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The fundamentalism polemic

Tony Lane

JAMES BARR's book *Fundamentalism* (SCM, 1977. 380pp. £3.95) is a serious attempt, by one who has long recognized the importance of the conservative evangelical movement, to understand and evaluate it. It comes as a welcome change to the pretence that a conservative evangelical position does not exist and to many of the caricatures to which evangelicals have become accustomed (some of which Barr himself corrects — e.g. pp.17, 26, 36, 40, 48f., 62f., 90f., 317f., 322f.). Professor Barr has worked hard to understand his opponents (pp.8f.) and the outcome is a portrait that is far more recognizable than much earlier polemic and which in places is most perceptive (and uncomfortable!). But the tone remains firmly polemical and Barr's thesis is that 'fundamentalism', in particular 'its doctrinal position and its entire intellectual apologetic', is 'completely wrong' (p.8). (Ironically, one of his repeated charges against evangelicals is precisely their tendency to portray their opponents as completely wrong — e.g. pp.162f., 308, 324.) Apart from the goal of understanding, the book is written to influence 'liberal' students attracted to 'fundamentalism' and to prevent scholars from *overreacting* against fundamentalism (pp.9f., 150). Barr says that he is not primarily addressing 'fundamentalists', but nonetheless this book is likely to exercise a real influence among evangelicals.

Professor Barr's attempt to understand evangelicalism is undoubtedly sincere and not without success, but those familiar at first hand with a wide range of evangelical life and thought will perceive much inaccuracy. *First*, Barr has 'worked through the morass of British conservative evangelical literature' (p.223); but if his bibliography is any guide it is an arbitrarily selected morass, being especially weak on recent works. Two old and slight works of John Stott are included and he receives no mention outside the bibliography. (Is Barr really unaware of his importance and influence?) Despite the considerable space devoted to evangelical biblical scholarship, only one old work each of Howard Marshall and Ralph Martin are mentioned in the bibliography and they barely receive attention in the text. This list could be extended considerably but attention must be drawn especially to the gross misrepresentation of Michael Green. He is frequently attacked as a bigoted funda-

mentalist, ignorant of modern scholarship (e.g. pp.126f., 129, 141f.), all on the basis of a booklet written in 1963! Evidently Barr is unaware of Michael Green's many and more recent books. The only other work of his that he quotes is *2 Peter Reconsidered* (on p.349) and Barr is evidently unaware that Michael Green changed his position in his later Tyndale Commentary on 2 Peter. Such a treatment is especially regrettable when we remember that Michael Green is rector of the largest church in Barr's university city.

Secondly, there are some surprising silences. Considerable space is devoted to conservative biblical scholarship, but the Tyndale Fellowship is never mentioned. Is Barr unaware of its existence or just unaware of its importance and influence? If he knew of currents of thought in TF circles he might have revised a number of his comments on conservative scholarship. Likewise there is no mention of the 1974 Lausanne Congress, in which many British evangelicals participated. Considering the influence of Lausanne in Britain and world-wide such an omission is remarkable, and even a passing acquaintance with Lausanne should have led Barr to revise some of his judgments. (Here mention must be made of the amazing but oft-repeated charge that British evangelicals are totally complacent and lacking in any self-criticism (e.g. pp.162f., 222f., 338) which, if it ever was true, is certainly not true of the post-Lausanne era. I hope Barr reads the reports of NEAC.)

Thirdly, while Barr devotes a great deal of attention to the differences within evangelicalism, he still does not allow sufficiently for the diversity that exists. He attacks the hard-line anti-ecumenical position (pp. 328-331) without noting that many evangelicals (especially Anglicans) have a very positive attitude to the movement. Not only is he unaware that Martyn Lloyd-Jones is no longer minister of Westminster Chapel (p.362) but more serious is the way in which inadequate allowance is made for the difference between the popular and scholarly levels. Thus at one and the same time the scholar is charged with saying things not obvious to the layman (pp.47, 124f., 153f.) and saddled with popular prejudices (note the

inclusion of the Scofield Bible on p.45 and the charge that 'the average fundamentalist seldom or never makes a philosophical statement', p.271).

