
A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

'Fundamentalism' and Evangelical Scholarship

JAMES BARR

Dr R.T France published in *Anvil* vol. 8 no. 1 some comments on the relation of my book *Fundamentalism* to evangelical scholarship, and I am grateful to the editor of *Anvil* for offering me space for a response. There seem to be three main points: 1. evangelical scholarship and my treatment of fundamentalism; 2. some aspects of contemporary evangelicalism as Dr France himself sees it; 3. some general considerations.

Evangelical scholarship and the treatment of fundamentalism

Dr France concentrates a good deal on matters of terminology and definition. The point which he most emphasizes is that, as he sees it, my book was unfair to evangelical scholarship because I classed it as fundamentalism. I mentioned evangelical scholarship, in his opinion, 'if only to denigrate it', and I 'deliberately' designated conservative evangelicalism by the pejorative title of 'fundamentalism'. All sorts of lively and interesting things that are happening in evangelical scholarship, he says, go unmentioned in my book, and this creates an unfavourable impression of that sector of scholarship.

What Dr France says I 'deliberately' did is exactly what I deliberately did not do. The book was about fundamentalism, not about evangelical scholarship. If I had been writing about evangelical scholarship, I might well have mentioned just the people and tendencies that Dr France feels are neglected; indeed, I might still do it some day. But, from my point of view, obviously, if evangelicals are not fundamentalists and do not use or restate fundamentalist arguments, they should not be mentioned in the book, precisely in order to avoid the associations which Dr France thinks I deliberately make. Why did I not devote any criticism to my friend (and colleague at Manchester over eleven years) the late Professor F.F. Bruce, who was surely *the most important* single scholar of conservative evangelicalism of his time, one deeply revered in evangelical circles, and one who had no doubt that he himself was squarely an evangelical? Why did I not devote a critical analysis to his work? Because I knew very well that he was not a fundamentalist: on the Old Testament, indeed, I sometimes suspected that his opinions were more critical than my own! Why did I not bring in James Dunn, whom Dr France mentions? Because I did not suppose that he was a fundamentalist either. Thus, if areas of evangelical scholarship are left unmentioned in my book, this is because I was talking about fundamentalism, and, if scholarship was not fundamentalist, then it would be wrong to talk of it

as if it was. Thus, if I left out any mention of many things that are happening in evangelical scholarship, it was precisely in order to avoid that association of all such scholarship with fundamentalism which Dr France thinks I 'deliberately' carried out.

The same applies to the 'definition' of my theme in general. In my opinion I made it quite clear that I did not consider conservative evangelicalism, still less evangelicalism in general, to be identical with fundamentalism. Although I say that most fundamentalists prefer to be called conservative evangelicals, which is certainly true (at least in British usage, though not necessarily elsewhere), I do not say nor did I ever think that all conservative evangelicals are fundamentalists. I make a careful distinction in principle between the three logical positions, evangelical, conservative evangelical, and fundamentalist.[1] If I say, in *Fundamentalism*, something like 'conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists think such and such', I mean exactly what I say, that is, that fundamentalists think this, and conservative evangelicals also think this, not that these groups or categories are exactly identical. Thus I am careful again and again to say 'conservative evangelicals' precisely because I mean exactly this and do not wish to call them fundamentalists. In particular I am very careful not to say that any individuals are fundamentalists unless they are clearly committed to views of inerrancy and infallibility, which for me constitute, roughly speaking, the boundary line.

Connected with this is another question: how scholarship is to be valued? *Of course* excellent scholarship is produced by evangelicals; I never doubted it. I am in close touch with many of those who produce it, and am pleased to have them as colleagues and friends. But, if it is indeed excellent, all I want to say of it is: this is excellent scholarship. And that, I believe, in most or all cases, is what the evangelical scholars themselves want. It does not matter whether the scholars are evangelicals or not; all that they want to have recognized is that it is good scholarship. Dr France, if I understand him, sees this more as a partisan contest, in which successes have to be marked up for the side: can evangelical scholars 'win'? he asks, and he is very worried about this. Seeing it as a matter of 'winning', as a matter of scoring points for evangelicalism, is an attitude which can serve only to devalue evangelical scholarship itself, and many evangelical scholars are surely aware of this.

