

Perils of Generalization and Superficiality: // The Reception of James Barr's Book *"Fundamentalism," 1977-1981*

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• SUMMARY

James Barr's book *Fundamentalism* is one of the most thorough examinations of fundamentalist theology. Barr predicted that the book would have no impact on fundamentalists because 'any critical appraisal from without & will be branded as a distortion and a caricature'. This article investigates the reception of the book in evangelical circles and evaluates the points of criticism that evangelicals raised against the book. The reception in non-evangelical circles is investigated to form a control group to compare with the evangelical

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• ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

James Barrs Buch *Fundamentalism* (auch in Deutsch unter dem Titel *Fundamentalismus* erschienen) ist eine der gründlichsten Untersuchungen fundamentalistischer Theologie. Barr sagte voraus, dass sein Buch keine Wirkung auf Fundamentalisten haben werde, da jegliche kritische Bewertung von außen & als Verzerrung und Karikatur gebrandmarkt werden wird.' Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht die Rezeption des Buches in evangelikalen Kreisen und bewertet die Kritikpunkte, die Evangelikale gegen das Buch vorgebracht haben. Zur vergleichenden Gegenkontrolle wird außerdem die

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• RÉSUMÉ

L'ouvrage de James Barr intitulé «le fondamentalisme» constitue l'une des Études les plus fouillées sur la théologie fondamentaliste. Barr avait prévu qu'il n'aurait aucun impact sur les fondamentalistes parce que «tout regard extérieur critique . . . » serait «dénoncé comme une présentation déformante et caricaturale».

reactions. The majority of evangelical reviewers showed a widespread willingness to read and listen to criticism while at the same time criticizing certain traits in the book, especially its generalization and superficiality. These criticisms were found also in the non-evangelical sources. Generalization and superficiality also appeared in the reviews, and the article calls for the use of nuances and thoroughness in scholarly work. Barr's book is important for evangelicals, but is not to be taken as the final word on fundamentalism and evangelicalism.

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Rezeption in nicht-evangelikalen Kreisen einbezogen. Die Mehrheit evangelikaler Rezensenten zeigte eine große Bereitschaft, Barrs Kritik wahrzunehmen und zu prüfen, gleichzeitig aber auch Aspekte des Buches zu kritisieren, besonders dessen Verallgemeinerungen und Oberflächlichkeit. Diese Kritikpunkte wurden auch in nicht-evangelikalen Quellen gefunden. Verallgemeinerung und Oberflächlichkeit kennzeichnet allerdings auch die Rezensionen; der Artikel ruft daher zu nuancierter und gründlicher wissenschaftlicher Arbeit auf. Barrs Buch ist wichtig für Evangelikale, aber nicht als letztes Wort zum Thema Fundamentalismus und Evangelikalismus zu verstehen.

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L'auteur du présent article se penche sur la manière dont le livre de Barr a été reçu par les Évangéliques, et propose une évaluation de leurs critiques à son égard. Les réactions Évangéliques sont comparées à la manière dont l'ouvrage a été perçu dans d'autres milieux, ce qui fournit un critère pour contrôler la validité des réactions des Évangéliques. La majorité des Évangéliques qui ont fait une recension sur l'ouvrage de Barr manifestent

un désir de prendre en compte ses critiques, tout en critiquant certains aspects du livre, en particulier sa tendance à la généralisation et la superficialité de son approche. On retrouve ces mêmes critiques chez les non Évangéliques qui se sont exprimés sur l'ouvrage. L'auteur du présent article invite donc à faire preuve

d'attention aux nuances, ainsi que d'une plus grande rigueur, dans les travaux académiques. Le livre de Barr est important pour les Évangéliques, mais on n'y trouve certainement pas tout ce qu'il y a à dire sur le fondamentalisme et sur le mouvement évangélique.

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'*FUNDAMENTALISM* BY Barr is a provocative book. Some will chortle in delight at the conundrums that he makes so painfully obvious. Others will be furious. And all that means that the book is likely to be widely read.¹ Such are some of William Wells's concluding remarks in his review of James Barr's book *Fundamentalism*, and few will disagree with his first remark: when SCM Press and Westminster Press published Barr's book in 1977 and 1978 respectively, the book was categorized under 'controversial literature' in the *Library of Congress Cataloging Data*. Whether the book has been widely read is hard to tell, but the number of book reviews made on the book points in that direction. And finally, that some chortled and others were furious is very clear for anybody studying the reception history of the book.

In his book, James Barr makes what could be labeled an indirect prophecy regarding the reception of his work. Says Barr,

The immediate defensive response of fundamentalists when faced with any sort of criticism is often a good indication that the appearance of moderation is only skin-deep. The fundamentalist wants to be the one who presents his own position; he does not want to hear it interpreted from without Any critical appraisal from without, however carefully researched and documented, will be branded as a distortion and a caricature; this can be taken as automatic and discounted.²

A statement like this cries out for an investigation into the reception history to see if the 'prophecy' came true.

