

## *Are Evangelicals Fundamentalists?*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

After a period of relative inattention the subject of Fundamentalism has become a matter of controversy again in the church and the world at large. As every LBC student knows, the word 'Fundamentalism' first came into use at the turn of the century in connection with the activity of orthodox Christians in upholding traditional formulations of the faith over against the liberalism of the time and in defending the reliability of the biblical record and its authority over against the threat which was perceived to lie in so-called higher criticism which questioned the authenticity of the documents and the reliability of their contents. A set of booklets called *The Fundamentals* was written by a group which included some outstanding scholars who were anything but obscurantists, and it was this title which catalysed the development of the nickname.

It never entirely dropped from circulation, especially in North America where it became associated with attacks on the theory of biological evolution and the defence of a literal interpretation of the Genesis creation story, and it came to fresh life in the late 1950s, partly as a result of the resurgence of evangelical religion that was associated with the evangelistic campaigns of Billy Graham in this country. A lively discussion took place in the press and elsewhere. One critic (G. Hebert) wrote a book called *Fundamentalism and the Church of God*,<sup>1</sup> and, at least in the opinion of the fundamentalists, met his match in a reply with the apt title of *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* by J. I. Packer.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter the battle quietened down, until the publication of *Fundamentalism* by James Barr<sup>3</sup> who had earlier held to a theological position of this broad kind and who was now not only expressing his reaction to it but actively campaigning to dissuade people from joining it and to tempt away those who had succumbed; the generally scornful tone of the book helped to ensure that those it was most meant to influence were merely inoculated further by it against the author's own new position.

The excitement once again died down, but now the matter has come to life once again. The current recrudescence of interest appears to have been stimulated by the activities of extremist sects, both Christian and

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non-Christian. But the criticisms raised against positions that seem extreme to us are also often directed against the general position of this institution and those who share its outlook—Christians who would be happy to use the term 'evangelical' as a self-description. It is in fact one of the curiosities of the present situation that, while evangelicals protest against being lumped together with 'fundamentalists' in this extremist sense, their critics insist on using the term 'fundamentalist' rather than 'evangelical' to describe them. However unhappy

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<sup>1</sup> London: SCM Press, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> London: SCM Press, 1977.

we may be about the tendency to 'guilt by association' which this nomenclature engenders, we do need to examine carefully what is being said and to discuss what we may learn from it and where we may want to reply to it.

## DEFINITIONS

We start by attempting to define the usage of the two terms in our title. First, we consider 'evangelical'. Two English adjectives have developed from the word 'evangel' which is simply the Latin word for gospel. There is 'evangelical' and there is 'evangelistic', and they are continually confused, sometimes by people who should know better. Evangelistic refers to a type of activity associated with the gospel—the activity of making it known with the aim of persuading people to accept it and so to become Christians. Hence the word is sometimes used of anybody who attempts to promote any kind of cause or product—an enthusiastic life-insurance salesman, for example. Evangelical refers to a kind of belief associated with the gospel, namely holding a form of religion which has at its centre the gospel. In practice, the term has a narrower reference than this, namely to that specific understanding of the Christian message as gospel which was held by the Protestant Reformers; when there was a revival of this message in the church in England in the 18th century, it was christened the evangelical revival, because it meant going back to the message of the Protestant Reformation. Similarly, there was a 'second evangelical awakening' in the mid-nineteenth century when the experience of the seventeenth century repeated itself. There is no doubt as to what the nature of this message was. The evangelical message was principally concerned with the human need for salvation from sin, the gracious offer of God in and through the atoning death of Jesus for sins, the need for conversion and new birth through faith, and the subsequent life of holiness and love. This message was proclaimed and led to widescale conversions and the growth of the church. But it was not accepted and preached by everybody, and therefore we can draw a distinction between evangelical and non-evangelical groups in the various Christian denominations.

Writing as a historian rather than as a theologian, David Bebbington suggests that there are 'four qualities which have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: (1) *Conversionism*, the belief that lives need

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to be changed; (2) *Activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; (3) *Biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; (4) and what may be called *Crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.'<sup>4</sup>

We now look at the term 'fundamentalist'. There is no doubt that this term, however it originated, was gladly accepted by a number of evangelical Christians as an honourable and appropriate designation, because what they were doing was to uphold and defend what they saw as the fundamentals of the faith, and they could produce a significant list of historic Christian positions which they embraced. If the term retained that kind of rational meaning, many of us today would be happy to use it. But of course a term can get so twisted by the use made of it by influential people, that it inevitably arouses the wrong associations, and

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<sup>4</sup> D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 2f.

therefore even the people who find it a positive term and use it in a positive way may be forced to give up the use of it because it simply creates misunderstanding.