The other side of this matter of 'definition' is this: Dr France appears to give the impression that my way of talking about fundamentalism is a peculiar, rather perverse, personal assessment of my own. Not at all. I was only following normal English usage, from which he seems to want to depart. As I made clear 'fundamentalism' is the normal word in the

---

[1] I express this best, I think, in my essay 'Fundamentalism and Biblical Authority', in A. Linzey and P.J. Wexler, eds., *Heaven and Earth* (Churchman, Worthing 1986), pp 23-37.

English language for the sort of phenomena I describe in my book.[2] If people regard a sacred book as inerrant and infallible, and accompany this with various other features which I mention, that is fundamentalism. That is what people call it. Evangelicals may not like it, but it is not likely that it will go away. Unless evangelicalism turns clearly away from inerrancy, infallibility and the other accompanying features, people as a whole will continue to call much evangelicalism 'fundamentalist', as they already do, and they will not bother with the distinctions that I myself have observed. Where there is the ascription of ultimacy, inerrancy and infallibility to a sacred book, along with militancy, exclusivism and the assumption of orthodoxy, 'fundamentalism' is the normal English word for that phenomenon and suits it very well. Today - much more than when I wrote my book - the increasing visibility of fundamentalism on the world scene, in a variety of religions, is only increasing public perception of the phenomenon and making the contours of the concept more firmly established.

Moreover, 'fundamentalism', as I describe it, is not only the common and normal English-language term, but, more important, it is the common perception of catholic Christianity in general, the normal and widely-held expression of those people of the churches who are not evangelical, and indeed of some who are evangelical as well. As I see it, I was only providing scholarly material and academic discussion to a perception which is already, and rightly, established in the life of the churches. In fact, I have been very gratified by the warm acceptance which my conception and definition of the subject has received. If my description of fundamentalism is so far off the mark as Dr France thinks, why was I asked to write the article *Fundamentalismus* for the authoritative dictionary *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon*?

And the same is true of work by anthropologists, sociologists and scholars in comparative religion, who are devoting an increasing volume of study to world fundamentalism. Take a work like Lionel Caplan (ed.), *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*.[3] This volume contains ten papers from an inter-collegiate seminar series organised by the Department of Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in 1985. Of the participants, a high proportion mention my work and in some cases take it as a model diagnosis, appropriate for use in the analysis of non-Christian fundamentalisms also. Or consider the attractive work of Kathleen Boone, *For the Bible tells them so: the Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism*, written by a specialist in English literature and approaching the subject from the side of discourse analysis. There again I find my use of terms fully supported. Thus, without wishing to justify myself, I have to say: I have no worries whatever about Dr France's concern that I have used inappropriate terms and

---

2 *Fundamentalism*, p 3.

3 Macmillan, London 1987.

definitions.

On the contrary, it is Dr France's picture of the religious world that seems to me to be oddly and unnaturally defined. The logic implied by him seems to suggest two things:

1. There is really no such thing as fundamentalism, or at the most it is so rare and remote that one need not bother about it;
2. Anyway, even if fundamentalism exists at all, conservative evangelical scholars have nothing to do with it and are free from all blame or responsibility connected with it.

To Dr France, as far as one can see from his article, there is no problem of fundamentalism. Indeed, fundamentalism scarcely exists. There is just no problem of the kind except in the minds of perverse critics like myself. Perhaps far away on the margin there might be a few extravagant persons who are really fundamentalists, but they are so few and so marginal that they are not worth thinking about. He does not doubt (p 57) that fundamentalism does exist, indeed, he says, 'I think I have met it from time to time'. From time to time? He must live in a different world from the rest of us. Has he heard, for example, of the near destruction of serious theological education in the huge community of the Southern Baptists, through a carefully orchestrated fundamentalist takeover, happening at the present time - and this in institutions that were already quite conservative and entirely evangelical? The mass of evangelical Christianity, he seems to think, presents no phenomenon that deserves to be described as fundamentalism. Actually the reverse is true. Although *logically* fundamentalism is only one circle within the several that constitute evangelicalism, as I have myself made clear, numerically it is much the most populous: let's say, something well over ninety per cent of world evangelicalism is fundamentalistic, and, even for many of those not included in that percentage, fundamentalism commonly remains the ideological standard by which it is determined what is evangelical and what is conservative.

