

# James Barr on 'fundamentalism'— a review article

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*Many reviews of this book have already been written, some fiercely critical. This careful assessment by one of our Associate Editors, which was first printed in the Church Leaders in Student Situations Broadsheet last November, not only picks out some of the book's weaknesses, but also draws out some valid and important lessons for contemporary evangelicalism.*

It is surely remarkable that a prominent biblical scholar who has taught in Scotland, the USA and England should have to embark on a programme of research in order to write about one of the major currents of Christian life in Britain, conservative evangelicalism. Such is the ignorance of the movement that prevails in other sectors of the church and theology. The reasons for this fact are no doubt complex, but this much is obvious, that Barr will have had no difficulty finding out about his subject, for his analysis is largely based on literature freely available in the bookshops. His work is to be welcomed as a serious attempt to correct a major defect in the internal ecumenism of British Christianity. It may at least be hoped that as a consequence conservative evangelicals will find themselves better understood by other Christians.

As a pioneer Barr perhaps deserves special consideration from a reviewer. It must nevertheless be pointed out that his research displays grave limitations. His familiarity with the works of leading evangelical scholars like John Stott, F. F. Bruce, Earle Ellis, Ralph Martin, G. W. Bromiley and Howard Marshall is severely restricted and rarely up-to-date. By ignoring G. C. Berkouwer altogether, Barr manages to extend Van Til's almost total rejection of Karl Barth to evangelicals in general (p. 220). He never mentions Tyndale House and its library or the Tyndale Fellowship or Latimer House, and he appears to be unacquainted with evangelical periodicals. The National Assemblies of Evangelicals in Britain in recent years, the National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele in 1967 and the Lausanne Congress of 1974 seem to lie beyond Barr's ken, so that he remains unaware of important developments in evangelical thought, including the element of self-criticism he

failed to find in Britain (pp. 222, 353). On one point, evangelical attitudes to evolution, the dated quality of Barr's work has left him ignorant of a recent anti-evolutionist reaction (p. 92).

It would have been helpful if Barr had identified the other critical observers of conservative evangelicalism he refers to from time to time, and also been more open about his own fundamentalist past which he hints at once or twice. One can understand but not condone his disingenuousness about his earlier involvement with a variety of Christianity he now patently detests. A quarter of a century ago he was president of the Christian Union at Edinburgh University. This may be thought to give him a peculiar authority to write on this subject, but its significance is probably to be found more in the old-fashioned flavour of some of his material and in the fact that he directs his fire chiefly against the British IVF (now UCCF) and IVP publications. Augustine of Hippo spent most of his twenties in the ranks of Manichaeism, which after his catholic conversion he proceeded to assail with both the insight and the vehemence of an ex-Manichaean. Barr is no Augustine, but the parallel may still hold.

Some explanation is certainly needed why a book which sets out to analyse and understand (p. 9) becomes a hatchet job. Like a child with the pile of wooden bricks on the cover, Barr is bent on demolishing evangelicalism. A sympathetic reviewer in *The Scotsman* called him 'ruthless', and so he is. It will be no surprise if the book embitters relations between different kinds of Christians. Time and again I found my own taste soured by the harsh caricatures, exaggerations and even scurrilities of Barr's arguments (e.g. pp. 98, 99, 101, 120, 164, 172, 247). The tone is set on the very first page which selects three negative features (biblical inerrancy, hostility to modern theology and biblical criticism, rejection of non-evangelicals as not true Christians) as 'the most pronounced characteristics' of conservative evangelicalism.

One of the most perceptive contributions to the 1955-1956 debate on fundamentalism was entitled *The Many Fundamentalisms* (by Cyril Bowles, then Principal of Ridley Hall, Cambridge, and now Bishop of Derby). Barr shows some of the symp-

toms of the fundamentalism of the biblical critic. This may explain why he conceives of evangelicalism chiefly as anti-criticism (pp. 208, 344), and why he endeavours to contrast Reformation and evangelical theologies on the wholly tautological grounds that 'theology in the pre-critical period was not animated by the anti-critical animus and passion of modern conservative theology' (p. 174). While poking fun at the extravagances of conservative scholars, he shows little awareness of the follies and excesses of liberal criticism. I cannot forget the day when a lecturer at Cambridge tried to convince us that Matthew was so obsessed with Old Testament proof texts that he actually believed Jesus rode into Jerusalem on *both* a donkey *and* a donkey's colt *at the same time* (Mt. 21:1-8)! Barr would have helped evangelicals to come to terms with biblical criticism, as indeed very many have done, if he had directed some of his fire against those practitioners who have brought it into so much discredit.

