J.I. Packer’s Significance for Evangelicalism

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[0:00] Thank you. It's great to be back with you all this morning. The talk I want to give you this morning is one that I gave for Jim's 90th academic birthday party.

It was at the Evangelical Theological Society in San Antonio in Texas, the group that meets every year along with the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion.

And the Society wanted to honor Jim and his life and his ministry. And so there was a session in San Antonio devoted to Jim's career and his work.

And what personally we remember San Antonio for is Carolyn was there and walked off a curb and broke her ankle. So she took back a little gift from San Antonio, still has a crutch there.

But sadly, Jim was not well enough to come. He was going to come and respond to the papers. So it was slightly less fun because I think all of us were wanting to give our papers as an honor and as a tribute to Jim.

[1:06] But Alistair McGrath gave a paper on Jim's theology, his significance in theology. Timothy George gave a fascinating paper just on Jim's contribution as an ecumenical figure.

And Timothy George from Beeson Divinity School has worked with Jim over the years in Evangelicals and Catholics together in that whole dialogue. Gerald McDermott, a Jonathan Edwards scholar who has the new chair, well, he's not a new chair, but he's newly appointed the chair at Beeson Divinity School in Anglican theology, gave a paper on Jim's significance for Anglicanism.

And I'm trying to think of the other papers. Lee Ryken, Leland Ryken, a longtime English professor, Wheaton, just wrote a biography of Jim. And so he gave a paper, the first paper just outlining Jim's career and so on.

So it was a bit of a Jim Packer fest for his 90th. I actually attended and gave a paper at one for his 80th birthday.

And there was a Festschrift, which is the academic term. It's from the German. It means festival writing. And it's an academic, when academics produce a Festschrift, festival writing, it's this kind of an event where different people give papers when they're published.

[2:23] It's called a Festschrift. And there was a Festschrift that was also done for Jim's 70th birthday. So I don't know if I will have anything left to say for Jim's 100th. But we hope that he thrives.

He's just such a remarkable figure. And I think there's a way that locally we can kind of take Jim for granted. He's just Jim. We love him. No Jim. I thought it might be helpful to present to you some of what I presented in San Antonio.

My brief was Jim's contribution or significance for evangelicalism. And just sort of for us to be aware of the gift that Jim has been to the church and to put our local Jim in a bit larger context.

So I'll kind of give the paper with a little bit of director's commentary on what I was doing in the paper. In a way, it's easier.

It's a little bit, in one way, a little bit easier for me to give this paper without him being here. But he gave various responses. My paper was written a little bit late.

[3:31] And so he said, yes, I read your paper, Bruce. He said it felt like a warm hug. And I thought, actually, I don't mind giving Jim Packer a hug. So it's a warm hug.

So Jim Packer is the man who, for me, was first my teacher at Regent College in the 1980s. And some years later, my colleague and literally next-door neighbor in the hallway at Regent College.

A fellow church member here at St. John's Anglican Church in Vancouver. So these are some of the contexts in which I've known Jim. And when I gave the paper, I talked about how we've been – this paper was given in November.

I said we've been hard-added already, celebrating Jim's 90th in various ways. Much fanfare since the summer. There are a couple events at Regent. There's an event here. But on this occasion in San Antonio, we were reflecting with gratitude for his contribution to the church and its theology over a long and fruitful lifetime, remarkable lifetime.

And my brief, as I say, is to talk about Jim's significance for evangelicalism. I say with thanks to Phil Long for his splendid caricatures. And you'll see what I mean in a minute.

[4:47] In the present political culture, the word evangelical is freighted, isn't it, with a good deal of baggage that I want to shed immediately. And so when we think about the term evangelical since the 1970s, at least, in American culture in terms of politics and polling and the evangelical vote and in the recent election, there's so much baggage with the term evangelical.

And so in shedding that immediately, I do so by going straight back to the great 16th century Bible translator William Tyndale, who wrote this.

Isn't that a great definition of evangelical?

So we may set aside for the moment the pollster's use of the word evangelical as a term of partisan identification and remind ourselves with Tyndale that the Old English word gospel never got a proper Old English adjective.

We don't say gospelical or something. It had to steal one from the Greek evangelical. But the noun and the adjective belong together. We may therefore throw open the windows, let in some clean 16th century air, and appreciate with William Tyndale what the Apostle Paul called the power or the dynamic, the dunamis of the gospel to generate confidence and set people in joyful motion.

[6:30] That's what the gospel does. This vibrant relationship between word and life, message and experience, doctrine and devotion was absolutely central to the evangelical movements in Germany and English-speaking lands that emerged with the modern period.

With the overwhelming concern to foster true religion in a population that could only be described as nominally Christian. So especially in the aftermath of the Reformation, this was a real push and a real concern in Germany and then an English-speaking lands.

Somebody like Johann Arndt, who wants to see the Reformation extended into people's lives, wrote a book called True Religion. True Religion. And this was the beginning of that kind of a concern.

Evangelicals today claim some sort of either genealogical, like family tree connection, or theological continuity, and ideally both with these movements.

That's how I understand the term evangelical. Though as I say today, the danger is sometimes it's simply used as a term of partisan or sociological significance. But wherever, wherever we see the preaching of Jesus Christ generate new life and set people in joyful motion, this is where we properly use the adjective evangelical in its most basic sense and its most important sense.

[8:01] It is why we cannot, I think, abandon the term, even though sometimes given politics and everything else we might want to. All other uses of the term evangelical to classify or categorize or even self-identify are at best secondary.

They may still be necessary for historians and sociologists, but they are definitely secondary. The gospel, the message about Jesus Christ, and evangelical ought always to be kept together.