The virtual disappearance of fundamentalism is the effect also of Dr France's argument (pp 55f.) implying that, if people would not use the title 'fundamentalism' of themselves, that means they are not fundamentalists. But from the beginning I accepted that 'fundamentalism is a bad word: the people to whom it is applied do not like to be so called'.[4] If we are to be restricted to persons who *call themselves* fundamentalists, we will soon find that there are none at all, or only very few. That seems to be Dr France's opinion. He has brought about, at one stroke, the disappearance of one of the most powerful religious phenomena of modern life. Will he, to be consistent, do the same for 'liberalism', certainly another (for most evangelicals) pejorative word? His own logic requires it, by his own principle of fairness. Will he tell his fellow-evangelicals

[4] *Fundamentalism*, p 2.

that no one is to be called a liberal unless they expressly call themselves by that term? But, if this is done, almost all 'liberals' will have disappeared. Yet another huge religious constituency will have ceased to exist. And perhaps evangelicalism itself will be badly damaged as a result: for how is it to understand itself, if there is no liberalism for it to oppose? As an eliminator of the existence of huge religious groupings, Dr France will be a record-breaker.

Catholic Christianity simply cannot take seriously the minimizing of the extent of fundamentalism. The reality of fundamentalism, and its power, its power-seeking, its influence and its hostility to other currents of Christianity, are so great that it is obviously one of the main challenges to the churches in the end of the twentieth century. The pretence that all this simply does not exist cannot be taken seriously.

Contemporary evangelicalism

Moreover, in spite of Dr France's emphasis on the varied, novel and interesting things that are happening in evangelical scholarship, his own article seems to make it clear that this has not progressed very far. If he wants to criticize my work for neglecting these creative movements, he wants also, as I read him, to give these movements his own cautious but positive support. But the way in which he does this shows that he feels there is a long way to go.

Thus for instance, he himself (p 65) tells the story of how Professor Gundry, for using the term 'midrash' of Matthew's Gospel, was expelled (!) from the Evangelical Theological Society, in spite of his own express evangelical loyalty: certainly a lurid case. If I had mentioned it when I wrote *Fundamentalism* I would have been blamed for collecting and publishing discreditable stories. It certainly sheds a worse light on evangelical scholarship than the arguments of my own book did. Doubtless that society included a number of the very diversely-minded, creative, non-fundamentalist, evangelical thinkers whose existence Dr France so emphasizes; but there seems not to have been enough of them to prevent this from happening. To Christians in general that incident would seem an obvious case of 'fundamentalism' and would be classified as such.

The case of James Dunn (p 59) is another example. From within an evangelical standpoint, Dunn argued 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'. But Dunn, with this evangelical manifesto, ran into trouble. Of course he did. But why? Because many fellow evangelicals found it difficult to move away from a near-fundamentalist position, in spite of the fact that Dunn's advocacy (like my own) was founded *on the basis of Scripture itself.* Dr France regrets this, finding it 'sobering, but perhaps hardly surprising'. Why was Dr France not surprised? Surely because his experience in the evangelical world had shown that many are so tied to a near-fundamen-

talist position that they find it hard to tolerate creative proposals, even when argued on the basis of the Bible itself and put forward by a foremost creative evangelical scholar. And this means that the free-wheeling and flexible lines of opinion within evangelicalism have still scarcely achieved wide acceptance.