What, then, do people who criticise fundamentalism think that they are attacking? I begin with a couple of quotations from a responsible newspaper. The first comes from an editorial comment in *The Scotsman*:

Intolerance and a crusading zeal are the hallmarks of most fundamentalist religious movements. This is as true of Christian fundamentalism as it is of militant Islam and revivalist Hinduism. They brook no dissent, but at the same time offer their followers an absolute set of beliefs which may be appealing in an age when a moral and religious framework is often perceived as missing in society, and people are forced to draw on their own personal resources.<sup>5</sup>

The second quotation, also from *The Scotsman*, is from a report of an interview with the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. He comments:

Fundamentalists adhere to a certain view of the Bible, claiming it to be infallible and inerrant, and that their viewpoint is the only rational view. People who almost create a church within the Church, and refusing to listen or share with other people who don't share their views. These fundamentalists are divisive.<sup>6</sup>

To these quotations let me add a third. From a somewhat different angle the sociologist Robin Gill offers the tentative definition of fundamentalism as:

a system of beliefs and practices which treat scriptural absolutism as the way to counter the pluralism and relativism engendered by modernity. And the term militant fundamentalism might be used further to distinguish those recent forms of fundamentalism which

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have sought actively to counter modernity through political means.<sup>7</sup>

That is to say, Gill sees fundamentalism as essentially a protest movement, a counter-cultural force against aspects of the modern world, using as its weapon appeal to some absolute authority from the past.

From these three quotations, which are representative, we could say that the popular picture of fundamentalists is of people (1) who adhere to the literal interpretation and the supreme authority of some ancient religious book, and who hold fast to it even when to everybody else it seems totally anachronistic; (2) who are aggressive in urging other people to accept their beliefs; (3) and who are fiercely intolerant of anybody who does not share their views.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> From an editorial in *The Scotsman*, Thursday, 1st November, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> R. Davidson, [then] Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in an interview in *The Scotsman*, Thursday, 20th December, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> R. Gill, *Competing Convictions* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. Barton, *People of the Book? The Authority of the Bible in Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1988), 1: 'It is fundamentalism that comes closest to adopting in Christianity a theory of Scripture like the majority Islamic view of the Qur'an—as supernaturally inspired in origin, inerrant in content, and oracular in function.' Similarly, K. Boone, *The Bible tells them so: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism* (Albany: State UP of New

## EVANGELICALS AND FUNDAMENTALISTS

From this brief discussion of the characteristics of evangelicalism and fundamentalism two conclusions can be drawn. First, I would claim that the four characteristics detected by Bebbington can be seen as forming a logical and coherent whole. There is the belief that lives need to be changed, and this is normally understood to be universally true of all people: one's eternal well-being depends upon conversion to the Christian faith. But if all people need to hear and respond to the gospel, inevitably there arises a zeal to convert people expressed in activism.

At the same time two other things follow. The first is that this attitude is based upon biblical teaching, and it includes a specific understanding of the cross-event which, of course, evangelicals would claim is clearly taught in the Bible. The other is that other views and theologies which differ from this are to greater or less extent false, and it is not surprising that people who hold the evangelical position should want to insist on its truth over against other views.

In short, it is clear that once the truth of the gospel as necessary, saving truth is affirmed, the four points listed by Bebbington are seen to form a logical whole, none of which is expendable.

The second conclusion is that there is obviously some overlap between this position and that of fundamentalism. It is clear at the outset that if 'fundamentalism' retains its original sense of adherence to the fundamentals of the faith, then it is essentially another name for the same outlook, except for two things. First, fundamentalism refers more broadly to several beliefs considered to be fundamental, whereas the term 'evangelicalism' draws attention to what might be regarded as the most fundamental of those beliefs. Second, fundamentalism is more concerned with the maintenance and upholding of these truths as truths whereas 'evangelicalism' is more concerned with the saving power of these truths and the need to proclaim the gospel.

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If, however, we take up the popular image of fundamentalism, then we can say:

1. The activism of evangelicalism is to be compared with the 'crusading zeal' of fundamentalism.
2. The stress on the truth of the gospel in evangelicalism is to be compared with the intolerance and the tendency to create divisions within the church said to be characteristic of fundamentalism.
3. The biblicism of evangelicalism is to be compared with 'the literal interpretation and supreme authority' of the Bible in fundamentalism.

We consider these three points in turn.

## **ACTIVISM AND CRUSADING ZEAL**

As we have seen, the nature of the evangelical gospel is such that it contains the command to activism within it. This raises a number of interesting questions.

