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James Barr and Evangelical Scholarship

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1977 - a year to remember

In 1977 I returned from Nigeria to Britain. It was an interesting time to re-enter the British theological scene; indeed in retrospect 1977 seems something of an *annus mirabilis*. New Testament scholarship was just beginning to digest (and thereafter studiously to ignore) John Robinson's *Redating the New Testament*. It was the year when *The Myth of God Incarnate* provoked lively discussion; though as one perceptive writer to *The Times* pointed out, another book on the same subject published in the same year (Moule's *The Origin of Christology*) was likely to be valued long after the *Myth* had been consigned to the museum of theological curiosities. It was the year of the second National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Nottingham, which among other things put the work 'hermeneutics' firmly into the vocabulary of evangelical Anglicans. And it saw the publication of James Barr's *Fundamentalism*.

This last became, for a time, quite a talking point in evangelical circles. Reactions (among those who actually read the book - not all did before condemning it!) were interestingly mixed.

Some feared (particularly in the light of the last two pages) that this book signalled the beginning of a new phase of hostilities against evangelical scholarship, threatening the increasing degree of acceptance and dialogue which we felt had been achieved during the previous decade or two. Looking back now, while Barr himself has continued to write on the subject, there is little evidence that he represented, or initiated, a trend.[1]

There was, however, gratification that at last someone had noticed the existence of evangelical scholarship, if only to denigrate it; it was better to be regarded as a threat worth countering than to be politely ignored, or so some of us thought. But there was also annoyance at Barr's deliberate designation of 'conservative evangelicalism' by a pejorative title ('fundamentalism') which we would have repudiated, and which seemed, inevitably, to tip the scales even before the argument began.

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1 Professor Barr tells me, however, that the University of Chicago has set up a 'Fundamentalism Project' which aims to produce five volumes of studies; it may be that 'fundamentalism' is more a matter of scholarly concern in America than in Britain.

There was recognition that Barr's critique was at many points perceptive and damaging, and an eagerness among some of us to ensure that we did not fail to learn from the unfamiliar experience of seeing ourselves as others saw us. But there was also frustration that Barr's critique, for all his impressive bibliography of evangelical writings, showed little awareness of the variety and development within evangelical scholarship, and seemed to present us all as clones of a particular style of writing more characteristic of the fifties and sixties than of the late seventies.

Evangelical biblical scholarship in 1977

Another of the landmark publications of 1977 was *New Testament Interpretation*, a collection of essays edited by Howard Marshall to show how evangelical study of the New Testament was relating to the methods and assumptions of mainstream critical scholarship. Those of us who contributed represented quite a range of approaches, some of which were very far removed from the sort of 'fundamentalism' presented by Barr, and the book displayed an openness to and an appreciation of the wider world of biblical criticism which dismayed some more traditionally inclined evangelicals. Yet the essays came from the New Testament Study Group of the Tyndale Fellowship, and the editor described the authors as 'conservative evangelicals who combine a high regard for the authority of Holy Scripture with the belief that we are called to study it with the full use of our minds'. Had Barr's *Fundamentalism* already been available, this would have been a direct challenge to its portrayal of 'fundamentalist' scholarship. Did it then render his attack out of date even before it was published?

Not a bit of it! Reviewing the Marshall volume in *Theology* (vol 81, May 1978, pp 233-235) Barr dismisses it as 'a book with two faces: it points in one direction, and goes in another'. Its claim to be conservative is false; despite the origins of many of the writers in 'fundamentalism', we had now come to represent 'the slide of conservative scholarship towards a liberal position' (and not a very wisely selected one at that!).

Now it is not easy to see how one could win in this situation. Once Barr's rather monolithic model of conservative scholarship has been set up, any deviation from it by those who wish to be known as 'conservative evangelicals' is characterised as duplicity, while to conform to it is to be written off as 'fundamentalist'. The only way into Barr's good books is, apparently, to cease to claim the title 'conservative evangelical' at all.