And so it continues. It is possible, Dr France writes, 'to propose the pseudepigraphic origin of 2 Peter without being hounded out of (some) evangelical circles'. Some? Not, therefore, a majority. And 'hounded out'? To me a strong term. To accept that anyone is likely to be 'hounded out' of evangelical circles, apart from 'some' of them, for holding this opinion, seems to be a very substantial admission of defect in evangelical society. Dr France, rightly, approves of this movement towards flexibility over recent years. But his own words make it clear that he does not think it has gone very far.

Some general considerations

Inerrancy and infallibility

All this is not surprising, because it fits with the general place of the view of scripture in the self-understanding of evangelicalism. As we have agreed, a proportion of conservative evangelicals are not fundamentalists. They may still, however, use particular arguments that logically depend on the fundamentalist position, or they may still feel more at home in the fundamentalist thought-world than in that of catholic Christianity, or they may find that, when talking within their own constituency, it is easier to use the fundamentalist categories and arguments than to proceed with the difficult search for alternatives. Thus, in spite of unwillingness to accept full-blown fundamentalism, it is easy to see how that same fundamentalism functions as a very powerful standard in evangelicalism and one the influence of which is very difficult to overcome. It follows from the very strong sense of loyalty to evangelicalism which most evangelicals feel.

After all, the fundamentalist view of Scripture is the only one, effectively, that is *distinctively* evangelical, while, on the contrary, no doctrine of scripture really deeply different from the fundamentalist one has been worked out, or become accepted, as really evangelical, still less become known to the majority of the constituency. Since fundamentalists are more or less universally accepted as evangelicals, and since people strongly differing from fundamentalism in its view of the Bible quickly come under suspicion of not being evangelical, the fundamentalist view of Scripture comes to be a sort of identity badge for evangelicals, and since their loyalty to evangelicalism is so central to them they do not easily abandon that badge.

Thus, though we have agreed that conservative evangelicals may not be fundamentalists, the way in which the term 'conservative' is defined

for this purpose is commonly by the standard of approximation to the fundamentalist position. And here it seems to me that much evangelical scholarship *does* indeed have some responsibility for the continuing power of fundamentalism, even when scholars are not fundamentalist themselves. If one comes closer to the fundamentalist position, that makes one more clearly 'conservative'; if one is farther away from it, it becomes doubtful if one is conservative, if one really contradicts it and goes in another direction then people immediately think that one is not conservative at all: one begins to be thought of as a 'liberal', and people begin to doubt if one is evangelical at all (as in the case of Gundry already mentioned). Thus, even for the non-fundamentalist conservative evangelical, fundamentalism tends to function as the standard by which the degree of 'conservatism' will be measured. Dr France seems to show this himself, for example, in his warm appreciation of Robinson's *Redating the New Testament*. As he rightly says, this book does not emerge from an evangelical theological position at all. What then is good about it? Why should evangelicals be pleased about it? It is good because any sort of early dating constitutes an approximation to the fundamentalist position. I can't see what else favours it. Evangelical scholars are often unwilling to move outside the categories and thought-patterns of the wider evangelical constituency, and these are often formed by fundamentalism.

One illustration of this may be useful. Dr France thinks (pp 67f.) that I identified evangelical scholarship excessively with the strict Princeton position of Warfield. Great as has been the influence of the Princeton view, he thinks, the evangelical view has been closer to the softer position of James Orr, and I should have taken this into account. Here, however, in spite of his vigilant inspection of the errors in my book, he has not read it very carefully. For I myself wrote 'It is scarcely to be doubted that Orr's doctrine comes closer than Warfield's to what most evangelicals in fact believe'.[5] I actually went farther in Dr France's direction than he himself did, for he said this only of 'evangelical scholars' while I thought it true of evangelicals in general, and still do.

