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REV. J. I. PACKER, M.A., D.PHIL.

The Fundamentalism Controversy: Retrospect and Prospect

For some years now a movement denominated 'fundamentalism' has been the whipping-boy of English Protestantism. It has been damned, like Socrates, for corrupting the youth; it has been pictured as a sworn foe of scholarship; its spirit has been likened to that of political totalitarianism, and its published utterances to political propaganda; it has been described as the great barrier to ecumenical progress and, indeed, as holding within itself a threat of fresh schism. A sequence of public utterance by leaders in the Churches and in education have rung the changes on these themes in tones varying from cool patronage to mild hysteria. Today, anti-fundamentalism has become a fashion, almost a craze.

There has not been much doubt at any stage as to the persons against whom this flow of denunciation was directed; but the matter is finally settled by Dr Gabriel Hebert, who tells us at the beginning of his recently published *Fundamentalism and the Church of God* (a book which has won general, if undiscriminating, acclaim in anti-fundamentalist circles): 'It is with conservative evangelicals in the Church of England and other churches, and with the Inter-Varsity Fellowship of Evangelical Unions, that this book is to be specially concerned.'[1] It is, perhaps, in order to comment here that, seeing these are the persons under review, it is a pity that the words 'fundamentalism' and 'fundamentalist' were ever introduced into the discussion at all. For on English lips these terms, like 'Manichean' in the Middle Ages, 'Puritan' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and 'Methodist' in the eighteenth, are little more than ecclesiastical Billingsgate, 'odious names' used to express and evoke emotional attitudes towards those one dislikes rather than to convey any exact information about them. Moreover, 'fundamentalist' is an epithet which is commonly applied to such groups as Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists—both 'fundamentalists in the strict sense' (whatever they may be) according to Hebert (p. 22)—and one which is also linked in British minds with real or imagined oddities

[1] Op. cit. p. 10.

on the other side of the Atlantic; and British evangelicals have no desire to saddle themselves with such associations as these. In fact, they have repeatedly declined the word 'fundamentalist' as a description for themselves. Hebert notes this, and comments: 'It will be therefore only common courtesy on my part to refrain from calling them by a name which they dislike and repudiate' (p. 10). One could wish that others had seen fit to show the same courtesy. As it is, the readiness of some to make capital out of the prejudicial associations of the word reflects badly on both their Christian charity and their intellectual integrity. It suggests also that they have failed to learn Bacon's lesson: 'words are the counters of wise men, the coinage of fools.' This debate is not about words. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet; and the conservative evangelical viewpoint remains the same, whatever it may be called. And it is that viewpoint which is in question at present. Moreover, the criticisms brought against it are so serious that they cannot with a good conscience be ignored. Evangelical Christians must be ready to examine themselves afresh, with a willingness to admit their mistakes and to correct them if Scripture sustains the anti-fundamentalist indictment; otherwise, they will stand self-condemned. Let us, then, look at this debate more closely.

The controversy has proved illuminating in three respects. In the first place, it bears indirect witness to the resurgent vitality of evangelicalism in this country today. The debate is in essence, as we shall see, the re-opening of a conflict which raged during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth. For almost a generation it lapsed; not because the contending parties had reached agreement, but because evangelicalism had become so weak—as far as ability to sustain a theological debate was concerned, anyway—that its opponents were able simply to ignore it, and left it, as they thought, to die of its own accord. Now, however, so far from expiring, evangelicalism in Britain has begun to revive. It would not be sober or realistic to say more than that; but it seems certain that the evangelical cause is now stronger, both numerically and theologically, than it has been for some time, and that it is among men and women of the younger age-groups that its new strength is found. Some of the anti-fundamentalists, at any rate, are in no doubt on the point. Alarm at this trend seems to have prompted the first denunciatory salvos which re-opened the debate; and alarm, as much as anything else, seems to be the reason for the surprising violence of some of the things that have been said. The impression given by these utterances

is of the bluster of nervousness, in face of the spectacle of a supposedly dying evangelicalism becoming once more a force to be reckoned with.