But then Barr's book as a whole seems so ill-suited to educate conservative Christians that it is doubtful whether it was written with them in mind at all. He expects an unfavourable reception from evangelical readers, and is really intent on addressing to outsiders a dissuasive from 'fundamentalism'. He is not at all sure that conservative evangelicals should be tolerated in the churches (pp. 343-344). Such a posture is nothing new, although it may not be entirely accidental that it coincides with other signs of renewed pressure against evangelicals.

Barr's critical-fundamentalist cast of mind is probably linked to his antipathy to theology and often theologians (as distinct from biblical and historical scholarship and scholars) which is well-known from some of his earlier writings. 'Biblical theology' and neo-orthodoxy come under attack again here, sometimes when Barr is overtly attacking only conservatives. His own theological convictions remain unclear, except that they are subservient to the currents of liberal criticism (pp. 185, 186). The chapter on 'Fundamentalism and Theology' is the most lamentable in the book. Exaggerations abound (e.g. 'In fundamentalism all relations with non-conservative theology are purely polemical', p. 163), even absurdities ('If you ask what is the reason why one should be a conservative evangelical, rather than some other sort of Christian, the answer will very likely be: because of sin', p. 177), while his attempt to show that the line of continuity from Luther and Calvin runs down to, let us say, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, rather than to evangelicalism is myopic. Barr is clearly not at home in historical theology; he discounts an Atha-

nasian christology (p. 171), and twice misconstrues the Westminster Confession (pp. 261ff., 294). Above all, Barr's distaste for theology may be responsible for his fastening on the formally negative, technical concept of inerrancy as the most significant feature of the evangelical view of Scripture. In reality, the divine authority of the Bible, which is a positive theological principle, is of far greater importance.

One of Barr's tactics is the age-old policy of divide and conquer. He arrays against conservative evangelicalism not only modern theology (undefined—Barth or Tillich?) but also the Reformation, the Westminster Confession and in important respects the Princeton theology of the Hodges and Warfield. More interestingly he finds popular evangelicalism less objectionable than scholarly evangelicalism. It is almost as if he is afraid of the increasing prominence of evangelicals in professional biblical circles. He is anxious to assure his readers that biblical criticism is not on the wane (pp. 132-133), which is undoubtedly true. But it remains a half-truth unless one adds that a growing number of biblical critics remain 'fundamentalists', which Barr cannot stomach. For Barr a conservative evangelical has no business engaging in biblical criticism unless he allows the latter to overthrow his evangelicalism. He is in fact a very difficult man to please. When evangelicals learn from others, they are hanging on their coat-tails (p. 232), when they quote non-evangelical writers, it implies no lessening of hostility towards them (p. 233). When evangelicals are politically and socially conservative, it is the fault of their conservative evangelicalism, but when they are more to the left, their socialism has nothing to do with their evangelical faith (p. 108).

It is partly the limitations of Barr's research which have led him seriously to underestimate the diversity of British evangelicalism (e.g. he has missed the Reformed evangelical's pursuit of a Christian society, p. 100). At the same time on a host of issues he is unaware of the strong winds of change blowing through the movement. But the neat, static quality of the picture he paints is also integral to his campaign of isolation and demolition. If he encounters a writer or a viewpoint which does not fit in with his schematic presentation, he discounts them as 'not really conservative' (p. 233).

A number of Barr's criticisms fail to take into account the minority-outsider position that evangelicalism has had to occupy until relatively recent times. This helps to explain, for example, why evangelicals have often excluded non-evangelicals from their platforms. Things are changing here

too, now that evangelicals do not always have to fight for the right to be heard. But when Barr alleges that it is 'fundamentalist policy' to reject non-conservative arguments unheard, the boot is really on the other foot, at any rate in the world of biblical and theological study. A brief perusal of the bookshelves of conservatives and non-conservatives would rapidly have robbed Barr of this complaint.

