Fifty Years of Evangelical Biblical Research: Retrospect and Prospect[1]

JOHN WENHAM

The most crucial question facing both church and world at the present time is this: Is the great evangelical movement going to remain true to its doctrinal foundations? On the answer to this depends the long-term renewal of the church and the rapid evangelization of the world. Many devout and thoughtful people are deeply worried as to where evangelicalism is going. My task is to review the events of the past fifty years and to set up some direction signs for the future.

A Day for Thanksgiving, not Triumphalism

I think I should begin with a reading from Ezra 3:11b–13:

> All the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy; so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard afar.

Today, it seems to me, is a day for great thanksgiving, but not a day for triumphalism. Fifty years ago evangelicalism was probably at its theological all-time low point. When the Inter-Varsity Fellowship came to launch its first theological students' conference in 1937 we could not find a single academically qualified senior man to come to help us defend the truth of the Bible. We had to rely on student papers. (I read one entitled, 'Our Lord's View of the Old Testament' showing that Jesus regarded its history as true, its doctrine as authoritative and its wording as inspired). In 1938 at St. Luke's Vicarage, Hampstead, G.T. Manley, H.E. Guillebaud, Norval Geldenhuys, Douglas Johnson and I proposed the appointing of the Biblical Research Committee. From those tiny beginnings sprang the Tyndale Fellowship, this magnificent library and the great multiplication of evangelical scholars and literature which we see today, and for which we rightly thank God from the bottom of our hearts. It is a day for thanksgiving; but it is not a day for triumphalism.

I regard these past fifty years more as a holding operation than as a spectacular advance of the Church of God. British evangelicalism in the thirties may have been theologically weak, but it was dynamic, knowing what it believed and where it was going. There was insistence on sound doctrine (that is to say, basic protestant orthodoxy), on the Word, on prayer, on obedience. Our heroes were people like C.T. Studd and Hudson Taylor, who believed the Bible and set out to evangelize the world. Knowing that the arena of theological scholarship was dominated by anti-Christian philosophies the advice had been: 'Whatever you do, don't read theology.'

So we had left the field of philosophy and of biblical criticism to the liberals. Nonetheless that generation was heir to much good biblical work done by their conservative predecessors, people like the contributors to the Speaker's Bible, Alford, Edersheim, Pusey, Orr, Salmon. That generation knew something of the work of the Americans: the Hodges, Warfield, Machen, R.D. Wilson, A.T. Robertson; and the Dutchmen: Kuyper, Bavinck, Aalders; it knew that by and large Roman Catholic and Jewish biblical scholars were on their side. On the protestant front T.C. Hammond, T.W. Gilbert, Griffith Thomas and Sydney Carter had been doing doughty work. These Evangelicals knew that biblical authority was their life-blood and that biblical criticism conducted on Enlightenment principles was the main enemy. G.T. Manley, brilliant mathematician and dedicated missionary, knew his pentateuchal criticism and rejected J, E, D and P root and branch. The Biblical Research Committee under his chairmanship set about (with much prayer to God) the re-establishment of a school of evangelical scholarship committed to the authority, inspiration and infallibility of holy scripture. We knew the risks that we were taking by encouraging students to plunge into the sea of academic theology; many would drown, but many more (we hoped) would emerge as teachers and writers to serve the worldwide church. And so it proved; we suffered heart-breaking losses (including men destined to become archbishops and professors of theology), but we received many precious gifts for the building up of the body of Christ.

Early efforts

Nearly all our early efforts were directed towards points of biblical criticism where the infallibility of scripture was under attack: Bill Martin, Don Robinson, Alec Motyer and Manley himself wrote on the Pentateuch; Aalders on Jonah; Don Wiseman, Terence Mitchell, Ken Kitchen on Daniel; Stafford Wright on Ezra; Fred Bruce on Acts; Donald Guthrie on the Pastorals. We worked, too, on the doctrine of scripture: my student paper on *'Our Lord's View of the Old Testament'* was upgraded to a Tyndale lecture. Our discovery of Warfield's *Revelation and Inspiration* had a big effect in deepening

and stabilizing our adherence to biblical infallibility—it showed how inescapably this was the Bible's own doctrine.