This is the natural outcome of Barr's alarmist account of 'fundamentalism' as a total religious and theological subculture which allows no modification, but only 'escape', rather like some of the totalitarian cults of California. I do not doubt that such a 'fundamentalism' does exist; indeed I think I have met it from time to time. But to suggest that that is the right model for understanding evangelicalism in general (even 'conservative evangelicalism'), and evangelical theological scholarship in particular,

seems extraordinary to me as one who is happy to wear those labels. To insist that in owning them I am also committed to being a 'fundamentalist' seems unfair, to say the least, when the function of the latter term in my vocabulary is to designate those from whom I wish to dissociate myself.

Barr is right, of course, to have raised the issue of what is 'evangelical' identity (though his introduction of the gratuitous label 'fundamentalist' has rather muddied it); nor is he the first to have done so. A distinction between more 'conservative' and more 'liberal' evangelicals has always been possible, and there have been those on both sides of that notional divide (though primarily on the former) who have wished to restrict the right to be called 'evangelical' to their own side of it. Evangelical biblical scholarship, precisely because it must operate in the area of primary sensitivity for evangelicals, has always been in danger of being regarded as too 'liberal' by other evangelicals, as well as dismissed as hopelessly narrow by 'real' liberals. And evangelicals have proved distressingly quick to form rival camps and to excommunicate each other over such issues.

A middle way?

I referred above to the second National Evangelical Anglican Congress as one of the theological markers of 1977. I was still in Nigeria when it happened, but its impact in evangelical Anglican church life was soon noticeable. All at once 'hermeneutics' was on the evangelical agenda.

John Stott summed up the issue for evangelicals as follows: 'We have the highest doctrine of Scripture of anybody in the Church. We must therefore acknowledge with deep shame that our treatment of Scripture seldom coincides with our views of it. We are much better at asserting its authority than we are at wrestling with its interpretation. We are sometimes slovenly, sometimes simplistic, sometimes highly selective and sometimes downright dishonest.[2]

Problems of interpretation and of cultural relativity which had previously been discussed mainly in academic circles now became common currency, and many evangelicals felt that the old certainties were threatened in a new way, from within. Along with the openness to new questions and new answers on the part of some evangelicals went a revived determination on the part of others to defend the old formulations. Evangelicalism, at least among Anglicans, became more diverse than in the days before Barr's *Fundamentalism*. It was out of this period that in due course *Anvil* was born, as the 'exploratory' and 'traditionalist' tendencies found it impossible to continue together in publishing *Churchman*.

All of this, one might think, could be easily accounted for in terms of Barr's review quoted above, as the development of 'liberal evangelicalism'

2 J.R.W. Stott (ed.), *Obeying Christ in a Changing World*, Vol.1, Fountain Books, London 1977, p 21. This was one of the preparatory volumes for National Evangelical Anglican Congress.

over against the continuing 'conservative' brand (or, as Barr would put it, 'fundamentalism'). But those of use who would identify with the *Anvil* tendency would regard that as too simplistic a judgement. We would contend that it is possible (indeed necessary) to be open to new approaches in biblical interpretation and theology, and to learn from and respond to current concerns in the wider theological world, while continuing to hold the doctrines of classical evangelicalism, and that this is what responsible evangelicals have always tried to do. We would not regard our views as the same as those normally labelled 'liberal evangelical', particularly with regard to the authority of Scripture. There is, in other words, an 'evangelicalism' which is neither 'fundamentalist' nor 'liberal', and it is that sort of evangelicalism which is most typically to be found involved in academic biblical and theological studies. It is this strand of genuinely evangelical scholarship which is most difficult to recognise in terms of the model set up in Barr's *Fundamentalism*, even though it was already alive and well long before 1977 (and is indeed represented in some of the works listed in Barr's bibliography).

Escaping from Fundamentalism

Since writing *Fundamentalism*, Barr has continued to devote his attention to this phenomenon, though not on the same scale.

Most noticeable, at least on account of its provocative title, was the 'sequel', *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (SCM, London 1984). The preface to this book claims, however, that it is not, like its predecessor, a work of theological polemics, but has a more pastoral aim in view. Here there is no discussion of 'fundamentalist' scholarship, and very little direct reference to specific writings from this quarter. That work has already been done. He aims now to offer constructive help to those who would like to 'escape', but feel trapped in 'fundamentalism'.

