

The Failure of Contemporary Evangelicals

Rev. Jonathan C. Page

Professor James Barr was infuriated. Specifically, he was incensed at the evangelical obsession with biblical inerrancy, the doctrine that every word of the original manuscripts of the Bible is without error and historically accurate.

Barr had gone to college in the 1940s and been heavily involved in the evangelical student group on campus. That group molded his faith and his passion for studying the Bible. But by the 1970s, the movement had changed. The sole criterion for being an evangelical Christian had become biblical inerrancy, something that, as one of the leading biblical scholars in the world, Barr could not understand. (James Barr held the prestigious Regius Chair of Hebrew at Oxford University in England.) And so, like any good scholar, Barr began to write.

His first complaint was that evangelical fundamentalism, the name he called those evangelicals who insisted on biblical inerrancy, lacked any real scholarship. Yes, the movement was more than mere emotionalism. Evangelical fundamentalism had serious intellectual pretensions. But it was not interested in new insights from the field of biblical studies that might inform theology or belief. Its intellectual energy was solely focused on apologetics, i.e. the defense of an unchanging orthodoxy. Evangelical scholars were severely chided when they even hinted at doubting inerrancy. For James Barr, that was the complete avoidance of the scholarly pursuit.

Barr then mocked the claim that biblical inerrancy relied on a literal reading of the Bible. Not so. In the Genesis creation account, for instance, instead of reading creation as occurring over six days, scholars tried to claim that those six days were actually billions of years, something that clearly went against the plain sense reading of the text. The same could be said for countless other apparent historical issues or contradictions. Whenever inerrancy was in trouble, the literal reading of the text was creatively explained away to maintain the edifice.

Barr also had little time for the so-called “domino theory” of biblical criticism that claimed once one detail was questioned the whole concept of biblical revelation fell apart. According to that theory, if you doubted the sun stood still exactly as described in Joshua 10, then you might as well say Jesus was not the son of God. Barr chided, “If in fact one’s faith is in a person, in Jesus Christ, and if one knows that person as a person, then that faith is not going to be overturned by any changes in the meaning or certainty of one part of scripture or another.” It is important to remember that the early church did not have our New Testament, which was gathered in its final form only three hundred years after Jesus died. Instead the early church had faith in Christ based on the testimony of others and on their personal experience of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. An obsession with biblical inerrancy, in Barr’s view, showed a distinct lack of true faith.

But Barr’s most impassioned criticism of the evangelical movement of the 1970s was the way it viewed other Christians. “The real fault in fundamentalism,” Barr complained, “is

not its lack of intellectual gifts but its way of looking on other people...Its only real positive message to anyone is that they must be converted to Christ, which in effect means that they must become fundamentalist Christians. Justification is not by faith in Jesus Christ but by conversion to fundamentalism.” Barr had many evangelical friends and he respected the positive expressions of their faith. He was personally insulted that they did not show the same courtesy back to him.

Thankfully, the world has changed much since the 1970s and the British and American evangelical movement has changed alongside it. Far fewer evangelicals today make biblical inerrancy the sole test of faith. Evangelical biblical scholars like N.T. Wright and Richard Bauckham are broadly respected in their field. Major leaders like Rob Bell preach universalism and younger evangelicals see gays and lesbians in a much different light than their elders. The Emergent Church movement, largely an evangelical phenomenon, is re-drawing the lines of orthodoxy away from a strict adherence to the old five fundamentals of the early 20th century.

While much has changed, we can still learn a lot from people like James Barr. After all, it is frequently our opponents and forebears from whom we learn the most.