We started at the point where the need was most acutely felt, but from the very earliest days of the Biblical Research Committee some of us had the vision of a revival of evangelical theology which would embrace all aspects of life and which would offer a challenge to the secularist outlook of the modern university. We encouraged, therefore, the exploration not only of biblical languages, archaeology and ancient history, but also theology and philosophy in all their aspects, ethics in all its ramifications, Christian history down the centuries and the religions of the world. To sustain this as a truly Christian activity we had, while immersing ourselves in all these technical studies, to attempt to rebuild a biblical theology which was deeper and sounder and more comprehensive than the theologies of our protestant forbears. So Evangelicals pushed out in all directions, rediscovering the intellectual power of their ancestors: Fathers, Reformers, Puritans, and trying to grapple not only with the directly biblical questions, but also with such topics as Genesis and evolution, and trying to contribute constructively to the ethical, social and political problems of our day and to church government, to liturgy and to a true ecumenism.

Counteractions: Evangelical weakening

The growing number of converts and the development of literature caused strong reactions from those who scorned this crass 'fundamentalism'. The focus of attack was usually the infallibility doctrine, which seemed to run counter to the whole ethos of critical scholarship. Some Evangelicals, who were being trained by teachers who were anxious to call attention to every conceivable difficulty in the Bible, had not the time, or perhaps the inclination or knowledge, to seek out the answers to the myriad problems; and they found themselves accumulating an intolerable load of questions in their pending-trays, which eventually forced them as a simple matter of honesty, either to cease to affirm infallibility, or actually to repudiate it.

Others, particularly those in evangelical institutions who were to some extent shielded from the critical blast, became rather impatient with what they felt to be a defensive attitude to the Bible. They felt that the authority and inspiration of scripture could be taken as read and that they should devote their energies to its application. This resulted in a commendable growth in breadth of interest and in ecumenical charity, but there was coupled with it a dangerous loss of depth, and sometimes an almost unconscious abandonment of the truth of scripture. For instance, one evangelical writer considered it unnecessary to regard the gospel writers as even 'well-informed'. Others plunged into a form of redaction criticism which involved two or

more successive alterations in sense of a saying of Jesus—for example, they argued for two recensions of Q (at least one of which was untrue to Jesus' teaching) and they then argued that these recensions were further altered without reference to dependable tradition.

At the same time the evangelical movement had to come to terms with various potentially divisive currents of thought. Feminism and pluralism raised difficult hermeneutical questions. The charismatic movement, while rejoicing in the Bible as a God-given source of spiritual inspiration, tended not to look to it as necessarily the final authority in all matters of debate. The saying became popular: 'doctrine divides, but the Spirit unites.' If a sermon was judged 'cerebral' that was a term of reproach. Such exalting of experience above doctrine sometimes had a baleful effect on efforts to build up a well-taught community grounded in sound scholarship and painstaking research.

Unhealthy trends

The liberal and charismatic trends led in turn to attempts to tighten the reins and (as it was supposed) to take the authority of the Bible more seriously. The most noteworthy example was the revival of an Ussher-type, literalist interpretation of Genesis, which repudiated two hundred years of historical geology and half a century of cosmology. In all this ferment and with this enormous spread of our energies and the necessity of gaining our training in secular universities, is it surprising that in our attempt to be *au fait* with the most up-to-date research and the most up-to-date thought we have found it difficult to sift the false from the true?

The problem is seen in its starkest form in the creation versus evolution debate. Darwin raised a problem for biblical Christianity which neither the Victorians nor ourselves have ever wholly solved. Our scientists, trained in their evolutionary schools, bent their utmost energies to square theistic evolution with Genesis 1–11. They were prepared to believe that all the marvellous mechanisms of the living world could be explained on neo-Darwinian lines as a result of small beneficial mutations. This has been met by a horrific backlash in which equally intelligent men are prepared to reject the two hundred years of patient geological study and argue that nearly all the sedimentary rocks were laid down in the six months of the flood, and to reject the many-thousand-million-year time-scale of modern cosmology in favour of a universe about ten thousand years old. The situation of fifty years ago with Douglas Dewar, Merson Davies and Robert Clark advocating the acceptance of the findings of historical geology and cosmology, but rejecting the Darwinian attempt to explain macroevolution, was far saner and healthier. These men were not wedded to biblical literalism.

The same problem is seen in the field of technical biblical studies.