In the second place, these criticisms show what kind of views evangelicals are thought to hold by those outside their own circles. It is instructive, if startling, to see what these are. And it would be wrong for evangelicals just to laugh, or snort, according to temperament, at the sometimes ludicrous inaccuracy of their critics' ideas about them, and leave the matter there. The picture is often ludicrous enough, in all conscience; but whose fault is that? It seems undeniable that evangelicals themselves are partly to blame. If ever there was a breakdown in communication, it is here. We find evangelicals accused of holding the 'dictation theory' (so-called) of the mode of inspiration, which turns the Biblical authors into mere automata; of being 'literalists' in interpretation, in the sense that we read all Biblical records of fact as if they were modern newspaper reports, prosaic descriptions of what we should have seen had we been there, and exclude on principle the possibility that metaphors and symbols enter into the telling of the story; we are described as opposing all Biblical criticism, in the sense of enquiry into the human origins of the Biblical books; as maintaining that the Bible speaks with final authority on questions of natural science; as believing that the 'true' church is an altogether invisible church which does not become visible in any sense, and that the time has come to abandon the historic denominations as being apostate; we are accused of a pietistic insistence that only those who have successfully passed through a standard conversion-experience can be accepted as real Christians; of regarding all concern about the world as 'wordly', and of extolling unconcern about the social, political, economic and cultural implications of the faith as a positive virtue; and so forth. As statements of evangelical principles, such charges are sufficiently wide of the mark; but where are the representative evangelical treatments of these matters, which may be quoted to refute them? Where are the positive evangelical contributions to the discussion of these topics, stating the Biblical position and offering an informed critique of other views in the light of it? They are conspicuous by their absence. And if evangelicalism during the past generation could not, or would not, make known its mind on these themes at the level of scholarly enquiry, it is no wonder that so many have drawn their ideas of what evangelicals stand for from the sometimes unguarded remarks of such individual evangelicals as they have happened to meet.

These persons may have been quite unrepresentative; but how was the enquirer to know ? The currency of such misconceptions as we have mentioned should bring home to us that for some decades evangelicals have skimped their theological homework; our service of God has been negligent on the intellectual level; we have failed to see the need for, and to produce, a scholarly literature; and, by and large, the only areas of Christian concern on which we are equipped to speak are those covered in books written by evangelical scholars of the pre-first world war period. On other matters, we are often silent perforce, and our silence is taken, not unnaturally, as showing lack of interest as well as lack of knowledge.

It is probably true to say that between the wars the attitude of evangelicals towards academic Biblical studies, theology, and natural science, was on the whole one of suspicion and hostility. It is not hard to see why. Biblical science was built exclusively on the methods and conclusions of old-fashioned higher criticism; in theology it was liberals of one sort or another who made the running; natural science was evolutionary in outlook and anti-Christian in temper. It was as natural as it was regrettable that evangelicals should have reacted to this situation by concluding that the best course was to keep clear of such studies altogether, lest their faith should be contaminated. Hence, instead of scientific exegesis and theological argument, they turned to the cultivation of a type of 'Bible teaching' and Bible study which was concerned more with analysing the form of the books than with elucidating their contents, and paid more attention to the prophecies of Christ's second coming than to the meaning of his first; and instead of developing a genuinely Christian philosophy of natural science, they indulged themselves in truculent belittling of all scientific views which seemed to conflict with what they supposed that Scripture taught on scientific subjects. (Would that they had taken their cue here from the ideals of the Victorian Institute!) It seems both unfair and untrue to regard present-day evangelicals as avowed obscurantists; but equally it seems undeniable that there is more than a dash of obscurantism, real, if unconscious, in the legacy which they inherit from the immediate past. Evangelicals in the last half-century have not thought as hard, nor studied as deeply, nor written and spoken as fully, as the situation demanded, and we are now reaping the fruits of this neglect. If the present controversy brings home to us the extent of our failure to communicate our mind to those outside our own circles, and the need for a more vigorous intellectual life within them,

it will have contributed a great deal towards a strengthening of the evangelical cause.

In the third place, we learn from the line followed by some anti-fundamentalists—notably Hebert, and Philip Lee-Woolf, general secretary of the Student Christian Movement, in an article confessedly based on Hebert's book[1]—the shape of things to come; for these writers tackle 'fundamentalism' from a distinctively ecumenical standpoint, and their remarks are no doubt typical of much that will be said to evangelicals by ecumenical spokesmen during the next few years. Before reviewing what these writers say, we must indicate what the ecumenical standpoint is. The ecumenical movement is concerned above all to promote the re-integration of Christendom, and to that end has developed an approach to theology that is distinctive to itself; one which is concerned above all to secure the maximum of agreement between the various Christian bodies. It starts by taking for granted that every conviction which any Christian group holds strongly is at least part of the truth on the point with which it deals; and its method in discussing the apparently conflicting convictions of Christendom is to seek a common formula in terms of which they can all be reconciled, or at least accommodated. Inevitably, this approach breeds unhealthy aspirations after ambiguity, and an incautious and really irresponsible readiness to hail the discovery of equivocal forms of words, to which all can subscribe in their own sense, as evidence of real agreement; which, of course, it is not. This approach to theology has at least three basic weaknesses. Because it takes theological systems piecemeal, examining their various tenets in connection with the parallel tenets of other systems, but in isolation from the total views of which they each form part, it fails to appreciate that every theological outlook is in fact a systematic whole, and cannot be fruitfully discussed except as such. Because this approach treats all strongly held views as valid 'insights', facets and fragments of truth, it fails to reckon with the depth of theological differences and the reality of theological errors.[2] Because it seeks merely agreement between the various 'traditions', it overlooks the necessity of subjecting all views and opinions, even those on which the Church is unanimous, to the corrective judgment of the written Word of 'fundamentalism', as we shall now see.

