

'FUNDAMENTALISM'

Eryl Davies

The message is loud and clear. Conservative evangelicals are wrong. Our doctrinal position and entire intellectual apologetic are 'incoherent' and wrong; Yes, affirms James Barr, "Completely wrong" (*Fundamentalism*, p8, SCM, £4.95). That is not all. He describes us as "a pathological condition of Christianity" (p318). Clearly the Oxford Professor feels strongly and passionately about us; in fact, his intolerant, bitter approach is hardly the best way to debate theological questions.

Barr is convinced that 'Fundamentalism' (a term he does not define) is based on a particular kind of religious tradition in which Biblical authority functions only as a 'form' providing a shield for its cherished tradition (p11). The point is basic in his analysis. This tradition includes an emphasis on the necessity of personal conversion and an insistence on true doctrine which Barr finds distasteful. Coupled with this there is also a distrust of existing churches, the emergence of evangelical organisations like U.C.C.F. which "provide a remarkably stable ideological centre and point of reference" as well as the importance of preaching, prayer, evangelism and eschatology. Our distinctive view and use of the Bible are then seen as a basic, dominating and cohesive force within the tradition. At this point, Barr rightly concludes that the point of conflict between ourselves and others is not over literalism but over inerrancy. However, our hermeneutic procedure is deemed inconsistent, swinging between literal and non-literal interpretations in a desperate attempt to preserve inerrancy. The Harmonisation Principle is firmly rejected and ridiculed (pp55-70) while our reasons for affirming inerrancy fare no better. For example, the appeal to our Lord's attitude to Scripture is described as a "grotesque argument" (p74) while, in Barr's view, it is nonsense to

2.

talk of the Bible's "claims" about itself. "There is no 'the Bible' that 'claims' to be divinely inspired, there is no 'it' that has a view of itself." There is only this or that source, like 2 Timothy or 2 Peter, which make statements about certain other writings, these rather undefined . . ." (p78)

His conclusion which we must challenge is that the link between inspiration and inerrancy "rests on one basis only: supposition. Here evangelicals go over to a purely philosophical and non-Biblical argument; if it was inspired by God, then how could there be error of any kind in it?" (p84). Our attitude to 'sound' literature as well as the quality and inconsistency of our scholarship are then deplored (pp120-159) and Barr accuses us at the same time of "large-scale rationalizing and naturalizing of miracle stories" (p259). Professor Barr concludes his book with the provocative statement that "we have to recognise that the liberal quest is in principle a fully legitimate form of Christian obedience within the church, and one that has deep roots within the older Christian theological tradition and even within the Bible itself" (p344).

Despite its underlying bitterness, this is an important book likely to exercise a significant influence upon contemporary religious thought. The author - Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture at Oxford University - is a Biblical scholar of renown and his aim in this book is to provide a theological analysis of 'Fundamentalist' beliefs and practices, while he is addressing the whole church, he feels a particular concern to write for those people who remain uncertain concerning their view of the Bible yet who are at the same time attracted by the conservative evangelical position. He hopes that through the reading of this book such people will be dissuaded from accepting our position and will make instead what he calls a more "intelligent and deliberate decision" (p10). For these reasons alone we dare not ignore this

book nor deal with it in a perfunctory manner.

Another reason for the importance of the book is Barr's sustained attack on our doctrine of Scripture and, in particular, inerrancy. Inerrancy is a key doctrine currently overshadowing all other issues. Barr's book illustrates this and indicates how controversy over the Bible is at boiling point. We dare not remain silent at such a critical time. For example, he denies that our position is 'orthodox' (p168) and views inerrancy as a development of the later nineteenth century with its roots in the scholastic Calvinism of theologians like Turretin. At the same time Barr regards inspiration as involving a long process of development involving the use of sources, multiple previous editions, textual changes and additions. The implications of such a view are far-reaching. "There was in fact", affirms Barr, "no single point at which the Scriptural text was 'originally given'" (p294). These and other arguments need to be answered responsibly.