Research students are confronted with a vast literature much of which is secularist in outlook, and in order to obtain their doctorates they usually have to satisfy examiners who have no sympathy with the doctrine of the infallibility of scripture. They therefore argue almost exclusively along lines which their examiners will approve. There is nothing wrong in this provided they remain completely clear in their own minds that their argument is an *ad hominem* one. The trouble starts when the secular outlook begins to become the researcher's own outlook, either through inadvertence (perhaps through believing in some supposedly neutral critical method) or through lack of a biblical view of scripture to serve as a check on his findings. Neutrality is a pretence when we are dealing with supernatural events. To the secularist miracles are self-evidently legendary, to the Christian miracle lies at the heart of the whole story of creation, incarnation and salvation history. What is highly improbable to the one may be entirely probable to the other. Some were beguiled into judging probabilities by secularist principles.

The Basis of Faith sustains stability

In all the comings and goings the evangelical movement continued to grow: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, Tyndale Fellowship, Tyndale House, Tyndale Commentaries, Latimer House, Rutherford House, the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion, the Whitefield Institute, the Institute of Contemporary Christianity, the Oxford School of Mission Studies, Inter-Varsity Press, Grove Publications, *Third Way*, New International Version, New International Commentaries, Tear Fund and a host of other activities, leading to a growing influence throughout the churches. All this time the Inter-Varsity Fellowship doctrinal basis stood guard over the publication policy of Inter-Varsity Press and the literary watch-dogs stood firm in the tradition which they had inherited from the conservative scholars of the nineteenth century and resisted as far as possible the destructive and negative conclusions of Enlightenment criticism. In the U.S.A. the inerrancy clause of the Evangelical Theological Society served the same purpose, leading eventually to the founding of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. Though some gifted scholars felt that they could not conscientiously continue to subscribe to the infallibility doctrine, a greater number reaffirmed it with conviction and continued to provide the teaching which nourished and sustained the work. They illustrated the great lesson of the twentieth century that ideology is the most powerful thing in the world. It is not the charisma of leaders like Martyn Lloyd-Jones, John Stott and Jim Packer that has given them such influence, but their theology. (Happily many of those who have dissented from infallibility have not moved far from their old views and have continued to do valuable work.)

Situation now: losses

The growing work is a wonderful story for which we thank God, but how do we stand now? Christian faith and Christian morals have lost much ground in the last fifty years. There was a real sense in which the countries of the western world could be called Christian when I was young. Though liberalism was penetrating everywhere, much Christian knowledge was still to be found and generally speaking Christian ethical standards were thought to be sound. Today the great brains on Mastermind cannot be relied upon to answer the simplest Bible question; and ethics is permissive. In the biblical field we have suffered losses: Kuyper's Free University is no longer conservative, and the Roman Catholics and Jews have largely succumbed to the biblical criticism of Protestantism. *We ourselves have scarcely dented the academic world.* People can write books about contemporary theology and not mention us at all (for example Stephen Sykes, *Christian Theology Today*, revised edition, 1983); we are not considered as offering an alternative school of biblical criticism. Less still does the secular university think that we might have a tenable *Weltanschauung*. And most serious of all, we ourselves are far from clear and united in our basic convictions. That makes it difficult for Evangelicals in high places to stand out clearly; they tend to be indistinguishable from the liberal establishment.

The effects of liberal training

One significant fact is that virtually all of us have had a liberal or semi-liberal training. We are taught to see critical questions in terms of probabilities, and at the same time we find great stress laid on the views of the consensus of (liberal) scholars. This means that probabilities seem often to weigh heavily against conservative conclusions. If we see the scriptures thus through liberal eyes, we see a Bible with many contradictions which at times evokes our warm consent and at times our strong dissent. The Bible as such is not an authority with one consistent message. It is the conclusion of Jimmy Dunn's *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (p.366) that the canon of the New Testament leads us to the conclusion that 'insistence on one orthodoxy' is possibly 'the biggest heresy of all.' A young scholar brought up in a strongly Bible-believing tradition may fail to see the implications of this stance. He may well discover that, even if he shifts his ground a little, he can still preach the gospel and sing God's praises and make a lot of relevant sense out of many biblical passages. We are therefore in an interesting position: a survey of Evangelicals recently showed that those consulted had only one common conviction, which was the need to be biblical; yet there was no agreement as to whether it was to be scriptures as seen through liberal eyes or through infallibilist eyes, whether it was to be scriptures seen as mutually inconsistent or as a harmonious unity. It

was not clear whether we were under an obligation to be governed by something called The Critical Method or whether criticism itself must be the servant of revelation. If it is the former the Bible is an inspiring instrument, but not an authority. The final authority will be reason or the inner light or experience or tradition or the church or a jumble of them all. It is this phenomenon which is common in evangelical circles that causes anxiety. Where are we heading? The nineteenth century saw a marvellous flourishing of evangelical life, but one institution after another went liberal, lost its cutting edge and withered. Is it all going to happen again?