This approach involves two stages of argument. Its exponents begin by affirming that there are really no substantial theological differences

[1] 'Fundamentalism', *Christian News-Letter*, July 1957, pp. 31 ff.
[2] Ibid.

dividing evangelicals from other Protestants today. 'Both sides hold the orthodox faith', affirms Hebert. 'The doctrinal fundamentals are not in dispute', says Lee-Woolf.[1] The things that are distinctive in evangelicalism, it is suggested, are due to the influence of non-theological factors, and have no theological significance. A sociological explanation of evangelicalism is offered. Thus, the evangelical insistence on the factual inerrancy of the Bible is attributed to the materialistic conception of the truth which evangelicals make for submission to the authority of the Bible as an attempt to 'cash in' on the widely felt need of our restless age for stable authority and in particular to entrap the adolescent, who longs for shelter from his intellectual storms and is only too glad to be saved from the need to think for himself. Again, the peculiarly warm and close fellowship which evangelicals cultivate among themselves is mere escapism, an attempt to get away from the loneliness of suburbia, the frustrations of middle-class life and the general drabness of the everyday world. Discount the effect of these sociological factors, it is said, and we shall find there is nothing essential to differentiate evangelicals from other Protestants. This leads on to the second stage of argument, in the presentation of positive reasons to show why evangelicals and others—I.V.F. and S.C.M., for instance—ought to come together. Each, it is said, has much to give the other, and each is necessarily incomplete without the other. Combination is particularly necessary in evangelism, for the spectacle of Christians unable to co-operate puts a serious stumbling-block in the unbeliever's way. The conclusion is that evangelicals ought not to hold themselves aloof from other Protestants in any way, and that it betokens a schismatic spirit if they do.

We find this sociological interpretation of evangelicalism altogether unimpressive. Indeed, it is tempting to invoke the principle that sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, and to offer in reply a sociological interpretation of the ecumenical movement. We might point out that this is pre-eminently an age of international organisations and combines, of enforced monopolies, of large firms putting pressure on small ones in order to buy them up, or squeeze them out of business, and that this mentality seems to be largely responsible for ideals of the ecumenical movement. Probably there would be as much truth in such an interpretation of ecumenism as there is in the ecumenical interpretation of evangelicalism. But, of course, such considerations do not get to grips with the positive convictions of either side. Nothing

[1] Hebert, op. cit. p. 12; Lee-Woolf, op. cit. p. 32.

can be deduced about the truth or falsehood of anyone's convictions from the mere fact that without certain conditioning he would probably not have held it in the same way, that by pointing out the conditioning factor one refutes the conviction itself. To suppose that by pointing out the conditioning factor one refutes the conviction itself is the sophistry which C. S. Lewis called Bulverism; it is probably the oldest and commonest *non sequitur* known to man. Suppose it is true (we are not concerned to deny it) that this is an age which is preoccupied about the truths of fact, which feels acutely unsettled and insecure and which longs for some experience of fellowship to enliven the impersonal routine of big city life. What of it? Does it follow that to believe in Biblical inerrancy is to fall into the snare of an unbiblical bibliolatry,[1] or that the demand for submission to the authority of Scripture is a summons to deface the image of God in oneself by 'abdicating the use of your mind',[2] or that which links like-minded evangelicals in worship and Christian service is '*human* fellowship, not the divine bond spoken of in the New Testament'?[3] of course not; and it does little credit to anti-fundamentalists when they lay weight on considerations of this sort. The truth is that evangelicalism, like ecumenicalism, is a theological movement, and must be taken seriously as such. To refuse to do so is as discourteous as it is inept. Bulverism is not good enough, on either side.