The object of this study is therefore: to investigate the reception of James Barr's book *Fundamentalism* in order to evaluate the way the book was received in evangelical circles. Furthermore it will be tried to evaluate the points of criticism that evangelicals raised against the book. For this purpose, the reception in non-evangelical circles is investigated to form a control group to compare with the evangelical reactions. The object is not to analyze Barr's book, nor to evaluate the material

he used for his research.

It is not that the book does not deserve careful analysis. It is one of the most, if not the most, thorough examinations of fundamentalist theology in print, written by an Old Testament scholar and critic of recognized high standard.³ A preliminary definition of the research object of the book is given already on the first page. Fundamentalists are characterized by three things:

- (a) a very strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible, the absence from it of any sort of error;
- (b) a strong hostility to modern theology and to the methods, results and implications of modern critical study of the Bible;
- (c) an assurance that those who do not share their religious viewpoint are not really 'true Christians' at all.⁴

The focus of the majority of the book is on inerrancy, which Barr thinks to be the most central fundamentalist belief and guiding principle. But the hostility to critical scholarship and the ecumenical problem created by the fundamentalist retraction from fellowship with Christians of other convictions are also major issues in the book. Further analysis of Barr's position, however, is beyond the limits of this article.⁵

I. Presentation and Categorization of the Sources

The sources for the present investigation comprise 22 reviews, two review articles,⁶ and one monograph.⁷ I am aware that the source list is not complete, but enough sources have been found to establish an adequate basis for my analysis.⁸ I have chosen the time limits 1977-1981, of which the *a quo* should be obvious, and the *ad quem* chosen more subjectively from the observation that the number of reviews seemed to decrease substantially in 1980 and 1981.⁹ Geographically, the reviews show enough variety: both the British and the American scene are well represented, whereas the Continent is represented by only three reviews.¹⁰ Only one of the sources, Paul Wells'

monograph, deals with more than *Fundamentalism* in Barr's writing. This poses a special problem in working with that source in that it is difficult at times to see whether the author deals exclusively with viewpoints stated in *Fundamentalism*, or he is influenced also by other parts of his sources. In this investigation, therefore, only parts of the monograph that explicitly deal with *Fundamentalism* are used.¹¹

The reviews cover a wide spectrum of theological viewpoints, including both Protestant and Catholic,¹² liberal and fundamentalist/evangelical (F/E).¹³ For the purpose of this article, the sources have to be divided into two groups: Liberal/non-evangelical and F/E. In doing so, I am aware of two weaknesses: One is the problem of generalization; the other the problem of imprecision. It is obvious that in generating two categories so broad some will be classified together with others whom they feel uncomfortable to be grouped with. But the two groups should not be taken for more than they are: convenient working categories. Secondly, the information available in the sources about the reviewers was at times quite limited, and my personal acquaintance with several of the persons involved even more limited, so the danger of misrepresentation in my categorization is there. On the other hand, some information was at hand, and I was able to fill out the most serious gaps.¹⁴ Therefore, the procedure is judged to be warrantable.

Within the broad F/E group are found: Bush, Dockery, Edgar, Henry, Marsden, Pinnock, Surlburg, Traina, P. Wells, and W. Wells. In the other group, likewise broad, are found: Crabtree, Fransen, Hardy, Hinson, Osborn, Pittinger, Poulat, Rodd, Rogerson, Sandeen, Shinn, Smith, Strange, and Ward.

II. The Fundamentalist/ Evangelical Response

1. *L. Russ Bush*.¹⁵ Bush, professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Tex., signals the importance he ascribes to Barr's book by saying that '[e]vangelicalism can never again be the same.'¹⁶ Bush is especially concerned with Barr's criticism of F/E figurative interpretations 'that twist and turn in any direction' to protect inerrancy. For Barr, the rationalizing of miracles in F/E exegesis fits badly with the opposition to critical scholarship's anti-supernatural bias. Bush admits that Barr has a point here.

On the other hand, Bush finds that much of Barr's criticism would apply just as well to much

liberal work, and that the theological alternative that Barr offers is not desirable. The criticism was necessary and worth reading, but more needs to be said.

2. *David S. Dockery*.¹⁷ Dockery seems to be leaning much against Bush in his review. Being a conservative Southern Baptist like Bush and living in the same town, he cites Bush's poignant statement quoted above with approval, and other formulations are close to those found in Bush's review.

Dockery finds the book very provocative and controversial, yet full of genuine insights. What he finds most telling is Barr's criticism of F/E theologians being occupied with passing along tradition without really doing theology. Dockery finds that verdict true and sees it as a challenge to make good the failures done in the past.¹⁸ In his last remarks, Dockery makes a hidden criticism of the book by saying that it had been better had it been written by a true evangelical, because then it could have been an honest evaluation. Dockery is here unspecific and superficial, giving no examples from Barr's work.

3. *William Edgar*.¹⁹ It is obvious that Edgar has rather mixed feelings about Barr's book. On the one hand he finds that Barr has exposed weaknesses and patterns of faulty methodology in conservative scholarship, which should be considered by F/E. These elements should function as a challenge to F/E to rethink the areas of apologetics and biblical criticism. Also Edgar recognizes that Barr has tried to be broad in his research, although he is able to point to serious deficiencies in the coverage of the American scene.

