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***Biblical Authority  
and New Testament Scholarship***  
**The Laing Lecture for 1985**

**Donald Guthrie**

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There can be no doubt that the subject of biblical authority is an important theme, perhaps the most important theme that faces the Christian church today. But the question of its meaning is confused because of the lack of precision with which the term is used. Indeed many scholars from widely differing schools of thought claim the authority of the Bible, but clearly mean different things by the same term. Our primary task must be to comment on the nature of biblical authority before discussing the various attitudes of contemporary New Testament scholars towards it.<sup>1</sup>

The basic idea behind authority is that of relationship. Before it can become a reality there must be one to exert authority and others to accept it. Such authority can exist in a derived sense in impersonal enactments, as for example in laws, but the real power rests in the executives who frame them and the enforcement officers whose task it is to ensure that they are kept and to punish offenders. Only in a limited sense can we speak of authority vested in statutes. This is an important consideration when we attempt to define biblical authority.<sup>2</sup> Whereas it may appear that we are attributing authority to a book, which has given rise to the charge of bibliolatry, the Bible possesses authority only by virtue of its origin, ie by the authority of God. But it is at this point that problems arise in the field of biblical scholarship, for if, as is widely held, the Bible is a purely human book without any divine origin, we have a right to ask what notion of biblical authority is still possible.

Many scholars who reject a divine origin are fully aware of the need to define what they mean when they speak of biblical authority.<sup>3</sup> They are also acutely aware of the impossibility of maintaining any objectivity in Christian teaching unless some authoritative standard can be upheld. Nevertheless some of the more radical critical schools have such a low view of the authenticity of the biblical texts that they have virtually jettisoned the whole concept of biblical authority. In face of these movements we need to make the following points as a preliminary to our study of New Testament scholarship.

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<sup>1</sup> Many modern movements deny the possibility of an absolute authority. Cf the report of the World Council of Churches, *Ecumenical Review* 21 (1969) 138. It is asserted that acceptance of biblical authority could no longer guarantee right exegesis.

<sup>2</sup> We need to distinguish what is authoritative from what is authoritarian in discussions on biblical authority. In the latter sense obedience is enforced rather than freely given.

<sup>3</sup> Cf J. Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London, 1973) 113: 'We are willing today to listen to the theology and consider its claims before we hear an account of its authority.' Barr's approach is very much in human terms (118). He has no use for terms like inspiration. The Bible is viewed as imperfect as well as fallible (119). It is seen as the classic model for understanding.

## PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

### The approach to biblical authority up to the time of rationalism

The divine authority of the Bible was not questioned until the rise of

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rationalism. Although there were wide divergences over the interpretation of the Bible, there was no divergence over the fact that God spoke in scripture. This was basic to the Apostolic Fathers, Apologists and Gnostics in the earliest period. They were mainly concerned with the authority of the Old Testament, but during this period there was increasing regard for the words of Jesus and the teaching of the apostles. The phrase 'It is written' was used at first to stress the authority of the Old Testament text, but soon became attached to the New Testament witnesses.<sup>4</sup>

The Alexandrians and Antiochenes, although adopting very different approaches to the interpretation of scripture, were united in recognizing the authoritative character of the text.<sup>5</sup> The same may be said of Jerome and Augustine. Indeed the importance of the biblical texts as providing guidance for daily living was never questioned during the Dark Ages, in spite of the fact that in this period there developed the parallel authority of the church in the magisterium. The Reformers were not faced with the task of establishing the authority of the biblical text, but with challenging the ecclesiastical interpretation of it.<sup>6</sup> During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Protestant churches based their entire doctrine on a divinely authenticated Bible.<sup>7</sup>

During the whole period prior to the rise of higher criticism the biblical text was regarded as thoroughly dependable as a source of faith and practice. This was the position expressed in the Westminster Confession.

### The rise of rationalism

Rationalism in biblical studies proceeded on the assumption that the Bible must be treated on the same level as any other literary work. It was regarded *a priori* as a purely human book. Any notion of divine authority was *ipso facto* excluded.<sup>8</sup> Already a classical work like

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<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus accepted the absolute authority of scripture, although he only adumbrated a doctrine of inspiration. Tertullian also accepted the absolute authority of the text.

<sup>5</sup> Even Origen's allegorizing was used to defend the authoritative nature of the text.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin spoke of God lispng to men. For a discussion of Calvin's views, of H. J. Forstman, *Word and Spirit* (Stanford, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the Reformers' approach to scripture, cf R. C. Johnson, *Authority in Protestant Theology* (Philadelphia, 1969) 21-60. And more recently J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco, 1979) 75-116. The treatment by the latter authors has met with criticism, not only on Luther, but also on Puritanism and Reformed orthodoxy: cf W. R. Godfrey, 'Biblical Authority in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: a Question of Transition', in D. A. Carson & J. D. Woodbridge (eds), *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids and Leicester, 1983) 225-243.

<sup>8</sup> D. E. Nineham, 'Wherein lies the Authority of the Bible?', in L. Hodgson et al (eds), *On the Authority of the Bible* (London, 1960) 88, claims that 'no one believed in the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scripture until the geologists began to question it'. Nineham thinks there is no simple answer to the question he poses. All is bound up with the authority of the church, saints, liturgy, conscience and reason (96).

Homer's *Iliad* had been subjected to analytical criticism and its authenticity questioned, and the same approach was regarded not only as legitimate but necessary for biblical studies.

It was not surprising, therefore, that some of the early literary critics at once undermined the authority of the Bible. In New Testament studies there was no place for the superhuman, and a variety of rationalistic explanations were given for the biblical narratives. In effect the authority of the human scholar replaced the authority of the text, or at least the authority of the resultant truncated text was no greater than the validity of the scholar's findings. Thus began the fluid concept of authority apart from the divine origin of the scriptures. The uniqueness of scripture was abandoned.

### **Philosophical presuppositions**

Biblical scholarship was approached with philosophical presuppositions.

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It is highly significant that the first detailed application of historical-critical principles to the New Testament was made by Schleiermacher, who himself represents the most powerful influence in the development of the religion of feeling. It was basic to his position that no external authority could dictate in religious matters and hence the divine authority of the Bible was ruled out. When he approached the text, therefore, it was not to study it as the word of God. The radical theories of F. C. Baur illustrate the strong influence of the philosophy of Hegel, while the liberal school of Holtzmann and Harnack reflects the views of philosophical idealism. A more recent example is the powerful influence of existentialism on the critical view of Bultmann. Given the starting point that the Bible is a purely human book the attempt of biblical scholars to interpret it in terms of the prevailing currents of thought must be regarded as inevitable and indeed laudable.

But scholars of these schools of thought did not always admit the nature of their own presuppositions. Indeed one of the most unintelligible features of modern critical scholarship is that some have fondly imagined that they had arrived at a presuppositionless position.<sup>9</sup> But those who approach the question of biblical authority from such a point of view will never understand the standpoint of those who begin with the conviction that the Bible is the authoritative word of God rather than the words of men.<sup>10</sup>

### **Revision of the concept of revelation**

It follows from the rejection of the divine origin of scripture that revelation ceases to have the same meaning.<sup>11</sup> If the biblical texts are records of men's search after God rather than God's

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<sup>9</sup> Cf G. N. Stanton, 'Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism', in I. H. Marshall (ed), *New Testament Interpretation* (Exeter, 1977) 60-71. See especially 64-66 on presuppositionless exegesis, which he rejects as impossible. He refers to the claims of B. Jowett and E. Stauffer.

<sup>10</sup> Luther was strong in differentiating *Gottes Wort and Menschenlehre* (WA X.2, 61ff), but this distinction found no place in nineteenth-century theology. Cf Johnson, *Authority*, 38, who brings out the fact that for Luther both law and gospel were found within God's word.

<sup>11</sup> For a historical study of the idea of revelation, cf H. D. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation* (London, 1959); *Theories of Revelation* (London, 1963).

revelations to men they can provide no more than an example,<sup>12</sup> a collection of case studies which can inspire others to make their own quest.<sup>13</sup> But there is no longer any room for an authoritative message from God which sets out the only way of salvation and which must be obeyed.<sup>14</sup>

These general remarks set the scene for the modern debate. Our aim will be to illustrate the way in which the approach outlined above has become the position of critical orthodoxy, and as time has gone on this has widened the gap between those who accept and those who reject a divinely authoritative text.

## **BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND CRITICISM**

### **The nature of criticism**

It must at once be recognized that in itself criticism is neutral. In its root meaning it is concerned with the examination of texts. But history has shown that much criticism has had the effect of undermining the

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authenticity of the text and has become adverse to a true biblical authority. Many critical scholars have expressed surprise that some sections of the church for whom the maintenance of biblical authority is regarded as crucial have tended to avoid all critical approaches.<sup>15</sup> But this was a natural reaction to the extremely radical conclusions of so much earlier German scholarship. It is, however, not impossible to sustain full biblical authority at the same time as using critical faculties to determine the historical background of the biblical texts. Every exegete is a critic in the best sense of the word. But the rise of historical biblical criticism has posed an important problem for the biblical scholar. How far is it possible to maintain the divine origin of scripture and at the same time to investigate the background and methods of the human author?

There can be no doubt that some scholars have stressed the divine origin to such an extent that the human writers have been completely overshadowed.<sup>16</sup> There may be justification for maintaining that some stress should be placed on the humanity of scripture, yet it must be recognized that it is the so-called humanity of scripture which has contributed most to the eroding of biblical authority. While no view of the text which does not give weight to the human authors through whom the revelation of God came is adequate for a true doctrine of scripture, this must always be approached alongside the conviction that the Bible is the authoritative word of God. Does this, however, mean that the former must be subjugated to the latter?

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<sup>12</sup> Cf Barr, *Bible in Modern World*, 120ff, on his idea of revelation. He especially discusses and rejects propositional theology.

<sup>13</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible* (London, 1928) 133ff, proposed the theory of the religious genius as one explanation of biblical authority.

<sup>14</sup> Many scholars attempt to find the basis of authority in a variety of forms rather than rooting it in the nature of God. Cf D. L. Bartlett, *The Shape of Scriptural Authority* (Philadelphia, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> For instance, some nineteenth- and twentieth-century evangelicals. A similar stance was adopted by the pietists in Germany.

<sup>16</sup> This was largely true of the Church Fathers, cf G. W. Bromiley 'The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture', in *Scripture and Truth*, 199-220.

## Modern discussions of inerrancy

It is the tension which this has raised that has led to the most recent discussions about biblical 'inerrancy'.<sup>17</sup> It is not the intention of this lecture to focus on 'inerrancy', although the current debate over this issue has undoubtedly raised more acutely the wider debate over authority. It is important to note that biblical authority did not develop from a particular theory of inspiration, but rather that theories of inspiration were evolved to account for the conviction that the Bible was the authoritative word of God. An understanding of the authority of the text is a necessary prelude to any approach to the doctrine of inspiration.<sup>18</sup> It is significant that since the rise of historical-critical scholarship, a clear distinction has been made by many scholars between authority and inspiration, the former being retained and the latter rejected.<sup>19</sup> The disjunction between the two has undoubtedly led to a weakening of the concept of authority. Yet few who maintain the link between the two would want to argue for a mechanical theory of inspiration,<sup>20</sup> although opponents are in the habit of bringing that charge against them.

'Inerrancy', although not a scriptural word, is thought by many to

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safeguard the authority of scripture. The problem is that the word itself needs qualifying or at least defining before it can be a useful instrument.<sup>21</sup> Our purpose here is rather to stress the divine authority of scripture in face of its erosion in so much critical scholarship, so as to provide a better approach to the doctrine of scripture.<sup>22</sup>

## A conservative approach to biblical authority

1. Biblical authority is not something which is imposed upon scripture. We are not presented with an indispensable article of belief. Calvin was undoubtedly right when he recognized that no one could accept scripture without the enabling of the Holy Spirit (cf *Institutes*, III.ii.33; I.vii.5). This inner conviction that the Bible when it speaks speaks with the voice of God was the basis of the Reformers' doctrine of scripture.<sup>23</sup> It follows that the way to God is to be found in the right understanding of scripture. Justification by faith was not dependent on a particular view of scripture, but those who experienced it were confirmed in their conviction

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<sup>17</sup> See S. Custer, *Does Inspiration DEMAND Inerrancy?* (New Jersey, 1968). Also J. M. Boice (ed), *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, 1978). See also the series of essays in J. W. Montgomery (ed), *God's Inerrant Word* (Minneapolis, 1973).

<sup>18</sup> Barr, *Bible in Modern World*, 23, thinks that 'authority' as distinct from 'inspiration' removes the emphasis from the origins of the Bible. But this reflects his particular view of authority.

<sup>19</sup> J. Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London, 1977) 286ff, discusses verbal inspiration, but although not rejecting it in toto, seeks to reinstate it in a non-fundamentalist way. But the result is hardly worthwhile.

<sup>20</sup> Cf Forstman, *Word and Spirit*, 50ff, on Calvin and the dictation theory.

<sup>21</sup> P. E. Hughes, 'The Truth of Scripture and the Problem of Historical Relativity', *Scripture and Truth*, 194, considers orthodox and evangelical faith has become too defensive. The jump from the positive 'The Bible is the word of God' to the negative 'therefore it is inerrant' illustrates this.

<sup>22</sup> Too often the view of scripture which sees it as authoritative has been confused with a literalism which is not endemic to it. Cf C. F. Evans, *On the Authority of the Bible*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Cf J. H. Gerstner, 'The Church's Doctrine of Biblical Inspiration' in Boice, *Foundation*, 23-58, especially 36-40 on Calvin's views. Cf also Forstmann, *Word and Spirit*, 66ff, on Calvin and the word of the Spirit in the believer, and W. D. Godfrey, in *Scripture and Truth*, 230-234.

that what the scripture said was right. It is important to affirm that true faith needs a solid foundation which is not found in the teaching of the church, but in the authoritative word.

2. The nature of biblical authority is inextricably tied up with the authority of God. Any recognition that the text of scripture is the means by which God communicates his message to men must mean that what scripture says must be obeyed. Biblical authority arises therefore out of the experience of conversion and is not a *sine qua non* for conversion. It would be totally unacceptable to maintain that a particular doctrine of scripture must first be accepted before conversion was possible. This must condition our approach to biblical authority and scholarship, for the text studied cannot be divorced from the underlying convictions of those who form the church of God in the New Testament sense of the word. It raises the serious question whether the text can in fact be approached in similar terms to any other book. The Christian believer knows that God's revelation through the Bible has effected something in his life which cannot be said of any other book. Nevertheless a problem arises when such a text becomes the subject of academic study.<sup>24</sup> How far can its uniqueness be preserved? And if it is not preserved, how can the Christian believer reconcile this with his own experience?

It has already been pointed out that authority rests with God and that it is confirmed in man through the Holy Spirit. It must also be added that for the New Testament the word of God is also found through the acts and teachings of Jesus. God's revelation is also continued in the writings of the apostles. This concept of revelation must be seen within the total religious experience of man.<sup>25</sup> This will remove the idea of biblical authority from being a separate article of faith and establish it as an integral part of God's dealings with mankind.

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3. If the Bible is authoritative, does this remove the responsibility to examine its human origins? This is the real crux in any approach to scholarship. It may be that adverse biblical criticism first drew attention to the need to examine historical backgrounds, but the processes do not belong exclusively to the advocates of that movement. It is imperative to recognize that God chose to use human writers for the communication of his revelation. All we can learn about the writers, their times, their purposes, their relations with their readers, can only illuminate our understanding of the text. In no sense does this detract from the authority of the text. Biblical scholarship of this kind is indispensable. But it is clear that it is pursued with an *a priori* conviction about the authority of the text. On this all but the most radical scholars would agree. Differences arise, however, about which conclusions arrived at through subjecting the text to critical examination conflict with the notion of authority.

4. There are two main schools of thought on this matter. One group says that the notion of authority must be in line with the results of critical scholarship.<sup>26</sup> In other words, biblical criticism calls the tune. If the text is declared to be in error, or if some statement is alleged to be inauthentic, or if some biblical book is claimed to be composed of numerous different sources, then the authority is limited by the character of the text. This would represent the general approach of the majority of modern scholars.

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<sup>24</sup> Care must be taken not to suggest that scripture is put in the place of God. L. Hodgson, *On the Authority of the Bible*, 5, warns against this. But an authoritative text does not usurp the place of God who gave it.

<sup>25</sup> Consult P. Helm, 'Faith, Evidence, and the Scriptures', in *Scripture and Truth*, 303-320.

<sup>26</sup> This would be the general approach of liberal orthodoxy. Barr and Nineham would both represent the general acceptance of authority but of a modified kind.

But the alternative view is that the authority of the text cannot be dependent on the uncertain results of biblical scholarship, but that those results must take into account the character of the text being studied.<sup>27</sup> Full recognition is given to the fact that there are no assured results of scholarship, and when supposed results conflict with the divine authority of the text suspicions immediately arise about those results. The difference in these two approaches will be obvious. There is no way in which they can coincide and this in itself gives rise to the strong opposition against those who will not admit the finality of critical opinions. The history of criticism in the last century and a half is littered with theories which were originally proposed with much assurance, but which have since been abandoned—eg Barr's reconstruction theory, Strauss' mythical theory, the liberal Jesus theory, the history of religions theory. The assured results of criticism look decidedly thin in the light of this, and biblical authority has suffered disastrously as a result.<sup>28</sup>

## **BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND ATTACKS UPON CONSERVATISM**

### **Comments on Barr's position**

A recent phenomenon is the development of an all-out attack on fundamentalism and conservative evangelical scholarship, ie against

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those who maintain that God is the source of scripture. Indeed the attack from one quarter has taken the form of a demand for the dismantling of the whole system built on a biblical basis. The one who particularly wants to do this is James Barr, who has written two books specifically on this subject and has echoed it in other writings.<sup>29</sup> It has been customary for many critical scholars simply to ignore conservative scholarship. But Barr's approach is unashamedly antagonistic. He sees and portrays the position built on full biblical authority as not merely impossible but dangerous. No survey of biblical authority from a conservative point of view can completely ignore Barr's approach, although his methodology is so open to criticism that it might reasonably be argued that his point of view can be summarily dismissed. It may, however, be valuable to point out some of the weaknesses of his approach in order to demonstrate the methods which dominate at least one representative of liberal critical scholarship.

### **Critique of Barr's methodology**

#### ***Labels without identification***

He invents his labels and then proceeds to attack the views supposed to be held by those denoted by those labels. His pages are splattered with the terms 'Fundamentalists' or

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<sup>27</sup> See P. E. Hughes, in *Scripture and Truth*, 193, on the danger of using human reason to steady the ark of God.

<sup>28</sup> The same may be said about theories of hermeneutics. Cf J. I. Packer, 'Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics' in *Scripture and Truth*, 325-356.

<sup>29</sup> Barr's most thorough-going book against the conservative evangelical position is *Fundamentalism*, but he deals with aspects of the same subject in several other books: *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Oxford, 1983), *The Bible in the Modern World* (London, 1973), *Explorations in Theology* (London, 1980), *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London, 1984).

'Fundamentalism' or 'Fundamentalist religion' or 'Fundamentalist mind'. He gives little indication of the names of the people who are identified with the labels. He purports to distinguish between dogmatic fundamentalists and conservative evangelical scholars, but in practice he lumps everyone together. There is of course some logic in this procedure if one's aim is to attack a system, for it is clearly easier to focus on a composite creation than to deal with particulars. But in using the method of generalities Barr cannot absolve himself from producing supporting evidence, any more than he would want from those he is attacking.

### ***Generalities which lead to distortion***

He falls into the trap of sometimes using the method of distortion in order to discredit, although he is clearly not aware of this. He sincerely believes that he has fully understood what he is attacking. But it is nevertheless true that he presents a distorted picture of what conservative evangelicals hold on such matters as science and social concern.<sup>30</sup> The weakness of Barr's statements again lies in his use of block methods. He may well believe that some conservatives hold certain views on these important areas, but he is totally unjustified in the sweeping statements he makes about the conservative position as a whole. This type of methodology tends to undermine confidence in the validity of what Barr is saying.

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### ***Unrestrained use of derogatory adjectives***

More unacceptable is the widespread use of emotive and derogatory adjectives which he applies to the object of his attack. A few examples will suffice. He maintains that fundamentalism 'radically contradicts the Bible',<sup>31</sup> he describes the fundamentalist approach as 'unprincipled',<sup>32</sup> he speaks of an 'absurd' lack of proportion,<sup>33</sup> indeed he maintains that 'its distortion of the proper proportions of the Christian faith is extreme',<sup>34</sup> he describes an approach by a conservative author as 'grotesque',<sup>35</sup> he speaks of conservative apologetics as being 'loudly vociferated',<sup>36</sup> but gives no indication of whose voices he has heard, he tells us that the social gospel is 'cordially detested',<sup>37</sup> he regards conservative scholarship as 'shockingly defective' in ideas,<sup>38</sup> he even uses the term 'demonic' to describe the conservative position.<sup>39</sup> One does not expect the use of such adjectives in an objective scholarly assessment of another point of view.

### ***Separation of fundamentalism from mainstream Christianity***

Another argument that Barr uses is to set what he calls the fundamentalist religion over against mainstream Christianity.<sup>40</sup> Although he does not define what he means by mainstream Christianity, he clearly implies everything which is not fundamentalist. In actual fact he must mean liberal scholarship. But this is an interpretation of 'mainstream' which could not be maintained from an impartial examination of history. Barr is here not only claiming for his

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<sup>30</sup> Cf *Fundamentalism*, 90ff.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, xxii.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

<sup>38</sup> *Explorations*, 72.

<sup>39</sup> *Explorations*, 68.

<sup>40</sup> Cf, eg, *Fundamentalism*, 77.

own opinions the label of mainstream, but he is implying, no doubt deliberately, that fundamentalism is not Christianity at all. But is he really serious in such an assessment?

***Conservative scholarship regarded as propagandist***

In spite of the fact that Barr denounces the attacks made by fundamentalists against critical scholarship, for which he even thinks they should apologize, he himself makes some strong attacks on conservative scholars. He deplores their lack of frankness.<sup>41</sup> He charges conservative scholars with being propagandist.<sup>42</sup> He imagines that conservatives regard criticism as a passing phase.<sup>43</sup> He charges conservative evangelicals with having a lack of impartiality,<sup>44</sup> but does not see that the charge fits perfectly his own approach. He further supposes that conservative scholarship (of what he calls the maximal type) is respected only in so far as it is not committed to a purely conservative line,<sup>45</sup> which seems to mean that it must come to liberal conclusions. But he does not tell us what happens if conservative conclusions are the right conclusions. Apparently liberal scholars can come to any conclusions they like, but conservative scholars must beware about conservative conclusions. Moreover conservatives are

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‘imperialistic’,<sup>46</sup> ‘bitterly sceptical and secularistic’<sup>47</sup> and ‘rationalistic’.<sup>48</sup> These are but a selection of the epithets which Barr uses. He imagines that conservatives are craving for recognition.<sup>49</sup>

***Mainstream Christianity assumed to be monolithic***

It is extraordinary that in a book purporting to be a serious study of fundamentalism Barr presents what he understands as mainstream Christianity as a monolithic structure which has arrived at the truth by historical critical methods. There is no hint at self-criticism of the liberal position, nor any setting out of the enormous variety of opinions which have sprouted from critical studies. In responding to the comments of those who pointed out this lack, Barr dexterously turns it, as he thinks, to his own advantage. He states that he left this out as a ‘friendly little trap into which several duly fell’.<sup>50</sup> The ‘trap’ seems to be that Barr has his answer up his sleeve by maintaining that liberal weaknesses do not come into the argument with fundamentalists. One expects some solid reasons, but is confronted by a naive remark that ‘no one is going to be inspired or spiritually enriched by learning from a conservative commentary that St Paul did after all write the letters to Timothy and Titus’.<sup>51</sup> Is he implying that anyone has ever been inspired or spiritually enriched by learning from a liberal commentary that someone else wrote these letters in the name of St Paul? He clearly is, for he goes on to say that ‘nothing is more stodgy, dull, uninspiring and lacking in fervour than the fundamentalist scholarship of our time’.<sup>52</sup> In view of this it is not surprising that he finds more

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>46</sup> *Explorations*, 18.

<sup>47</sup> *Fundamentalism*, 239.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 241.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 343.

<sup>50</sup> *Explorations*, 86.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>52</sup> Loc cit.

spirituality and inspiration in von Rad and Bultmann. He is, of course, entitled to his opinion, but others are equally entitled to a different view of spirituality and inspiration. Moreover, no one who generalizes in this way can complain if such statements are not taken seriously. When Barr goes on to speak of the stodgy pedantry of fundamentalists, he is using terms of reference which could well be applied to a great deal of critical literature.

### ***Conservatives accused of obsession with authorship and dates***

Another comment about Barr's methodology concerns his assumption that conservative scholars are obsessed with questions of authorship and dates.<sup>53</sup> This is certainly an extraordinary method of argument, for no scholar of any school of thought when approaching the biblical texts in a historical way can possibly avoid questions of authorship and dates. Moreover, on the latter subject J. A. T. Robinson has devoted a whole book to the redating of the New Testament and comes to some surprisingly conservative conclusions.<sup>54</sup> If dating is as unimportant as Barr supposes, why did he bother? Barr warns his readers that conservatives will inadvisably take comfort from Robinson's book. He thinks, quite correctly, that a faith that depends on early dating of

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documents is not Christian faith. If he has persuaded himself that fundamentalists really believe this, his understanding of conservative scholarship must be lacking. Barr states that even if on almost all issues of history and literature the conservative answer was accepted it would still result in a 'totally different' understanding of the Bible between modern critical scholarship and conservative evangelicals.<sup>55</sup> So it is not because of the conclusions reached that Barr is critical of fundamentalists, but because they are what they are. His conclusion is that the conservative apologetic is 'a waste of time'.

### ***Conservative evangelical opinion regarded as a minority***

Throughout, Barr treats the conservative evangelical position as being very much a minority opinion. Yet if that is so it is not clear why he is so concerned to demolish it. The fact that he has thought it worth while to write several books and articles on the subject, always from the most antagonistic point of view, shows that he regards its influence as considerable. Indeed he has to admit that in some parts of the world evangelicalism is the dominant form of Christianity, but he gets over this by arguing that where this is so fundamentalistic religion has not succeeded in stamping out sin anymore than Bultmann's theology could have done. 'Even in those happy parts of the world where liberalism, modernism and biblical criticism have hardly been heard of sin seems still to be present, and on a scale not noticeably different from elsewhere; revival campaigns have to be held repeatedly in order to enliven the churches with an interest in the true gospel; and complaints of hardness of heart and the unbelief of churchgoers are almost as loud as if Wellhausen and Bultmann had been stalking the land.'<sup>56</sup> Barr's readers have a right to know where those parts are, but unfortunately, he provides no details.

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<sup>53</sup> *Fundamentalism*, 158.

<sup>54</sup> J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London, 1976).

<sup>55</sup> *Fundamentalism*, 159.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

### General comments on Barr's position

Sufficient has been said to show the kind of tools that Barr has gathered together for his attack on the conservative evangelical position. He seems to think that provided he can discredit that position effectively the whole structure as he sees it will collapse. But he has overlooked the fact that misrepresentation of the object of attack is counterproductive and his more discerning readers will at once detect this. In his most recent book, *Escaping from Fundamentalism*, he claims to be responding to the heart cries of those who have agonizingly been caught in the grip of fundamentalism. He sees himself as a kindly pastor to assist them to escape. But what are they to escape to? This is the crux of the matter. What is Barr's notion of biblical authority?<sup>57</sup>

He certainly makes clear that he does not regard the divine authority.

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of the Bible in its traditional form as tenable. This goes without saying once it is regarded as no more than a human collection of books. Within such a restriction the notion of divine revelation must either be abandoned or considerably modified. The following statement will clarify Barr's position: 'Biblical authority on Protestant terms (on Catholic or Orthodox terms it may be otherwise) exists only where one is free, on the ground of scripture, to question, to adjust, and if necessary to abandon the prevailing doctrinal traditions. Where this freedom does not exist, however much the Bible is celebrated, its authority is in fact submitted to the power of a tradition of doctrine and interpretation.'<sup>58</sup> This must mean that one's doctrine of biblical authority must be submitted to one's own reason. But what kind of authority is that?<sup>59</sup>

If we are to take Barr's position as typical of critical scholarship generally, it becomes increasingly clear that the real battleground is biblical authority.<sup>60</sup> If authority is to be attached only to those parts of scripture which critical hypotheses pronounce to be valid, those who, with Barr's assistance, escape from fundamentalism will find themselves in an ever-changing scene of human opinions in which 'Thus saith the Lord' will have different values for different people. Barr wants to exchange the earlier model of 'God→revelation→scripture→church' for 'God→people→tradition→scripture', with revelation deriving from all stages alike.<sup>61</sup> Another point that Barr raises is whether authority

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<sup>57</sup> Cf *Bible in Modern World*, 24, where he maintains that the authority of the Bible does not rest in what it is in itself, but upon the events of salvation of which it is the written expression. In the end he favours 'function' rather than 'authority'.

Barr talks of flexible authority which is not dependent on any perfection in the Bible (*Bible in Modern World*, 25). He attempts to distinguish between 'hard' and 'soft' views of authority. In the latter case authority is posterior to interpretation and limited according to the passages (*Bible in Modern World*, 27). The statement of the Louvain conference in 1971 concluded for a hard view of authority in saying that the Bible must be read with the expectation that it can disclose truth to us (see Barr's comment on this in *Bible in Modern World*, 27, n 12).

See 'Four Preliminary Considerations on the Concept of Authority', *Ecumenical Review* 21 (1969) 150-166. The opinions expressed were those of E. Jüngel, G. Krodel, R. Marle, J. O. Zizioulas. They raised questions about the use of the word 'authority'.

<sup>58</sup> *Holy Scripture*, 31-32.

<sup>59</sup> Forstman, *Word and Spirit*, 152, commenting on Bultmann, says: 'Once a man has rejected the view of the Bible as an objective, unquestioned authority, he is impelled to approach the Bible with a finely honed historical scalpel.' He notes that Bultmann wrote nothing on authority but much on hermeneutics.

<sup>60</sup> Cf his exposition of his view of authority in *Bible in Modern World*, 23ff

<sup>61</sup> *Explorations*, 60.

relates to the books or to the persons, and here he declines to decide the matter, because he affirms that authority resides in the people of God.<sup>62</sup> But this would not be in line with the accepted notion of revelation.

We have commented on Barr in some detail because of his more concerted and vociferous attack on the whole conservative evangelical tradition. We are not suggesting that amid the jungle of dubious points he makes there are not some valid criticisms which many evangelicals would do well to heed. Nevertheless, Barr has set himself up as a sure guide to the evils of fundamentalism in a way that no earlier scholar has done. He has convinced himself that no one within the conservative evangelical movement is in a position to assess that movement.<sup>63</sup> He fails to see that by the same token no one but a conservative should be in a position to judge the strengths and weaknesses of the liberal critical position.

### **Comments on Countryman's position**

It must not be supposed that Barr's is the only recent attack. William Countryman, in his book *Biblical Authority or Biblical Tyranny?*<sup>64</sup> addresses himself to fundamentalism within American Christianity. The *Biblical Tyranny* part of his title refers to the position of fundamentalists as Countryman sees it. The book purports to speak for the majority of

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American Christians who have come to the conclusion that there is no simple explanation of the place of scripture in modern Christianity.<sup>65</sup> The line Countryman takes is that only a Bible that can err is of any use to us since we are human and therefore can only appreciate what is also human.

But we may well ask what concept of authority Countryman has? His conclusion is: 'The authority of the Bible is an earthly authority and therefore cannot be absolute. Absolute authority belongs to God alone; even though God speaks through Scripture, he does so in a way limited by the very nature of the written word and the created world in which it exists.'<sup>66</sup> He goes on to affirm that the Bible is only one of the authorities that give guidance to the Christian.

It may well be that these attacks on the conservative evangelical position will make those who are convinced of the divine authority of scripture take greater care in the presentation of their case. But nothing can disguise the fact that different presuppositions are operating in the field of biblical criticism. We shall conclude with some comments on the present conflict in New Testament studies over the matter of biblical authority.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>64</sup> W. Countryman, *Biblical Authority or Biblical Tyranny? Scripture and the Christian Pilgrimage* (Philadelphia, 1981).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 95.

## **BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND THE NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR**

In view of the above discussion we need to propose a positive approach which will go some way to resolve the tension which arises when historical critical studies are pursued in line with acceptance of the divine authority of scripture. There will undoubtedly be times when problems arise in the texts which cannot easily be resolved. Barr charges conservative scholars with always opting for the most conservative solution as if this in itself is an unacceptable procedure. But it is reasonable to suppose that the most conservative solution may more likely be right than a more liberal one. We have already noted that an understanding of the Bible as the revelation from God will certainly predispose one to believe that solutions which undermine that authority are under suspicion. This does not mean that on every issue a conclusive answer can be given. It means rather that the conservative scholar is going to examine the evidence in the light of his conviction, supported by the overwhelming testimony of historic Christianity, that the biblical texts are the word of God. We have already demonstrated that the modern critical movement, not fundamentalism, is the innovator.

Some examples from New Testament scholarship will illustrate the issue. Take the origin of the pastoral epistles. Does it matter whether Paul was the author of these epistles? Does it undermine their authority if they are regarded as later productions attributed to the apostle? Many New Testament scholars are prepared to accept the theory that they are

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pseudonymous on the assumption that pseudonymity was an accepted procedure in that period.<sup>67</sup> But if there is any suggestion that the readers were deluded into thinking that they were apostolic, a moral issue is raised which at once makes the maintenance of their authority highly dubious. A careful study of epistolary pseudonymity in the ancient world does not support the suggestion that this would have been a widespread practice, and certainly gives no credence to the view that the Christian church would have accepted it without question. The Pauline authorship of the pastorals is preferred, not because of prejudice against the alternative view, but because the alternative view does not square with the available evidence.<sup>68</sup>

Another matter which every conservative scholar has to face is the validity of much that passes for form criticism in the approach to the gospels. Is the view that the gospels were largely community products acceptable? A careful examination of the variety of theories which have been proposed does not lead to a convincing conclusion that communities are likely to have created the core of the gospel material. It would be necessary, first, to demonstrate that communities do create traditions which confirm what they have already come to believe; but this has never been done. No conservative scholar is faced with the necessity to accept the current notions of form criticism as the assured result of scholarship.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> This is one of the issues that Barr thinks should be gladly accepted (*Explorations*, 89).

<sup>68</sup> On amanuenses, pseudonymity and biblical authority, cf R. N. Longenecker, 'On the Form, Function, and Authority of the New Testament Letters' in *Scripture and Truth*, 101-114.

<sup>69</sup> D. A. Carson, 'Redaction Criticism: on the legitimacy and illegitimacy of a literary tool' in *Scripture and Truth*, 127, complains that insufficient thought has been given to distinguish the *Sitz im Leben* that creates from that which preserves.

Indeed the obvious weaknesses of form criticism have led to the development of redaction criticism with its emphasis on the authors rather than the units of tradition.

To what extent can conservative scholarship embrace the current theories of redaction criticism? To answer this question some careful definitions are necessary, for, as with so many terms, this has been muddled up with imprecision. It is generally supposed that it is possible, particularly in the gospels, to discover the way in which the evangelists used their sources or traditions to express their own theological thinking. But much redaction criticism depends on acceptance of the two-source theory for the synoptic gospels, which is itself under attack. It cannot be claimed that it is an assured result of scholarship that Mark was used by Matthew and Luke, or that Q ever existed as a tangible source. Unless we can be certain of the precise nature of the sources, how can we confidently speak of the way Mark has used his sources? It is even more difficult with Matthew and Luke.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless some moderate use of redaction criticism may be legitimate if the tentative character of our knowledge of sources is borne in mind.<sup>71</sup>

This brings us to another matter which is coming to the fore in biblical scholarship, and that is canonical criticism which stresses that our major concern must be with the books that are in the canon rather than with sources and traditions. Most work has been done in the Old Testament,<sup>72</sup> but the discussion is relevant to New Testament studies.<sup>73</sup> Much New Testament scholarship draws distinctions between the

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various books of the New Testament canon, asserting, for instance, a difference between the Pauline and deutero-Pauline writings, but is this a legitimate procedure? Moreover is it valid to attempt to construct a theology of Q when we do not even possess Q? It is clear that no authority can attach to a non-existent source and in the end it is only with the canonical books that we can be concerned.

There have been various discussions recently about the character of the canon. If authority is attached to the Bible, the contents of the Bible are of the utmost importance. Critical scholarship has been loth to revise the canon. Logically, if scholars arrive at the conclusion that certain books are inauthentic, there would seem to be no justification for retaining them in the canon. Without any conviction that God has had anything to do with their production, there would surely be no reason for retaining them. But liberal critical scholarship has not followed the course of exclusion, but of acceptance of a Bible that consists of a mixture of authentic and inauthentic material. The authority question has to be approached from the point of view of the variant materials that remain as a result of scholarly deliberations. This is the background against which conservative scholarship continues to maintain that the canonical scriptures are the word of God.

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<sup>70</sup> Cf Carson 'Redaction Criticism', 123-128 for a discussion of redaction criticism, where he cites several criticisms. He lists 20, including *Sitz im Leben*, dissimilarity, history and theology.

<sup>71</sup> Cf Carson, 'Redaction Criticism', 141.

<sup>72</sup> Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1979) 41; cf also the introduction to his *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, 1970).

<sup>73</sup> For a discussion of Childs' view, see D. L. Bartlett, *The Shape of Biblical Authority* (Philadelphia, 1983) 131ff.

Donald Guthrie, "Biblical Authority and New Testament Scholarship," *Vox Evangelica* 16 (1986): 7-25.

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No conservative biblical scholar would pretend that the application of critical methods to the biblical texts is not fraught with problems. But in the last analysis a divinely originated word cannot be holden to the dubious results of human propositions. The word of God will vindicate itself.

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