But the difference between Warfield and Orr is deceptive, and this is how it fits with our argument above. In discussing this difference, all we are doing is to remain within fundamentalism: we are tinkering with minor variations within the same general system. Orr's position, as I made clear in my book, is only a religiously more attractive and acceptable formulation of fundamentalism. He did not insist on complete factual inerrancy, but assumed something like ninety nine per cent factual inerrancy, while grounding biblical inspiration in a different way. Fussing over the minor points of Orr's differences from Warfield is only a search for a way to remain within fundamentalism but with greater

[5] Ibid., p 270.

comfort.

For me, in the last resort, inerrancy and infallibility of scripture are no support for evangelical religion. For, even if we take the Bible as fully inerrant and infallible, and take it for itself as a source, it provides equally good support for catholic and for liberal, moderate, directions within Christianity. The association of biblical infallibility with evangelicalism, though emotionally strongly felt, is logically accidental. The actual basis for evangelical conviction, in my opinion, lies elsewhere, and I hope to develop this theme in due course in another work.

The impression that the Bible furnishes support uniquely to evangelicalism is the result of long centuries in which the Bible was interpreted in an evangelical sense, a tradition in the light of which its support for evangelical religion appears to people to be automatic. Interpretation is central, as Dr France himself says. But its centrality points in a direction different from that which he perceives. It is not the Bible itself that univocally supports the evangelical position in religion; that position depends on a long-held tradition of interpretation.

Putting it in another way, it is a question between the realities of the Bible and theories about the Bible. As I see it, the realities of the Bible make it clear that it is neither inerrant nor infallible in any customary sense of these words. It follows that any attempt to press for inerrancy or infallibility, even in a more moderate mode than the fundamentalist one, is denying the reality of the Bible and is thus anti-biblical. For the sake of the Bible therefore we have to make it clear that we break completely away from these views. We do not improve untrue views of the Bible by merely asserting, in John Stott's terminology as quoted by Dr France, that evangelical views of the Bible are 'high'. 'High' is a slogan which has no basis other than assertion of an opinion. Only views built upon the realities of the Bible can call themselves 'high'.

Fairness

An important point raised by Dr France is the matter of fairness. Several times he says that my arguments are unfair. I don't agree; I think they are entirely fair. But I welcome his concern for fairness very much. Nevertheless I have to say: the evangelical constituency has a long way to go before putting this concern for fairness into practice. In my years of experience in evangelicalism I seldom if ever heard or saw any attempt to be fair to non-evangelical religion, whether Protestant, Catholic or non-Christian. 'Denigration' (Dr France's word) of non-evangelical religion occupies a great deal of the time in evangelical sermons and expositions, and its centrality as a rhetorical approach is even greater. I do not say this as a matter of moral blame; it is more a matter of logic. Fairness is not a principle much fostered by the evangelical approach to religion. Evangelicalism set out not to be fair, but to convert. Fairness seems to belong to the sphere of natural morality, which can be badly

damaged by conversion. Conversion easily displaces this ethical element and replaces it with a partisan ethic for which fairness is unimportant. Certainly fairness must in the end be a Christian virtue, and not only a matter of natural morality, but it requires time and experience for this to be perceived and worked out. Thus individual evangelicals can be entirely fair, because they have succeeded in retaining that element of natural morality, or in rebuilding it on a Christian basis. But evangelicalism as a set of communal practices does not give high priority to fairness (except, as in this present case, in defence against criticisms of itself). I doubt if evangelicalism could continue to exist if it was fair to other types of religion, fair, I mean, not only in academic discussion but down to the grassroots of what is said in sermons, what is said in student Christian Unions or in evangelistic campaigns, what is written in book reviews, and so on. So I entirely esteem the wish for fairness; but experience of the ethics of discussion in these matters leaves me pessimistic.

Hermeneutics

Dr France much emphasizes the present evangelical fashion for hermeneutics, and seems to think that this has improved the situation or may do so in the future. It is not clear why he thinks this to be such an improvement. It has meant, he thinks, that evangelical scholarship has become more 'sophisticated', and perhaps this is true. In some other respects it seems to be a very ambiguous development, even as seen from the evangelical side itself. It certainly indicates movement, but what sort of movement?