### **The Scope of the Task**

The first question is concerned with the place of evangelism in the life of the Christian and the church. On the one hand, it would seem that, if everybody needs to hear the gospel, then the church and individual Christians should devote their main energies to this task. If the primary aim of the church is to worship and glorify God, then evangelism should be the first priority in achieving this aim. But then it could be said that the task is so great that it demands all our time and effort. Would it not be true to say that even if every Christian spent every moment in effort connected directly or indirectly with evangelism, then there would in fact be no room or energy left for anything else? Once the necessities of life had been met, there would be no time for anything else whatever, so long as a substantial number of humankind remain unevangelised.

No doubt there are some groups which take an attitude very like this. The zeal and devotion of Jehovah's Witnesses have often been the subject of favourable comment from people who are quite convinced that their actual beliefs are seriously astray.

On the other hand, it has to be urged that the picture of the New Testament church is not that of a group of people, all of whom spend all their time directly or indirectly in evangelism and Christian nurture. To adopt that outlook would be to relativise all the rest of human activity into insignificance—nothing is of value except insofar as it directly promotes the task of evangelism. This seems to go against a biblical understanding of the created world which is meant to be enjoyed. Rather we would want to say at least two things. First, the New Testament envisages some people who are called and equipped by God to be specifically evangelists for some part of their time, just as it

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envisages others called to other tasks within the church. Second, the biblical understanding of human life as a whole is one in which there is a place for things that may broadly be called religious and others that are secular, but the latter are part of a religious way of life in which God has given us the world and its potential to enjoy.

### **The Problem of Universalism**

The second point is concerned with the question of universal and limited salvation. Evangelical Christians are convinced of the universal need of humankind for the gospel. All would agree that the present benefits of the gospel are such that they should be shared with all mankind. But most evangelicals find that the urgency of evangelism arises from the question of the ultimate fate of those who do not accept the gospel. Here three views are found:

1. Many evangelicals hold that those who have not heard the gospel are lost for all eternity unless they hear and respond to the gospel.

2. Others would say that the unevangelised are judged by the light that they have—but that they still need the full light of the gospel.

3. Others hold the view or, more cautiously, the hope that somehow in the end God will bring all mankind into a state of salvation.

Some proponents of the first and second of these views would respond by saying that this third view must be wrong because it takes away from the urgency of evangelism, but, put in this form, this is hardly a sound argument. Advocates of the third view can reply that in any case there still remains the urgent need to share the present blessings of the gospel with others. The crucial argument, however, is whether this view is true, and here, to my mind, it breaks down completely, in that, to put it mildly, it is far from being clearly taught in Scripture, and therefore it is not a view on which one can base a theology of evangelism.

The second view also requires some consideration. If it is true that the unevangelised are judged by the light that they have, this certainly takes away the worry that people are indubitably lost if they have never heard the gospel. And perhaps we need this comfort in face of our failures in mission and evangelism. But we must be careful not to move on imperceptibly from this view to the belief that all of the unevangelised will be saved by the light that they had. If the experience of Christian mission is anything to go by, many people when confronted by the clear light of the gospel do not respond to it; is it not also likely to be the case that people will not respond to this other, lesser light, and indeed is it not more likely that people who have not responded to the weaker light may be led to faith when they see the light in all its fulness? Therefore, this view does not reduce the urgency of evangelism in any way.

Therefore, as in the case of the third view, the real question that arises is that of the truth of this belief over against that expressed in the

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second view. Is it true that those who have not heard the gospel have no chance of salvation? Since, however, our concern here is with the urgency of evangelism (which seems to me to be equally pressing, whether we take this view or not) I do not propose to discuss it further here.

### **The Need for Activism**

The effect of these considerations is to show that activism is essential to evangelical religion. The command to mission is built into evangelicalism. It does not follow, however, that this will be a 'fiercely crusading zeal', although it may well be that to people who are not convinced of the urgency of the question of salvation the enthusiastic witness of Christian believers may well appear to have this character, or they may deride it in this way. It is a natural tendency to respond to the enthusiasm of any group which keenly promotes a line that we do not accept by accusing them of over-pressing their case, exaggerating its importance, having a false sense of proportion and so on. It is not to be denied of course that there are gauche and insensitive attitudes to evangelism which deserve criticism. I felt embarrassed by the lady who handed out gospel tracts to people going into a university graduation ceremony, since this wasn't the time and place to be doing it, but I've been known to do similar things,

and some people might say that, if you wait for a convenient and appropriate time, you may never find one!

## TRUTH AND INTOLERANCE

If a group believes that it has a message of such crucial importance as the gospel, what is its attitude to other groups?

Let us consider this question with respect to evangelism. Within the Christian church there are groups who may be regarded by evangelicals as (a) uninterested to greater or lesser extent in evangelism, and/or (b) holding a different understanding of the gospel. This point often leads to separationism by evangelicals. They find it difficult to work together with other Christians who do not make evangelism a priority or who do not evangelise to any significant extent. It is a problem which may arise in different contexts.