What account, then, does evangelicalism give of itself? It claims to be no mere assortment of insights, but an integrated outlook stemming from a single regulative principle: that of submission to Scripture. Because this principle is itself scriptural, evangelicalism corresponds to the Biblical pattern of Christianity; and this sets it apart from all forms of Christianity which have lapsed from this principle. Evangelicalism is not a sectarian movement, which with the Bible in its hand would turn its back on the Church's history and tradition of teaching and start again from scratch. That is anabaptism, not evangelicalism. Evangelicalism knows from Scripture that the Spirit of Christ has indwelt His Church since it began, and that therefore its heritage of thought and achievement is of prime value. The evangelical insistence is simply that Christ rules His Church by Scripture, and not another way; and that He has commanded the Church to

[1] Hebert, op. cit. p. 138.

[2] The Archbishop of York, *The Bishopric* (Durham Diocesan Gazette, February 1956, p. 25.)

[3] Lee-Woolf, op. cit. 35.

sustain its life by expounding Scripture and subjecting itself to Scripture in faith and obedience. When evangelicals have separated from existing churches, their reason—the only reason that could ever justify such a course—has been that these churches compelled them to leave, in that they refuse to recognise their need of reformation, so that evangelicals within them lacked liberty to be subject to Scripture. In that case, it is the evangelical who is the catholic churchman, and those who refused to be subject to the authority of the Bible are the schismatics. Schism is a matter, not of numbers, but of theology. All this was made clear at the Reformation. And evangelicalism stands in the direct line of descent from the Reformers. It is sometimes supposed that, because 'fundamentalism' is a new word, that which it denotes must be a new thing; but in fact it is a very old thing, much older than the liberal Protestantism which opposes it. The paradoxical truth is that that which is really old is so unfamiliar today that it seems newer than that which is really new. And the first step for evangelicals in the present controversy must be to insist that this, their own account of themselves, must be taken seriously and examined on its merits by those who find fault with them.

It is helpful at this point to remind ourselves of the situation which gave birth to the word 'fundamentalist'. This was a name given to a group of American evangelicals who met together in 1920 'to re-state, re-affirm and re-emphasise the fundamentals of our New Testament faith' in the face of liberal denials. A religious weekly called them 'fundamentalists', and the name stuck. Indeed, those who bore it regarded it as a title of honour. Ten years before, representatives of the same view-point had published *The Fundamentals*, a series of small volumes expounding and defending the evangelical faith; these may fairly be read as the manifesto of original fundamentalism. The movement was essentially one of protest against liberalism of the old-fashioned sort which had itself grown out of the nineteenth-century attitude to history and philosophy. 'Scientific' history, to the nineteenth-century mind, meant, among other things, explaining events without reference to the supernatural; 'scientific' philosophy, whether idealist or empiricist, pantheist, deist or atheistic, sought to conceive of all that happened as part of one uniform evolutionary process, and to show that it was needless to suppose that the regularity of this process was ever interrupted. Liberalism advocated a non-miraculous and, indeed, non-Christian Christianity constructed in accordance with this anti-supernatural outlook. As the fundamentalists saw,

liberalism was not hereby rehabilitating Christianity, but destroying it; and they opposed liberalism by a vigorous stress on the supernatural 'fundamentals' of the faith: notably creation, miracles, the virgin birth of Christ, His substitutionary atonement and physical resurrection and the inspiration of Scripture. Regrettably, the movement was diverted from its original concern for the defence of Christian supernaturalism as a whole into the narrow channels of squabbles about evolution; the fundamentalists discredited themselves by mistakes in theology, science and the tactics of debate, and in the late twenties the movement largely fizzled out, at any rate in its original form. But its stand for the supernatural outlook of the Bible was necessary and timely, and continues to be so as long as liberalism lasts.

It is true that Hebert tells us that old-fashioned liberalism is dead, and the 'biblical theology' movement has taken its place. The latter, however, is recognisably the child of the former. It is a brave attempt to eat one's cake and have it: to maintain the necessity of believing the teaching of Scripture, bowing to the authority of Scripture, and putting faith in the truth of Scripture, while clinging to the unscriptural methods and conclusions of liberal criticism of Scripture in the last century. 'We must at all costs be biblical,' it says; 'but we must on no account abandon the unbiblical biblical criticism of our fathers'. Such a programme is patently self-contradictory. Liberal criticism proceeded on the assumption that the Biblical claim that Scripture is the utterance of God, so that the truth of all its assertions is guaranteed by His veracity, may be discounted, and that the question as to whether Biblical statements are true is an open question to be settled by historical scholarship. But if we are to be consistently Biblical, we must abandon this approach altogether. For the question is not open; God himself has closed it; and our study of the Scripture ought to be such as to express faith in its entire truth. 'Biblical theology', however, is unwilling to go so far. But until we have come to regard Scripture as absolutely trustworthy, we shall not submit ourselves unreservedly to it as an authority for faith and life. 'Biblical theology', therefore, for all its fair speaking, cannot—and its exponents demonstrably do not—stand in relation to the Bible as evangelicals stand. Why is 'biblical theology' so hesitant here? It boggles, apparently, at the robust supernaturalism of the Biblical account of Scripture—word for word God-given, verbally inspired, having the unshakable stability of truth. But if 'biblical theology' is unbelieving here, how genuine can its acceptance of the rest of Biblical supernaturalism be? Its