What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder. Indeed, at the outset, I think one of the ways Jim Packer has been most significant for evangelicalism, and this would be, this is my thesis statement for the paper, where he's been most significant for evangelicalism over the past six decades, six decades, is precisely that he has acted to help those who identify as evangelicals socially to be evangelicals theologically and spiritually.

Right? Can I say that again? I think where he's been most significant is helping those who identify as evangelicals socially to be so theologically and spiritually.

So, in thinking of Jim's contribution to evangelicalism in this respect, I can think of six roles. So we're going to unpack this in terms of six roles that Jim has played among evangelicals.

[9:28] The first role is one I assigned to him on his 80th birthday, but it still applies. He is the Robin Hood of evangelicalism. Do you all know Phil Long?

My colleague Phil Long at Regent College in Old Testament. Phil actually earned a living as a portrait painter. And he's a wonderful artist, but he can also whip off these caricatures pretty quickly.

And so when I gave him a copy of my paper and asked him, he kindly illustrated it for us. And when I gave the paper for Jim's 80th birthday party, I invited the audience to imagine him in green lederhosen and lincoln green.

Anyways, there he is. He's the Robin Hood of evangelicalism, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. By training and by dint of his own disciplined study, extensive study, massive study, he acquired early in his career a deep knowledge of church history, as you know, and classic works of Christian theology.

Popular evangelicalism, on the other hand, has often been profoundly ahistorical, without reference to history, and anti-intellectual in its outlook. Just as the absence of good King Richard had left England in turmoil in the time of Robin Hood, modernity has caused problems for the church.

[10:56] Not to put too fine a point on it, Packer described North American Protestantism as man-centered, manipulative, success-oriented, self-indulgent, and sentimental.

He gets away with saying these things, and he still gets invited to speak. He has therefore contrived, like Robin Hood, to take from the rich and give to the poor.

He has been able to retrieve riches from the past, and employ them for the purpose of renewing the life of Christians in the present. So this is the strategy I'm talking about.

Retrieval for the sake of renewal. Let's explore this just a little bit. Other Christians in the 20th century have responded to modernity similarly. Most famously, C.S. Lewis argued that the characteristic blindness of our age can only be discerned by reading old books.

To counter what he called chronological snobbery, that assumes everything new is best. To counter that, it was necessary, said Lewis, to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds.

[12:05] It's a famous line from Lewis, and appropriately so. The clean sea breeze of the century blowing through our minds. I call this, as I say, a strategy of retrieval for the sake of renewal in the present.

A response to modernity which cuts off our memory of the past. In 1944, when Packer was in his late teens, Lewis wrote an introduction to a new translation of Athanasius' classic work on the Incarnation.

And Lewis wrote that he did not wish the ordinary reader to read no modern books. He's introducing a very old book, a patristic book. But that he said if it was a choice between the new books and the old books, he would advise reading the old books.

Why, said Lewis, he said a new book is still on trial. The amateur is not in a position to judge it. It has to be tested against the great body of Christian thought down the ages.

All its hidden implications have to be brought to light. The only safety is to have a standard of plain central Christianity. Mere Christianity, as Baxter called it, which puts the controversies of the moment in their proper perspective.

[13:08] This is part of the role of church history, part of why we go to the past to have perspective in the present. C.S. Lewis lapses into his teacher's voice and looks over his glasses, as it were, and lectures his pupils as he continues.

He says, It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one until you have read an old one in between. So the characteristic blindness of a given age, of our own age, can be discerned by reading old books.

And Lewis said, When you read the old books, when you discover what Jim Packer and others have called the great tradition, he says, You get onto the great level viaduct, like those Roman viaducts, which cross the ages and look so high from the valleys, so low from the mountains, so narrow compared with the swamp, so broad compared with the sheep tracks.

For Packer and Lewis in England, it was important to recall the church in the modern world to this level viaduct, this great tradition. It was a place to stand in the midst of modernity.

Something similar was also happening in France in the mid-20th century. Another exercise of historical retrieval for the sake of renewal as a strategy to deal with modernity.

[14:25] Here, certain European Catholic theologians just prior to Vatican II were using the same strategy. Henri de Lubac, Jean Danilou, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Louis Boyer, and others that Jim knows well participated in this movement.

It was labeled derisively La Nouvelle Theologie, or The New Theology, even though precisely what they were doing is going back. What united this diverse group, says one critic, were the convictions, number one, that theology had to speak to the church's present situation, number two, the key to theology's relevance in the present lay in the creative recovery of its past.

Those two things. In the language that came to be used later in Roman Catholic circles using one Italian word and one French word, the key to aggiormento, renewal or adaptation, was to be found in resorcement, a rediscovery of the riches of the church's past.

In the Protestant world, it was ad fontes. We associate that with the reformers going back to the fount. But it seems like something like this was happening with these Catholic theologians.

We could go on to illustrate this, but out of this whole movement on the continent in Europe came the patristic revival, the revival of the study of the fathers, renewed scholarship translation efforts and a focus on spirituality.

[15:46] I think it's parallel. What was happening in the mid-20th century in France among Catholic theologians had its parallel, at least in the strategic retrieval for the sake of renewal with the neo-Calvinist revival that was going on and associated with Jim Packer in England seeking to retrieve some of the riches of the past for the renewal of the church in the present.

I think it's a really important response to modernity. It's addressing a church that seemed to be cut off from its own sources by the caustic, ahistorical, and pragmatic culture of modernity.

That's a Robin Hood kind of ministry. There's more we could say about that strategy. It's one that I emphasized in Jim's 80th birthday.