### The Student World

If we take the situation in the student world, it is common for a group of like-minded people to form a Christian group with the specific purpose, perhaps among others, of evangelism. Such a group is a voluntary association; it is not a church, and it is free to do what it pleases. If another group of Christians wishes to form a separate group with some

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other objectives, they are equally free and able to do so. People may belong to more than one such group. The problems arise when any such evangelistic group claims to be exclusively *Christian* and/or to refrain from any expression of fellowship, unity or common effort with other Christian groups.

Why do they adopt this exclusivist stance? It is primarily because they feel that the truth of the gospel is being compromised in some way or because there will be less devotion to the task of evangelism. If these fears are justified, then it is perfectly proper that an unwillingness to cooperate with others should arise. The situation may be exacerbated by the belief that a defective presentation of the gospel can be positively dangerous, leading people into a false position.

There is good support in Scripture for taking a position which appears intolerant to others. One has only to read the strong language which Paul uses of people who in his words were preaching 'another gospel'—the point being that their message was indeed being presented as a gospel, although it did not place Christ crucified at the centre and insisted on Gentiles observing the Jewish law in addition to believing in Christ. So the intolerance can be justified.

James Denney said wise words on this. Commenting on Paul's anathema against preachers of 'another gospel' in Gal. 1:4, 8f., he wrote:

I cannot agree with those who disparage this, or affect to forgive it, as the unhappy beginning of religious intolerance.... If God has really done something in Christ on which the salvation of the world depends, and if he has made it known, then it is a Christian duty to be intolerant of everything which ignores, denies or explains it away.... If the

evangelist has not something to preach of which he can say, 'If any man makes it his business to subvert this, let him be anathema,' he has no gospel at all.<sup>9</sup>

The problems arise as to what constitutes a false, inadequate or misleading view of the gospel, and to how far differences over the nature of the gospel prevent common evangelism or other forms of activity and fellowship with other Christians. At what point, if any, do other *soi-disant* Christians cease to be people with whom one can have fellowship or common activity?

In more than one University known to me there takes place an annual carol service attended by vast numbers of students who perhaps rarely attend a place of worship on other occasions. My heart cries out: What an evangelistic opportunity! And year by year I weep (figuratively speaking) over the crass failure of many speakers at such occasions who fail to present the message of 'Unto you is born this day a Saviour' with clarity, conviction and challenge. It is no wonder that evangelically-minded students feel the need to hold a rival show at which the

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Christmas message will be properly presented. After all, the Methodist Church began by presenting a rival show at a time when the parish churches could not be relied on to present the gospel to all and sundry. Now I do not doubt the Christian convictions of the people in the 'official' carol service, and I see no reason either to be absent from it or to refuse to play a part in it if invited. But equally I would regard it as criminal not to use the Christmas opportunity for evangelism, even if it carries an implied rebuke of those whose witness has left something to be desired. I can go a long way in friendship and sharing in Christian witness with other Christians who do not see eye to eye with me, but if in the end of the day the gospel is not proclaimed, then I must act independently with others of like mind.

### **The Church**

Similar considerations apply in the church, but here the situation is more complex. For now we are thinking of the church and not of voluntary groups for specific purposes. And you will remember that it was divisiveness within the church that was the problem. There can be occasions when the church is so far removed from the truth that though it bears the name of Christian it is beyond Reformation. Calvin replied to the charge of making a schism in the church by saying: 'This necessity was that the light of divine truth had been extinguished, the Word of God buried, the virtue of Christ left in profound oblivion, and the pastoral office subverted.'<sup>10</sup>

There may well be modern situations when the same considerations apply, and when there is no course but to move out. Sometimes this means that an individual moves over to a different church, sometimes that a group of people start their own fellowship.

Here I may remark the curious fact that, were it not the largest Protestant group in the world, the Baptist Churches would presumably have been regarded as sectarian and divisive because of their split off from other churches solely on the basis of believers' baptism. It is probably not accidental that by and large believers' baptism and evangelicalism tend to go together.

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<sup>9</sup> J. Denney, *The Death of Christ* (London: Tyndale Press, 1951), 66f.

<sup>10</sup> 'Reply to Sadolet' in J. K. S. Reid (ed.), *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 241.



Nevertheless, it is tragic that Christians form separate churches over a matter that appears to be of secondary importance.