Fourthly, there are a number of inaccuracies, many of which are not particularly significant, such as the interesting statement that all evangelical meetings are in principle evangelistic (p.23). One inaccuracy is more serious. Barr rightly notes that the distinction between 'true' and 'nominal' Christians is basic to the evangelical ethos. But he goes too far in saying that this can be equated with the distinction between 'evangelical' and 'liberal' (pp.4f., 14f., 338; cf. 314f., 322f.). He does allow that there are exceptions to this, but this is an inadequate qualification. One can safely say that the majority of informed evangelicals would reject the simplistic equation of nominal Christianity and liberalism, as well as being aware of the real danger of nominal Christianity within evangelicalism.

It is evident that Barr has little first-hand knowledge of his subject, certainly in recent years. I would be surprised if he has any close friends who are evangelicals and even more surprised if any informed evangelicals read the book before it went to the publishers. This is a real pity, because many blemishes could have been avoided and Barr would have been less likely to suffer the fate that he predicts for books like his of being 'branded as a distortion and a caricature' (p.325). To a limited extent it is, though Barr is not guilty of some of the grosser misrepresentations for which he criticizes some evangelical polemicists. I sincerely hope that evangelicals will not imagine that Barr's blemishes exempt them from taking him seriously. He makes many points of substance and hits his target often enough and accurately enough to leave the evangelical thinker with plenty of food for constructive thought.

The very title of Barr's book is polemical. He is not unaware that British evangelicals dislike the title 'fundamentalist' and yet he insists on retaining it (ch.1). This is doubly unfortunate. First, it does not help mutual understanding to insist on calling your opponents by a name that they repeatedly disown. Secondly, it blurs an important distinction that Barr himself later seeks to make between fundamentalists and conservatives (e.g. pp.85-89, 124-126). It also shows how he does not always differentiate between different types of evangelicalism. There is a real difference between American-style fundamentalism (involving dispensationalism) and the remaining conservative evangelical movement. Dispensationalism and Zionism are less influential in Britain than is suggested by chapters 4.5 and 7.2. There is also the distinction between the purely dogmatic approach to Scripture, working simply from the doctrine of Scripture even if the conclusions are then defended

by the use of historical argument, and the conservative approach which seeks to give weight to both historical criticism and the doctrine of Scripture. Barr notes the tensions between these two groups but never shows any signs of recognizing the theological basis for the latter¹; in fact he criticizes conservative scholars on the assumption that no such basis exists. Barr argues that there is no ground for refusing the term 'fundamentalist' unless one can show a real difference in substance (pp.3f). This is fair, and I would retort that there is a real difference in substance, certainly between the conservative evangelicalism of this magazine and American fundamentalism. I doubt, for instance, if many readers of this magazine would accept all three of the characteristics of fundamentalism listed on page 1.

A major target of Barr's attack is the doctrine of inerrancy. He shows the inadequacy of many evangelical treatments of the opening chapters of Genesis and the differences between the Gospels. He concludes with the charge that evangelical exegesis follows 'a completely unprincipled — in the strict sense unprincipled, because guided by no principle of interpretation — approach, in which the only guiding criterion is that the Bible should, by the sorts of truth that fundamentalists respect and follow, be true and not in any sort of error' (p.49). Many evangelical scholars would agree with the charge that evangelical exegesis and hermeneutics leave a lot to be desired,² but I doubt whether 'completely unprincipled' even begins to be fair. It is noteworthy that Barr's bibliography contains only a very few evangelical commentaries and not one that is recent and substantial. We can admit that Barr makes his point about techniques of harmonizing, though he ought to have noted that more recent evangelical scholarship has itself moved beyond some of the methods that he attacks.³ But Barr does not face the real issue. Is the teaching of different parts of the Bible ultimately compatible or not? If it is, as evangelicals affirm, we are committed to an exegesis that accepts it all — perhaps synthesis is a better word than harmony, because it is important that each part be allowed to speak for itself. If there is no ultimate compatibility, as Barr affirms, we are forced to pick and choose. If Paul and James, say, are *ultimately* incompatible, we can be even-handed only in rejecting both; otherwise we must choose one or the other. Because evangelicals are committed to accepting the teaching of the Bible, they can claim that only that approach takes that teaching fully seriously, however much they may have abused it or trivialized it in practice. It is also surely undeniable that this is the traditional Christian approach up to the rise of liberalism. While *methods* of exegesis have varied considerably there has been agreement in the principle of interpreting Scripture on the assumption that it is true.