On the other hand, Edgar finds that Barr in part is driven by personal unsympathetic presuppositions, citing one specific example. He also contends that Barr is trying to ridicule the F/E position through his wording, and he finds his work 'anti-Christian to the point of unkindness.'²⁰

4. *Carl F. H. Henry*.²¹ Henry is the only one of the F/E reviewers who is cited in *Fundamentalism*, and he has also made one of the most thorough examinations of the book, producing both a review and a lengthy review article. In the beginning of his review article, Henry asks, after quoting a number of provocative statements from Barr, if 'such comments [are] the balanced observations of a gifted scholar or the exasperated reaction of a biased observer?'²² He exhorts the evangelical reader not to decide prematurely, but be patient.

It is evident, however, after reading along that Henry's own position is the latter. In the review, he talks about Barr's acerbic criticism and his deep revolt against his past involvement in the then Inter-Varsity movement.²³

While Henry takes exception to Barr's style (and as will be shown below, to some of his content), he clearly sees some appropriate points in Barr's criticism: '[W]e must avoid discarding the wheat with the chaff and must give due consideration to theological aspects of his work that touch the vital nerve of evangelical witness today.'²⁴ In Henry's opinion, F/E have to face a number of the points put forward in Barr's book and wrestle with them instead of overlooking or ignoring them.

Henry mentions that he, and several others in the past, has moved from an uncritical acceptance to a position more critical to fundamentalism. He and others have criticized F/E positions over the last decades on points equal to Barr's:

Yet who can gainsay that evangelicals are weak in the area of development of Christian doctrine, that they defer too uncritically to tradition, that champions of inerrancy frequently ignore textual difficulties or plead a corrupt text without supportive evidence and leap hurriedly from Second Timothy 3:16 to the present New Testament canon, or reflect a desire to flee from the miraculous for the sake of scientific credibility or readily forsake the literal sense in order to preserve inerrancy?²⁵

This means that Henry, himself being part of the F/E movement which Barr criticizes, has long before Barr raised quite a few of Barr's points. The reason for this paradox is one of the inconsistencies of *Fundamentalism* that Henry criticizes: Barr's terminology fluctuates. Henry mentions 13 different terms which Barr uses for F/E, and the point he makes is that this imprecision 'allows [Barr] to manipulate what he prefers or dislikes into one category or another.'²⁶

As already noted, Henry is not uncritical of Barr (to say the least). He shares a number of criticisms with him, but at the same time tears the book to pieces on other points. He finds not only an acerbic tone and an imprecise and manipulative use of terminology providing a basis for false generalizations, but he also finds derisive presentation of conservative views. In several instances, Henry finds Barr giving 'radical misconceptions' and 'exaggerations that become misrepresentation' of F/E doctrine.²⁷ As examples, Henry mentions

Barr's contention that the bible, not Christ, is the absolute symbol in F/E religion, and that F/E emphasize the deity of Christ so that they do not recognize his humanity.²⁸ And Barr's suggestion of a connection between the modern appetite for witchcraft, the irrational, and the exotic on the one hand and millenarian interest among F/E on the other, provokes Henry to comment that 'we may rightly wonder whether London's notorious fog may at times blur academic vision at Oxford.'²⁹

Furthermore, Henry criticizes Barr for superficiality and non-objectivity, e.g., in his treatment of J. Gresham Machen, and charges Barr with using the same selectivity in the use of his sources which he considers blameworthy when F/E scholars use it.³⁰

In spite of Henry's extensive criticism of Barr,³¹ his concern for rethinking in the F/E camp is clear. F/E need to formulate 'a doctrine of scripture that makes its way in an age of biblical criticism.'³²

5. *George Marsden*.³³ Marsden, at the time teaching at Calvin College, regards Barr's work as highly polemic in that Barr 'displays almost nothing but disdain and contempt for conservative evangelical scholarship.'³⁴ In its way of describing F/E positions, *Fundamentalism* resembles what it itself criticizes, which Marsden calls 'the irony of this volume.' He finds arguments, which are untrue or unfair, and mentions as examples that F/E scholars should be ignorant of what non-conservative scholars think, and likewise Barr's use of generalization attributing traits from some F/E writers to all. Lastly, he charges Barr with the fact that he sets up 'no-win situations' for F/E scholars, so that he can criticize them no matter what they do.³⁵ The book has strong personal elements, and Barr has, in Marsden's view, clearly been deeply hurt himself by the F/E movement.

This very polemic style of the book offsets the value of Barr's correct analysis and criticism in other places. Marsden notes especially the F/E emphasis on supplementing faith with rational proof, because of the importance of historical fact in connection to inerrancy.³⁶ Marsden also supports Barr's criticism of F/E claims to be the only true Christians.