This may illustrate the point that divisions can arise over matters that appear to be of lesser importance. In fact of course the history of evangelicalism is strewn with a plethora of internal divisions over matters that must seem to be of little moment to those who look dispassionately from outside. And this fissiparousness demands some scrutiny. What lies behind it? I suspect that, generally speaking, evangelical religion is on the whole uncomfortable with the large, centrally organised church with a hierarchical system and wants to

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emphasise 'small is beautiful' and the importance of freedom. I think there is also a tendency that concern for truth can take precedence over love and can get out of focus.

### **The Question of Intolerance**

There is a danger that adoption of a distinctive doctrinal position can lead to intolerance of others. It is one thing for us to insist on freedom and the right of individuals to their own beliefs; this means that people are free to belong to whatever groups they may wish. The problem concerns the limits of freedom within a group which in one sense is voluntary and in another sense is not. Within the church as a whole people must be free to believe as they wish. But where are the limits to be set?

To take another controversial issue. There are some Christians who believe that homosexual practices (as opposed to orientation) are compatible with Christian belief. I do not doubt the sincerity of my friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, who hold this position. But here is a dilemma. If we believe, as I do, that this view is wrong—and indeed dangerously wrong—then either we may endeavour to define membership or leadership in the church in a way that excludes practising homosexuals, or we may be content to live with what we see as an error. If we take the first view, have we then to recognise the possibility of a separate church for such people? Or have we to say that any organisation which they create is not a Christian church at all? Or, again, have we to admit that it is possible that our view may be wrong, and that we must hold to it with due caution and recognition that other people may possibly be right?

In this case what we are saying is that the church is for those who accept the gospel, but that accepting the gospel carries certain implications. There are in fact two problems here, one the question of toleration and the other the question of truth. I think that I should want to insist that if a particular Christian group believes that a certain belief and way of life is wrong and indeed dangerous, then it has the right to disallow it, while always recognising that people of a different persuasion are entirely free to act as they wish independently. This may sound intolerant, but I find it difficult to see the situation otherwise. Even the most ardent relativist has to admit that lines and limits must be drawn somewhere. Nevertheless, I believe that we have to be very sure of our position before we draw the lines, and somehow we have to combine concern for the truth with love of those who disagree with us.

## THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

We come, third, to what is in essence, the main criticism made of Fundamentalists, namely that they make an inerrant Scripture into an

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absolute authority on which people can rest amid the welter of varying secular views. The objections to this are:

1. The search for security is misguided. Faith must remain faith—which by its very nature has no safe and secure basis.
2. Scripture is manifestly not such a basis. Its interpretation is uncertain, it is fallible, and its teaching is often inadequate and anachronistic in the modern world.

### Faith and Security

We shall consider first the suggestion that people must not have security. The claim that it is wrong to have certainty in religion goes against all that many psychologists tell us about the basic need of the human personality for a firm foundation for living whether in childhood or in adulthood. A child needs loving persons and an environment surrounding it in which it can trust, and developmental problems with the risk of delinquency arise where security is lacking. I am not persuaded that adults are basically any different in this respect. We look for solid ground that is not shifting sand; for example, we seek for personal relationships in which we can build up a sense of trust and hence of security, and at the same time we also endeavour to provide such relationships for other people who put their trust in us. Why then should it be wrong to look for religious certainty? Some will answer that all we can have is faith, which by its nature is a gamble or risk; or that the only certainty that we can have is God himself and not something tangible and testable like Scripture. To reply in this way is, of course, to shift the ground; it is to admit that security may be desirable but to assert that it may not be possible and that we have to learn to live with ultimate uncertainty, or at least with a certainty that is not in any way tied to the authority of Scripture as the Word of God.

If we move on to this fresh point, of whether Scripture can be a basis for security, two things need to be said. First, in principle there is no difference in kind between a faith that puts its trust in God and one that does so through his revelation in Scripture or in Christ. In both cases, we are dealing with a faith that cannot prove the truth or reliability or whatever of God or Scripture. If we can claim that God is trustworthy only by faith, it is equally true that we can claim that Scripture is trustworthy only by faith. (And of course we cannot know God apart from Scripture.)

Second, the trustworthiness of God or Scripture is indeed a matter of faith—but it is a faith which is confirmed by experience to the point where it becomes a trusty foundation. Faith in any human being is equally faith, which is confirmed or otherwise by continuing experience and which always has to some extent the character of risk. But there comes a point in any relationship when the element of risk becomes

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minimal, and the faith is tantamount to knowledge and leads to ventures of faith which are not foolhardy. Surely it is so with God. And therefore, the charge that we ought not to look for certainty is beside the point. Human life depends on the certainties of faith through and through.

### **The Bible and its Interpretation**

So the ground shifts to the argument that the Bible is not suitable to be a basis for faith. It is manifestly errant and its teaching is not a sound basis for modern living. This lecture is not the appropriate place for a discussion of the basis for affirming biblical infallibility and inerrancy. But we shall take up one point that is important.