I want to suggest another reason why we should consider Barr's book. Some of his observations are perceptive and accurate. He chastises non-evangelicals for their inconsistency in accepting a critical view of the Bible while representing to their congregations the incidents and sayings in the Gospels as if they were real incidents and actual words of Jesus (p335). Their approach is dishonest. Barr also feels strongly that it would be a "more honest and sincere position" (p332) for evangelical clergy within the Church of England and other mixed denominations to withdraw and form "strictly fundamentalist" churches. We heartily agree. Barr is also perceptive enough to recognise the emergence of a "newer current of evangelical opinion" (p228) which he also calls the "younger" and "new conservatives" (p229) who have since the sixties adopted a more open, critical approach to the Bible. He illustrates extensively how conservative evangelical scholarship has compromised increasingly by "moving markedly

4.

towards the acceptance of standard critical procedures and results" (p145). Some of his examples are taken from the New Bible Commentary and Dictionary. In addition, he criticises our failure to grapple in depth with complex ethical questions (p328) and our lack of creative theological thinking (p161ff). He describes us as having doctrines rather than a theology and what theology we have is fossilised, fragmented and uncreative. There is considerable truth in this charge. For some years now we have tended to stagnate in theology and to concentrate on isolated doctrines like that of scripture to the neglect of others.

I mention these details in order to indicate the importance and, surprisingly, the usefulness of Barr's book. Our reaction should not be entirely negative. 'Fundamentalism' provides us with the opportunity of looking more critically at ourselves and, at the same time, of grappling with some of the more important issues raised by Barr and other critics.

We intend to discuss these questions and criticisms in some depth in our Journal. We are not prepared to ignore them. For example, in this issue we have included an article on the subject of inerrancy in the Old Testament. This article is introductory in its aim and is not intended as a reply to Barr; its role is the more restricted and useful one of indicating what is our right approach to the Scripture. The author not only emphasises our Lord's attitude to the Old Testament but, in addition, he touches on the question of literalism and refers to some of the apparent contradictions which Barr argues not only disprove inerrancy but also make it appear ludicrous (p225).

Barr's claim that there is no essential connection between inspiration and inerrancy will be discussed in the next issue of the Journal. This is a question of major importance which will be considered alongside the historical argument that inerrancy is a

post-Reformation scholastic doctrine with a concomitant rational apologetic unfortunately adopted, it is claimed, by the Princeton Theologians Hodge and Warfield. Many critics like Barr argue that, apart from the unwholesome influence of Aristotelian-Scholastic philosophy, which allegedly came into Protestantism via Turretin, there is no support for the doctrine of inerrancy. We are told that even men like Augustine, Luther and Calvin rejected inerrancy. In addition, we intend to include articles in the next two issues on form and redaction criticism and a more general article on the theology of James Barr.

Why are we discussing these questions and taking notice of contemporary theological thinking?

Basically, we want to express, discuss and contend for Biblical truth in a relevant, theological manner without, like many critics, jettisoning the faith "which was once delivered to the saints"! Our consciences are captive to the Word of God but we are not obscurantists; by contrast, we are prepared to give "a reason for the hope that is in us".

A final word by way of introduction. One immediate criticism of Barr is that he uses important terms without careful definition and such an imprecise use of terms does not facilitate theological discussion.

One term that needs careful handling is 'Fundamentalism'! Barr is not prepared to define the term because he claims it is part of a "complex religious movement" which is easier to describe than define. He submits that 'fundamentalism' has three pronounced characteristics: (a) a very strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible (b) a strong hostility to modern theology and critical methods and (c) a conviction that those who do not share their religious viewpoint are not really "true Christians" at all (p1).