Marsden offers a valuable analysis of the cause of the deep split between Barr and critical scholarship on one side and F/E scholarship on the other. He points to Thomas Kuhn's concept of scientific revolutions, where advocates of the new paradigm

see their approach as 'normal science' and the old paradigm as not science at all. Advocates of the old paradigm will find the new one irrelevant and unintelligible.³⁷ He also points out that the understanding of Scripture is the fundamental issue in the controversy.³⁸ Marsden does, however, fall into the trap of generalization himself, when he states that evaluation of Barr's work depends on 'the degree that readers consider either conservative evangelicalism or critical biblical scholarship worthless nonsense.'

6. *Clark Pinnock*.³⁹ Pinnock's reception of Barr's work follows the pattern so far seen: some points in Barr's work are well taken, but others are not. Commenting on the question of inerrancy, Pinnock thinks that F/E have gone too far ending in 'devious reasoning' in defending inerrancy. He thinks that F/E scholars have to stop using the language of inerrancy, or at least qualify and nuance it.⁴⁰ Also he agrees with Barr that F/E scholars should take the consequences of their rationalizing exegesis and 'cool down' the polemic attacks on critical scholars doing the same. Barr has shown some things in his book which gives Pinnock the hope that he in the future can help constructively to remedy the weaknesses of the fundamentalist past.⁴¹

Pinnock launches heavy criticism on Barr on other points. Barr's criticism of the F/E hostility to modern theology and their zeal for sound doctrine is acceptable, if F/E have made mistakes in doing so. But if it is a matter of taking truth seriously, the criticism is unfair. Likewise, he finds Barr's charge that F/E do not consider non-conservatives true Christians a 'wild and irresponsible charge.'⁴² He also sees a strong tendency towards generalization and drawing a stereotypical picture of evangelicals.

7. *Raymond F. Surburg*.⁴³ In his short but intense review, LCMS-professor Raymond Surburg offers an indignant assault on what he sees as 'one of the most vicious attacks on historic Christian teaching to appear in a long time', and the volume 'represents heresy to the nth degree.' Barr attacks all distinctive elements of historical faith, says Surburg, mentioning revelation, authority, and Christology. Surburg shows no positive appreciation of any point in Barr's work.

8. *Robert A. Traina*.⁴⁴ Traina presents himself as a person sympathetic to the evangelical movement, and he finds it evident that Barr's purpose with the book is to dissuade from becoming F/E

rather than just inform about it. But still the book has valid insights.⁴⁵ Although it is provocative, the book is challenging as well and should be an occasion for F/E to think through their position.

The major weakness of *Fundamentalism*, in Traina's view, is that it doesn't recognize the strengths of the position which it criticizes so severely, and it doesn't take into account the weaknesses of the movement to which Barr belongs. Traina mentions that Barr, by down-playing their presuppositions, is not critical enough of the practices which he wants F/E to embrace, and he points to the downgrading of the biblical event. And on the other side of the spectrum, Barr does not allow the F/E distinction between a true and a nominal Christian to be right, although at times wrongly applied in F/E circles.⁴⁶

9. *Paul Ronald Wells*.⁴⁷ P. Wells, a professor at *Faculté libre de Théologie Réformée d'Aix-en-Provence*, gives in his book a very balanced analysis of Barr's contribution to modern scholarship; as one reviewer of P. Wells's book says: '[H]e is most sympathetic towards Barr . . . Wells goes out of his way to put Barr's point of view, before drawing attention quite briefly to inconsistencies he finds in it.'⁴⁸ Because of the special character of this source, as mentioned above, only a few points will be mentioned where Wells does engage in criticism of Barr.

One of the important issues which Wells discusses is the relationship between Scripture and tradition. Barr finds that while the official F/E view is that Scripture is the authority, the real authority is tradition giving unlimited possibilities of tampering with the text.⁴⁹ Wells admits that Barr's criticism might be right to a degree, but raises the question if it is more widespread in the F/E movement than in many other traditions. This way of describing the relationship is explicitly denied by some F/E scholars, and Wells finds Barr's analysis too generalized. Also Barr's investigation of the relationship has not been thorough enough, for example in relation to the interpretation of Genesis 1. Barr contends that a shift in F/E exegesis of that passage from literal to non-literal was caused by the demand of protecting inerrancy in confrontation with science, without asking if this change might have been caused by other considerations, e.g. for literary reasons.⁵⁰

Another point, where Wells finds Barr's analysis too superficial, is the use of Jesus' witness in relation to inspiration. F/E writers make a literary

category mistake, according to Barr, in referring to Jesus on this matter, for his intention was to be savior. The problem that Wells sees in this argument is that Barr nowhere shows that Jesus did not intend to teach about the authority of scripture. Also his criticism of the F/E use of 2 Tim 3:16 and 2 Pet 1:20 as the proof of inspiration misrepresent what F/E authors actually have said, and thereby fails to meet the F/E position on their own ground.⁵¹

10. *William W. Wells.*⁵² W. Wells, a Wesleyan theologian teaching at University of Hawaii, finds that although *Fundamentalism* is an angry book it deserves careful reading, noting the extent of the research, the quality of the sources, and the cogency of at least some of the arguments.⁵³ He recognizes that several of Barr's points should be given serious thought and consideration by F/E scholars. As an example, he mentions that F/E writers often 'resort to special pleading in order to make things come out right,'⁵⁴ and as a consequence of Barr's criticism he thinks that F/E scholars should reconsider their resistance to the documentary hypothesis in light of the acceptance of the source theory in the Gospels. And likewise, they should ask whether critical theories, like pseudonymous authorship, is rejected for psychological reasons or because they are 'incompatible with the doctrine of inerrancy.'⁵⁵ Wells mentions two areas which F/E scholarship has to work through after Barr's book: One is a more careful articulation of the doctrine of inerrancy, and the other is the degree to which the F/E community shall get involved in critical methodology.