This is the objection that in any case an infallible book is useless apart from an infallible interpretation of it. In support of this objection we can cite the fact that there is a large number of fundamentalist groups whose views differ substantially from one another. The view of the *authority of Scripture* taken by such sects as Jehovah's Witnesses may seem to be no different from that of reputable Christian groups, and yet the end—result is very different.

Now the point of substance which arises here, and is particularly developed by K. Boone, is that different groups produce different interpretations because the interpretation is in effect a product of Scripture and the community. Boone would dispute that there can be an objective interpretation of Scripture. Her argument at this point is dependent upon a concept of 'meaning' in literature in general which is certainly open to criticism. But her other point is well-taken, namely that any interpretation of what Scripture signifies for a particular community is a complex product of Scripture and community, with certain parts of Scripture and certain interpretations of them being made binding. Some of Boone's examples are drawn from American dispensationalism in its various forms, and they illustrate how a literalistic interpretation of prophecy in Daniel and Revelation coupled with a particular application of those prophecies can assume a dominant role in some fundamentalist groups though not in others. This may be to some extent a matter of varying emphasis placed upon certain texts rather than a difference in interpretation of them, but it is significant that some groups will devote much energy to study of this area and hold that it is highly significant for Christian thought and practice, whereas other groups never touch it at all.

Recently a fairly conservative church group had a weekend conference with a visiting speaker, and the participants came back with various handouts which they had received and with the blessed word 'hermeneutics' on their lips. Someone who had not been at the conference read the handouts and tackled me on the matter: 'What does this word

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"hermeneutics" mean?' he asked me on Sunday afternoon while I was struggling with post-prandial exhaustion. I endeavoured to explain to him that the examples cited in the handouts appeared to deal with matters where Scripture might receive a different application today from what it did in its own time. Then he replied: 'It seems to me that hermeneutics is simply a way of getting round the message of the parts of Scripture that you don't like.' Well, that's not a bad definition, but it doesn't really settle the matter. So I said to him, 'OK, tell me what do you do with the bit about "Greet one another with a holy kiss" in your meeting?' And I think that he began to see the point, that hermeneutics or no hermeneutics, there are bits of

Scripture that we quietly ignore as being no longer relevant or appropriate. I may say that, although they don't wash one another's feet at this particular church, you can't get in through the door without several people shaking you warmly by the hand as you enter, a practice for which I can find no clear command in Scripture; and they have now gone so far as to use instrumental music at the breaking of bread meeting, although what there was in Scripture to forbid its use up to 1990 or to sanction it thereafter I just don't know. This shows that in fact some kind of hermeneutics was already being practised there.

Now these may be considered trivial matters. But let us consider how we resolve them.

1. We admit the authority of Scripture.
2. We apply it to our situation, and we try to act in such a way that Scriptural teaching remains authoritative. Where Scripture says nothing on an issue, we endeavour in church meetings to do everything 'decently and in order'.
3. We recognise that traditions of doing things grow up, so much so that different sets of Christian groups can be distinguished by the traditions that they severally follow. We would also recognise that some of these traditions may be due to cultural and other factors and therefore are not of universal application.
4. But there is the danger that a tradition can become authoritative and even justified by dubious appeal to Scripture (I think for example of the Free Church of Scotland's practices with regard to singing only the psalms and without instrumental accompaniment. Where in my view they go too far is in making absolutes out of practices that are wholly good and which the rest of us might imitate from time to time to our great advantage.) In such cases, we have to be prepared to recognise that our traditions are man-made and to be ready to alter them for a whole variety of good reasons.

Now I suspect that the difference between the evangelical and the fundamentalist may surface at this point, that the evangelical is prepared to admit—perhaps grudgingly in some cases—the need for interpretation of Scripture and for self-criticism of one's beliefs and

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practices in the light of Scripture. That is to say, there is a recognition that to say that we take Scripture 'literally' is a considerable oversimplification. And so far as practice is concerned, that may not be too difficult for us to admit. But we have to cope with some much more difficult issues.

What about the authority of Scripture in matters of doctrine? Again let us see how an example works out in practice. Take the question of the virgin birth or, rather, the Spirit-conception of Jesus. This doctrine is not accepted by quite a number of people, generally outside the evangelical camp. Those who object to it do so on such grounds as:

1. Scripture is divided on the matter; the idea is found in some documents but not in others, and it could be that some documents present ideas incompatible with it. Therefore, it may be only one of several doctrines in Scripture, varied ways of expressing something about the person of Jesus, and not the most central.