According to its original meaning in the period 1910-20 when it referred to those in North America who upheld the fundamental doctrines of the Bible, every

evangelical should be a 'fundamentalist'. More recently, however, the term has acquired an unfortunate connotation and some evangelicals are partly to blame. Some have implied that inerrancy involves a crude literalist interpretation of the Bible and this has often been coupled with an opposition to scholarship as being intrinsically devilish. This segment of evangelicalism has often been obscurantist and sensationalist employing evangelistic methods that many of us deplore. As early as 1947, Carl Henry in the United States expressed this disquiet in his book *'The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism'* and in the fifties a considerable number of evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic attempted to remove the fundamentalist label. For example, in America H.J. Ockenga was one of the first to propose 'New Evangelical' as an alternative descriptive term. In 1958 Dr Packer in his *'Fundamentalism and the Word of God'* rightly described 'fundamentalism' as an objectionable term used more often as a term of 'ecclesiastical abuse' and a 'theological swear-word' (p30). While Barr's use of the term is elastic and his terminology fluctuates from 'old-fashioned Christian fundamentalism', 'average fundamentalist', 'normal fundamentalist', 'extreme and consistent fundamentalism' to 'fundamentalist-evangelical' etc. yet he is not prepared to distinguish between fundamentalists or 'extremists' and 'moderates'! We are all tarred with the same brush. This is unfortunate because there are very important differences between us. We accept inerrancy without reservation and insist that inerrancy is a distinctive tenet of evangelicalism. On the other hand, we reject the label 'fundamentalist' because inerrancy does not commit us to a naïve literalism nor does it entail the despising of scholarship.

Furthermore, Barr's knowledge of evangelicalism is extremely limited. To claim, for example, that the Scofield Reference Bible is "perhaps the most important single document in all fundamentalist

literature" (p45) and a "pillar of conservatism" (p348) is to betray his ignorance of wide areas of evangelicalism in Great Britain where this particular Bible is neither read nor consulted. Barr's failure to define what he is attacking leads him to make generalisations and a caricature that is far removed from reality. His real target of attack, of course, is not so much the extreme literalist but the doctrine of inerrancy. In this major line of attack he is prepared to be imprecise and to import into a term like 'fundamentalism' what he personally finds to be offensive.

A precise use of terms in the contemporary theological debate is extremely important if only for the reason that complex and disturbing changes are taking place within evangelicalism itself. A new type of evangelical has appeared who accepts the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel yet acknowledges in the light of higher criticism that the Bible contains error and that some of its teaching is culturally and historically conditioned. Terms even like 'inerrancy' and 'infallible' have been re-interpreted and adjusted to critical thought, thus emphasising the need for precision and vigilance. Clark Pinnock, for example, claims to believe in an 'inerrant' Bible yet he also maintains that the Bible contains error. He thinks it is an 'overbelief' to "identify God's Word with the words of the Bible" (*Biblical Authority* edited by Jack Rogers; Word, 1977). "Minute inerrancy", he claims, "may be a central issue for the telephone book but not for Psalms, Proverbs, Apocalyptic and Parables" and he goes on to argue that belief in inerrancy of detail is possible only for those, like Warfield, who do not take the difficulties of the Bible seriously" (see Hywel Jones, *The Bible under Attack* pp 9-31; Evangelical Press, for other examples). Terms like 'inerrancy', 'infallible', 'trustworthy', etc. are all being qualified in the contemporary debate by critics and evangelicals.

Similarly, Barr's attempt to bend the term

'evangelical' to embrace modern theology and Biblical criticism illustrates the present ambiguity of the term. One can also criticise Barr's use of a term like 'scholarship' which he assumes to be synonymous with a liberal, critical method. For Barr this method is unquestionably right. His position, he claims, is an 'open' one whereas ours is 'a closed position' (p185). But the Professor needs to be more self-critical. Furthermore, if a 'closed position' means refusing to believe that God has lied or made mistakes in his self-revelation, we accept the description. We prefer to believe that the Scripture is the inerrant Word of God rather than the fallible words of men. Believing this we cannot approach the Bible in the same way as Barr. This does not mean that we stop thinking. Far from it. It does mean, however, that we stop thinking sinfully and unbiblically.