It's a way of throwing a lifeline to a church sinking beneath the toxic waves of modernity. We could use other metaphors. The church is like an army cut off from its historic supply lines by the forces of modernity.

Without food or water or ammunition, the church weakens. It's unable to repel the assaults of its enemies. In this situation, the church has needed some special operations forces, some green berets to make strategic raids behind enemy lines, retrieve resources from the past for the renewal of the beleaguered forces in the present.

[17:09] And that, I think, one of those has been Jim Packer. In an article on ecumenical orthodoxy in 1996, in my paper I say Packer, but in this context I think I just need to say Jim.

In an article on ecumenical orthodoxy in 1996, Jim identified himself as operating in a very similar way to these other figures I've been mentioning, saying, as an Anglican, a Protestant, an Evangelical, and a small c Catholic, I theologize out of what I see as the authentic, biblical, and creedal mainstream of Christian identity, the confessional and liturgical great tradition.

He plants himself in this tradition. From such riches, he has addressed the poverty of popular Evangelicalism, which he once described as 3,000 miles wide and half an inch deep.

We can even sharpen this a little bit, be more specific about the nature of his Robin Hood ministry as an Evangelical.

Although he has stolen from the riches of all of church history, and Jim knows church history really well, he knows the whole story of church history extremely well, he came earlier to the conviction that there was much in the Puritan tradition in particular to contribute to the church today.

[18:31] As I've already alluded to, he is one of the key catalysts in the post-war revival of Puritan or Neo-Calvinist theology among Evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic. And it wasn't antiquarianism.

It wasn't just antiquarian scholarship. He felt, with Martin Lloyd-Jones and others, that the Puritans could correct what he called the, here's some more vintage Packer, the entrenched intellectualists, restless experience, and disaffected deviationists among Evangelicals today.

Since his first encounter with the Puritans at Oxford as librarian for the OICU, who knows what the OICU stands for? Of course. The Oxford Intercollegiate Christian Union or the InterVarsity Group.

As a secretary, librarian for that group in Oxford, then through his doctoral dissertation on Richard Baxter and his part in founding the Puritan Studies Conferences, he has drawn deeply from this particular well of historical theology, this particular fount of experimental Protestantism.

For a quarter century, he led a seminar at Regent College with Jim Houston on Puritan and Cistercian spirituality, with Jim Houston feeling like where we need to go for renewal is to the Cistercians, to this 12th century Cistercian movement, Jim Packer feeling like where we really need to go is to the Puritans.

[20:01] Carolyn took that seminar. So for a quarter century, 25 years, they did this seminar, which the students enjoyed chiefly, I think, for the sparks that flew between the two gyms as they interacted over student papers and vigorously disagreed.

The Regent College Library is now actually the happy beneficiary of the gift of a large number of 17th century Puritan folios, Puritan volumes that Houston and Packer have passed on from their personal collections, old books to nourish a new generation.

Having these folios, folio just describes the size of some of these books, in our basement library, having these Regent, I often remind our students that Regent is founded on treasure, treasure stolen from the rich and given to the poor.

This may serve as a cameo of Jim Packer's wider influence for good among evangelicals. We are all richer on account of his theological generosity and theft. So one contribution of Jim to evangelicalism has been in this role as a theological and spiritual Robin Hood, alleviating our poverty from the wealthy stores of the Greek tradition, generally, and the Puritans specifically.

A second related role he has played is one memorably identified by Time Magazine. Time Magazine in the year 2005 when he was named one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America.

[21:31] He was, said Time Magazine, the theological traffic cop of evangelicalism, theological traffic cop of evangelicalism, which, it must be said, sounds much more law-abiding and less nefarious than Robin Hood.

Evangelicalism has been, throughout its history, a movement with all the fluidity that that word implies. Without a magisterium like the Catholic Church or a visible church order or a hierarchy, it has not always been clear how theology functions to regulate evangelical belief and practice or unite evangelicals around core doctrines.

Who is the evangelical pope? where is the evangelical magisterium? Who speaks for evangelicals? In this context, amidst all the diversity and denominational pluralism of 20th century evangelicalism, Packer has been, according to Time Magazine, a doctrinal Solomon.

Mediating debates, and here I'm quoting from the magazine, on everything from particular Bible translations to the acceptability of free-flowing Pentecostal spirituality, Packer helps unify a community that could easily fall victim to its internal tensions.

Through the influence especially of his 1973 book Knowing God, Packer emerged as a theological arbiter among evangelicals, someone around whom they could rally and say, yes, this speaks for us.

[23:06] Across the board, said Time Magazine, Presbyterians, Baptists, conservative Methodists could all appeal to his writings and say, this sums it up for me. What Time Magazine said here is perhaps less true for Mennonites, Pentecostals, African American evangelicals than these other denominations.

The more nuts and bolts research will no doubt be done to assess in time how Packer's influence, how widely it extends. And Mark Knoll has done some of this work. He made a beginning on this in the Festschrift I mentioned earlier.

But I suspect that we will find even here among these denominations his influence has been extensive as it has been around the world in other places such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Korea, I know for sure, where his works have been translated and loved.

In many places there are evangelicals who have looked to Packer's writings as the embodiment of evangelical theology. He is an international traffic cop too. Ten years ago Knowing God was listed at number five on Christianity Today's list of the top 50 books that have shaped American evangelicals.