The hope that Evangelicals will broaden out

It is the ardent hope of many non-Evangelicals, not that we should lose our edge, but that we might drop our antiquated, pre-scientific, pre-critical views and become authentic twentieth-century Christians able to communicate to this generation without burdening them with the incubus of our silly 'fundamentalism'. James Barr who belonged to an Inter-Varsity Fellowship group and regards himself as an Evangelical wrote his *Fundamentalism* with passionate intensity with the express purpose of weaning us from this folly. Jimmy Dunn regards himself as a radical Evangelical, but he too thinks that we should abandon the line and adopt a more 'biblical' view of Christianity, which sees in the New Testament not mere diversity, but contrariety. Similarly, David Edwards (who sees himself as catholic, liberal and evangelical) in his critique of evangelicalism (as represented by John Stott) pleads with us to come to terms with science and critical scholarship.

The basic question not faced

The thing which strikes me about all these writers is that none of them seems to entertain the possibility that modern critical conclusions might be fundamentally unsound. Although the members of the old Biblical Research Committee saw this as the main enemy, we do not seem to have brought it home to the academic world that this is what we believe: in their debate with us this is not the point they tackle. They find fault at many points of detail with our exegesis, but they do not think it necessary to deal seriously with the question of critical method. Barr, for instance, takes as his favourite illustration of the illuminating power of the J,E,P theory the story of Hagar and Ishmael. He refers to this three times in *Fundamentalism* and twice in *The Bible in the Modern World*, yet this is a passage which only fits the theory if one emends the Massoretic text. David Edwards, for all his range of knowledge, after referring to 'innumerable passages' which critical scholarship has shown to be wrong, describes its results as a 'laboriously accumulated body of knowledge, one of the most

splendid achievements of the human mind inspired by the Spirit of truth.' (*Essentials*, p.73)

I studied the pentateuchal question (which is the most important of all critical questions) with great care in the nineteen-thirties and came to the conclusion that the documentary theory was riddled with improbabilities. I have not had the slightest reason to change my mind ever since. I have had to wrestle long and earnestly with the infallibility doctrine but if at any time I had felt that I must in conscience abandon it I should never have been able to accept J, E, D, and P. Far from being a splendid achievement of the human mind inspired by the Spirit of truth, I consider the theory a specious and baseless construct of man's fallen mind (aided no doubt by the Spirit of Delusion). In *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (p.106) Ward Gasque complains of criticism's lack of objectivity: 'New Testament criticism became a "science" in its own right, based on studying other [mostly liberal] New Testament critics.' A reviewer of Roger Beckwith's book on the Old Testament canon, after commending its learning, its accuracy and its lucidity in superlative terms, then says: 'It is a thousand pities . . . that such a book should turn out . . . to be essentially a very sophisticated fundamentalist apologetic . . .' (*Theology* Jan. 1987, p.64). I suspect the trouble to be that Beckwith's book shows that the Old Testament canon was probably recognized in the Maccabean era, which makes it impossible to believe in a Maccabean date for the writing of Daniel. Instead of acknowledging the point and recognizing it as a strong argument in favour of the traditional date of Daniel the reviewer regards it as a manifestation of conservative evangelical bias! To challenge such a solid rock of criticism as the Maccabean date of Daniel is manifestly wrong-headed and undercuts the value of the whole enterprise. It is astonishing how brilliant men can see Evangelicals as people with closed minds and non-Evangelicals as people with open minds, whereas we are simply people with different beliefs about scripture. It seems to me in fact that the boot is on the other foot. It is rare to find an *opponent* of infallibility whose mind is genuinely open to the *possibility* that infallibility might be true.

We have gained some ground and lost some ground and could lose a great deal more if the liberals were to get their way. As yet I think it is true to say we have not dented their confidence in Enlightenment biblical criticism.

Plan of action

What are we to do to make a dent and to go on to challenge the secularist world of academia? I would suggest six things.

