



Fundamentalism barred

James Barr's *Fundamentalism* contains 344 pages. The limit must have been imposed by the publishers because this gentleman certainly wasn't finished. He could have gone on for ever because he hates fundamentalists with a perfect hatred. The book is less a treatise than an outburst; as if some dam were breached and all the frustrations of a lifetime released in an awe-inspiring flood. Major criticisms occur at a rate of about a dozen per page and even on page 344 he is still in full flow.

Fundamentalism and Scripture

The crucial issue between fundamentalists and others, as Barr sees clearly, is the infallibility of Scripture. He does less than justice however, to the arguments by which this position is supported. The crucial factor is our Lord's attitude to Scripture: "*Scripture cannot be broken*" (John 10:35). Evangelical allegiance, in the first instance, is not to a book but to a person. We find it impossible to profess loyalty to Christ on the one hand and differ from Him on something so vital on the other. Barr obviously finds this argument distasteful — "*for Christians generally it is probably not necessary to offer this grotesque argument the dignity of a refutation*". But it is difficult to see how one can be a Christian and reject it. According to Barr it is a real possibility that "*biblical writers may have been affected by personal animosities against one another, by misunderstanding and polemics, by partisan loyalties and pride*". Other non-fundamentalists speak equally strongly. Karl Barth, for example, held that "*the vulnerability of the Bible, i.e., its capacity for error, also extends to its religious or theological content*". To such men, Christ was not only wrong about the Old Testament. He was *monumentally* wrong. He lacked not only the skills and insights of the modern scholar but also the theological and moral discernment necessary to detect the crudities of Old Testament religion. How one can bow the knee to a Lord whose morals and theology one feels bound to correct passes at least our comprehension.

Inerrancy and Biblical interpretation

Barr goes on to argue that this concept of inerrancy leads to forced and unnatural interpretations of Scripture. The prime example of this is the fundamentalist attitude to the opening chapters of Genesis. To protect the idea of infallibility we have given way to science all along the line. "*A hundred years ago,*" he writes, "*most fundamentalists would have insisted on a literal interpretation; if science said that this was impossible, they would just have damned science.*" As a statement of historical fact this is glaringly untrue. The great leaders of evangelicalism in Victorian Scotland — Chalmers, Cunningham and Candlish — neither damned science nor dismissed the Genesis account as simply wrong. They saw no reason why the doctrine of biblical infallibility and the findings of the scientists should not exist happily side by side. Nor was it yesterday that Hugh Miller dismissed the geology of the anti-geologists with the words: "*A little folly is amusing, but much of it fatigues.*" The prevailing attitude of evangelicals 100 years ago was that of "Rabbi" Duncan who said of "*the development theory*", "*I do not think it offers any very terrible results to the theologian.*" It is in fact the practice of "*damning science*" which is an innovation in British fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism and Biblical criticism

Another consequence of our view of biblical authority, according to Barr, is that it leads to a state of perpetual conflict between fundamentalism and critical biblical scholarship. Here again the facts are awkward because Barr knows that some evangelicals like Donald Guthrie are acknowledged

experts in this field. This itself is proof that there is nothing in the fundamentalist principle as such to preclude biblical criticism. It is perfectly legitimate to try to identify the sources used by the evangelists, to work out which of these sources is the earliest, to ascertain the life-situation out of which they came and to penetrate through the various editorial overlays to the precise wording of the original sayings.

But criticism as practised by evangelicals is bound to operate under controls which scholars like Barr would totally repudiate. For example, we are not prepared to accept conclusions which have the effect of reducing some biblical books to the level of forgeries. To believe in the existence of Proto-Luke is not the same in principle as to deny that Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles. These deliberately claim to have been written by the Apostle and address the church in his name. If they are in fact the anonymous compositions of a second-century author we can have no respect for them.

Nor can we accept conclusions which directly contradict the claims of Scripture itself. This is why evangelicals reject the common analysis of the Pentateuch in terms of the four sources, J, E, D and P. We have no objections to source-criticism or to documentary hypotheses as such. But the critics claim such dates for these sources (the reign of Josiah for D and the time of Ezra for P) that Moses could not possibly have used them. This not only contradicts the tradition as to the authorship of these which our Lord accepted but also requires us to abandon entirely the Old Testament representation of the history of Israel. It stands that history on its head, dating the book of Leviticus long after the prophecy of Jeremiah.

