

“CAN TWO WALK TOGETHER UNLESS THEY BE AGREED?” EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

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Choosing a topic for this occasion has proven to be a little difficult. On the one hand, this is a scholarly society, so it would seem appropriate to treat a subject that falls within the areas of my specialization as a researcher. On the other hand, one would have to question the wisdom of delivering an after-dinner discourse on linguistic patterns in the Hexaplaric recension of the Greek text of Isaiah, with special reference to the translator’s treatment of Hebrew semantic fields.

After considerable reflection, therefore, I have decided to revisit a theme—or, better, a subtheme—that occupied my attention more than two decades ago when I delivered the Harry F. Worcester Lectures at Westminster Theological Seminary. Originally entitled “History or Theology? Ned B. Stonehouse in the Light of Recent Gospel Criticism,” the lectures were subsequently published as a two-part article in *WTJ*. My concern tonight is not with redaction criticism as such (although that topic will surface later on) but with a couple of remarks I made in those lectures—remarks that some readers may have thought to be nothing more than passing comments, although in fact they played a fundamental role in my assessment of Stonehouse and his legacy.

For example, when dealing with Stonehouse’s book on *The Witness of Matthew and Mark to Christ* I pointed out the following characteristic:

Stonehouse refuses to deal with the gospel material in isolation from contemporary critical scholarship. It goes without saying that Dr. Stonehouse was fully abreast of that scholarship. But his approach does not consist in a mere paying of lip service to the scholarly establishment. He tells us, in fact, that he has selected “the most important questions which have been thrust forward in the modern discussion of the gospels.” One must note that Stonehouse did not select these questions as a means of ridiculing the critics; on the contrary, he chose them as the most effective means of clarifying the character of the gospels. The very structure of the book, moreover, reveals his sensitivity to the importance of critical research for a proper understanding of the biblical documents.¹

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¹ M. Silva, “Ned B. Stonehouse and Redaction Criticism,” *WTJ* 40 (1977–78) 82–83.

Then at the end of the article, seeking to summarize what we can learn from Stonehouse, I emphasized his

appreciation for careful scholarship, whether arising from evangelical circles or not. Stonehouse himself, no doubt, was strongly influenced by his teacher, J. Gresham Machen, in this regard. The tendency [in evangelical circles] to play down the significance of contemporary critical theories, and the apparently related habit of too swift a use of modern scholarship when it supports a conservative position—these are qualities that we must eschew once and for all.²

As it turned out, 1977 also saw the publication of a book that was almost as significant and as widely read as my article—namely, James Barr's *Fundamentalism*. Since one of the major burdens of his book was to critique conservative scholarship, it occurred to me that parts of his analysis could serve as a valuable starting point for my address tonight. My recollections of this work, which I had not looked at in all these years, were that Barr, in spite of being wrong about some important matters, had several insightful criticisms of evangelical scholarship that we need to take with utter seriousness. That is the area where I intended to focus.

Unfortunately, upon rereading the book I have been so struck by its misconceptions and lapses that it is simply impossible to pursue my real interest here without first addressing those problems. Now you should keep in mind that my admiration for Barr knows no bounds. During my awakening at the tender age of twenty-one to the wonders of linguistic science—in the midst of my devouring of Jespersen and Saussure, of Sturtevant and Ullmann—Barr's work on *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, to say nothing of his later *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament*, served to set the direction of my scholarly aspirations for the rest of my life. You can certainly understand why, having decided to pursue doctoral studies in the area of semantic change and Semitic influence in the Greek Bible, I crossed the Atlantic, accompanied by my wife and a fifteen-month-old child (plus another one about to be born). We were on our way to Manchester, where Barr was at the time.

I was of course drawn to Barr's work because of his particular academic interests in the field of linguistics, but even more because of his broader qualities as a scholar. When it comes to powers of analysis—including the ability to identify the real issues clearly and to focus on them without distraction until a resolution is achieved—Barr simply has no equal in the guild. Moreover there is a fundamental fairness in his evaluation of the views he opposes. I realize that he has a reputation for ruthlessness, and it is true that he does not pull his punches. It may also be the case that at times he has been less than impartial. But such lapses are not characteristic of his work. Typically there is clear evidence that he has gone out of his way to understand opposing viewpoints and to represent them fairly.