In fact I repeatedly felt that Barr's arguments could be stood completely on their head. He accuses evangelicalism of being parasitic on non-evangelical Christianity, whereas in reality the ranks of ecclesiastical and theological leaders in Britain would be much thinner without those won to the Christian faith by evangelicals and later wooed to more respectable brands of Christianity. When Barr discovers a kind of evangelical anti-clericalism echoing 'the typical secularistic reaction of irreligious man' (p. 101), I am less convinced than I was by John Robinson's earlier highlighting of a strong clericalist streak among evangelicals in the major churches.

The general flavour and gross simplifications of the book are regrettable for the further supremely important reason that they may hinder evangelicals from taking to heart its *many* valid criticisms of evangelicalism. Some of these merit special mention.

1. Evangelicals generally lack a satisfactory understanding of doctrinal development. As a consequence, theology is rarely seen as a constructive and creative task (p. 223), and the most overtly developed Christian doctrine, that of the Trinity, enjoys little more than formal recognition in much evangelicalism (pp. 176-177). As so often, however, Barr spoils a sound point by blatant misrepresentation (the traditional faith of the church and the Fathers count so little for evangelicals that on these grounds they would just as readily be unitarians as Trinitarians—p. 177), which he has earlier directly contradicted ('true fundamentalism' has no role for theology other than the conservation and reiteration of tradition—p. 162).

2. One of our most urgent unfinished tasks is the elaboration of a satisfactory doctrine of Scripture for an era of biblical criticism. The development of critical, *i.e.* literary and historical, study of the Bible constitutes one of the great divides in Christian history; there can be no turning the clock back. We cannot afford to rest on Warfield's laurels, but must meet the challenges of today. In particular, we have to work out what it means to be faithful *at one and the same time both* to the doctrinal

approach to Scripture as the Word of God *and* to the historical treatment of Scripture as the words of men. It is at this point that Barr's strictures are most acute and accurate—and it is a crucially central point.

3. We must be careful not to appear to usurp the divine prerogative in our use of terms like 'a Christian'. Unnecessary offence has clearly been given by statements like 'He is not a Christian', when what is meant is 'He is not an evangelical (Christian)'. The former may have its place in an evangelistic context, but not in the setting of differences among professing Christians. God alone knows those who are his.

4. We must dare to be more self-critical of false structures of thought and practice within our own ranks. Barr's target here is dispensationalism, whose prevalence I feel he considerably exaggerates, partly because his evidence is out-of-date, and whose appeal and significance he surrounds with considerable speculation. Nevertheless he carries conviction in claiming that we have been soft on such internal evangelical excesses.

5. Evangelicals' economic, political and social attitudes have often been unthinkingly conformist and complacent. Barr is again woefully behind the times (the Shaftesbury Project, for instance, is unmentioned) and blind to the increasing diversity of evangelical viewpoints. Yet we do well to heed his comments.

6. Barr repeatedly claims to have detected a rationalistic streak in evangelical writings. Some of his examples suggest that a lack of confidence in accepting the miraculous has fostered a rationalizing outlook at times. But big questions arise here, for example, of the relation between historical evidence and acts of God, which Barr is in no position to settle. His argument in the chapter on 'Miracles and the Supernatural' is open to objection at several points. There is no necessary inconsistency, as Barr assumes, seeking to divide (J. N. D. Anderson and G. E. Ladd) and conquer, between an apologetic appeal to the evidence for the resurrection and the recognition that the raising of Jesus from the dead is an act of God *sui generis*. And it is frankly incredible, at least for those of us who know and read liberal biblical critics, that their beliefs about miracles or the supernatural do not influence their historico-literary study of the Bible (p. 236). It simply begs the whole issue (or sells the pass) to assert that 'even where miracles and supernatural events are related, the historical and literary questions can be and should be treated as a matter of normal human relations' (p. 237).

Barr has produced a book of remarkable in-

genuity and industry which is liable to mislead many of its readers. Very few indeed outside the ranks of evangelicals will be sufficiently well-read to assess his accuracy. Indeed, 'Barr' is likely to become a substitute for first-hand familiarity with conservative evangelicalism and to be quoted authoritatively in the judgments of the ignorant.

In so far as he hoped to teach evangelicals a better way, he has only himself to blame if he misses the mark. We owe it to ourselves, if not to him, to see that he does not.

*James Barr's Fundamentalism is published by SCM Press, London, 1977 (379pp. £3.95 paperback).*

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