Fundamentalism and theology

When Barr comes to deal with evangelical theology he continues to speak a fair amount of nonsense. But this is an area in which we are confessedly weak and it may be wiser to listen than to refute.

At the most radical level he claims that fundamentalism is a movement without a theology. This becomes more plausible when he explains it in detail.

He means, first of all, that our theology is *fragmented*. It has concentrated on one doctrine —the inerrancy of Scripture — and has tended to ignore other areas of Christian truth. It has shown little interest in the doctrine of the atonement. It has no doctrine of the church. It has been superficial in its study of the biblical ethic. Furthermore, while it has clung tenaciously to individual doctrines like inerrancy and the virgin birth it does not relate them to each other in a coherent theological system. In this respect it is discontinuous with the orthodoxy of the past. Even when it affirms doctrines which have been traditional it wrests them out of their historical setting. For example, it borrows Warfield's doctrine of Scripture but totally ignores his Calvinism. These are valid criticisms, although they should not apply with the same force to a denomination like ours which has enjoyed the theological ministry of the Westminster Confession.

Barr suggests, secondly, that the theology of fundamentalism is *fossilised*. It has been content to conserve the past and is completely lacking in theological creativity.

We are not altogether prepared to plead guilty to this charge, at least not without qualification. It is an open question whether main-stream theology in the 20th century has been creative. The tools it has fashioned have been largely destructive and its main efforts have been directed to attacking traditional dogmas and even traditional norms. There has certainly been no increase in "*the things most surely believed amongst us*". Quite the contrary. The result of Barr's "creative" theology has been a grossly attenuated creed. Nor is Barr's accusation entirely fair. For the most part, creative theology comes from those holding professional academic posts and these are hardly open to fundamentalists. It might also be said that such creativity as evangelicals have shown has been in the realm of expository preaching — an area which Barr completely ignores and in which non-conservatives are notoriously weak.

Yet there is truth in Barr's contention. We have been too ready to applaud Charles Hodge's boast in connection with his career at Princeton: "*No new idea ever originated in this Seminary.*"

While it is essential to engage in defending the great doctrines of the past it is not enough. Not only must these doctrines themselves be re-possessed in the phraseology of each generation but the tradition itself must be looked at critically. Certain words and phrases — like the Romish *merit* — must go. Dubious fundamentalist mythologies — like that on guidance — must be carefully scrutinised. The kind of detached, scholastic method found in Hodge's *Outlines of Theology* must be repudiated. The doctrine of the divine attributes must be freed from bogus philosophical constraints and rooted firmly in biblical theology. Above all, we must harness for theology and preaching the gains of the prodigious exegetical labours of the last 100 years. Every book, every sentence, every little word, has been minutely examined and we know as never before the precise meaning of the Spirit's utterances in Scripture. By contrast, the labour of gathering up the conclusions into a harmonious whole of biblical theology has scarcely begun within evangelicalism.

Closely related to this is another criticism made by Barr. Fundamentalist theology is *isolationist*. "*The alienation of fundamentalism is so complete,*" he writes, "*that almost no worthwhile contact remains.*" Such discussion as there is purely polemical and no serious attempt is made to discover what others think. Fundamentalism entirely repudiates the concept of "*a catholic community of theological thinkers seeking by joint discussion with one another to state the truth within the totality of the Christian faith*".

Here again, one may reply by bringing counter accusations. By and large, evangelicals are much more conversant with the literature of non-conservatives than men like Barr are with ours. But the criticism is worth listening to. In our present situation debate with mainstream theology is imperative. Not only is that theology a threat to the doctrines dear to us but its advocates are men of immense ability and influence and we covet them as preachers and defenders of the faith which they now labour to destroy. At this level (Barr would be horrified!) theological debate is almost a method of evangelism. It represents carrying the Gospel to Samaria (Acts 1-8). But we can only speak effectively if, first of all, we are prepared to listen.