For these very reasons I had high expectations for *Fundamentalism* when it first came out. Barr's admirable qualities, in fact, are not totally absent in

² *Ibid.* 302.

this book. For example, it is immediately apparent that in some respects he did his homework and carefully read many works representative of conservative scholarship. It would be easy to cite specific instances that demonstrate the effort he expended trying to understand some of these works and to depict them accurately. Furthermore his treatment of certain subjects is far more nuanced than we have come to expect in criticisms of conservative theology.³ But where he failed, he failed gravely—and with dire results. Lamentably, subsequent criticisms of the book failed to move him. Indeed, in the second edition he repents that he was too lenient in his denunciations.⁴

The first problem, which affects the presentation of the book as a whole, was his decision to use the most prejudicial term available—fundamentalism—to describe a group of people so diverse as to include Bob Jones, Sr., and Billy Graham, Carl McIntyre and Edward J. Carnell, Lewis Sperry Chafer and B. B. Warfield, C. I. Scofield and E. J. Young. Barr acknowledges that “fundamentalism is a bad word: the people to whom it is applied do not like to be so called. It is often felt to be a hostile and opprobrious term, suggesting narrowness, bigotry, obscurantism and sectarianism.”⁵ But that did not stop him. It is frankly a sad thing to read Barr’s lengthy justification for the use of a term that would be repudiated by the vast majority of the people he discusses—a term, moreover, that is virtually designed to make the average reader reach a verdict of guilty before any of the evidence has been presented.

Second, Barr gives a tendentious description of the people he intends to critique. On the very first page of the book he identifies the three “most pronounced characteristics” of fundamentalists: (1) a strong emphasis on Biblical inerrancy, (2) a strong hostility to modern theology and Biblical criticism, and (3) “an assurance that those who do not share their religious viewpoint are not really ‘true Christians’ at all.”⁶ Now since the only thing he has so far said about “their religious viewpoint” is that they believe in inerrancy (and thus oppose modern theology), the logical inference would seem to be this: The group that Barr is about to critique in his book consists of people who are sure that to be a true Christian one must believe in inerrancy. The truth, of course, is that nowhere in the book do we find a quotation from anyone asserting such a thing, probably because he could not find one. Indeed, what many would consider the most significant statement of

³ Here I have in mind such questions as whether fundamentalists “take the Bible literally” and whether it is invalid to appeal to the autographs of the Biblical books (J. Barr, *Fundamentalism* [2d ed.; London: SCM, 1981] 40, 279).

⁴ “On most points on which some modification is required, I think that one would be forced, in the light of further information and consideration, to be more severe than I was in the original edition” (ibid. xi).

⁵ Ibid. 2.

⁶ I find it curious that Barr tries to justify this woefully inadequate description by claiming that it is necessary to begin not with a clear definition but “with a rather vague recognition” of what “many or most Christians perceive” about fundamentalists. He does express a mild caveat that there are other traits characterizing fundamentalism, and that even the three he mentions need expansion and nuancing. But the fact is that by drawing this picture from the start Barr prejudices his analysis as well as his readers’ ability to look at the subject matter fairly.

the conservative position—J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*—says exactly the opposite: "It must be admitted that there are *many* Christians who do not accept the doctrine of plenary inspiration. That doctrine is denied not only by liberal opponents of Christianity but also by *many true* Christian men."⁷

I do not deny that evangelicals, as a rule, question whether one may regard as a Christian someone who has abandoned the central doctrines of historic Christianity (such as the divine origin of Scripture or the historicity of Jesus' resurrection)—though I should note that there is a world of difference between having doubts about the genuineness of someone's faith and being sure that such a person is not a Christian. The point, however, is that no serious representative of conservative Christianity, to the best of my knowledge, has ever argued specifically that a denial of Biblical inerrancy disqualifies anyone from being a Christian.⁸ No doubt there are fundamentalists who believe such a thing, but the tactic of identifying a position on the basis of its worst rather than best representatives and then tarring the conservative evangelical movement as a whole with the same brush is simply unconscionable.⁹

But if the traits that Barr includes as "pronounced characteristics" distort the facts, what shall we say about what he fails to include? Could he possibly be unaware of the basic convictions that typically motivate evangelicals? Barr makes no real effort¹⁰ to point out that the true force driving their thinking and their life is (1) a very strong sense of having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, inextricably linked with (2) a desire to serve God by obeying his word, based on the assurance that (3) his word is uniquely and reliably preserved in the Bible. The doctrine of Biblical infallibility is not a piece of abstract theorizing but an immensely practical conviction.¹¹ For if the Scriptures are characterized by errors such as are found

⁷ J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; reprint Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 75 (italics mine).

⁸ I spent four years at Bob Jones University—one of the few institutions of higher education that actually accept the fundamentalist label—and during that time I do not remember ever having heard the claim that noninerrantists could not be Christians.

⁹ When one adds the anger (and even contempt?) for fundamentalists that seems to underlie much of the book and that surfaces at various points—especially in his repeated charges of hypocrisy—it becomes all the more doubtful whether Barr can be relied on to provide a balanced and accurate analysis of the topic. One sympathetic reviewer commented that the book is "perhaps too angry to be of much help to those who would understand American evangelicalism" (R. T. Osborn in *Int* 33 [1979] 311). The most perceptive and useful review that I have come across is by D. W. Dayton in *Christian Century* 95/23 (July 5–12, 1978) 710–713.