On the other hand, Wells also criticizes Barr. In Wells's opinion, Barr does not discuss the real issue regarding scripture, namely the attitude in stead of the doctrine. The real issue is academic vs. humble and obedient reading of the Bible. Wells admits that this description of the critical scholar may be 'an unfortunate generalization,' but does not withdraw his statement for that reason.⁵⁶ Another point of criticism is Barr's contention that the historical and literary information is equally or more important for the F/E scholar than the theological content. Wells finds this wrong and mentions the F/E view of the Roman Catholic Church as proof against Barr. If Barr were right, the F/E movement should be positive towards the conservative RC Church, but it is not. This shows that the gospel, not inerrancy, is the core value.⁵⁷ Wells seems to be a little too hasty, when he in this con-

nection says that Barr admits to be confused over this issue. Barr talks about a 'paradox', but goes on to explain the F/E non-acceptance by the RC down-playing of the doctrine of inerrancy in favor of the doctrine of the authority of the church.⁵⁸ Wells could have made a point in asking why Barr does not even consider the possibility of the gospel having priority with the F/E movement, and that being the reason.

11. *Summary of the F/E response.* The evangelical response to Barr's *Fundamentalism*, as we have seen it now, can be divided into three groups: One almost totally favorable; one favorable to some or many points, but critical to others; and one group totally critical.

Starting with the last group, it consists of only one review, namely that of Surburg. Thinking of Barr's own 'prophecy,' it is quite surprising to find that this group is so small. Surburg has nothing sympathetic to say about the book, and in light of other F/E reactions it must be seen as a sign of a superficial reading of the book.

The first group is only insignificantly larger, consisting of two reviews: Bush and Dockery. Both produced rather short reviews, not giving much room for details. It is somewhat surprising, however, that they have very little or only indirect criticism to offer in view of their explicit and distinctly different theology compared to Barr. Are we seeing the result of a too rapid or careless reading of the consequences of Barr's criticism?⁵⁹

The largest group, group two comprising six authors, offers a quite uniform judgment of certain traits in *Fundamentalism*. And the phrase *certain traits* must be emphasized, for this group is equally uniform in commending the book for its insights and its correct analysis and criticism of aspects in the F/E movement. By looking at the criticism put forth by Henry, Marsden, Pinnock, Traina, P. Wells, and W. Wells, especially two traits stand out in Barr's work: generalization and superficiality. Henry, Marsden, Pinnock, and P. Wells all point to generalization in some way or another, and Henry, P. Wells, and W. Wells all comment on Barr's lack of depth in some important aspects of his analysis. Besides that, Henry points to misrepresentation; Marsden to unfair or untrue arguments; Pinnock to 'wild charges'; and Traina to unbalanced investigation. Most of their criticism seems substantiated, but at one point W. Wells generalizes and at another gets too superficial, and Marsden generalizes in his description.

III. The Non-Evangelical Response

As stated in the introduction, a number of non-evangelical reviewers have been included in the material to form a control group. Is the criticism put forward by the F/E writers supported by similar points in non-evangelical reviews, or must it be seen only as the inevitable result of bias and one-sidedness? These sources do not constitute the main target of the investigation, for which reason they are not treated one by one giving extensive attention to each one of them. But for the sake of clarity, the remaining 13 reviews and one review article are divided into four groups: The first giving no significant criticism to any aspect of Barr's work; the second criticizing Barr for not taking his criticism far enough; the third giving few points of criticism; and the fourth giving more severe criticism.

The first group is the largest, comprising seven reviews: Arthur Crabtree, Robert Osborn, Norman Pittenger, J. Rogerson, Ernest Sandeen, Robert Shinn, and John Strange. Crabtree shows a clear example of superficiality stating that dispensationalism is one of two pillars of F/E method.⁶⁰ Such a contention can hardly be substantiated from Barr's book. Osborn calls Barr's work 'a rather strange book', but at the same time 'an excellent study', and describes it surprisingly as dealing exclusively with 'the British scene.'⁶¹ This points towards a superficial reading of the book, and the only criticism he advances is that the book perhaps is too angry in its style. Pittenger, in his very short review, gives one of the most affirmative evaluations among all the sources, sharing the generalization that people belonging to the F/E movement 'will probably never read [the book], since they have already been warned against [it].'⁶² Rogerson is clearly more balanced than Pittenger stating that the hidden presuppositions of both liberal and conservative methods must be exposed and evaluated. The only criticism he raises against Barr concerns the transmission of pre-Kantian philosophy down to the present F/E movement.⁶³ Sandeen obviously commends Barr's demonstration of the development from 'old F/E' to 'new F/E' (Barr building on Sandeen), and he slips into some of Barr's generalizations talking about F/E scholars as a non-differentiated group.⁶⁴ Shinn is a little slap-dash in his review letting *Fundamentalism* be a critique of American Fundamentalism and giving credit to Barr's 'insightful use of psychological . . . interpretation.'⁶⁵ Strange finds the book