Our relations with these men need not, however, be entirely negative and polemical. Some of their criticisms of the orthodoxy of the past are valid criticisms: and at many points, especially in their exegetical work, their contribution is solid and substantial. The problem with scholars like Dodd and even Bultmann is not that they do not understand the New Testament but that, having understood it, they repudiate it. We may disagree with their evaluations and yet accept their exegesis. This is why the late Professor Murray in his commentary on Romans relied so heavily on the critical commentary by Sanday and Headlam and why every preacher would benefit from the careful study of Cranfield's superb commentary in the same series. However we look at it — whether from the point of view that we may spoil the Egyptians or the point of view that it is valuable to see the truth from standpoints radically different from our own or from the point of view that these men are far superior to us academically — there are compelling reasons for evangelical ministers and students to approach non-conservative literature not only to controvert it but to be instructed.

One other criticism may be noted. Fundamentalist theology is *exclusivist*. The doctrine of inerrancy is everything. If one accepts that, one is a Christian. If one denies it, one is not.

There may, for all we know, be fundamentalists who apply this simple criterion. But most of us do not. In the past, the reformed churches differed radically from groups which accepted the doctrine of inerrancy without question. The same is true today. Romanism (officially), Dispensationalism, Pentecostalism and Campus Crusade all share our view of scripture. Yet to us they are dangerous distortions of the Gospel. Personally, we would be more at home with Vincent Taylor who denies the doctrine of inerrancy than with Scofield who believes it; and certainly more at home with James Orr than with R.A. Torrey.

Yet the point would have to be made that in many instances the doctrine of inerrancy and the characteristic doctrines of evangelicalism will be renounced together. Among those who accept the (to us) radical conclusions of biblical critics, how many are there who believe in the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, a literal resurrection and the Christology of Chalcedon? How many non-fundamentalists can accept all the doctrines set forth in the Westminster Confession?

By insisting so much on inerrancy Barr is minimising the disagreement between fundamentalists and other Christians. Under the guise of repudiating inerrancy what is really being repudiated is something quite different: the canonicity of Scripture. The problem is not whether the statistics in the Books of Chronicles agree with those in Samuel and Kings, however important that may be. The question now is whether biblical theology is normative and binding for the Christian church. Modernism has abandoned a great deal more than the doctrine of inerrancy. It no longer accepts as normative the christology of John, the soteriology of Paul or the eschatology of Jesus. It has repudiated its theological monitor and met its nemesis is an unknowable Christ, an unreliable apostolate and an infallible scholarship.

The conservatism of moderates

But we must end on a more interesting note. Barr rightly draws our attention to a phenomenon which he labels "*the conservatism of moderates*". The moderates are, of course, the opposite of the extremists, the fundamentalists. They accept unreservedly the critical method and its conclusions. But, according to Barr (and he is absolutely right) these men often preach like fundamentalists: "*The point is that many people in the church, though rejecting fundamentalism, continue to treat some biblical passages, or some sections of the Bible, in a manner that seems to come close to the fundamentalist understanding.*"

This implies that there is, among non-conservatives, a very serious dichotomy between the pulpit and theology. They do not preach what they learned in their theological colleges. They have been trained, according to Barr, by *creative* theologians, but their congregations do not reap the advantages.

The reason for this may be, as Gerhard Ebeling suggests, that "*one is unable to reconcile the insights of theology with the traditional types of sermon and the expectations of the so-called 'faithful' congregation*". Or it may be, in the language of C. H. Spurgeon, that these men know that the residual theology of their mentors wouldn't build a mousetrap, let alone a Christian church.

But Barr is also implying something more serious. There is an element of dishonesty in much modern preaching. Men who know better (as he sees it) preach from certain texts "*as if they were a direct transcript of the actual words of Jesus, or as if they were in the fullest sense the word of God*".

Let us imagine a self-respecting preacher trained by biblical critics and "creative" theologians and preaching on the words, "*I am the way*" (John 14:6). His headings will be:

- Why we do not believe that Jesus ever said this.
- Why we do not believe that Jesus is, exclusively, the way.
- What nice, cosy lessons we may nevertheless learn from these charming words.

A man who preaches like that is probably not a Christian. But he *is* honest and one has more respect for him than for the clergy who "*have represented incidents and sayings in the gospels as if they were real incidents and actual words of Jesus not because they themselves firmly believed this but because it was easier to do so*".

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