Barr argues that evangelicals, in concentrating on issues such as date and authorship, have missed the real point of difference between conservative and liberal (pp.158f., 152). There is much truth in this, as has been noted by some evangelicals in recent times (of which Barr is unaware).⁴ Furthermore, it is true in a wider sense than that intended by Barr. The basic issue with, say, John's Gospel is not who wrote it when, nor even the type of truth there to be found, as Barr suggests, but rather the question of *whether* it is true. If the last point is granted there is no reason why the evangelical should not be as open and scholarly as anyone else in dealing with the other two.

Barr also attacks the doctrinal basis for inerrancy. He is very critical of evangelical appeals to the teaching of Jesus (pp.72-85). He rightly points to the weakness of appeals to Jesus' passing references to Daniel, Moses, *etc.* Such references cannot really be taken as positive teaching on matters of authorship. But Barr does not adequately discuss the main thrust of the evangelical case, which is not that Jesus pronounced on the authorship of the Pentateuch but rather that he accepted the OT Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God. Does Barr himself accept Jesus' teaching at this point? He does not tell us in so many words, but I am left with the distinct impression that Jesus' own view is not necessarily binding. But it should not be imagined that Barr has no doctrine of Scripture. He defends the doctrine of verbal inspiration, though not in the conservative evangelical sense. He objects to the evangelical belief that inspiration implies inerrancy. Here he is especially critical of the doctrine of B. B. Warfield (pp.260-70),⁵ preferring that of James Orr. This section is certainly worthy of careful attention. It may be that the approach of Warfield presents too many difficulties and that another approach can be found which better safeguards the evangelical concern for the truth and authority of Scripture. But while Barr may have presented a penetrating critique of Warfield's doctrine, not many evangelicals are likely to prefer his alternative. He speaks of inspiration but does not show what substantial content he gives to this word.

Barr is very negative about evangelical theology. Five of his main criticisms can be noted. *First*, he repeatedly insists that 'fundamentalists' have no theology as such, but only a fragmented collection of unrelated doctrines (pp.161f., 166, 168). Here I wonder if Barr has not unduly limited his reading or whether he has concentrated too much on the common platform of the evangelical movement to the neglect of the theologies propounded in certain sectors. Many of us would bring exactly the opposite charge against some of our fellow evangelicals — that they have an over-precise theological system where the Bible is some-

times distorted in the interests of the consistency and inter-relatedness of the system.

Secondly, Barr accuses evangelical theology of being fossilized and inactive. 'Within true fundamentalism there is no real task for theology other than the conservation and reiteration of a tradition believed to have existed in the past and in any case now taken as immovably fixed' (p.162). This is certainly true of much evangelical theology, but it would be mistaken to suppose that it applies to all. Barr adds that, compared with evangelical *biblical* scholarship, 'practically all they say about theology or philosophy can only be described as abysmally poor in comparison'⁶ (p.160). While this is an exaggeration it is not without truth and it is noteworthy that the Tyndale Fellowship is aware of this deficiency and has been seeking in recent years to rectify it. But while this charge can be made of *English* evangelicalism, the same is not true of Holland or the USA. It is significant that G. C. Berkouwer is never mentioned by Barr, although IVP now distribute many of his weighty theological tomes. One might also ask whether a similar charge could not be made against English non-evangelical scholarship.

Thirdly, Barr states that 'nowhere in the conservative evangelical literature have I found evidence of any serious attempt to understand what non-conservative theologians think' (p.164). While this statement must be taken as further evidence for the narrowness of Barr's reading it must be admitted that much evangelical polemic completely bears out his point. Suffice it to say that Colin Brown (cited by Barr) is not the sole exception to this rule.