2. As a doctrine it may be thought to be defective in certain respects.

3. It goes against scientific possibility.

The areas of debate fall into these three groups. It may be suspected that 'liberals' are ultimately moved by objection 3., although they may not readily admit it, and that 'evangelicals' and 'fundamentalists' are ultimately moved by the simple fact that it is present in the Bible, whether or not it is prominent there. But how do you settle such an issue?

First, the evangelical and many other Christians will argue that God is perfectly capable of acting miraculously if he so desires. Therefore the question is one of appropriateness rather than of possibility. (This then raises the general question of a supernaturalist versus a non-supernaturalist Christianity.) It should be noted that when one of the first IVF aids to Bible students, *The New Bible Handbook* was published, H. H. Rowley objected to the statement in it that people like himself rejected the supernatural and miracles on principle; he confessed to being open to the miraculous, but said that the question was one of the historical evidence for any particular account. By no means all so-called 'liberals' would side at this point with Rowley who admittedly was a 'liberal evangelical' rather than a 'liberal'. Nevertheless, the point needs to be affirmed that exclusion of the supernatural on principle is not necessarily the mark of the non-evangelical. By contrast, of course, there are critical scholars who assert unequivocally that miracles cannot happen.

Second, the question of the basis in Scripture is thus of fundamental importance and it is one that can be debated. It is undeniable that Matthew and Luke believed in the virgin birth, although one might argue that they were mistaken. Questions are then to be asked regarding the function of their statements or their basis for making them. Or it can be observed that the virgin birth does not function

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significantly, if at all, in other christological teaching in the NT. Much argument proceeds by relativisation of Scriptural teaching. If some doctrine belongs to only a part of the NT, it can be argued either that it is 'primitive' and was superseded, or that it is 'late' and represents a declension from the central teaching, or again that it is local to a particular community and not universally held, or again simply that it is one of several different and even contradictory expressions of Christian faith and therefore cannot be made normative.

Now there is no doubt that some doctrinal teaching in the NT can be assigned to some of these categories. The question then is whether this justifies relativisation of it. It can surely be argued that, where there are differing expressions of Christian belief, they are to be held together—in tension, if need be—rather than being individually jettisoned.

Third, the problem of 'defective' doctrine is perhaps the key one in this case. Debate takes place as to whether the virgin birth is an appropriate part of modern Christian doctrine. The attitude of the fundamentalist is to say: because it is in Scripture, therefore it must be part of doctrine. The attitude of the liberal is: because it is inappropriate doctrinally, we must not accept it, and we relativise the Scriptural teaching in one way or another.

So the question is: how we determine the role of Scripture in such an issue. The liberal approach finds much fundamentalist doctrine and practice anachronistic. The question then

becomes in some cases: do we examine our interpretation of Scripture in the light of other considerations, or do we let Scripture speak a word into our situation? Here we may have a tension which is not easily resolvable between the problem of interpretation of material that causes us difficulties as modern people, and the problem of letting Scripture challenge the false assumptions and assertions of the contemporary world.

In dealing with these issues we can try to establish a world-view which is biblical, and ask what is essential to it. To some extent the biblical teaching is manifestly given within a frame of understanding that is not essential for its expression. For example, biblical writers probably thought of the eye as a mechanism whereby light actually enters the body; they shared a corpuscular theory of light. We do not need to share that view. Again, they thought of a three-decker universe. They used language which suggests that the organ of thought and decision-making is the heart rather than the brain. They were ignorant of a vast amount of knowledge which has grown up in the intervening centuries. It is not impossible to re-express some biblical teaching in a different framework of thought. But there is also the problem where the modern world-view rejects the possibility of spiritual influence in the material world, whether by good spirits or evil, and the question is whether this form of expression in the Bible is merely part of a framework which can be replaced by another or whether it is a matter of fundamental content

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that must be preserved whatever the framework of thought within which it is expressed. The problems thus arise when modern thought professes to exclude God—and the devil for that matter—from reality. Or, one should add; when the problem is not the exclusion of God and the devil from the world but the expression of their activity in different terms from those found in the Bible.

We might sum up the matter by saying that biblical religion does pose a challenge to some aspects of modern thought and life, and the problem is to decide where the biblical view is the correct one. Consider three examples:

1. If the Bible appears to teach a three-decker universe, we as a matter of fact do not accept that view, but insist that the biblical picture is not an essential part of revelation or is not incompatible with a scientific view.
2. If the Bible insists on the existence of a spiritual dimension to life, we insist on upholding that against any form of reductionist materialism.
3. If the Bible condemns homosexual practices, some people uphold the biblical ethic, while others claim that it is anachronistic and should be discarded.

Here are examples of following modern thought, following the Bible, and uncertainty which way to go. The hard place is the third area. I do not know that there is any clear rule of thumb for dealing with it, but I suggest that the evangelical Christian will accept the authority of Scripture even when it goes against some aspects of modern thinking.

Along these lines we may see a case that evangelical Christianity is not to be identified with fundamentalism in its more literalistic types of expression. But where they agree is in the supreme authority of Scripture properly interpreted.

To raise questions like these is probably in itself to pass outside fundamentalism. It is to move outside what may be called a 'literal' view of Scripture—which of course is something that cannot be consistently maintained. And therefore, it will be clear that I am coming to a position where I am suggesting that there is an important difference between evangelicalism and fundamentalism in that the evangelical is not tied, as the fundamentalist professedly is, to an unquestioning view of Scripture but is open to new understanding of Scripture. Where they are united, however, and this is of crucial importance, is in firmly affirming the truth of Scripture. There may be room for debate regarding the precise reference and meaning of such terms as infallibility and inerrancy, but what unites evangelicals is their conviction not only of the authority of Scripture but also of its competence to be such an authority in virtue of its truth. As I have argued elsewhere, that truth may be a complex phenomenon, and I have warned against the kind of view which seems to possess special insight into the characteristics that Scripture must have in this respect. I have said that it is best to say that

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Scripture is fully adequate for the purposes for which God intended it—and such adequacy will include the truth and validity of what it affirms.<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Before we sum up, it may be helpful to reverse the direction of our initial question: Are fundamentalists evangelicals? From what I have said, it will be apparent that Christian fundamentalists are usually evangelicals in that they hold to the historic Christian faith and to the four main characteristics of evangelicalism that we noted earlier. But let me suggest that things can go wrong:

First, where fundamentalism becomes a matter of affirming the inerrancy of the Bible without translating that belief in scriptural authority into meaningful action. There is a real danger that a person or group of Christians may be fundamentalist in the sense of being strictly orthodox in belief without necessarily putting the task of evangelism high on their agenda. To do so is to ignore the implications of the truths in which they believe, and we are all prone to that kind of blindness.

Second, where fundamentalism finds ways of misinterpreting or ignoring scriptural teaching. In such cases we may well ask with K. Boone whether Scripture is being used to prop up some belief that is not truly Christian. Here one might think of the defence of certain types of racial discrimination allegedly on the basis of biblical teaching.

Third, where fundamentalism in fact follows a human leader who insists in effect that to disobey him is to disobey Scripture of which he is in effect the authoritative interpreter. One can readily think of some Christian ministers and pastors whose authority is paramount.

By contrast with such positions, the evangelical is committed to acceptance of the authority of Scripture—and therefore to a concept of the church which is *semper reformanda*.

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<sup>11</sup> I. H. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982).

In this lecture I have tried to depict the characteristics of evangelicalism as the term is historically used without attempting to show why I believe that this understanding of the Christian faith is its truest and purest form. Here I share the position of C. K. Barrett in his commentary on 2 Corinthians:

Like most people, I sometimes wonder if Christianity is true; but I think I never doubt that, if it is true, it is truest in the form it took with Paul, and, after him, with such interpreters of his as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Barth. And, as I read them, and especially Paul himself, conviction returns, and, though problems may abound, grace abounds much more.<sup>12</sup>

Further, in its earliest use, the term 'fundamentalism' refers to this same understanding of Christianity, more especially in terms of defending and affirming it over against other views, especially those which

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attack the truth and sufficiency of Scripture. In that sense, the term, like 'Christian' itself, is one applied by outsiders but nevertheless one that we can accept as an apt description of a position that we are not ashamed to hold. However, there is an important difference. Whereas the users of 'Christian' were correct in recognising that the chief characteristic of the new religious group was its message about 'Christ', even if they derided them for doing so, in current parlance, the term 'fundamentalist' has become one of abuse for attitudes that are sometimes the vices rather than the virtues of those thus characterised. There are tendencies found both among some Christians and among other groups which we ourselves should want to repudiate—I am thinking particularly of intolerance of the views of others, of the hypocrisy of some fundamentalist leaders whose way of life has brought discredit on the gospel, and of the adoption of interpretations of the Bible which cannot be defended as being truly in accordance with its central message. From these tendencies we need to distance ourselves: Where, however, the term refers to good qualities which we must uphold despite the criticism which is provoked by them, these we must strive to cultivate because they are part of the evangelical faith—and here I think of the burning zeal to proclaim the gospel which stood at the top of Paul's agenda, the equally strong opposition to views which are destructive of the gospel, and the defence of the authority and truth of Scripture. These things may not be welcome to everybody, but they are non-negotiable, and we must beware, lest, in the current climate of opposition to so-called fundamentalism, we are in danger of playing down their importance.

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<sup>12</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: A&C Black, 1973), vii.