The chief basis for this feeling is, he suggests, the insistent propaganda which asserts that only 'fundamentalism' is truly biblical, and that to deviate from it is to prove untrue to the biblical revelation. The book therefore sets out to show in one area after another that 'fundamentalism' is not the only, or even the most probable, system of thought which may be derived from the Bible, fairly interpreted. Indeed Barr believes that the Bible, freed from 'fundamentalist' assumptions about its meaning, actually militates against it.

This argument reminded me of a parallel which was perhaps unknown to Barr, but which seems to me significant. The two-part article in *Churchman* which was, I understand, primarily responsible for the ructions out of which *Anvil* grew, was an attack by James Dunn on the 'Princeton doctrine' of biblical inerrancy ('the Warfield position'), as being

'pastorally disastrous'.[3] What Dunn had particularly in view was the 'slippery slope mentality' (or 'domino theory') whereby to accept the presence in Scripture of one slight error must undermine the student's total confidence in biblical revelation, a result which sadly too often does occur. This view, which Dunn sums up as 'exegetically improbable, hermeneutically defective, theologically dangerous, and educationally disastrous' is in fact, he argues, a relatively recent scholastic construction based on a particular interpretation of a few biblical statements while ignoring the witness of Scripture as a whole. He therefore argues from Scripture itself for a less rigid understanding of the Bible's authority, noticing particularly the freedom with which Jesus and the early Christians themselves used the old Testament.

I find it interesting that Dunn, arguing from inside the evangelical camp (his article was, after all, a paper delivered at the Anglican Evangelical Assembly), can set up an argument so similar in principle to that of Barr. Each aims to use what is reputedly the chief weapon of 'fundamentalism', the Bible regarded as authoritative, to undermine its essential theological structure, and to offer a 'way out' for those who are trapped by the fear of being (and still worse of being thought and said to be) 'unbiblical'. It is sobering, but perhaps hardly surprising, to notice that the reaction to Dunn's 'evangelical' manifesto from those to his theological right proved no less hostile than that experienced by Barr. The possibility that Scripture may not be entirely on the side of the traditional formulations is perhaps even more uncomfortable when raised by a 'friend' than by an 'enemy'. The acceptance of the need for evangelicals to take modern hermeneutical questions seriously has made it less easy to draw and defend the old battle-lines.

Returning to the attack

But I digress. While *Escaping from Fundamentalism* adopted a less polemical tone, Barr has continued with the attack - and the responses which *Fundamentalism* elicited have given him ample scope to do so (including an informative foreword to the second edition of *Fundamentalism*, published in 1981). An important and perceptive paper on 'The Problem of Fundamentalism Today', read in South Africa in 1979 and published in Barr's *Explorations in Theology* (vol.7 of the series of that name, published by SCM Press in 1980, pp 65-90) may serve to represent this next phase. (It covers a lot of the same ground as the 1981 foreword.)

First, Barr returns to the question of defining 'fundamentalism'. His target was not those who merely ascribe final authority to Scripture; 'fundamentalism' begins when that authority is seen to entail the *inerrancy* of Scripture, especially in historical matters, leading to the repu-

3 'The Authority of Scripture according to Scripture', *Churchman* 96 (1982), pp 104-122, 201-225.

diation of modern biblical criticism. In particular, Barr does not wish to be seen as anti-evangelical; he would prefer to be seen as the defender of true evangelicalism against the imposition of a more rigid 'orthodoxy' derived from Dutch Calvinism. But many who rejoice in the name evangelical and would repudiate the label 'fundamentalist' (like me!) are in fact, he believes, nearer to 'fundamentalism' than they wish to admit.

'Fundamentalism' is a perversion of true evangelicalism. 'Young evangelical Christians, open, free and delightful, are often quickly reduced through the life of their society and the pressure of their doctrine to a strained, suspicious and exclusivist frame of mind.... These are not people who were inherently bigoted or who had from the beginning a pathological personality structure. They did not begin this way: it was fundamentalism that made them this way.' (p 69) Here speaks the former leader of the Edinburgh University Christian Union, who has escaped the fate which he has sadly seen befall so many of his former associates. A fascinating brief autobiographical reflection (pp 81-82) laments the gradual replacement of a focus on personal religion (characteristic of true evangelicalism) by a focus on orthodoxy, leading to the marginalising of Barthianism and, in effect, of liberal evangelicalism.