Isn't that amazing? The further reach of Packer's most famous book Beyond the Anglosphere may be gauged by considering that it has been translated now into, wait for it, Japanese, Norwegian, Chinese, Italian, Spanish, Korean, Finnish, Portuguese, French, Swedish, Polish, Hebrew, Russian, Dutch, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Turkish, Greek, Indonesian, Estonian, and Urdu.

[24:37] And last summer an ambitious crowdsourcing fundraising project was mounted to translate Knowing God into Arabic. Isn't that amazing? It's the impact of that one book.

I did a little bit of research and maybe afterwards we could talk about this a little bit if we have time, but I, talked to Karen Stiller, one of the leading Canadian evangelical religious journalists, to Brian Stiller, a former president, head of Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and to John Stackhouse, my former colleague, who's a major historian of Canadian evangelicalism.

What's Jim's contribution to Canadian evangelicalism? And nobody felt that there was a distinctive contribution that could be distinguished in Canada from his general contribution in the States.

It wasn't that he headlined any Canadian organizations or Canadian conferences or Canadian publications. And it may say more about the nature of Canadian evangelicalism than anything.

If there's an influence in Canada, I think it's been chiefly as an Anglican in Canada and through Regent College. But it'd be interesting to know if there's any distinctive way we can distinguish his influence in Canada from his influence generally.

[25:57] Maybe you know what God was translated into Canadian. In his regulatory role as a traffic cop, it's important to note not only that Packer has articulated core beliefs around which evangelical could rally as a kind of one-man magisterium, but also that he has been willing to engage in controversy and contend for the faith.

There are a number of issues within evangelical ranks we could identify as drawing Packer's fire. From his critique of Keswick teaching on the higher life in the 1950s to his concern in the 1980s with the view of conversion in both crusade evangelism and charismatic power evangelism as conversion, that view of conversion is too shallow.

There's a Lausanne address he gave on that. From his opposition to Lloyd-Jones in 1966 over evangelical separatism, to his public opposition to female ordained ministry that caused such a stir in 1991, including at Regent College.

Underlying his genuine warmth and goodwill, there's a good deal of steel. He has not been averse to controversy. However, his main concern throughout his career has not been with these issues so much that are internal to evangelicalism.

Right? I don't think so. I think his main concern is with the larger threat of theological liberalism to the faith and spiritual life of ordinary Christians.

[27:23] As he often said, liberal Christianity has no grandchildren. With the emergence of radical theology in the 1960s, he vigorously opposed the effort of fellow Anglicans such as John A.T.

Robinson to alter theology to meet the supposed needs of modern culture. It was in response to this liberal threat that he sought to uphold and strengthen evangelical convictions about biblical authority and divine revelation in influential works such as Fundamentalism and the Word of God, 1958, which sold 20,000 copies in its first year.

It's actually quite remarkable in 1958. It established him as a spokesman for evangelicalism. Or also in his later 1965 book, God Has Spoken, Revelation and the Bible.

This continued in his work on the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in the late 1970s and 80s. In all of this, he was a kind of latter-day B.B. Warfield, the Princetonian theologian from the 19th century, and I think his concern was emphatically less with the polarizing politics evident among evangelicals in the 1970s in the battle for the Bible, 1970s and 80s.

I don't think that was his main concern, than with the pastoral need to sustain a proper confidence in Scripture as the faithful Word of God. Jim's concern has always been with the implications of this for ordinary Christians.

[28:46] What does it mean to sustain proper confidence in Scripture as the faithful Word of God that speaks to me? In my own class notes from the fall semester of 1987, when I took a systematic theology course from Jim, his definition of inerrancy struck this note, and this is vintage Packer again, it's very terse, but it's really good.

Alison McGrath really likes this. Inerrancy, said Jim in my class notes, was an affirmation of total trustworthiness as a consequence of entire truthfulness.

Total trustworthiness as a consequence of entire truthfulness. There's the positive emphasis rather than the negative focus. This was a very traffic coppish kind of affirmation to make.

So also with his first work, his work first in England and then in Canada to combat the inroads of liberal theology and ethics within Anglicanism. His stat has been costly and led in 2008, as we all know here, but I'm saying this to people in San Antonio, the perverse charge under Canon 19 of the Anglican Church of Canada of quote, presumption of abandonment of the exercise of ministry.

But here he stood, he could do no other. Throughout his career then, for some 60 years, wherever Packer saw revisionist, liberal traffic approaching, he held up a hand, blew his whistle, and refused to let it merge onto the evangelical roadway.

[30:14] So what have we got so far? We've got Robin Hood, we've got traffic cop, Jim Packer has also been a plumber. A plumber. On December the 11th, 1989, on the occasion of his installation as the first Sangwu Yutong Chi professor of theology at Regent, he gave an inaugural address.

So on being installed in any new professorial appointment, it's typical to give an address where you set out your agenda for your research and so on. And his inaugural address was an introduction to systematic spirituality.

Now remember, Jim Houston had been teaching spiritual theology at Regent for more than a decade. This emphasis was something Packer loved about Regent. It's unwillingness, said Jim, that theology should ever be taught and learned in a way that however much it enriches the head impoverishes the heart.

No, he said, when people ask me, as they sometimes do, why I feel I belong at Regent, this emphasis on spirituality always bulks large in my answer. When someone came up to him in the mid-1980s and said that his books were all about spirituality, it at first took him aback, but then he realized it was true.

Evidently, I've been writing spirituality all along. As a pastor theologian in the Puritan tradition, he had always understood theology as a devotional discipline in the service of authentic Christian living.

[31:41] As he said, the Puritan passion for application got into my blood quite early. In this inaugural address, he therefore called for a marriage of sorts. I want our systematic theology to be practiced as an element in our spirituality, and I want our spirituality to be viewed as an implicate and expression of our systematic theology.