to be provoking, amusing, and deeply depressing reading. He finds that Barr's book fills a gap in analyzing the foundations of the F/E arguments and commends Barr for describing all the different shades of the F/E movement.⁶⁶ Strange expresses no criticism of Barr and recommends the book strongly to theologians of all persuasions.

The second group consists of Piet Fransen and E. Hinson. Fransen initially errs in making Barr a 'famous New Testament scholar', and his review is characterized by several generalizations, referring all the time to 'they', 'their' etc. making F/E scholars a standardized group. His criticism of Barr concerns the latter's reluctance to look at the psychological root of F/E, which Fransen thinks is fear and insecurity.⁶⁷ It might be unfair to put Hinson in this group, but part of Hinson's criticism concerns points that Barr has missed, and which could make the criticism of F/E more adequate. Primarily, Hinson mentions the belief in a personal devil as a F/E test point of orthodoxy, and he also thinks that Barr should re-include the F/E controversy with science in his description. In the other part of his criticism, Hinson interestingly equates Calvinism with fundamentalism and Arminianism with pietism, and he criticizes Barr for 'lumping' them together.⁶⁸

The third group is only little larger than the previous, showing three reviewers: E. R. Hardy, Emile Poulat, and C. S. Rodd. Hardy is basically sympathetic to Barr's criticism, but does find some inconsistencies in his presentation: Barr tends to generalize when he describes F/E scholars, while at the same time noting divergent opinions; and Barr considers the designation 'heresy' outdated, while at the same time coming close to using it towards the F/E position.⁶⁹ Poulat approaches the book as sociologist without any theological agenda, and he recognizes that Barr has several accounts to settle with F/E: one from his youth and one from his present, the last in fighting its influence and in dissuading potential followers. His main criticism of Barr is one of inconsistency: He puts himself in a position where he can tell who are the true Christians, a position he denies to his F/E opponents.⁷⁰ Rodd, besides thinking that the book should have been reduced to half its length and that the style is too polemic and hostile, finds much good and true analysis in *Fundamentalism*. He mentions two points where he finds that Barr generalizes. The first is the linking of F/E with dispensationalism drawn from *Scofield Reference Bible*, criticizing Barr for not distinguishing

between belief in the Second Coming and 'deviant eschatological beliefs.' The second point is Barr's tendency to describe F/E scholars as a unified group, although he notes, and at times exploits, differences among them.⁷¹

The last group, Lewis Smith and Keith Ward, shares Barr's dissociation from the F/E position, but both raises severe criticism towards aspects in the book. Smith points to the inconsistency that Barr wants to do away with 'orthodoxy' but retains it in order to use it against F/E scholars, a point very much like Hardy's. Also, Smith criticizes Barr for using '*argumentum ad hominem*' and swinging counterstatements not always later qualified.⁷² Ward recognizes much of Barr's work, but criticizes the sociological considerations for being superficial and other parts of the book for being arrogant and showing contempt, traits Barr criticizes with his opponents. In this Barr has a tendency to generalize, so that his critical points 'sound like a diatribe of a radical against conservatives of all sorts.'⁷³

Iv. Conclusion

Besides being able to show that generalization and superficiality also exists among the non-evangelical reviewers, the investigation of this control group has shown that the criticism expressed in the F/E sources is partly found outside this group. This means that there is sufficient basis for a conclusion. Barr's contention was that: '[a]ny critical appraisal from without, however carefully researched and documented, will be branded as a distortion and a caricature; this can be taken as automatic and discounted.'⁷⁴

The present investigation has shown that his prediction was build on a generalized and superficial picture of the F/E scholarship. The reception history of Barr's work has shown a widespread willingness to read and listen to criticism from non-evangelical scholars combined with a wish to correct whatever needs correction. Only one reviewer showed no recognition of any aspect of Barr's book.

At the same time, F/E scholars have put forward a number of critical points in respect to different aspects in Barr's book, and the investigation of the control group of non-evangelical scholars has shown, that the F/E reviewers have not been carried away by bias or prejudice, but have raised appropriate questions.

Besides these two points, which were the stated objects for this study, the investigation has also

shown that no group has totally succeeded in evading the perils of generalization and superficiality. This is true for the sources, which Barr used in his research, and in which he, at least partly, rightfully pointed out these weaknesses. This is true for Barr's work as it has been strongly pointed out by several of both F/E and non-evangelical reviewers. And this is true also for both F/E and non-evangelical reviewers in commenting on *Fundamentalism*.