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Fourthly, Barr repeatedly asserts that it is 'liberals' rather than 'fundamentalists' who stand in continuity with the church throughout the centuries. Space prohibits an adequate discussion of this point, but it must certainly be disputed. It is true that some evangelicals too glibly refer to 'historic Christianity' when they are in fact referring to a section of the post-Reformation Protestant tradition. But nonetheless, when one comes to the basic point at issue between 'liberal' and 'conservative', there should be little question which has moved the further from traditional Christianity. But the evangelical should note the word 'further'. None of us has remained in exactly the old position, because in a world of change even to stand still is to change.

Finally, Barr makes a serious charge against evangelical theology. He regards biblical authority as a form rather than a reality in evangelical thought (p.11). By this he means that the *real* authority is evangelical *tradition* and the Bible is simply used to support this (pp.37f.). This charge will make many evangelicals angry, but I have no doubt that it contains much truth. Many evangelicals simply assume that their beliefs are biblical, supporting them with a few proof texts. Often the exegesis used to support the beliefs is ludicrously inadequate and there is little awareness of the historical process that has led to our present beliefs (pp.16, 186). Evangelicals should take this criticism to heart and seek to turn their profession of being under the authority of Scripture into more of a reality. If the traditions of other groups and churches are open to criticism in the light of Scripture, our own unwritten and often unacknowledged doctrinal traditions cannot be exempted — in reality as well as in theory (cf. pp.107f.).

This book is a significant milestone in the history of evangelical-liberal polemic. (I wish I could say 'debate', but I see too little evidence of genuine interaction for this.) It is noteworthy that evangelicals are no longer viewed as a few ignorant fundamentalists whose outdated ideas are about to pass away. Now they are seen as a dangerous, robust and articulate foe who shows remarkable signs of stability and vitality, who could well last for another 500 or 1000 years (p.315) and from whom students need to

be defended. Barr has corrected many old fallacies about 'fundamentalists'. It is a pity that he may have started some more. I hope that 'liberals' will not simply assume that what they read in this book is the last word on the subject. I also hope that evangelicals will be prepared to look past the blemishes to the weighty points of substance that merit a carefully-thought-out response.

A number of misprints were noted and the book was obviously prepared in some haste. There are one or more lines missing at the bottom of p.151 and the page headings are erroneous on pp.283-303. More seriously, my copy repeats pp.263-278 in place of pp.279-294 and I would urge potential purchasers to check theirs in advance.

References

- ¹Cf. especially J. I. Packer, 'Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority' in *Churchman* 81, 1967 pp.7-21 and in *Themelios* 1, 1975-6, pp.3-12.
- ²J. I. Packer, *art. cit.*; Tony Thiselton, 'Understanding God's Word Today' in *The Lord Christ* (ed. J. R. W. Stott) (Collins, 1977), pp.90-122.
- ³R. T. France, 'Inerrancy and New Testament Exegesis' in *Themelios* 1, 1975-6, pp.12-18, and 'The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus' in *History, Criticism and Faith* (ed. Colin Brown) (I.V.P., 1977) pp.101-143; W. L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1974), to name but a few. It is noteworthy that *History, Criticism and Faith* is reviewed in *Expository Times* 88, July 1977, pp.290f. in a tone markedly different to Barr's approach to conservative biblical scholarship.
- ⁴Cf. especially J. Goldingay, 'Inspiration, Infallibility and Criticism' in *Churchman* 90, 1976, pp.6-23.
- ⁵Barr writes as if evangelicals were unaware of the philosophical presupposition of the Princeton school (pp.270-279) while this is the major charge made against them by the Dooyeweerdian school and I have often heard it made by other evangelical scholars.
- ⁶In defence of evangelical philosophy it should be noted that Barr makes no mention of Paul Helm, for instance. Paul Helm has written an interesting review of Barr in *Third Way* 1.14, 14 July 1977, which I know purely by oral tradition.

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