Remember what we said earlier about theology and life belonging together? Evangelical theology, evangelical life, are to be inseparable. And then at the close of his address, he donned his plumber's bib embrace, as it were, and described his own role in this enterprise at Regent College alongside Jim Houston.

Quote, It's a splendid picture for me.

Packer and Houston sharing a common house, with Packer messing about with drains in the basement, and Houston soaring aloft high in the attic. So I think his picture is theologically, he wants to make sure clean water is coming in and the sewage is going out, and this is a healthy environment in which people can then soar.

The role of Packer the plumber at Regent College might be extended more broadly to Packer the plumber within evangelicalism. With the renewal of interest in spirituality among evangelicals, since Richard Foster's celebration of discipline in 1978, alongside the growing interest in spirituality in the wider postmodern culture, Packer has played a role as plumber-in-chief, keeping the drains clear and digging out foundations more broadly with the aim that all evangelicals may soar aloft in such healthy, unpolluted air.

[33:43] He has been emphatically uninterested in a kind of reformed theology that is overly noetic, rationalist, or, on the other hand, a kind of evangelical devotionalism that is sentimental and undiscerning, a kind of sloppy agape.

He has countered, opposed the increasing tendency for the word spirituality to connote much but denote little, as just this kind of suggestive word.

Theology and spirituality are two aspects of the one reality of the encounter with the living God. Again, what God has joined together, let no one put us under. We have in Jim Packer then our Robin Hood, our traffic cop, and our plumber, but to this we can add his role within evangelicalism as a catechist.

As a catechist. This has been a lifelong passion for him, as I think at St. John's we know particularly well. In 1977, at the same time that he was disappointed in the direction set by the National Evangelical Anglican Congress in Nottingham.

There had been the first meeting of NEAC, of the National Evangelical Anglican Congress, I think in 1967, which was really important for evangelicals coming together as Anglicans in Britain.

[35:02] But the second Congress in Nottingham was different, and he was disappointed in that. It had a focus with Anthony Thistleton on critical hermeneutics, but he identified his own concern as less about academic hermeneutics than it was about basic Christian education.

Anglicans need to be taught. The one great need today, he says, is a renewal of systematic Christian instruction, catechetical teaching for all adults.

This was one of the principal reasons he said he was attracted by the invitation to move to Canada to teach at Regent, with its focus for graduate education for lay people. He has always been pleased, these are his words, that Regent is more than a clergy factory.

And he has described the mission of the college, and I love this, as a kind of higher catechism. What are we doing at Regent? It's a kind of higher catechism, helping people think well about their faith as lay people.

And lay people here meaning the whole people of God, clergy and lay people more narrowly. The interdisciplinary ethos of Christian humanism at Regent, the interdisciplinary ethos, exploring the relevance of Christianity to all of life, every discipline, in all vocations, in multiple fields.

[36:20] This was a breath of fresh air to Jim when he arrived from England. His book Christianity, the true humanism, 1985, written with Thomas Howard, was an eloquent statement of these ideals.

From his post at Regent, and with the popularity of his book, Knowing God, around the same time, he had new opportunities, and became effectively a catechist at large for evangelicals.

In this, I think he found a kind of sweet spot as a communicator. He is a scholar through and through, as bookish and tweety as they come. And yet, he speaks and writes not for specialists in peer review academic publications, but for general audiences.

To be sure, he is never short on content. Packer by name, Packer by nature, he says. But he writes to be understood with tremendous clarity and an engaging style.

I once read, forgive this little aside here, but I once read a literary critic on the history of hymnody who lumped hymns into the familiar categories for historians of elite and popular.

[37:25] Elite hymns, highbrow hymns like John Mason Neill's translations of Latin and Greek hymns, but then popular hymnody like medieval carols or African American spirituals and so on.

But when this critic came to the Wesleys and evangelical hymnody, he was not sure what to do. He had to recategorize. The hymns were, he said, classic evangelical hymns were popular, not popular by origin, but popular by destination.

Learned in origin, popular in destination, aimed for ordinary people. That category, scholarly in origin and popular in destination, I think applies to the larger part of Jim's literature.

As the comparison to this Wesleyan hymnody suggests, this is a characteristic evangelical mode, placing scholarship in the service of the whole people of God. There may be some academics, and I know some, who wish Jim would have written more for specialists, and who are disappointed that he hasn't produced an academic, multi-volume, systematic theology, peer-reviewed.

But this was not Jim's personal sense of mission, I don't think. He was, and he would describe himself as a catechist. And I think, given the social structure and the character of evangelicalism as a popular movement, it will always need those who can communicate in exactly this register.

[38:52] Jim has done it better than anyone. Evangelicals need to be taught. Without catechists, one is only left with demagogues. I'm going to read this next paragraph just the way I wrote it and presented it.

This is a little shout-out for Learner's Exchange. From my perch in Vancouver, I am privileged to witness some of the ways that Packer has lived out this vocation as a catechist within our local church, where many ordinary church members simply encounter him week by week as Jim.

For decades now, he has been the inspiration behind a thriving adult Sunday school class, a rare bird in Anglicanism anywhere. The class goes by the humble name Learner's Exchange, and although he regularly contributes, it is lay led and lay taught most weeks.

Jim rarely misses and sits there utterly in his element, positively beaming, while adult Christians, serious about their faith, learn together week by week. What happens here is actually very central to what's animated Jim throughout his career.

In more recent years, in his 80s, let it be noted, he co-authored a book, Grounded in the Gospel, Building Believers in the Old Fashioned Way, 2012, making a forceful case for the need for a systematic program of instruction for families and churches that covers the essentials of the faith.