¹⁰ As far as I could tell, only in the conclusion (Barr, *Fundamentalism* 339) does he make a brief reference to evangelicals' emphasis on personal salvation.

¹¹ It is true enough that the doctrine of inerrancy can take on a disproportionately prominent role. I personally regret that, since the inception of the ETS and for most of its history, subscription to inerrancy has been the sole doctrinal requirement for membership, as though this conviction were all that matters. (The subsequent decision to add belief in the Trinity does not really solve this problem. It only highlights how truncated is the formal theological basis of the Society.) Moreover I recognize that for many Christians the doctrine of inerrancy does function mainly as an abstraction and/or as a convenient instrument of exclusion. But should we allow aberrations of this doctrine to be determinative for our understanding of it?

in any other book, then it is up to my less-than-reliable mind and moral judgment to determine what in the Bible is truth or error. And thus the notion of the Bible as a reliable disclosure of the divine will loses any distinctive meaning. At any rate, Barr’s failure to place evangelical convictions in their true context seriously compromises the validity of his subsequent analysis.

A third problem has to do with accuracy in representing those he opposes. As already mentioned, Barr appears to have made a genuine effort to read widely. In the case of selected works his reading has been careful, so that one cannot quarrel with the fairness of his representation. But in a significant number of cases that is not so. At times the problem is one of vast generalizations, or worse—as when he assures us: “*Nowhere* in the conservative evangelical literature have I found evidence of *any* serious attempt to understand what non-conservative theologians think.”¹² At other times it is the repeating of tired claims without carefully checking the evidence. For example, he quotes the well-known comment in which Charles Hodge compared (alleged) Biblical errors to specks of sandstone in the Parthenon and then infers that Hodge did not believe in Biblical inerrancy.¹³ But Barr could not possibly have drawn that inference if he had read what precedes and follows those sentences.¹⁴

More significant, however, is Barr’s ignoring of some of the most significant elements in conservative evangelicalism. Can anyone doubt that Machen’s life and work are of critical importance for the understanding of

¹² Barr, *Fundamentalism* 164 (italics mine). This comment borders on slander and is in fact contradicted by his own positive remarks on some conservative works. Elsewhere he represents the conservative self-understanding as follows: “On *every* point at *every* time the conservative evangelical position has been *totally* right. In *no* respect at *any* time has *any* non-conservative argument, viewpoint or position been in the slightest justified as a statement of Christian faith” (ibid. 162, italics mine). Or again, fundamentalism “shows *no* awareness of how the trinitarian doctrines were worked out or what they meant in their own original situation” (ibid. 176, italics mine). It should be added that, as several reviewers have pointed out, Barr tries to make the conservative movement look bad by painting an unrealistically benign picture of mainstream Biblical scholarship. Cf. also D. A. Carson, “Three Books on the Bible: A Critical Review,” *JETS* 26 (1983) 337–367 (esp. 351–353), which deals with Barr’s later work, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1980).

¹³ Barr, *Fundamentalism* 174–175.

¹⁴ The paragraph in which that quotation is found begins with the explicit statement that the discussion has to do with “cases of alleged [which surely means unproven] discrepancies” (C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* [1871–72; reprint Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.] 1.169). And the sentence that immediately follows the famous quotation is this: “Admitting that the Scriptures do contain, in a few instances, *discrepancies which with our present means of knowledge, we are unable satisfactorily to explain*, they furnish no rational ground for denying their infallibility” (ibid. 170, italics mine). Besides, even a cursory reading of the previous pages would prevent a misunderstanding. On p. 163, for example, Hodge argues that inspiration “extends to everything which any sacred writer asserts to be true,” and he then supports that thesis by saying, among other things, that what the sacred writers assert God asserts, so “their assertions must be free from error,” and further that “Christ and the writers of the New Testament refer to all classes of facts recorded in the Old Testament as infallibly true.” Again, on p. 165 he states that “Paul could not err in anything he taught.” In view of this and other evidence, Barr’s view that the pressure of Biblical criticism caused a doctrinal stiffening between the time of Hodge and that of Warfield has to be considered a fanciful—though not uncommon—interpretation of history (Barr, *Fundamentalism* 263).

the movement? Having studied in Marburg under some of the brightest luminaries of classical liberalism (including no less a figure than Wilhelm Herrmann, whom he greatly admired for his Christian faith),¹⁵ Machen struggled for many years with the issues raised by his teachers, so he can hardly be accused of not having taken seriously the liberal teachings of his day. Moreover Machen's thoroughness and fairness in studying the works of those he opposed were widely recognized by contemporary scholars.¹⁶ Yet the only time that Barr discusses Machen is, shockingly, to use him as an example of fundamentalists who have "very little or no understanding of what non-conservative theologians actually think, and no incentive to find out."¹⁷ The reader would never guess that highly-regarded outside observers like Walter Lippmann and H. L. Mencken—who were themselves hardly friends of the fundamentalist movement—viewed Machen's book as one of the most competent in the whole debate.¹⁸

Adding insult to injury, Barr includes a footnote in which he describes Machen's book on *The Virgin Birth of Christ* as "typical of strongly conservative apologetic." This extraordinary remark could have been made only by someone who has never really read the book. After all, what other "typical" conservative works of apologetics have evoked twenty-page review articles in *TSK*?¹⁹ For someone claiming to provide an authoritative critique of con-

servative Biblical scholarship, this simplistic dismissal of Machen can only be called irresponsible. One might just as easily give an account of the Brit-

¹⁵ In a letter to his mother, Machen said, "If my first impression is any guide, I should say that the first time that I heard Herrmann may almost be described as an epoch in my life. Such an overpowering personality I think I almost never before encountered—overpowering in the sincerity of religious devotion." A month later he wrote to his brother: "Herrmann affirms very little of that which I have been accustomed to regard as essential to Christianity; yet there is no doubt in my mind but that he is a Christian, and a Christian of a peculiarly earnest type. He is a Christian not because he follows Christ as a moral teacher; but because his trust in Christ is (practically, if anything even more truly than theoretically) unbounded. It is inspiring to see a man so completely centered in Christ, even though some people might wonder how he reaches this result and still holds the views that he does about the accounts of Christ in the New Testament"; see N. B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 106–107.

¹⁶ Early in his career, for example, Machen wrote some articles on Luke 1–2 that were reviewed by A. von Harnack. The latter described this work as a "sehr gründliche Abhandlung" in which Machen had critiqued "mit grosser Umsicht" Harnack's own research into the Lucan narratives. While the great German scholar was not persuaded by Machen's arguments, he was clearly impressed: "Seine treffliche Studie verdient alle Aufmerksamkeit" (*TLZ* 38 [1913] 7).

¹⁷ His evidence is purely secondhand—namely, a quotation by the hardly impartial L. Loetscher, who in *The Broadening Church* had protested that Machen described liberalism "in terms of the most radical naturalistic implications, and then, by implication at least, included in this classification all those who differed from traditional orthodoxy even on subordinate points" (quoted by Barr, *Fundamentalism* 165). The irony is that this supposed logical weakness in Machen's book is especially evident in Barr's method of presenting "fundamentalism."

¹⁸ Lippmann, in *A Preface to Morals*, called *Christianity and Liberalism* "an admirable book. For its acumen, for its saliency, and for its wit, this cool and stringent defense of orthodox Protestantism is, I think, the best popular argument produced by either side in the controversy" (quoted in Stonehouse, *Machen* 348). For his part Mencken went so far as to describe Machen's argument as "completely impregnable" (quoted in D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994] 4).

ish involvement in World War II by covering Churchill’s contribution in one paragraph.²⁰

Frankly, there are numerous other negative comments I could make, but I have already said much more about this matter than I initially intended. My primary interest is exactly the opposite—namely, to take as seriously as is possible Barr’s valid insights. The book was a great personal disappointment to me precisely because I believed Barr could have written an analysis that would, on the one hand, give nonconservatives an accurate picture of evangelical scholarship and, on the other, challenge evangelical scholars to be more self-critical. Instead, during the past two decades we have found ourselves in a situation where nonconservative scholars, whether they have read the book or not, sit back comfortably under the delusion that Barr has formally and definitively discredited evangelicals. For their part, evangelicals can point to and laugh at the inadequacies of the presentation and complacently ignore some extremely serious strictures.

What then are those valid criticisms? One could identify perhaps a half dozen of them that are both weighty and compelling. For example, Barr notes the selectivity with which the supernatural is invoked by conservative writers. Quite often an extraordinary event that the Biblical author clearly depicts as a miracle is explained by evangelical apologists in strictly naturalistic terms.²¹ I do not contest the possibility that some of those explanations may be justified. What is troubling is the failure to construct a cogent approach where the various kinds of answers really fit together.

This and a few other criticisms I have neither the space nor the skill to discuss adequately. Instead I shall focus on a couple of issues that fall under a distinct and crucial category—namely, the way in which evangelicals relate to mainstream critical Biblical scholarship. We may begin by noticing Barr’s complaint that conservative literature often uses a double standard when assessing the validity of critical views with regard to history:

The fact that historical demonstration is probabilistic and not absolute is constantly exploited by fundamentalists in order to show that critical reconstructions are not certain; on the other hand, . . . the same probabilistic element is exploited . . . in order to achieve at all points the most conservative picture possible. . . . Critical judgments [according to the fundamentalist argument] are at the best hypotheses, which cannot be demonstrated unless the most final and coercive proofs are brought: conservative judgments on the same historical

¹⁹ I allude to the review by F. Kattenbusch, who began by describing the book as “so ernsthaft, so umsichtig, so klug in seinen Erwägungen, dass es unbedingt als eine bedeutsame Leistung anerkannt werden muss” (*TSK* 102 [1930] 454–474). Note also the singularly sympathetic and perceptive review by one of the deans of American NT scholarship, H. J. Cadbury, in *Christian Century* 47/9 (March 4, 1931) 307.

²⁰ Other examples could be given, such as his handling of C. Van Til’s *The New Modernism*, a title Barr regards as “absurd” (Barr, *Fundamentalism* 220). Maybe it is, but one would like to see some evidence that Barr has tried to understand what would lead Van Til to view Barthianism in that way. The sentences that follow—which among other things effectively lump Van Til with evangelicals who rely heavily on natural theology—show that Barr did not have so much as an elementary understanding of Van Til’s work.

²¹ Barr, *Fundamentalism*, chap. 8 (esp. 238–245).

issues are fully reliable knowledge, and cannot be disproved except by the most final and coercive proofs.²²

The point is overstated, but if we are not honest enough to recognize that there is considerable truth in this complaint we are not likely to make much progress in articulating a view of Biblical history characterized by intellectual integrity and persuasive power.

More damagingly, Barr exposes a serious defect in the development of evangelical Biblical scholarship—namely, the tendency to adopt a critical point of view but to use that approach only when it supports the evangelical agenda. This can happen directly or vicariously.²³ By vicarious I mean the approach of many evangelicals who themselves reject critical methods in principle but who read liberal works looking for arguments that debunk other scholars. Barr justifiably says that this is not fair. How can we claim that a conservative conclusion developed within the framework of so-called higher criticism is valid unless we are willing to say that the framework itself is legitimate and that therefore in principle nonconservative conclusions too may be valid?

In addition to this secondhand use of criticism, there is the more direct approach of many of us who are actually engaged in critical Biblical scholarship. We explore text-critical problems, analyze linguistic data, pass historical judgments on the literature, and so on; but we tend to avoid dogmatic arguments by focusing on areas that do not conflict with evangelical convictions. Barr points out that

the framework within which such conservative scholarship sets out its position, and the overt principles of demonstration that it uses, lie within a world that is largely shared with critical scholarship. . . . Unlike all scholars who share and actually work with the dogmatic positions of fundamentalism, these conservative scholars share the same universe of discourse with critical scholars and know perfectly well that they do. What they fail to do is to point out the fact, and its lessons, to their fundamentalist readership.²⁴

Barr then remarks that works like the *New Bible Dictionary* and the *New Bible Commentary* contain developments that are “quite equivocal in relation to the principles” held so dear by conservative readers. These readers take pride in the fine scholars who defend conservative ideas, but in fact “the deservedly high reputation of some conservative scholarship rests to a

²² *Ibid.* 98.

²³ These terms are not used by Barr, but the distinction—I think—is implicit in his critique.

²⁴ Barr, *Fundamentalism* 125. Unfortunately, this way of putting it suggests that the “universe of discourse” in question belongs to critical scholarship and that conservative scholars enter it from the outside, as it were. In some cases and for certain kinds of issues that may well be true. In general, however, conservatives and nonconservatives share this universe of discourse in a different sense. We share the same air we breathe and the same transportation with which we move, the same languages with which we communicate and the same logical principles with which we reason. So also we share the same critical tools with which ancient texts must be analyzed. Indeed, at least some of the tools and methods of critical scholarship have actually been built to a considerable degree by scholars committed to Biblical infallibility. (One thinks especially of the contribution of scholars such as Bentley, Bengel and Tregelles to the field of NT textual criticism.)

large extent on the degree to which it *fails* to be conservative in the sense that the conservative evangelical public desiderate.”²⁵

We can hardly afford to ignore such criticisms. In fact, the problem may be even more serious than these quotations suggest. Barr suggests that scholars who in one way or another identify themselves as conservative know that they have abandoned distinctive evangelical principles and are simply not very honest about it. That may well be true in some cases. But much more alarming is the evidence that growing numbers of evangelical scholars are blissfully unaware of having adopted approaches or positions that conflict with their religious convictions at a fundamental level.²⁶

In any case, Barr’s criticisms highlight a tension—reflected in the title of this address—that needs to be faced squarely. I do not concede that this tension is a bad thing in itself or that it indicates a fundamental instability in the work of evangelical scholarship. The fact that we may feel pulled in different directions says nothing about the validity of our position. We may be sure that we will always experience that kind of frustration in this life.²⁷ The question, however, is whether we are willing to acknowledge the problem, reflect on its implications, and work toward a cogent articulation of our position.

The very first issue of our *Journal*, published forty years ago, carried a presidential address on the infallibility of Scripture by none other than Ned B. Stonehouse. His primary burden, he tells us, was to stress that the doctrine of Biblical infallibility is indispensable to real evangelical progress—indeed, that “the more clearly and consistently we take our stand upon the position to which this Society is committed the more assuredly and rapidly we shall make some genuine advance in the field of biblical and theological studies.”²⁸

Curiously, much of what he went on to say may appear to be at odds with this thesis. For example, in stressing the distinction between Scripture and tradition he expresses “deep” concern about a tendency among evangelicals to reject the two-document theory of gospel origins on the basis of so-called external evidence. Even with regard to the traditional authorship of the gospel of Matthew (of which he was “strongly persuaded”), Stonehouse is concerned to stress that this book “is an anonymous work in that it does not

²⁵ Ibid. 126, 128.

²⁶ The evidence of which I speak is simply the failure on the part of many to face straightforwardly the implications of their decisions, as when an evangelical scholar argues against the doctrine of inerrancy on the grounds that we should not get bogged down in “details”—but the next thing we know, this same scholar feels he has been freed to tell us that Jesus was mistaken in thinking that the end was near. The passage in question (Mark 13:30 and parallels) is followed immediately by Jesus’ forceful affirmation that, even if earth and heaven pass away, his words will not. If our Lord is willing to stake his credibility on a statement that we are unable to accept, what meaning is left to our theological claims? Insofar as evangelical scholars do not address the implications of what they are doing, one must infer that they do not recognize the problem or simply do not care.

²⁷ And nonconservative Christian scholars would have to be very naïve indeed to think that they are exempt from comparable tensions.

²⁸ N. B. Stonehouse, “The Infallibility of Scripture and Evangelical Progress,” *BETS* 1 (1958) 9.

make any claim to Matthaean authorship” and that therefore “we should not elevate such a conclusion to the status of an article of Christian faith.”²⁹

Stonehouse also expresses concern about the danger of conceiving “of infallibility or inerrancy in an *a priori* or abstract manner. In dealing with such matters as the harmony of the Gospels and quotations of the Old Testament in the New, for example, there is danger that we shall draw inferences from the affirmation of infallibility, or apply this doctrine in such a way, as actually to do violence to the total witness of Scripture.”³⁰

Among additional matters addressed in that article Stonehouse anticipated developments in the last third of the century by focusing on the need for “sound hermeneutics,” without which the doctrine of inspiration “is of little or no significance.” In this connection he highlighted the problem of interpreting historical narratives and in particular acknowledged the difficulty of distinguishing “between literal historical affirmation” and figurative elements. “It should become increasingly obvious that the suggested rule, ‘as literal as possible’ is not particularly helpful. Although one may sympathize with the apprehension lest the affirmations of history should dissolve into myths, sober reflection upon the character of language will compel the abandonment of any such simple approach to the problems of interpretation.”³¹

A few comments are in order. With regard to matters of special introduction I think it is accurate to say that nowadays evangelical scholars, regardless of their particular views about the synoptic problem, understand quite clearly the distinction between Scriptural claims on the one hand and the role of early tradition on the other.³² But I think there is a related problem—namely, the disproportionate amount of attention we tend to give to conservative views of date and authorship as well as the intensity with which these views are held.

Now let me be unequivocal about my own conservative convictions about such matters. I not only hold to the traditional position on them but also happen to think that, insofar as we have explicit claims in the text itself,

²⁹ Ibid. 10.

³⁰ Ibid. 12. I am not sure what specific concerns Stonehouse had in mind by bringing up the problem of OT quotations in the NT, but his pairing of this issue with that of gospel harmonization gives us a hint. Presumably he was troubled by evangelicals’ placing inordinate emphasis on reconciling these quotations with the corresponding OT passages. Note, for example, the tendency of some writers to emend the Hebrew text on the basis of the variations in the Greek NT. In principle, it is of course possible that at any one point the NT may preserve a competing textual tradition that has a claim to originality. If such a solution is formulated in the context of a comprehensive and consistent approach it must be taken seriously, but usually these suggestions are made in isolation from a broader and cogent theory of textual transmission (indeed, they come from writers who typically oppose textual emendation). The main reason for these suggestions is the assumption that the NT, by virtue of its authority, gives us the grounds for emending the MT. As O. P. Robertson (among others) has insisted, however, it is a mistake to treat the NT as a kind of text-critical handbook (see “Genesis 15:6: New Covenant Expositions of an Old Covenant Text,” *WTJ* 42 [1980] 280).

³¹ Stonehouse, “Infallibility” 13.

³² Whether our students—let alone our constituency as a whole—are clear about it is another matter.

these are very important issues. Moreover I am troubled by the significant number of evangelical scholars who are abandoning the conservative position—troubled not simply because of their shift as such but because one seldom sees a serious attempt on their part to show the cogency of their views within the framework of their commitment to the authority of Scripture.

Nevertheless it can hardly be denied that to some degree such matters as the early date of Daniel and the Pauline authorship of the disputed letters have been functioning in our midst as issues of the first order.³³ In practice, if not in theory, they tend to play as important a role as the most critical doctrines of our faith. As a result we are prone to fall into a pattern of inflexibility that does not even allow room for nuancing the traditional view.

To be sure, we are often forced to give undue prominence to our convictions on these matters precisely because of the assurance and sometimes vehemence with which other scholars deny them. Such a reaction is understandable and to some degree justifiable. But let me suggest that we cannot allow the opposition to set the agenda for us. Doing so distracts us from issues that are far more pressing, and we end up instilling in our students and in lay Christians a frame of mind that I do not think is particularly healthy.

The other issue raised by Stonehouse that deserves some further attention is his concern over the hermeneutical question regarding literal historical interpretation. I addressed this issue quite directly in my 1977 lectures on Stonehouse because of his willingness to treat the gospel narratives with far greater flexibility than most conservatives do. Since that time, of course, we have had the controversy over Robert Gundry's commentary on Matthew,³⁴ and a few comments about that are in order.

It so happens that I was Gundry's younger colleague at Westmont College for nine years. To me the only thing more impressive than his stature as a NT scholar was the breadth and depth of his theological thought. In particular, his understanding of the historic doctrine of Biblical authority was second to none. His work on Matthew—I believed then and I have not changed

³³ Granted that if we were to deny, say, the Pauline authorship of Ephesians in the belief that the author of the letter intended to deceive his readers, we would be thereby attributing falsehood to an explicit Biblical claim. In that case the denial of Pauline authorship may indeed be regarded as an issue of the first order. The difficulty is that not every scholar who rejects traditional views does so believing that deceit is involved, just as we would not attribute deceit to the prophet Nathan for relating to David an incident that probably did not take place (2 Sam 12:1–4). Consider the book of Ecclesiastes, which in my opinion makes a claim to have been written by Solomon. No less a defender of Biblical inerrancy than E. J. Young (*An Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949] 340) came to the conclusion, following Hengstenberg and other orthodox scholars, that Ecclesiastes was a pseudonymous work that merely alludes to Solomon as an ideal figure. (In later editions of his *Introduction* Young omitted his explicit denial of Solomonic authorship, but the argumentation was left intact and it was evident he had not changed his mind on this matter.)

³⁴ R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). The revised edition, published in 1994, bears a different subtitle: *A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*.

my mind—was a superb opportunity for evangelicals to think through this fundamental question of the hermeneutics of historical narrative.

Please understand that I have no interest in defending Gundry's conclusion that Matthew is a semifictional account. In fact, I am not convinced that this view can be sustained exegetically. I am not even ready to argue that his conclusions about Matthew fall within the parameters of our Society. Maybe they do not. What saddens me is that, apart from a couple of articles in our *Journal*,³⁵ there seemed to be no room to discuss that question adequately. A great opportunity for the self-critical examination of our hermeneutics was basically wasted, with—I think—unfortunate results.

If we simply retreat to a safe haven with regard to Matthew, how can we expect to make any real progress with regard to the gospel of John, where the questions multiply and intensify? No less arduous is the challenge posed by 1–2 Chronicles. Most of us are content to pull out of the bag ad hoc solutions when individual problems come up. Here a textual variation, there a different meaning for *'elep*, and then we sit down and hope nobody asks any more questions. But where will you find a coherent explanation for the scores of problems raised by that narrative? I will tell you where: in Raymond Dillard's commentary on 2 Chronicles.³⁶ You do not like his views on Biblical historiography? All right. But before you trash his work, show me a cogent alternative. Barr understandably grows impatient with the vagueness and selectivity that characterizes much of the evangelical apologetic for Chronicles.³⁷ Frankly, so do I.

Can evangelical theology and Biblical scholarship walk together? I believe they can, but only if we do full justice to both members of that pair. I have here placed my emphasis on the second part: We must do Biblical scholarship wholeheartedly, even if that means a certain degree of personal emotional trauma, and even if some of our students get rattled in the process.

But just as surely we must embrace the first part: evangelical theology. That means coherence, a recurring theme tonight. No more atomistic solutions. No more critical exegesis in isolation from a carefully-worked-out theological framework—a framework, incidentally, that must encompass the liberal arts and critical thought. And where can we go for help? One promising place is Old Princeton.³⁸ I do not mean the specific theological content

³⁵ *JETS* 26/1 (March 1983) was largely devoted to the controversy. It included two articles (by D. J. Moo and N. L. Geisler) in criticism of Gundry, followed by various responses and rejoinders.

³⁶ R. B. Dillard, *2 Chronicles* (WCB 15; Waco: Word, 1987). I do not deny that valiant and partially successful attempts to defend a more traditional approach have been made, but significant parts of the argumentation stretch credibility; cf. esp. C. F. Keil's introductory essay in *The Books of the Chronicles* (C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* [reprint Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.]) 38–45. On the other hand, I recognize that Dillard's approach is hardly impregnable; still, his pioneering work is far more promising than the standard fare. The most successful evangelical discussion of the problems raised by Biblical narrative in general is, in my opinion, V. P. Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), reprinted in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (ed. M. Silva; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 281–429.

³⁷ Barr, *Fundamentalism* 309.

of that tradition but rather the theological way of thinking that characterized it (although undoubtedly there was some connection between these two).

From the very beginning, in the person of Archibald Alexander we can see an almost seamless blend of an immovable commitment to Biblical authority with an undaunted embrace of critical learning that was partially—but only partially—motivated by apologetic interests. We see it in Hodge, who felt no need to deride nonconservative opponents and who could even speak warmly of Schleiermacher’s Christian faith. We see it in J. A. Alexander, who spared no effort researching every last critical insight that might shed light on the exegesis of Isaiah.³⁹

We see it very prominently in B. B. Warfield, who produced the most enduring formulation of inerrancy (not perfect, to be sure, but I have yet to see something better to take its place) while at the same time holding certain views regarding science and creation that would shock many evangelicals today. We see it in Geerhardus Vos, whose pioneering work in Biblical theology raised eyebrows because the discipline had arisen from within the matrix of unbelief. We see it in Machen, who pointed out that the Princeton faculty was not inclined to advise students “to seek out a conservative university just because it is conservative; for Princeton Seminary differs from some other conservative institutions in that it does not hide from itself the real state of affairs in Biblical study at the present day, and makes an honest effort to come to an understanding with the ruling tendency.”⁴⁰

All these great stalwarts were able to approach contemporary scholarship in a positive way not because of a weakened evangelical theology but exactly the opposite. Theological thought that is both profound and clearly formulated can make the right distinctions between that which is primary

³⁸ There are other places, of course. We might go, for example, to “Old Durham” and learn a great deal from J. B. Lightfoot, who exemplifies as brilliantly as anyone else the integration of evangelical faith (including total trust in the reliability of Scripture) with fearless scholarship.

³⁹ Concerning Archibald Alexander we are told that “those who were privy to his daily studies were astonished at the time which he bestowed on the most dangerous writers”; moreover, he argued that the Church should not “close her eyes upon the increasing facilities for biblical investigation which are now possessed in Germany” nor “turn away from the controversies there waged” (cited in D. B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994–96] 2.412). Hodge said of Schleiermacher that he “retained all his life” the reverence for Christ he had earlier imbibed from the Moravians. “His philosophy, his historical criticism, everything, he was willing to make bend to the great aim of preserving to himself that cherished object of reverence and love” (Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 2.440). In a footnote Hodge recounts that Schleiermacher would often encourage his family to sing a hymn of praise to Christ. Then he asks: “Can we doubt that he is singing those praises now? To whomsoever Christ is God, St. John assures us, Christ is a Saviour.” J. A. Alexander’s son recalled that when his father “was writing his Commentary on Isaiah, he caused to be made two standing desks reaching from one end to the other of his large study. These were two stories high. On the lower story he placed the folios and quartos, and on the upper the octavos. I should estimate that these stands held about fifty volumes, all of them open. He would first pass down the line where the commentaries were, then to the lexicons, then to other books; and when he was through, he would hurry to the table at which he wrote, write rapidly for a few minutes, and then return again to the books: and this he would repeat again and again, for ten or twelve hours together.” It is also worth noting, however, that he valued highly his mother’s opinion and would often ask her what she thought a particular verse meant. See H. C. Alexander, *The Life of Joseph Addison Alexander, D.D.* (New York: Scribner, 1870) 2.599.

and that which is secondary, that which allows for flexibility and that which does not. The dissonant elements in the previous paragraphs⁴¹ should not be viewed as inconsistencies (even if we take exception to them) but rather as the natural outgrowth of a deeply rooted evangelical theology that is not motivated by fear and suspicion.

As you may well imagine, I had to think long and hard about whether to say these things tonight. Undoubtedly some here will interpret my words as an acceptance, or even an encouragement, of the present dilution of evangelical distinctives in conservative scholarship.

If anything, however, I want to argue for an intensification of our theological convictions by insisting on the inseparable tie between those commitments and Biblical research. That link has already eroded to an alarming extent. To be sure, the problem is complicated by various factors. There are the pressures of time: How can one excel in a specialized Biblical area and still make room for the serious study of theology? Another problem is the growing mutual distrust between theologians and Biblical specialists. These and other obstacles can be very discouraging, but we cannot afford to surrender.

The very name of our Society reflects a commitment to the integration of the whole theological agenda. Tonight I would plead with you not to allow that commitment to come to naught.

theory of evolution and be Christians in the ordinary orthodox sense"; see Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary*, 25. On a similar point, see the historical theologian's 1935 *Muscular Christianity* and general lecture "What is the new Biblical theology?" in *Scientific and Christian*, 1894, 1895, 1896, 1897, 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1904, 1905, 1906, 1907, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, 1914, 1915, 1916, 1917, 1918, 1919, 1920, 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026, 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, 2031, 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