It seems that the fashion for hermeneutics, including the various burgeoning 'literary' approaches to the Bible, has already led to the abandonment of some time-honoured evangelical convictions and will probably lead farther in this direction. One of the sounder traditional conservative evangelical arguments was to the effect that critical scholarship and liberal theology were built upon a foundation of non-Christian assumptions drawn from modern intellectual fashions. There might be something in this, and at least it sounded good as an argument. But now these relations are coming to be reversed. Attending a modern conservative evangelical conference on hermeneutics, I found an audience which swallowed willingly, delightedly, every latest fashion in structuralism, deconstruction, literary theory, reader-response approaches and the like. But were the authors of these new trends and theories guided by orthodox Christian assumptions? Were they evangelicals, or at least believers of some sort? Not a bit. Their assumptions are openly existentialist, Marxist, atheist, idealist, materialist, and the rest. Where the tradition behind hermeneutics is a solidly theological one, it comes mainly through Bultmann (!) - an evangelical in a sense, but hardly a conservative one. So one of the conservative arguments that had at least some sort of good ground has gone. Where this is the case,

evangelical hermeneutics has virtually abandoned the claim that its assumptions come out of orthodox belief; and it can no longer use that argument against other trends of theology.

But what advantage does evangelical interpretation hope to gain in compensation? Ultimately, it is often distrust of the historical approach that is the motive. All hermeneutical suggestions are welcome - except for those that lead towards historical criticism. So long as the force of historical-critical arguments can be turned aside, any sort of reasoning is acceptable. But why should the historical arguments seem so dangerous? Only because of the heritage of fundamentalism, for which historical criticism appeared as the most serious threat. So fundamentalism is not so far away after all.

Literality

Discussion of interpretation leads us on to literality (pp 62ff.).[6] In spite of Dr France's strictures, the differences between the Gospels are a good illustration. Traditional fundamentalism was an objectivist theory. The text was an objective fact, and it referred to objective facts, events and teachings of the past. Its argumentation required that *what is said in the Bible* directly reflects the truth, both theological reality and historical truth. Of course, as Dr France says, evangelical commentators on these books commonly go another way, treating the evangelists as 'inspired reporters/interpreters'. Quite so. I pointed out the same myself. But this means that we are moving from *what the biblical words actually say* to another level, the level of the meaning in the evangelist's thought. Inspiration resides not in the relation between the words of the Bible and the objective truth, but in that between the guidance of the evangelists and the theology with which they handled the story. The evangelists were 'inspired reporters', but what the Bible actually says is not the meaning that was in their minds. The words of the Bible do not expressly state that meaning. What the Bible actually says is an account of actions and sayings, an account which, it has been admitted, is not necessarily precisely correct. And obviously, if the text is not precisely correct at those points where parallel passages betray the fact, it is not necessarily correct even where that particular kind of evidence does not exist. But, if this is so, our knowledge of the evangelist's meaning is not given directly by the text; rather, it is the product of the scholar's interpretation. And then it is a matter of open discussion which scholar's interpretation is the best; it cannot be settled by quotation of the text. The Gospel itself no longer *states* the truth; it has to be worked out from the Gospel. The Gospel itself provides only the material upon which interpretation of the evangelist's meaning may (possibly) be carried out. Evangelical scholars

[6] See more recently my article 'Literality' in *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 6, October 1989, pp 412-28.

work on this with their hermeneutics. But, so far as one can see, there is no longer anything distinctively evangelical about this: they are just doing the same as the rest of us are doing. This is one reason why they fit in so very well with the rest of the community of biblical scholarship. There is no evangelical theological principle which gives the answer or provides the true method. Evangelical hermeneutics is an admission that the general critical approach of scholars was the only possible one all along.

Naturally, evangelical interpreters may not wish to make this admission. But what can they add to the general hermeneutic of all scholars that is distinctively evangelical? Either they can add an accent on historical reliability, which is a partial return to the inerrancy doctrine of fundamentalism; or they can add a stress on the absolute importance of *believing*, accepting, what the text has to say, theologically. But this is no longer clear guidance, for a gap has opened up between what the text actually says and the inspired theological meaning intended by the evangelist, which lies behind the text, and is known only through interpretation. Which is one to believe?