[40:13] And he served on the committee that produced the 12-week catechism course for Anglicans in 2014. It must be satisfying for him to see in his old age something that he had hoped for for half a century, since at least that second NEAC conference.

I hope I got that right. Some of you have been involved in this, and you can correct me if I don't have that quite right. Four roles. These are significant enough. Robin Hood, Traffic Cop, Plumber, Catechist, but we may add, fifthly, the role of Bridge Builder.

Bridge Builder. To his curriculum vitae among evangelicals. Carolyn and I live on the south arm of the mighty Fraser River, on the delta where it empties into the Pacific Ocean.

And our provincial government has recently employed an army of engineers and a budget of three billion dollars to build a new bridge to span the river, as you all know, and connect us better to the rest of Vancouver.

We may picture one of Packer's roles in evangelicalism as being like one of these highly skilled bridge building engineers, knowing exactly how and where to connect distinct communities, each with their own local life and history and traffic patterns, how to connect them to one another.

[41:27] With the rise of the charismatic movement in the 1960s and 70s, he played just such a bridging role among evangelicals. Though critical of some charismatic experience, and especially any appeal to ecstatic experience as normative, he nonetheless saw in the charismatic movement and, quote, essential evangelicalism, and found much to admire.

His book, Keep in Step with the Spirit, in 1984, was an important mediating voice, mediating, bridge-building voice at a time when the discussion of spiritual gifts was divisive.

His approach was not to pursue some sort of abstract via media agenda, as though all you do is unite people without any principles, but rather, as always, to unite evangelicals around biblical teaching and a thoughtful consideration of the church's history.

He has been a bridge-builder here and a statesman, and not only in his writing, I have watched him worship and teach joyfully along our Pentecostal colleagues at Regent, people like Gordon Fee, who seems to need a whole row to himself to have enough space to worship.

We should enjoy the picture of the hulking and bellowing Pentecostal alongside the thin, pasty, white, and proper Anglican, united in the praise of Christ. I also worked with Jim on the Statement Committee of Essentials 94, some of you will remember this, a meeting that pulled together charismatics, evangelicals, Anglo-Catholics, and prayer book Anglicans of various sorts to address serious concerns over the doctrine and practices of the Anglican Church of Canada.

[43:05] There was such a genuine joy, love, respect, and fellowship in Christ evident in our worship and our theological reasoning and discussion, and Jim was a kind of bridge figure in the midst of it all.

It was inspiring for me and for Carolyn to be a part of this sort of principled exploration of agreement and disagreement, seeking to maintain wherever possible the unity of doctrine, discipline, and devotion.

Word people, spirit people, sacrament people need to all stick together. In Essentials unity, in Non-Essentials Liberty, in all things charity. And I've emphasized just the way Jim works and has worked very well with charismatics.

Timothy George, at the conference, emphasized Jim's role also with Catholics and evangelicals and Catholics together. Again, principled exploration of agreements and disagreements within a common frame.

A bridge builder with Catholics, with Eastern Orthodox believers, and others. It's worth noting, I think, the way his understanding of evangelicalism has functioned in such contexts. I chatted with him on one occasion about the problem some younger evangelicals have identifying with the label evangelical.

[44:19] Do I want to call myself an evangelical anymore? I talked to him about that. People worried about the crudely political and populist excesses that go by that name nowadays.

He replied wisely, I think. He said, I think he said, my dear Bruce. My dear Bruce, if one properly understands something, one can always use other words to describe it.

It's actually brilliant. It's actually brilliant. It's a helpful reminder, and we may soon have to find a lot more of those words to explain evangelicalism well to others and to ourselves.

Holding together theology and experience, Jim has understood evangelicalism to be a form of life within the wider confession of Catholic Christian identity.

Evangelicals have been most themselves when seeking to be Christians, not when seeking to be evangelicals. He thus describes evangelicalism in a characteristically taught phrase as an ethos of convertedness within the larger ethos of Catholicity.

[45:27] An ethos of convertedness within the larger ethos of Catholicity. Convertedness is a divine dynamic generated by an understanding of the gospel, issuing in renewed life.

It is like a mainstream current within the Great Mississippi River. The mainstream flows onward despite eddies and bayous, mudflats and reed beds. Creeds and councils mark the banks of the river.

Faith, repentance, fellowship, communion, holiness and service are all the while being renewed by the life of the Spirit. His appreciation for evangelicalism is this kind of an ethos of convertedness and of life within a larger ethos of Catholicity gives lots of opportunity and scope for bridge building.

That's the significance I think of that. Finally, the last role I would assign to Jim as we consider his significance among evangelicals is that of Tigger from A.A.

Milne's Winnie the Pooh stories. In the house at Pooh Corner, where the character is first introduced, Tigger says of himself, bouncing is what Tiggers do best.

[46:40] Piglet agreed. He just is bouncy and he can't help it. Forgive me, but this is the picture I've had for many years now of Jim Packer coming into the building at Regent College with a spring in his step.

Boing, boing, boing. Like he is walking on springs. Being more temperamentally an Eeyore myself by nature, I have looked on in wonder, admiring his effervescent Christian joy.

He has a zest for life, a real whimsical streak, and a genuine Christian cheerfulness. Also a remarkably dry wit. I remember on one occasion that he came into class and began with a casual remark that it still caused him to smile when in North America he saw a car coming to him in a crosswalk.

The set on the front of it, Dodge. He has a love of clarinet, classic jazz music, a love of steam trains, a love of literature, a love of food.

His Asian friends love to see him keep up with them spoonful for spoonful with the hottest curries and spiciest meals. His stomach is made of cast iron. There are many examples, too, of his joyful, sacrificial service at Regent, such as when he donated many of his own books to Regent in the beginning years to help the library get going joyfully.

[48:14] Students used to love to find these, by the way, hoping that his underlining or marginalia would help them find a section to quote that would earn a higher grade. But in the service of the church, Jim has been and is a joyful Christian.

And as we have all learned in recent years through his book Weakness is the Way, 2013, in this, this Christ-centered joy has been sustained in a life not without its own suffering and disability.

The personal witness to the joy of being a Christian and a theologian is a significant contribution to evangelicalism. Karl Barth wrote famously in his Church Dogmatics, a theologian who labors without joy is not a true theologian at all.

Selky faces, morose thoughts, and boring ways of speaking are intolerable in this field. Although Packer may not have followed Barth in all aspects of his theology, he certainly did on this point.

And this is perhaps the note to end on, for it brings us full circle to William Tyndall again. Euangelion, that we call gospel, is a Greek word. And it signifieth good, merry, glad, and joyful tidings.

[49:30] That maketh a man's heart glad, and maketh him sing, dance, and leap for joy. Like Tigger. At 90 years of age, Jim knows that there is still a joy set before him.

A lover of Richard Baxter's Saints Everlasting Rest, he writes now in his old age, he says, quote, we are on our way home, and home will be glorious. Or 30 years ago, he wrote that the wise men will live as it were, packed up and ready to go.

Friends, Packer's packed. Here too, in his personal witness, Jim Packer is doing what he has always done, keeping evangelicals connected with the gospel. Thank you.

Thank you. Do you want to chat about this a little bit?

Do we have time for, any questions or comments you'd like to make or add? Observations? Just coming from a United Church of Canada background, you mentioned we're evangelical.

[50:41] I was told, say they were evangelical in the United Church, it's like you said a swear word. I think that liberals have no grandchildren. There was a clergyman from Christ Church Cathedral.

I picked up Dr. Packer's book, Knowing God, and halfway finished, I put it down. He doesn't like anything liberal. This is how some of the people's, okay, that's what he's thinking, he's expressing it.

Yeah, yeah. No, I think it's been, as I say, I think Jim's concern has been, I mean, liberal, of course, is a good word. Liberal, just, generous is a good word.

But the radical theology of the 1960s, that it felt we need to adapt Christian orthodoxy to fit modern man, as it would have been said, and I think he realized that there's no future in that, and that it cuts the nerve of vital faith for ordinary people.

And I think in that, he's been right. He's been right. Yeah. Over the years, who are the philosophers, I think that there are philosophers, who Jim has fed on and been helped by, would you, in professional philosophers, have you been in that engagement with modernity?

[51:50] Is there anybody, do you think that's a question worth asking or answering? Yeah, I don't know. That's a good question, because I think he has been, you know, when Jim goes out for lunch at, what's the place on Dunbar?

Cheshire. Cheshire. Cheshire Cheese. Cheshire Cheese. Right? And he will have fish pie and a glass of Chardonnay, and once you've found something good, you stick with it. Right? And you stick with it.

He has the same thing every time, but why try something else? And there's a way that once you found a kind of home, I think, in 17th century Puritanism, that's where he didn't feel the need, like his colleague at Regent Clark Pinnock, to continue to explore modern theology.

I think he's aware of modern theology, but I think, so anyway, I think in terms of philosophy, philosophers, my guess is it would be classical, classical philosophers. And he will go back to Aquinas, I guess he will go back to Richard Hooker, and I mean theologians, but I'm not sure in terms of modern philosophers.

Does Jim read Charles Taylor, or does he read, I'm not sure. I don't know. What was it about the Cistercians that he found so interesting?

[53:06] Jim Houston that found the Cistercians so interesting. Jim Houston felt like there was, I mean the Cistercians, it's fascinating, it's 12th century monastic renewal movement that occurred in a culture that was fascinated with Saxon's violence in the midst of the chivalric culture, and it represented a person, Bernard of Clairvaux, it represented a personalizing of the gospel, and I think Jim Houston, who was reading the Nouvelle theologians and reading the French and aware of the Patristic Revival, felt like in the Cistercian piety there was a renewal of deeply personal faith, and he was in the late 1970s trying to find what would nourish a new generation of students.

So Jim Houston was teaching the Cistercians, Packer was teaching the Puritans, then they got together in this seminar. Carolyn can say more about it. She took the seminar. I never did. But they found all sorts of interesting continuities.

For example, commentaries of the Song of Solomon, both among the 12th century Cistercians and the 17th century Puritans, and so on. But is there anything else you remember from that seminar?

Yeah, no, I think that and even the reformers themselves were drew from Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercians, so I think there were actual points of influence in contact with that. Right, like one of the people Calvin most often quotes is Bernard.

Yeah, so. Can you say more about how Dr. Packer felt that modernity was undermining evangelical Christianity?

[54:42] Any specifics? It's interesting. Even the inaugural lecture that I quoted from at the beginning, he draws a comparison of what he's doing to C.S. Lewis's inaugural lecture at Cambridge, where C.S. Lewis described himself as a dinosaur and said, if you don't agree with what I say, you can at least enjoy me as a specimen.

And, um, um, so I, I, what comes to mind is just modern theology in terms of modern, one of the words for liberal theology in the 1950s and 60s would have been modernism, you know, theological modernism.

So I think it's more the idea that we have to somehow, the gospel is no longer relevant to modern people, it needs to be adapted. I think it's that kind of, all things new are better. You know, that modernity is now.

What's happening now is what's most important and the privileging of what's happening now. So I, it's that kind of thing. I don't know, I don't know that I've read an analysis of modernity as such by Jim, um, uh, more than his concern about sort of the idea that modern theology has to adapt, has to shed some of its, um, you know, traditional, um, content.

Yeah. Just a, a comment. I think another tribute to Dr. Pecker is, uh, I went online yesterday to look at the catechism courses, uh, and they're all completely full.

[56:24] They're fully subscribed. There's a wait list for people to get on the catechism. But don't let that, I mean, I took it about three or four years ago with Brown and Short and Greenwood and it was wonderful.

So, but if, don't be discouraged by that. It's all online. You could, you could study it all online along with the courses. So, but I think it's wonderful that it's, and there's Artizo too.

Jim has influence on Artizo and so many things that he's, uh, blessed us with. Yeah. Amazing. And the ESV Bible, we studied, we used the ESV because of what he did on there.

Yeah. As I say, I suspect that, um, that some of this goes right back to his concern in England and why partly he left, uh, is his concern for adult education.

What's that, like that, that, uh, that was his real concern is we need, I mean, that was the Puritan's concern, is how to move this from pulpit to pew. How to see the doctrinal gains of the Reformation become a genuine popular renewal movement.

[57:26] So in that, he was one of the Puritans. Yeah. I'm totally going to suggest, I wonder what you think, but the, Jim seems to me to be special in a sense that he does not come from that British public school.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Well, that's good.

And that's the kind of thing, I maybe could say more about that because most of us would be, we wouldn't hear that, we'd be tone deaf to class, which is in England. So he's a West Country lad and like George Whitfield when he spoke, the way he pronounced, everybody knew he was a gosh there.

He wasn't like the Wesleys, wasn't, didn't come from any kind of privilege. So I heard somebody say that as soon as John Stott would open his voice on the radio in England, half of England would turn off the radio because they could hear the Etonian kind of privilege.

[58:34] And people that, so do you think there's something about Jim's ability to communicate more popularly that maybe had to do with coming from it? Yeah, okay. Sort of Gloucester, more working class background.

Yeah. He did those 15 or more booklets that a variety of, I haven't seen them for a while, but we did, we did sell them and they were, again, sort of education for ordinary people.

Oh yeah, yeah. Within the Andalcan church, I don't know how far, too long. Yeah. But that was, he was editor, I think, but he did write some of them.

Yeah. I mean, his level, the level at which he's been prolific and the amount that he's produced and edited and his generosity as an editor, he is the fastest one to turn around any manuscripts that need to be read for crux, for Christianity Today, for the kind of stuff.

He, we joke that we should do an anthology of his blurbs because they're, you know, his blurbs are his prefaces because there's hardly a book that it seems doesn't have a J.I. Packer preface. But his generosity that way, Lee Rikin spent a good deal of time trying to explain how he gave up on trying to actually count how many things Jim has published because just to how, just, it's, it's been vast.

[59:56] Yeah. Yeah. Apropos your comment about Packer's introductions and words, I was visiting the John Bunyan Museum.

Oh yeah, I've been there, yeah. In England, yeah, it's interesting. It's very small, but in that small bookstore or gift shop, the number of J.I. Packer prefaces and, yeah, and the authorship.

Isn't that great? Yeah. Oh, that's nice. Sandra? If you need a fix for Packer too, I've recently I've been talking to him about trying to put some of his Learner's Exchange lectures into book form.

Yeah. Over a hundred sessions that he's given at either in Sermon or Learner's Exchange, so if you want to go online to the St. John's website, you can visit the Packer.

Yeah. Yeah. Seriously, he's like C.S. Lewis in that he, he examined the, the unspoken bullying almost that modern is, the word modern is, that it's not a form of debate, it's a form of snobbery and non-argument that shuts people up.

[61:07] Yeah. And if you can break through that and say, I think it was Lewis that said something like, modern is used as a form of praise, Yeah. as opposed to a description of something. Yeah.

And almost like we have the mechanistic, if you make a machine a hundred years later it's a better machine, Yeah. he said, life is not like that. Yeah. And I think that's where he's part of that brilliance of connecting with centuries is to say, that's a description but it's not a form of superiority.

Right. Yeah, yeah. And, and there's certain areas like morality, we don't expect, we just get better and better. You know, there might, there might be scientific improvements but in other areas we, we dare not think we're just getting better and better morally somehow.

The human nature remains much the same. Yeah. I have to say, after a few years of sharing a few with him he does have a wife named Kip. Yeah. Yeah. If he was here he'd mention it.

Yeah. Thank you. I just want to read a quote that I've got saved on my phone here it's by Lewis and it kind of reminds me of this Tigger thing and Lewis's comment well this is not Packard but it's the way Lewis would suggest maybe that you shouldn't be.

[62:23] He says, I begin to suspect that the world is divided not only into the happy and unhappy but into those who like happiness and who odd as it seems really don't.

So his bounciness would be you know life is tough but I'm here and I'm packed up and I'm ready to go and I'm here to give God glory which is what I was designed to do.

Thank you. Well what a fascinating topic and I'm sorry I have to kind of draw us to a close but I see people leaving and I know that we could be here for another two hours sharing great anecdotes.

I just want to take the opportunity to thank Bruce for being such a friend to Learner's Exchange for this delightful and fascinating talk and for I wrote it down so that I think I get it right so for thinking about our faith more seriously by engaging in higher catechism here at Learner's Exchange and you've just been such a great gift to us.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.