'FUNDAMENTALISM' UNDER FIRE

Signs are not lacking that the continuing resurgence of Evangelicalism is provoking a growing backlash. Even so mild a Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland as Professor Robert Davidson has judged it desirable on more than one occasion to sound his alarm, and the letter columns of *Life and Work* have not infrequently carried salvoes and complaints, often from quite senior churchmen. It would not surprise us if Billy Graham's evangelistic ministry in Britain in 1991 aroused other critics to give voice or put pen to paper. After all, it was a mission by Billy Graham in 1955 sponsored by the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union that evoked not only correspondence in *The Times* but also a notorious utterance by the late A.M. Ramsey, then a predecessor of David Jenkins as Bishop of Durham, labelling 'fundamentalism' as a 'menace' and a 'heresy'.

On that occasion the targets were explicitly identified, and the ensuing controversy generated not a little light as well as heat. It elicited John Stott's pamphlet *Fundamentalism and Evangelism* (1956) and James Packer's punchy little monograph *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (1958). A later generation that wishes to be aware of the issues at stake could do far worse than to read, or re-read, this sharp book. Apart from anything else it will remind – or inform – today's Evangelicals of battles not ignobly conducted over much the same ground as we are still challenged to contest – battles, moreover, without which the advances of Evangelicalism during the last three or four decades could scarcely have been consolidated.

But when Moderator Davidson's indictment of 'fundamentalists' avers that he is 'not thinking of the conservative evangelicals, those people within the mainstream who hold to the old doctrines but have a loyalty to the Church of Scotland and feel part of it', while one may breathe a sigh of relief ('he is not getting at me after all' – for a Moderator's words are weighty), one is left wondering whom he does have in his sights. Questions rear their heads about the point of attacks which leave their targets so indeterminate and yet, one presumes, must have specific targets in view (for a Moderator's words are no doubt well weighed).

Such vagueness is not hard to find elsewhere. *People of the Book?*, subtitled 'The Authority of the Bible in Christianity' (London, SPCK, 1988; 96pp., £4.95; 0 281 04387 6), is based on the 1988 Bampton Lectures given by John Barton, who teaches Old Testament at Oxford and is a former member of the Church of England Doctrine Commission. It is a moderately latitudinarian discussion, distinguished by 'the kind of *ad hominem* argument that may be called spoiling the Egyptians: taking the best arguments one's opponents have to offer, and turning them to one's own use. I have tried to grant all that may be granted to the fundamentalists' case, but then to show that their most precious jewels shine more brightly in a setting provided by critical theology than in the one they were designed for.' But a thesis allegedly involving 'a good deal of engagement with fundamentalism' never names or quotes a single 'fundamentalist' source! The index reveals an entire innocence of such standard critical procedures. It must be responsible for some of the book's weaknesses, including a curious confusion between Barthianism and inerrancy (*e.g.*, 'The proposition that Christ, and not the Bible, is the true Word of God is not at the living heart of the religion of most of those deeply influenced by Neo-orthodox theology').

What response is called for to these and similar exercises in the 'necessary cause' of 'anti-fundamentalism', as Barton puts it? It would be tempting to retaliate in kind. After all, the old establishment's church theology in Britain displays such appalling loss of nerve and disarray that survival must be at risk. Its anchorless Gadarene slide into an inclusivist morass that will sustain few firm boundary posts (except on socio-political issues, which increasingly constitute the new orthodoxy) must make discerning spirits tremble. Can these bones live? And one day a liberated sociologist of religion will assess the extent of the latitudinarian church's dependence – in personnel and finance, for example, not to mention less tangible resources such as prayer and spiritual courage – upon the despised 'fundamentalists'. ('Write an essay on "the church parasitic".')

Yet a humbler wisdom counsels a more circumspect response. 'Fundamentalism' deserves invariable quotation marks (and a lower-case initial) and perhaps occasionally 'so-called', at least until its critics come cleaner. Evangelical conservatives should take extra care to avoid being fairly tarred with the 'fundamentalist' brush (unfair tarring is beyond our control) – no hint that we do not welcome the soundest scholarship as the truest support of evangelical faith (so let us eschew those throw-away disclaimers 'Never mind what the scholars/pundits/academics say', and let us treasure and nourish the instruments of evangelical theological culture in our midst in Scotland, such as the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society, the Glasgow Bible College (a warm welcome to the hallowed BTI under

its new name!), Rutherford House, and this *SBET* and other journals), no suggestion that nothing theologically good has happened since the Reformation – or at least since the Westminster Assembly (so let us take the full measure of *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* – which must be reserved for a future editorial), and no failure to observe, in theological controversy, that golden rule which corresponds to the pastoral distinction between loving the sinner and hating the sin. After all, do not heretics bleed when they are pricked, no less than 'fundamentalists'?