As for the claimed upsurge in respectable conservative scholarship, Barr is not impressed. Much of it is conservative only in name, accepted and revered by the 'fundamentalist' constituency on the basis of the scholar's name rather than what he says; the same arguments advanced by someone outside the circle of approved conservative scholarship would be regarded as dangerously liberal. The conservative scholars themselves speak with two voices, depending on whether they are addressing the wider scholarly world or their own constituency. And, perhaps as a result of this uneasy balancing act, conservative scholarship cannot produce fresh ideas. 'On this side even the best conservative scholarship is shockingly defective. It is stodgy, apologetic and uncreative. Its dullness is monumental. What striking new line of approach, what creative new method, what fresh analysis has ever come from it, even in its most creditable modern forms?' (pp 72-73) The reason why so few conservative works find their way into most non-conservative reading-lists is simply that so few of them offer anything worth hearing.

It may fairly be suggested that here again Barr has produced a classic 'Catch 22' argument. The moment a strain of creativity appears the work concerned must be denied the label 'conservative'. The possibility of creative conservative scholarship is ruled out by definition, so that the charge made in the preceding paragraph is no more than a tautology. The only way to meet Barr's requirement is for a scholar to cease to be conservative (or 'fundamentalist', to use his own term), and no doubt this would please him immensely. But is it really the only option? While I would not in the least wish to dispute the dullness and predictability of much 'conservative

scholarship' (it distresses me too), I am not convinced that it must inevitably be so. I shall return to this point.

But the article we are considering concludes with a passage which brings out more clearly this black-and-white character in Barr's view of 'fundamentalism'. He paints a sinister picture of a tightly-organised 'fundamentalist' underworld, little understood by those outside, and hard to penetrate. It must not be allowed to continue in the obscurity which the very mediocrity of its intellectual output has fostered; it demands deliberate intellectual exposure, and it is this mission which Barr has taken upon himself. The result, he hopes, will be to force evangelicals 'to develop a theological position that is not a mild deviation from the fundamentalist ideology but a real and radical alternative' (p 90).

It is instructive to consider this critique from the perspective of evangelical Anglicanism in the post-Keele (and still more post-Nottingham) era. My impression is that Barr gives little attention to this aspect of evangelicalism, at least directly. NEAC2 took place, of course, when *Fundamentalism* was already in the press, but already at Keele ten years earlier the evangelical Anglican constituency (or at least a large part of it) had turned decisively away from the sort of 'fundamentalist' ghetto mentality Barr portrays, though without abandoning its essentially conservative theology.

At least that is how I would put it, but again we are up against the problem of definition, and no doubt Barr would respond that in so doing post-Keele evangelical Anglicanism abandoned 'fundamentalism', and moved out of the sights of his rifle. The true 'fundamentalists' within Anglicanism, I think he would say, are those who are now saying that the whole direction adopted at Keele (and still more at Nottingham) was a serious mistake, and who are seeking to bring us back into line with the more conservative elements of Nonconformist evangelicalism (perhaps even secretly sympathising with Dr Lloyd-Jones' call to secession, issued at about the time of Keele). If this means that Barr would not want to call me a 'fundamentalist', that will cause me no grief; but if it means that the 'conservative scholarship' which he criticises excludes me by definition, I am not so happy. The post-Keele tradition of evangelical Anglicanism within which I am happy to operate seems to me to represent precisely the sort of middle way between 'fundamentalism' and liberal evangelicalism which I suggested earlier. So I am not convinced that Barr's black-and-white division between 'fundamentalism' and the 'real and radical alternative' accurately reflects the true state of affairs. I suspect that it leaves me stateless!