Finally, two things can be learnt from this study: Nuances and thoroughness are not just zest to the scholarly work, but an absolute necessity. And secondly, James Barr's book *Fundamentalism* is not the final word on fundamentalism and evangelicalism to be cited whenever one wants to discard this specific position. But it seems fair to repeat L. Russ Bush's words in recognition of Barr's contribution to evangelical and fundamentalist re-thinking and re-consideration: 'Evangelicalism can never again be the same.'⁷⁵

Notes

- 1 William W. Wells, 'Blasting Bible Believers: Review of *Fundamentalism* by James Barr,' in *Christianity Today*, 2 June 1978, 30-34.
- 2 James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1978), 325. I have not had access to the British edition, which differs from the American only in the foreword (and year of publication).
- 3 James Barr was, at the time the book was published, Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture at Oxford University. Before that he had had teaching experience in Montreal, Edinburgh, Manchester, and in the United States at Princeton Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary, New York, and University of Chicago.
- 4 Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 1.
- 5 The most thorough analysis of Barr's contributions to modern theological thought is Paul Ronald Wells's doctoral thesis *James Barr and the Bible: Critique of a New Liberalism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980). For a more recent treatment of the challenges from Barr's book to evangelicals, expressing both heartfelt consent and vehement opposition, cf. Moisés Silva's presidential address at the 1997 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, published as 'Can Two Walk Together Unless They Be Agreed? Evangelical Theology and Biblical Scholarship,' in *JETS* 41 (1998): 3-16.
- 6 Carl. F. H. Henry in *Christianity Today*, and Lewis Smith in *New Blackfriars*.
- 7 Paul Wells, *James Barr* (cf. note 6 above).

- 8 Reviews in Choice, 15 (Nov. 1978): 1232; *Christian Century*, 95 (July 1978): 710; *Library Journal*, 103 (Aug. 1978): 1520; and *St. Marks Review*, no. 109, were not available to me.
- 9 Sources found: In 1977: 2 reviews. In 1978: 9 reviews and 2 review articles. In 1979: 8 reviews. In 1980: 2 reviews and 1 monograph. In 1981: 1 review.
- 10 Piet Fransen in LS, published by the Faculty of Theology of Katholieke Universiteit te Louven, Belgium; the sociologist Emile Poulat (to my knowledge, the only non-theologian among the reviewers) in *ASSR* (Paris); and John Strange of University of Copenhagen in DTT.
- 11 This means primarily pages 117-134; 162-168; and 171-187.
- 12 At least Crabtree, Fransen, and Smith are Catholics.
- 13 As elsewhere in dealing with the question of fundamentalism, there is a terminological problem in this study. Who should be called what? Although Barr recognizes differences within the fundamentalist movement, in terms of 'moderate' and 'extreme' and in terms of 'fundamentalist' as opposed to 'conservative evangelical', he uses the two latter terms interchangeably throughout the book. For the sake of convenience, I will follow the same practice in this paper and use the abbreviation F/E for 'fundamentalist/ evangelical' and 'fundamentalists/ evangelicals' with a broad sense.
- 14 The main research for this article was done in the fall of 1996 during an extended period of studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL. My thanks go to professors John Woodbridge and D. A. Carson for valuable information in conversation. Any mistakes are my sole responsibility.
- 15 L. Russ Bush, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 21 (Fall 1978): 100-101.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 17 David S. Dockery, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *Grace Theological Journal*, 2 (Spring 1981): 146-147.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 147.
- 19 William Edgar, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *WTJ* 40 (1977): 154-156.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 156.
- 21 Carl F. H. Henry, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *Eternity* 29 (May 1978): 52-53; and 'Those Incomprehensible British Fundamentalists,' *Christianity Today*, 22 June 1978, 22-26 [1092-1096]; 23 June 1978, 22-26 [1146-1150]; 21 July 1978, 29-32 [1205-1258]. (In the following, references to the latter source will be to the page numbers of the volume, not to the individual issues.)
- 22 Henry, 'Incomprehensible', 1093.
- 23 Henry, 'Review', 52.
- 24 Henry, 'Incomprehensible', 1095.
- 25 Henry, 'Review', 53. Cf. the likewise long list of criticisms, made by Henry through the years, in 'Incomprehensible', 1094, with reference to Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, the series 'Dare We Renew the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy?' in *Christianity Today*, (June-July 1957), and *Evangelical Responsibility in Contemporary Theology*.
- 26 Henry, 'Incomprehensible', 1095-1096.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 1093. Cf. *idem*, 'Review', 52.
- 28 Henry, 'Incomprehensible', 1093.
- 29 Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 206; Henry, 'Incomprehensible', 1094.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 1148. 1149.
- 31 Part 3 of his review article is a criticism of Barr's own theological viewpoint as expressed in *Fundamentalism*.
- 32 Henry, 'Review', 53.
- 33 Georg Marsden, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *Theology Today* 35 (January 1979): 520, 522.
- 34 Marsden, 'Review', 520. Marsden cites two expressions from the beginning of Barr's book: '[Barr does] not find any of its arguments to have validity except in very minor respects,' (p. 9) and '[Fundamentalism is] a pathological condition of Christianity.' (p. 5)
- 35 *Ibid.*, 522.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 522.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 520.
- 38 *Ibid.* Due to a typo, Marsden misrepresents Barr's view. He states that 'Barr . . . finds God's role in inspiring . . . 'a very important one'.' It should have been: 'a very unimportant one'.
- 39 Clark Pinnock, 'Unforgiving Critic: Review of *Fundamentalism* by James Barr,' *Sojourner* 8 (January 1979): 31-33. At the time of writing, Pinnock was professor at McMaster Divinity School, Hamilton. Year of publishing for the American edition is erroneously given as 1977.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 32, 33.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 43 Raymond F. Surburg, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 43 (October 1979): 386-387.
- 44 Robert A. Traina, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *The New Review of Books and Religion* 3 (December 1978): 14-15.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 47 Paul Ronald Wells, *James Barr and the Bible: Critique of a New Liberalism* (Phillipsburg, NJ.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980).
- 48 G[ordon] J. Wenham, review of *James Barr and the Bible: Critique of a New Liberalism*, by Paul Ronald Wells, *EvQ* 52 (April-June 1982): 121.