Certainly the results of Barr's allegedly 'open' approach are clear for all to see. It is significant that on the same day '*Fundamentalism*' was published the same press published '*The Myth of God Incarnate*'. Barr is unrepentant. "The Fundamentalists", he acknowledges, "have perhaps been right in one major point, more right, indeed, than the main body of Christian opinion. They have perceived, however dimly, that modern theology and the critical study of the Bible have initiated, and are initiating, massive changes in the way in which Christians understand God and Jesus Christ. Well-meaning persons, dazed and perplexed by the fury of fundamentalist attacks on modern developments, have often answered that no essential of the faith is changed ... Conservatives are perhaps right in their instinct that this is not so, and that major changes are taking place, with perhaps even greater ones to come" (pp185-6).

We are aware of these radical changes in belief and deem it crucial that we insist on the doctrine of Scripture taught by our Lord and His Apostles. Those who reject inerrancy will, as Barr

acknowledges, reject other cardinal doctrines, sooner or later. What is at stake is nothing less than Christianity itself.

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Reply to Article by Hywel Jones in Foundations 1,
(Nov 1978)

In his discussion of The Bearing of Regeneration on Some Aspects of Pastoral Work (Foundations,1), Hywel Jones argues the value of distinguishing theologically between begetting and bearing. In begetting, the Spirit works secretly and without the means of the Word. However, when scripture speaks of regeneration being 'by the Word of God' (Jas 1:18, 1 Pet.1:23) we are to understand it of the conscious possession of the new birth which comes with effectual calling and conversion.

From one point of view it matters little whether the distinction is made or not, in that writers on either side are equally concerned to maintain the sovereignty of God in salvation. What causes anxiety is the use to which such a distinction is put. The danger lies in positing a temporal gap between regeneration and calling or conversion. Archibald Alexander uses it in this way when discussing the regeneration of people brought under conviction during the 18th century awakening at Northampton. Berkhof and Hywel Jones are more concerned with the spiritual experience of the children of believers. Berkhof speaks of a seed of regeneration lying 'ungerminated' (?) until perhaps years after, and goes as far as to say that '*in the case of those who are regenerated in infancy there is necessarily a temporal separation between regeneration and conversion*' [Systematic Theology, p491].

While the distinction may be safe in Hywel Jones' hands, it is open to much potential abuse. It clearly implies, for instance, that a person may die uncalled, unconverted and yet regenerate ('*If God has regenerated them they will be brought to birth apart from death intervening*' H. Jones, p26). Is such a person

10.

saved or not?

The biblical position is that regeneration, calling and conversion stand and fall together. Regeneration has no meaning apart from the truth of the gospel addressed to our consciousness. There is no biblical or theological warrant for preachers to expect a time lag between the effective work of the Spirit and the exercise of faith. Pastoral difficulties of discerning spiritual experiences should not lead us away from the clear teaching of scripture.

What, then, of infants? John Murray's position on this is safe and scriptural:

'The salvation which is of the gospel is never apart from faith. This is true even in the case of infants, for in regeneration the germ of faith (not, notice, of regeneration - IS) is implanted ... The person who is merely regenerate is not saved, the simple reason being that there is no such person. The saved person is also called, justified and adopted.'

J.Murray, 'Romans' p27

The blind man must open his eyes before he can see, but this gap between the two is not one of time. In Thomas Boston's words, *'When the Lord opens the sluices of grace on the soul's new birthday, the waters run through the whole man'*.

Ian Shaw (Cardiff)

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THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE:

SOME OLD TESTAMENT PROBLEMS

Rev John C.J.Waite BD
(Barry)

Our belief in the inerrancy of the Old Testament Scriptures rests upon the unambiguous declarations of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself as recorded in the Gospels. It is evident to any unbiased mind