Fundamentalism revisited

Barr's later studies have made it clear not only that he stands by the critique he offered in 1977, but that he regards that book as his major statement on the subject, which he has no need to repeat. It is therefore to

Fundamentalism itself that we must now return. Without attempting a review of the book as a whole, I wish to draw attention again to a purely personal selection from among Barr's comments on evangelical *scholarship* (rather than the 'fundamentalist' phenomenon as a whole), where I believe we still have something to learn from his shrewd observations, however irritated we may be by their patronising tone and their determinedly negative stance.

1. 'Literal' interpretation. Fundamentalism pp 40-55 takes up a point already argued in Barr's *The Bible in the Modern World*[4] that, contrary to popular belief, 'fundamentalists' do not consistently espouse a *literal* interpretation of the Bible. Their concern is to defend its *inerrancy*, which is at the centre of their dogmatic system. Where a literal interpretation threatens to show the Bible to be in conflict with accepted scientific theory or known historical data (and therefore to be 'in error'), or where literal interpretation would involve the biblical writers in contradicting one another, they are only too happy to abandon the literal interpretation for one which is more comfortable to live with. It is not literary considerations, but dogmatic acceptability, which determines how a passage is to be interpreted. Similarly in harmonisation (*Fundamentalism* pp 55-72) 'fundamentalist' practice is governed more by opportunism (in defence of biblical inerrancy) than by principle.

Barr has no difficulty in illustrating these manoeuvres from respected evangelical commentaries, and it cannot be denied that they happen. I wonder, however, whether the starting-point for this gleefully repeated charge was quite fair. 'Literal' is a slippery word, but how many thinking evangelicals have in fact claimed that *literal* interpretation was their aim? At least, if we have used such thoughtless language, we must thank Barr for warning us to explain ourselves more carefully. I did once read a 'fundamentalist' book which suggested that Job 38:7 refers to music which can be scientifically shown to be produced by the physical movement of the heavenly bodies, but I wonder how many evangelical scholars would fail to share my amusement and embarrassment at such a crassly 'literal' interpretation. An inability to recognise poetry and metaphor is no part of the 'job description' of evangelical scholarship.

Similarly, Barr makes great play of the willingness of the 'fundamentalist' to defend the differing versions of a saying of Jesus and Luke, thereby allowing all of them to have changed the words which Jesus actually spoke. But to claim that the gospels are inspired records of Jesus' teaching is not the same as to claim that each is a verbatim reproduction of Jesus' words. Barr may feel that the one should logically entail the other, but in that case he sees the matter differently from most evangelical scholars, and I for one would dispute the cogency of his logic. Indeed, is it not

4 SCM, London 1973, pp 168 ff.

true that the search for the *ipsissima verba* underlying the gospel accounts is a more appropriate expression of a liberal than of a conservative criticism, suggesting as it does that only the words of Jesus himself may be trusted? To accept the reliability of the evangelists as inspired reporters or interpreters of what Jesus said and did frees the evangelical scholar from the need to penetrate behind them in search of Aramaic 'originals' which in the nature of the case can be only speculatively reconstructed.

So I suspect that the 'literal interpretation' which Barr seems to feel 'fundamentalists' *ought* to practise (and therefore may be pilloried for failing to practise) exists more in his personal stereotype of 'fundamentalism' than in either the theory or the practice of the evangelical scholarship with which I am familiar. But it is good to be reminded that such a misunderstanding does exist, and to be on our guard against feeding it by thoughtless statements about the 'literal truth' of the Bible as if so varied a corpus of literature could be confined within a single literary mode. Where a fair and well-informed exegesis indicates that a given biblical text is 'literally' intended, I am happy to take it on those terms, but evangelical scholarship has no stake in literalness as such.

2. *Traditional critical issues.* Chapter 5 of *Fundamentalism* ('Conservative Biblical Scholarship') is concerned predominantly with issues such as the authorship, date and composition of the biblical books. It is on these issues that evangelical theological students have traditionally felt most threatened, and a great deal of scholarly energy has been devoted to maintaining the 'pre-critical' views on such matters as the integrity of the book of Isaiah, the date of Daniel, or the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles. Such issues have provided ready rules of thumb for those who wish to be able to distinguish between 'sound' and 'unsound' scholarship, and many an evangelical scholar has been labelled 'liberal' not on the basis of a liberal theology, but because of a questioning of, or even a failure to defend explicitly, one or more of these traditional shibboleths.