Or else, perhaps, there is yet another aspect. Evangelicals seem to like the *anti-objectivist* tendency of modern hermeneutics. They like the erroneous but fashionable idea that historical criticism was objectivist, which makes it wrong. Everyone, it is thought, is working with presuppositions. Therefore evangelical presuppositions are as good as anyone else's. An evangelical bias can be slipped into interpretation without a bad conscience. But the theological principles now being fed into interpretation are principles that arose out of a quite different kind of history, out of an objectivist view of Scripture and meaning which has been abandoned by the new hermeneutical approach. Evangelicalism of this kind is not conservative in the sense of conserving the foundations on which the older evangelicalism was constructed; it is conservative rather in expressing what is now thought feasible by the 'conservatives' of today. Moreover, to insist upon an interpretation on the ground that other people's interpretations are equally determined by their presuppositions is not a very sound authority for an evangelical understanding.

Again, if the evangelists were inspired reporters/interpreters, and the differences of historical detail between the records do not matter too much, it means that the Gospels no longer necessarily state accurate historical fact. This completely eliminates any theory of inspiration according to which the Holy Spirit prevented the writers from writing anything that was not completely true. The Holy Spirit inspired, or at least permitted, the writing of inaccurate reports. The differences in the presentation of the story and the teaching are part of the evangelists' interpretation. Certainly. But then it is no longer being claimed that the words of the Gospels coincide with historical fact. But, if this is so in the Gospels, what religious reason is there why it should be different in the

rest of the Bible? If in the Gospels God communicates his truth to us through stories that are not factually accurate, why should not the same be true in other parts of the Bible? We thus come to the odd situation, which I have mentioned elsewhere, that the historical 'reliability' of other parts of the Bible is more strongly insisted upon than that of the Gospels in detail. In fact, variation in historical detail between the Gospels must entail the collapse of religiously-based arguments for historical accuracy in other parts of the Bible. Perhaps Dr France thinks that historical accuracy no longer matters. But if so, why the pleasure in early dates for the New Testament books, why the worries about Second Peter?

I think what has happened is as follows. Firstly, in matters like the differences between the Gospels, as also in biblical chronology and some other matters, most evangelical scholarship tacitly accepted the liberal position or parts of it. This simply had to be done in any case. It was tactically necessary to do so, because the attempt to maintain absolute verbal/factual accuracy would only make the Gospels look ridiculous. Apologetic attempts to prove that every single minor discrepancy between the four Gospels could be harmonized away would have bored people, and had no religious value anyway. This liberalization has been an important source of strength to evangelicalism and is one of the reasons for its advance in modern times. This liberalization was carried out, however, tacitly and without any perception of the degree to which it violated the theory of Scripture upon which traditional evangelical belief had been worked out, and upon which most evangelicals still worked. The liberalizers wanted to remain 'conservatives'.

My mention of this liberal element is not intended as a mere way of catching out evangelicals in inconsistency, as Dr France (p 63) thinks. It is a serious point about the evangelical tradition as a whole. There never was a consistent conservative tradition of biblical interpretation. There was, certainly, a Protestant tradition, or an evangelical tradition. But that tradition always contained liberal elements as it contained conservative elements. What held the tradition together was its general support for Protestantism or for evangelicalism. In particular questions of biblical interpretation it was always eclectic. If some evangelicals recover or restate liberal directions in interpretation, they are being quite true to their own tradition.

On the other hand, evangelicals have been naive in supposing that, given the interpretative element involved in knowing the meaning in the mind of the Gospel writer, it would nevertheless be the evangelical sort of meaning that would somehow emerge in the end. That is a matter for scholarship, and not one that is determined by the Bible itself, still less by the churchmanship or view of biblical authority that scholars may have.

Professor James Barr teaches at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville