again to the heart of Christianity. You might think that the missionary hymn, which I am just about to quote, is naïve in some ways; nonetheless, it makes this point for me admirably as I think. It is the hymn that provided the title for this chapter:

We've a story to tell to the nations,  
That shall turn their hearts to the right,  
A story of truth and mercy,  
A story of peace and light. . . .

We've a message to give to the nations,  
That the Lord who reigneth above  
Has sent us his Son to save us,  
And show us that God is love.<sup>4</sup>

4 H. Ernest Nichol, "We've a Story to Tell to the Nations," 1896.

Or again, with equal naïvety but with equal truth, we may look at the children's hymn:

Tell me the old, old, story  
Of unseen things above  
Of Jesus and His glory,  
Of Jesus and His love. . . .

Tell me the story slowly,  
That I may take it in—  
That wonderful redemption,  
God's remedy for sin. . . .

Tell me the story always,  
If you would really be  
In any time of trouble,  
A comforter to me.<sup>5</sup>

The story—yes, exactly. The hymns are right. You can get the same message from the theologians. Take the late Karl Barth. In the 1920s, he was insisting already that his purpose as a theologian was to focus on the simple points of Christian truth. And in 1962, touring America for the last time, he was asked by some American wiseacre what was the profoundest thought that he'd ever had. And Barth answered by quoting from the children's hymn, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."<sup>6</sup>

5 Katherine Hankey, "Tell Me the Old, Old Story," 1866.

6 Anna Bartlett Warner, "Jesus Loves Me," 1959.

*The Heart of the Story*

Paul wrote Romans as his great, elaborate, full-dress exposition of the gospel. And he started it almost ceremonially with a great, full-dress sentence announcing the subject of the letter. The sentence reads like this:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship. . . .” (Rom. 1:1–5)

But I needn’t read further. You see what Paul is announcing: the gospel, the good news concerning the Son—a historical personage descended from David according to the flesh, who rose from the dead—Jesus Christ the Lord. This is history. This is a story of what God has done.

And bracket with that the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul recalls the Corinthians to basics, saying:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for

our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared. . . . (1 Cor. 15:1–5)

Again, we have to say: This is story. This is narrative. This is history. This is a proclamation of what God has done. You don't need me to remind you that in the letter to the Romans, Paul moves from what God has *done* to what God is *doing* in giving life to those who have faith in Christ, and what God *will do* in perfecting the church. Remember how Romans 11 paints that glorious vision of the church finally complete, Jew and Gentile together in the one body and God all in all? Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul moves from looking *back* to Jesus's death and resurrection into the *present*, the forgiveness of sins that those who believe in the resurrection have, and into the *future*, the Christian hope of resurrection someday when the trumpet sounds and the dead are raised. This is the gospel, the declaration, the story of God's work—past, present, and future.

In 1936, studying the sermons in the book of the Acts, C. H. Dodd found the apostolic preaching, the characteristic *kerygma*, recurring again and again as men proclaimed the fulfilling of prophecy in the life and death and resurrection—the present reign and the future return—of Jesus Christ the Lord.<sup>7</sup>

Yes, all the way through the New Testament the gospel is declared as history. Let's not dance around this word *history* as so many scholars today, alas, do. When I speak of history, I mean the space-time continuum within which you and I are found

7 C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (1936).

at ten to nine on this Tuesday evening in September 1978, and which has been continuous since the world was made. History is the public stage of that space-time continuum, and the events that we are speaking of and that the New Testament records took place within that space-time continuum. And the nature of this story can be characterized by saying, in principle: If we could travel back through time with H. G. Wells's Time Traveler in *The Time Machine* or with the modern Dr. Who in his police box, we could in principle stand with those who listened to Jesus's preaching in Galilee long ago, stand with those who watched him die on the cross, stand with the women and the disciples at the empty tomb on the third day. These things happened. And in principle if we could travel back in time, we could have shared in the events ourselves. We could have witnessed what others in fact witnessed.

It's in this simple, straightforward, basic sense that we say, these things proclaimed in the gospel are history. For the apostles themselves clearly and unambiguously so regard them. The gospel is history. It is story. It is the narrative of what God has done in the space-time continuum—and does still, and will do until history reaches its end.

### *A Story in Many Strands*

The Bible narrates this story by ringing the changes on various key themes, which in different places of Scripture become focal points for the telling of the story. The gospel, we might say, is like a rope made up of a number of strands woven together, and each of these different presentations of the gospel is just one of those strands. But the gospel in its fullness isn't before us until

all the strands have been woven together and the whole rope has been constructed.

THE STORY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

What, you say, are the separate strands? Well, you can tell the story first as the story of God's kingdom: of how God expressed his unchanging kingship—his sovereignty over his world—by bringing that world, following man's initial rebellion, back into actual submission to his rule once again and the actual enjoyment of the saving mercy: the gift of eternal life that those who submit to God's rule come to know.

The story begins with man's rebellion and consequent loss of spiritual life in the garden of Eden. It goes on to show how God made himself King, first over his own people Israel. It tells how he set up a monarchy to rule in his place over his people Israel, how through the prophets he established in the minds of his people the hope of a greater King—a Son of David who would be David's Lord who was later to come. It shows how his Son came into the world to be that King: Jesus, the Christ. It tells us how, following his crucifixion and resurrection, he became King, reigning in heaven at the Father's right hand and how one day he is coming in his kingdom, finally to establish in a public and open way, that dominion that is already his, albeit unacknowledged for the most part by man.

This is the story of God's kingdom and of Jesus Christ the King in that kingdom. In spelling out this strand of the scriptural message, we shall pay special attention to the history books of Scripture, all the Old Testament, to many messianic passages in Old Testament history, and to the first three Gospels in the New Testament in particular, all of which dwell on this theme.

## THE STORY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Second, you can tell the gospel story in terms of the theme of God's people: God is fulfilling his purpose of creating a people who shall live in fellowship with himself, worshiping him and witnessing to him, glorifying him and enjoying him both now and forever. This story begins in eternity with the three who are one resolving to have man in their fellowship, and then on the stage of time the story goes on to tell us how God chose Abram and Abram's seed to be his people. The story tells how he called Abram's family out of Egypt and in the wilderness made them his people by covenant, and established worship—the pattern of priesthood and sacrifice—to ensure that the fellowship between them should always be an experienced reality and that nothing should block it.

The story would go on to tell how he taught Israel to live in fellowship with him. The story continued through to Jesus Christ, the true Israel, the seed of Abraham and his own person in whom Israel is reconstituted. The story would go on to show how the New Testament church is in fact the new and true Israel in Jesus Christ. And the story would end with spelling out the nature of the new community that God by his grace has brought into being: the church as the people of God, the church as the body of Christ, and the church as the community of the Spirit. The church is the third race in this world, the international society with a heavenly life. The church is the company of those who know the forgiveness of sins, fellowship with God by grace through faith, and eternal life now.

For the telling of the story in this way, we should draw most heavily on Exodus and Deuteronomy and Hosea in the Old



Testament, and books like Galatians and Ephesians and Revelation in the New Testament.

#### THE STORY OF THE MEDIATION OF GOD

In connection with the general story of God creating a people, we should tell, as perhaps a part of it or a separate theme, the third strand in the gospel story: the story of mediation, that is, the story of God's special work of grace to create fellowship between sinners and himself.

We should tell the story of how God first set up a typical priesthood and sacrifice and place of access in order to teach his people that there was a need for mediation. We tell how the pattern of mediation came finally to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is both our great high priest and the one perfect sacrifice for sins for all God's people for all time. We must tell them of Jesus, who by his sacrifice has substituted for that tabernacle, followed by the temple in Jerusalem, the particular locality where men were told to worship God. The situation, the state of affairs, is one in which any man, at any time, may call upon God through Jesus Christ, and find himself in Christ's presence with his mediation effective. We tell how he is bringing them to God and keeping them in fellowship with God. This is the story of mediation.

The pattern is spelled out in Exodus and Leviticus, and the reality is spelled out in the Gospel of John and Galatians and Romans and most of all in Hebrews, where we are shown how Jesus fulfills in his own person and by his sacrifice this pattern, this picture of mediation. So then this third strand in the gospel story is that of God's initiative in mediation, whereby he brings sinners into fellowship with himself.

THE STORY OF THE VICTORY OF GOD

A fourth strand in the gospel story is the theme of renewal—both the renewal of the world and the renewal of a disordered creation. Creation is morally disordered through the revolt of Satan and the consequent revolt of men, and cosmically disordered, as Paul indicates without going into details in the middle of Romans 8. But disorder has not come to stay. This strand of the gospel message proclaims that Satan and his adherents, both angelic and human, are doomed. Their revolt cannot last forever. Satan is a defeated foe. He will be judged, and those who side with him will be judged. By contrast, those who put their faith in God through Christ are already being inwardly renewed in heart and spirit and character. One day they will be outwardly renewed and given bodies to match in resurrection. On that day, the whole cosmos will be renewed. There will be a new heaven and a new earth, and the glory of God will finally and fully be shown forth throughout the cosmos as the waters cover the sea.

This way of telling the gospel story is a proclamation of divine victory, by stages, over sin and the disorder that sin has created. For telling the gospel story in this way, the passages of special relevance are Genesis 3, Romans 8, much in Isaiah, 2 Peter 3, much in Revelation, and so on.

THE STORY OF GOD THE FATHER  
GLORIFYING HIS SON

Fifthly, you can tell the story as the story of the glorifying of God's Son. You can announce it and present it in terms of the Father's purpose to honor and make known his Son as co-Creator, as

Redeemer, as head of the church, as the source of life to sinners, as the world's present Lord and coming King, and as the one whom men are to worship and honor as they honor the Father. Looked at from this standpoint, the gospel becomes an invitation to bow down and worship Jesus Christ. The Scripture passages especially relevant for telling the story in this way are the Gospel of John and the letter to the Colossians and again much in the book of Revelation.

#### THE STORY OF THE IMAGE OF GOD

Sixthly, one can tell the story as the proclamation of the perfecting of man in God's image. One can tell the story in terms of man, and the problem that he raises and that he presents to himself, and in terms of the solution that God, the God who made him, provides to that problem. Who am I? Why am I here? Whence did I come? Where am I going?

God's answer, revealed in the gospel, is that every man was made to be God-like. Every man was made to live in the image of God and in fellowship with God. I believe that biblical theology teaches us to see the image of God as destiny, no less than endowment. It was both the one and the other.

As for image as endowment, we see man made in the image of God in Genesis 1. The image consists of rationality (the capacity to make plans and carry them through), creativity, dominion, spiritual knowledge, knowledge of divine reality, and with that righteousness and holiness. I can prove all those things, I think, from Genesis 1. Surely it is right exegesis and theology to understand the image of God in Genesis 1, first and foremost, in terms of the presentation of God in Genesis 1, and in that chapter,

rationality, creativity, dominion, knowledge, and holiness are the qualities that God in Genesis 1 is shown as manifesting.

But man's destiny was to live in a way that exhibited godlikeness every moment, and in every activity, for the whole of human life. And in that sense, likeness to God was man's destiny. Of course, Adam fell and so his destiny wasn't fulfilled. But the New Testament picks up the theme and proclaims the image of God as restored in Christ through union with Christ. Union with Christ is another of the great gospel themes. In Ephesians 4:24 Paul spoke of the gospel as a summons to put on the new man, which is created after the "likeness of God"—the image of God, we might say, for that's what likeness means. Man is created after the image of God "in true righteousness and holiness." Similarly, Colossians 3:10 speaks of Christians as having "put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge" of God and all that that entails "after the image of its creator."

Everything that the New Testament has to say about God's gift to man in Christ, about the holiness that he requires, is in truth part of the theme of restoring in man God's image as his destiny. This is yet another strand in the gospel story, yet another way in which that gospel story can be told.