Biblicism seems to be more apparent than real; it is certainly arbitrary and selective, and the subjection to Scripture to which it leads is very far from being consistent and unreserved. 'Biblical theology' has still to show the sincerity of its own alleged Biblicism; and evangelicals cannot regard it as other than a refurbished liberalism till its attitude to Scripture changes considerably.

It seems, therefore, that what the present situation requires of evangelicals is a sturdy maintenance of the doctrine of Biblical authority and of the thorough-going supernaturalism of the Biblical world-view. The current misunderstandings which we have noted show that a good deal of explaining needs to be done. It must, for instance, be explained that the Biblical authority is not to the evangelical mind the theoretical problem which the spokesmen of 'biblical theology' (not unnaturally) find it to be, but a practical principle with clearly-defined existential implications: the principle, namely, that the statements of Scripture are to be received and regarded as the authoritative utterances of the speaking God, and believed and obeyed as such. It must be shown further that this view expresses, not obscurantism in face of modern knowledge, but faith responding to God's own testimony to Scripture within its own pages; and that the common evangelical exposition of this article of faith is intended, not to foster a superstitious bibliolatry, but to define and safeguard the attitude of approach to Scripture which God Himself requires. Thus, if we call Scripture *infallible*, we mean, not that we suppose it will answer any question we like to ask it, but that we are resolved to trust its guidance absolutely on all subjects with which it deals, and that we have no right to question anything that it lays down; for that would be doubting God. Again, if we call Scripture *inerrant*, we mean, not that we think we can demonstrate its accuracy in stating facts, but that we receive its statements as true on the credit of its divine Author, and deny that we have any right to doubt them; for that would be making God a liar. Again if we speak of Scripture (as many good theologians have done before us) as *divinely dictated*, we are not propounding a curious psychological theory of the mode of inspiration, but using a theological metaphor to express the fact that God caused to be written precisely what He wished, and His words were in no way altered or corrupted by the human agent through whom they were written down; so that we have no right to say of anything in Scripture that it is merely a human idea and no part of God's word. Again, if we say that Scripture should be interpreted *literally*, we do not mean that we

know in advance that there are no metaphors or symbols in the Bible, but that we must allow Scripture to explain itself to us in its own natural, intended sense; and that we have no right to spiritualise it after our fancy, nor to impose on it literary categories (allegory, for instance, or myth) which it does not itself warrant, but must let it fix its own sense by its own standards.

We are not, or course, tied to any of these much-abused terms; the evangelical position can be stated without them, and they are misunderstood so persistently that it might make for clarity to drop them all. What matters is not the words, but the truth which they express and the attitude of faith which they enshrine. It is this that must be preserved, and for this that we must contend. And we need to be watchful, in this matter or any other that comes into this debate, lest we mistake the use of compromise formulae (of which there are many; Hebert's book, for instance, contains a number—'the authority of the gospel', 'the truth of the Bible', etc.) for real endorsement of the evangelical position. Compromise formulae, which dissolve the clear edge of precise theological conceptions into a cloudy blur, are dangerously popular at present, due to the prevalence of the ecumenical approach to theology; and these are made the more specious by being presented in isolation from the total outlook of which they are part. It is necessary to ask in each case what this total outlook is before the meaning of such formulae can be rightly assessed. Hebert's formulae quoted above, for instance, mean something quite different on his lips from what an evangelical would mean by them, because his total outlook is different. It is strange that compromise formulae should be in such vogue, for they breed only confusion. Is it not evident that only a sham unity can come from blurring real differences? Or may it be that ecumenical theology is more concerned to reach agreement than to find truth?

To maintain evangelical truth today is no doubt a sufficiently exacting task. It requires patience, charity, flexibility of mind—and, above all, a firm grasp of Biblical outlook as a whole, and a fixed resolution only to discuss parts in the context of wholes. But we need not fear for the ark of God. Only let evangelicalism be faithful to God by being true to itself, and we may look to Him with confidence to use this controversy as the catalyst and crucible of His truth.