- 49 Wells, *James Barr*, 122.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 131-133.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 179-181 and 181-182. The last example refers to *Fundamentalism*, 78f. Wells also criticizes Barr for making what Wells thinks is an unfounded contrast between the Princeton theologians and the Westminster Confession, building on E. R. Sandeen's *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (128-129). Later on, he criticizes Barr for contrasting old and new F/E: 'It is simply an artifice Barr uses several times in his book to infer that older conservatism was more consistent than recent fundamentalism, so strengthening his rejection of present views (cf. p. 290). This ridicule thrown on contemporary fundamentalism is one of the most objectionable features of Barr's book.' (166 n.88).
- 52 William W. Wells, 'Blasting Bible Believers: Review of *Fundamentalism* by James Barr,' in *Christianity Today*, 2 June 1978, 30-34.
- 53 W. Wells, 'Blasting', 30.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 33-34.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 58 Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 105-106.
- 59 I acknowledge that this might be an over-interpretation, caused by my search for generalization and superficiality!
- 60 Arthur B. Crabtree, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *Horizons: The Journal of the College Theology Society* 6 (Fall 1979): 293.
- 61 Robert T. Osborn, 'The Problem of Conservative Christianity: Review of *Fundamentalism* by James Barr and Evangelicals at an Impass by Robert K. Johnson,' *Int* 33 (July 1979): 311. The reason for this evaluation is probably that the other book, which Osborn reviews, contradicts the picture which Barr draws of the F/E approach.
- 62 Pittenger, Norman. 'Old Arguments for New: Review of *Fundamentalism* by James Barr,' *The Modern Churchman* 22 (Summer 1979): 124. The description he gives of Barr's gifts seems rather one-sided compared to some of the other evaluations of the present work: Not a destructive critic, he offers balanced, lucid argument, well-chosen illustrations, and careful analysis.
- 63 J. W. Rogerson, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *SJT* 31, no. 5 (1978): 478-479.
- 64 Ernest R. Sandeen, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *JR* 59 (October 1979): 499: 'None of them is defending a literal seven-day creation . . .'
- 65 Robert W. Shinn, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *Foundations: A Baptist Journal of History and Theology* 22 (January-March 1979): 92-93.
- 66 John Strange, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *DTT* 43 (1980): 137-138.
- 67 Piet Fransen, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *LS* 7 (Fall 1978): 134-136.
- 68 E. Glenn Hinson, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *RevExp* 75 (Fall 1978): 635-636. He also criticizes Barr for letting Pentecostalism be viewed as part of the F/E movement, because 'their view of the role of the Spirit conflicts directly with the Fundamentalist view of the Bible.' (636)
- 69 E. R. Hardy, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *JTS* n.s. 29 (October 1978): 621.
- 70 Emile Poulat, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *ASSR* 50 (October-December 1980): 239. In describing the origins of F/E, Poulat makes a couple of mistakes: He states that fundamentalism got its name from *The Fundamentals* (1910-1915), which is not true; and he makes the Scopes Trial the center piece of the fundamentalist controversies in the inter-war period ('le Tennessee fut le grande foyer'). At its time, the Scopes Trial was not assigned the importance it was ascribed in later history.
- 71 C. S. Rodd, 'Taking Points from Books,' *ExpTim* 88 (September 1977): 353-355.
- 72 Lewis Smith, 'Fundamentalism Versus Tradition: Review of *Fundamentalism* by James Barr,' *New Blackfriars* 59 (May 1978): 232.
- 73 Keith Ward, review of *Fundamentalism*, by James Barr, *Theology* (London) 81 (March 1978): 146. On the previous page, Ward puts it even sharper: 'The programme is rather like that of early anthropologists who, in expounding the nature of religion, were really trying to explain how such gross superstitions could ever come to be held by rational beings.' As a further point of criticism, Ward contends that Barr never deals seriously with the question of a firm basis for faith.
- 74 Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 325.
- 75 Bush, 'Review,' 101.