In an article in the same issue of *Churchman* referred to above (vol. 96 [1982], pp 226-240) - indeed a paper delivered alongside Dunn's at the same Anglican Evangelical Assembly - I attempted to analyse 'Evangelical Disagreements about the Bible', and to indicate that within evangelical scholarship there was already then a greater range of opinion on such issues than we had been used to expecting, so that what were conventionally thought to be 'liberal' critical positions were in fact held and defended by convinced evangelicals (just as John Robinson has shown us that views of the date and authorship of New Testament books which have been thought to be distinctively 'evangelical' can be argued for with even greater vigour by a scholar whose espousal of these views in no way moderated his radical theology!). What was true ten years ago is even more clearly true today. 'Deutero-Isaiah' is no longer a word banned from

evangelical scholarship, and it is possible to propose the pseudepigraphic origin of 2 Peter without being hounded out of (some) evangelical circles .

What I wanted to point out in that article was that the correlation which has traditionally been assumed to exist between pre-critical views on such matters and evangelical theology was not as tight as was generally supposed, and that it is simply not the case that the defender of the unity of Isaiah is necessarily more ardent and consistent in his adherence to the authority of Scripture than the 'Deutero-Isaianist'. A particular critical position must be shown to be inconsistent with evangelical theology rather than assumed to be so because evangelicals have traditionally not held it. The increasing attention to hermeneutical issues in evangelical circles over the last decade has illustrated how an awareness of ancient literary conventions unfamiliar to us may change our view of how biblical books may have been compiled, and of how their formulae are to be interpreted. There is much room here for genuine disagreement irrespective of a person's theology, and the simplistic application of labels such as 'liberal' is not likely to improve the quality of debate.

This is not to suggest that evangelical theology has no bearing on the way one understands the compilation of the Bible. But evangelicals have sometimes been too quick to assume that they could discern a self-evident divide between what is and is not compatible with evangelical theology. A sad case was the recent expulsion of Professor Robert Gundry from the (American) Evangelical Theological Society because of his published views on the use of 'midrash' in Matthew's gospel. Gundry set out his views explicitly as consistent with his evangelical theology, and ably defended them as such, but he was in effect denied the right to call himself an evangelical by some of his peers. The debate is too complex to set out here. I personally question whether his literary conclusions were well-founded, but it seems to me a tragedy that he was not allowed to continue to debate them in the context of the ETS, and that in effect his integrity as an evangelical scholar was impugned.

So where does this leave chapter 5 of *Fundamentalism* ? I suppose Barr was in that chapter, to a greater extent than perhaps any of us realised at the time, firing at a moving target. In so far as he assumed that the defence of the standard 'conservative' critical positions was essential to evangelical scholarship, I think the chapter was already a bit out of date, and becomes steadily more so. This should not surprise him, however, since the chapter concludes (in the light especially of Robinson's *Redating* ; had he known Robinson's *Priority of John*, the point would have been even clearer) by arguing rightly that, whatever some conservative scholars may suggest, these are not the issues which essentially divide 'fundamentalism' from mainstream scholarship. 'Thus the whole elaborate apparatus of conservative apologetic for early date, traditional authorship, avoidance of source divisions, and the like, though we have here done it the courtesy of discussing it, is a waste of time. The issue lies elsewhere.' Not perhaps

the most diplomatic form of words, but I think that subsequent experience shows that he had a point.

3. *Evangelical theology.* Chapter 6 of *Fundamentalism* argues that there is nothing for a 'fundamentalist' theologian to do. There may be a need for apologists to defend the chosen beliefs of the sub-culture, but since those beliefs are fixed and timeless ('fossilized' is Barr's term) there is no new thinking to be done, no new worlds to conquer. Hence the lamentable lack of creativity in 'fundamentalist' theological scholarship noted above; the system allows no place for it. Rather there is a mood of complacency, and a sad lack of self-criticism; we have it all sewn up, and so have nothing to learn. Any contact with non-conservative scholarship can only be at the level of polemics, not of fruitful dialogue and exploration together.

Here, as so often when reading Barr's book, the immediate reaction is to cry out in frustration, 'But that simply isn't true! Haven't you read ....', and to quote some of the more creative evangelical theologians who are around today. I might, for instance, refer to the recent Bampton Lectures by my colleague Alister McGrath[5]. Or we might, as evangelical Anglicans, refer to the increasing representation of evangelicals on doctrinal commissions set up within the Church of England, and in theological discussions with other churches, such as ARCIC; the 'token evangelicals' on such bodies are becoming a more significant (and generally, I think, a more welcome) part of the enterprise. And even in 1977 it would not have been difficult to come up with counter-examples. Indeed Barr notes with some amusement the instinctive 'fundamentalist' recourse to such name-dropping in response to his generalisations.[6]

But it cuts little ice with him, partly on the principle that the exception only serves to prove the rule, and partly because he is prone to doubt the 'fundamentalist' credentials of any who fail to measure up to his yardstick of non-creativity and intellectual isolationism. We are back again to the problem of definition, and to the Catch 22 argument which rules out *a priori* any evangelical openness or creativity, and which therefore forbids us to claim as true representatives of conservative evangelical ('fundamentalist') scholarship any who display it. In so far as post-Keele Anglicans (the *Anvil* constituency) are entitled to the epithet 'conservative evangelical' (and many of us would be eager to retain that right), we may with some justification plead that Barr is trying to define us out of existence.

Unfair as the argument may appear, however, we cannot afford to disregard Barr's impression of the weakness of conservative *theology*. We *have* traditionally been much more inclined to detailed historical and critical argumentation than to theology proper. Well-respected evangelical leaders have sometimes been heard to demur with the claim 'Of course I

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5 *The Genesis of Doctrine*, Blackwell, Oxford 1990.

6 *Explorations in Theology 7*, p 71.

am not a theologian', as if that were a virtue. And there *is* a real tension between, on the one hand, the theological conservatism which is essential to a tradition founded on biblical revelation rather than on the changing fashions of the intellectual world and, on the other hand, the desire to be creative and to pioneer new avenues of thought. Novelty is not for its own sake appealing to the evangelical mind, and it is perhaps hardly surprising that evangelical theology has operated predominantly by reaction against threatening new trends. But where new developments in thought offer the possibility of doing justice to the biblical revelation in a new way, it is not 'unevangelical' to welcome and to learn from them, nor in principle to pioneer them. But it is an unfamiliar role, and we are not yet very good at it, and perhaps still less good at understanding and encouraging those evangelical scholars who are able to take it on.

4. The Domino Theory. The essence of 'fundamentalism' for Barr is in the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible. Here is a logically consistent position, whereby divine inspiration guarantees the total inerrancy of what is inspired. To allow even the smallest inaccuracy is to allow either that the Holy Spirit inspired error or that not all of Scripture is inspired. Neither conclusion is possible within 'fundamentalist' theology, and so the absolute inerrancy of the Bible must be asserted and defended, in line with the Princeton theology of the nineteenth century. It is the logical tidiness of this view which gives it its appeal, over against the alternative view of an evangelical (indeed 'fundamentalist', in as much as he was one of the contributors to *The Fundamentals*, from which the name is historically derived) such as James Orr who could accept an inspiration which did not entail complete factual inerrancy.[7]

But while the logical coherence of the Princeton approach has largely won the field in 'fundamentalist' circles, it has done so at a terrible cost, for it has set the scene for the domino theory, whereby every alleged error in Scripture is a hostage to fortune, and must therefore be explained away by increasingly implausible harmonisations as biblical scholarship becomes more sophisticated. This cannot go on, Barr suggests: 'The simple logical strength of Warfield's doctrine can avail little in the long run against the anomalies and unrealities into which it falls when applied to the detailed facts of biblical scholarship, as conservative scholarship itself is now showing.'[8]

Conservative scholarship has certainly become more hermeneutically sophisticated in the last decade or two. Does that mean that it has moved over to Orr rather than Warfield, that it has ceased to be truly 'fundamentalist', and that the fall of the first few dominos points forward to an increasing distance between the Warfield theory of inerrancy and the

7 *Fundamentalism* pp 260-270.
8 Ibid. p 303.

bulk of evangelical scholarship? Has the slide down the slippery slope begun? And if it has, who is to say at what point the boundary is to be drawn, beyond which it ceases not only to be 'fundamentalist' but to be recognisably evangelical at all?

I have no instant answers to these questions. They are real questions, which must concern us all, and we should be grateful to Barr for requiring us to face them. My impression, however, is that, influential as Warfield has been, 'conservative scholarship' as a whole (or at least conservative *biblical* scholarship; the case may be rather different for conservative dogmaticians) has for a long time been less committed to Princetonian orthodoxy than Barr suggests, and that even if Orr's name has not been much on our lips, his attitude has been closer to that of most evangelical scholars.

At any rate, whether by logic or by instinct, it is a fact that the boundary line between those results of critical study of the Bible which are felt to be compatible with an evangelical doctrine of its inspiration and those which are not has in practice been drawn at significantly different points by those who are happy to be known as 'conservative evangelicals'. It is perhaps hardly surprising that the more fully a person is immersed in critical biblical scholarship, the more toleration appears to be given to ideas which would appear clearly unacceptable to the evangelical non-specialist. It is at least arguable that this greater toleration is to be attributed not so much to 'creeping liberalism' as to a more sophisticated grasp of hermeneutical issues. An evangelical scholar well versed in the literary conventions of the biblical world is more likely to be able to accommodate such features as paraphrastic reporting of speech or 'transparent' pseudepigraphic intention than the 'plain man' who reads the biblical writings as if they derived from modern Western culture.

Barr asserts at the end of *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (p 174) that people who are well informed about the Bible and theology do not generally *become* 'fundamentalists', and suggests that for those who were already 'fundamentalists' the acquiring of such knowledge is likely to lead to a slow movement away from their 'fundamentalist' roots. Those who remain 'fundamentalist', he implies, contrive to do so in the face of the evidence.

An even more patronising passage in an earlier work (*Old and New in Interpretation*, 1966, p 205) presents an 'innocent and unselfconscious "fundamentalism" ' as appropriate enough to 'an African, or an American negro, village church'; but increasing sophistication either destroys it or turns it into a 'recessive, anti-progressive' attitude. By this criterion I must either be 'recessive' or have ceased to be (if I ever was) a true 'fundamentalist'. I hope the former is not true! But is the latter?

Again we are back to the problem of definition which has plagued this discussion from the beginning. I do not recall a time when I would ever have described myself by that term, but I am pretty sure that Barr would

have so described me, at least in my student period when I, like him, was active in evangelical Christian Union circles. My professional involvement since then in academic biblical studies has undoubtedly refined and developed my thinking very extensively, and has made me able and willing to talk in terms that I might then have regarded with suspicion. But I have not found it necessary to move out of the evangelical world to which I then belonged, nor am I aware that my adherence to the doctrinal position of classical evangelicalism has been eroded. Barr believes, I take it, that I have been trying for the last thirty years to have my cake and eat it. But I wonder if I dare suggest that it is his analysis of the theological options available (or rather his repeated equation of 'fundamentalism' with conservative evangelicalism) which is rather lacking in sophistication?

Conclusion

But it would be churlish to end on such a querulous note. I have taken issue with some of the specific points which Professor Barr has raised, and more fundamentally with the analysis of the total religious scene on which they are based, but I would like to end with an expression of gratitude. Painful as the initial reading of *Fundamentalism* proved to be for many of us (even those of us who did not earn the dubious distinction of figuring in his bibliography!), the experience has, I believe, been a healthy one. The debt may not often have been acknowledged, but I believe a new mood of self-criticism in evangelical scholarship may be traced at least in part to *Fundamentalism*, even if it was not entirely new at that time. This article has tried to highlight a few of the relevant areas; there are many more.

Perhaps those of us who belong to the 'post-Keele' strand of evangelicalism in the Church of England may be justified in feeling that not all of Barr's strictures apply (or were meant to apply) to us. But there is enough of Barr's 'fundamentalism' in most of our backgrounds to encourage us to take his diagnosis seriously, even if in the end we must beg leave to differ.

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