1. **We must go on producing the best work we can in all the fields of theological study.**

2. **We must encourage our Old and New Testament specialists to submit their thoughts to a Christ-taught doctrine of scripture.**

I think it is better to encourage a careful induction of Christ's whole teaching than to insist on a particular test-word. It is of course true that in whatever sense the Bible is or contains the word of *God*, in *that* sense it is both infallible and inerrant. But these words are liable to conjure up rigid, preconceived notions which can hinder the freedom of research. We must be open to the non-literal and to varieties of genre, and be aware of the limitations of language. We must acknowledge the difficulty and complexity of issues; we must allow people to make mistakes; we must be content if necessary to leave problems unsolved. Christ's doctrine of scripture will not automatically solve all problems, but it will exercise a gentle questioning and correcting influence. It will encourage also a harmonistic approach to scripture. Criticism so often becomes hypercriticism and turns differences into contradictions, whereas those who see the unities of scripture are its best interpreters. Our hermeneutic requires that we view the principles, precepts and precedents of scripture harmonistically. Only with a harmonistic approach can the Bible be a true authority. No common mind concerning the ministry of women, for instance, is possible without agreement as to how the different biblical strands fit together.

3. **We must work more closely together if we are to speak with an authoritative voice.**

In and around Oxford we have about thirty senior Evangelicals working away in their own little corners of the theological field. We have no common mind on many issues and we have little influence on one another. It is my dearest wish that we might meet regularly and hammer out a common position. May it be so elsewhere.

4. **We must work toward a proper polemical stance.**

Ideology is vital. Christ was a controversialist; Paul was both evangelist and polemical theologian; it is the duty of us all to contend for this faith given us once for all. We need to go forward to bolder Christian assertions, clearer in what we reject, richer in what we affirm. For a start I would like to see a total repudiation of J, E, D and P, of pseudepigraphy in the epistles and of redaction criticism which alters the sense of Jesus' sayings.

5. **We must identify the great tasks still to be done.**

We shall probably have to work again and again at Genesis 1–11. We need also a book which will show us Moses as a great historical figure (the greatest influence on the whole history of man?). This will have to include a satisfactory treatment of the large numbers and of the miracles (natural and supernatural). We need a thorough

commentary on Isaiah (let us pray for the completion of Alec Motyer's volume). We need a firmer grasp of the apostolic authorship of John's gospel. We need a new Edersheim on Jesus. We need a Christology on conservative lines, which sees the deity of Christ implied throughout the ministry of Jesus and explicitly affirmed on the Sunday after Easter, and the doctrine of the Trinity implied at the Last Supper and made explicit on the Galilean mountain. We need (I believe) more work on the text of the New Testament and on the dating of the gospels. We are not to be mere traditionalists; I myself would like to see the work of Basil Atkinson and Harold Guillebaud on the intermediate state and the final state of the lost taken much further.

6. **We must direct young scholars to helpful teachers.**

Under liberal teachers they may gain their doctorates, but they will probably not gain the best development of their biblical understanding and they may not produce a thesis of high value to the church. Here is a great field for advance.

The vision is still the same: a revival of Christian theology which will sustain the Church in its world mission and which will challenge our secular age. We have no desire to be sectarian, we want the Church united in utter loyalty to Christ and his revelation. In this global village we want (as far as we possibly can without compromising biblical principles) to have good relations with all Christians, Catholic, Orthodox, liberal and charismatic, and to serve them in any way we can. Some may not thank us for our efforts, but it is vital if the Holy Spirit quickens the church that the teachers and the literature should be available to all who need them.

So let us go forward with shouts of joy thanking the Lord for all he has done and *let us give ourselves to prayer*. Scholars who have the brains to teach in a university have great potential for good or ill and we are special targets of the devil. Let us pray that God will recall us all to a biblical view of scripture and that he will keep us delighting in its message and that he will give us the widest vision of our task. If God blesses us with *charismata* let us not forget to pray for those who are called to contend for the faith in the world of thought. As we go forward in obedience we shall meet the angry Saballats who will say: 'What are these feeble fundamentalists doing? Will they restore things? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish?' (Neh.4:2) But God will send us his word: 'take courage, all you people . . . work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts . . . My Spirit abides among you; fear not.' (Hag. 2:4,5).

JOHN WENHAM was formerly vice-principal of Tyndale Hall, Bristol and warden of Latimer House, Oxford.

NOTES

1 An address given at the Tyndale House Open Day, Cambridge 14 May 1988.