

DAVID BEBBINGTON
EVANGELICALISM IN MODERN BRITAIN:
A HISTORY FROM THE 1730s TO THE 1980s

BOOK REVIEW BY ÁDÁM SZABADOS

In his recent book on the Evangelical faith, John Stott recommends David Bebbington's monograph as a general introduction to Evangelicalism¹. Bebbington's *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* is a truly fascinating work. The author interprets a remarkably broad period of Evangelical history based on an incredibly large research material. While the main text of the book is 276 pages, the endnotes, containing no further comments beside titles and page numbers, occupy 76 pages! Bebbington's work is an amazing conglomeration of historical and theological knowledge, amalgamated into a coherent understanding of the subject.

Bebbington describes the changes of British Evangelical religion in three distinct phases throughout the given time-period. The first phase is the birth of Evangelicalism in the 1730s. In this period there is a special, though not exclusive, attention given to Wesleyan Methodism. According to the author, this type of Evangelicalism was a product of Enlightenment ideas fertilising earlier versions of Protestantism. The 19th century produced another kind of Evangelicalism, largely as a result of Romantic influences. This was the century when British Evangelicalism was strongest in its social impact. The Holiness movement, though a sign of decline in Evangelical influence on society, was still a result of the same cultural climate. The 20th century gave birth to a third form of the Evangelical movement, a form shaped by Modernist Expressionism. Bebbington sees both the Oxford Group and the Charismatic movement as two different realisations of Modernist cultural influence on Evangelical Christianity.

Bebbington's thesis raises significant questions about the real continuity and identity of the Evangelical movement. To what extent is Evangelicalism a product of the age, and to what extent does it have an identity that does not change with the current philosophical and cultural trends? Bebbington's answer is twofold. On the one hand, Evangelicalism can be identified on the basis of four core characteristics: conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism. This common core "has remained remarkably constant down the centuries". On the other hand, Evangelicalism has been constantly changing, and to call one version of it the "true" Evangelicalism is simply to prove that one is ignorant of the historical facts.

Bebbington's thesis, if true, can serve both as a warning and an encouragement to Evangelicals. It warns Evangelicals not to absolutise historical *realisations* of eternal truths and values, for history itself proves that these realisations constantly change.

¹ John Stott, *Evangelical Truth* (IVP, 1999). The other book Stott recommends is D.J. Tidball, *Who Are The Evangelicals?* (Marshall Pickering, 1994).

There is no Evangelical period that we can make a standard of for our present condition. All periods were influenced by historical accidents. It is encouraging, on the other hand, that Evangelicalism was ready to change as the cultural climate changed. It shows that Evangelicalism is a transcultural, and even supracultural, movement, a rather protean phenomenon that can be valid for all ages and all people groups. The changes of Evangelicalism might prove the strength of the movement, not its weakness, *if the changes do not affect its core identity*.

The Achilles' heel of Bebbington's thesis is the relationship of his definition of Evangelicalism to his assumption that Evangelicalism is a novelty of the 1730s. He tries to avoid the danger of defining Evangelicalism too narrowly on the basis of contemporary opinion of any group or period. He builds his definition, therefore, on the hallmarks that persisted over time among those calling themselves Evangelicals. Bebbington came up with the four unchangeable characteristics mentioned above: conversionism, activism, biblicism, crucicentrism². This definition, however, comes into conflict with one of the basic assumptions of Bebbington's thesis, namely, that Evangelicalism was essentially a new phenomenon of the 1730s.

Grant Wacker remarks that Bebbington's monograph is "governed by a single argument... that evangelicalism is, despite its self-perception, a radically modern form of Christianity."³ Bebbington wants us to understand Evangelicalism as a new phenomenon of the eighteenth century⁴. There are two methodological problems with this assumption that I tentatively mention here.

My impression is that in evaluating 18th century British Evangelicalism, Bebbington gave Wesleyan Methodism more weight than he should have. This approach makes 18th century Evangelicalism look more discontinuous with the past than it probably was. Although Bebbington mentions the other two thrusts of the Evangelical Revival, Calvinistic Methodism and Moravianism, but, seeing the prominence Bebbington gives to *Wesleyan Methodism*, one has the impression that for him it was that movement that represented 18th century Evangelicalism best. It is one further step from here to show that the departing points of Wesleyanism from earlier versions of Protestantism was the birth of Evangelicalism, itself. That is, to put it bluntly, the emergence of Evangelicalism is basically equivalent with the emergence of Wesleyan Methodism⁵.

This approach raises questions, however, that might challenge Bebbington's thesis. It needs some explanation why Wesleyan Methodism should be seen as the *birth of Evangelicalism* and not a *departure from Evangelicalism*, as some of Wesley's

² This definition has been widely accepted by scholars. John Wolffe refers to it as "an influential definition" (*Global Religious Movements in Regional Context*, Ashgate, 2002, p. 18.). Mark Noll adopts it almost uncritically, see his *American Evangelical Christianity* (Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p. 13, 24-5) and also chapter 1 of the yet to be published *The Globalizing of Evangelical Christianity: An Historical Introduction* (edited by Hutchinson and Kalu, p. 10). John Stott, on the other hand, criticises it and suggests instead a more trinitarian approach (See Introduction to *Evangelical Truth*).

³ This sentence can be read on the back cover of the 1992 edition of Bebbington's book (Baker Book House).

⁴ Bebbington, p. 1.

⁵ This impression is further strengthened by the subtitle 'Discontinuity with the Reformed tradition' (Bebbington, p. 35). The conclusion is obvious: Evangelicalism is a departure from Calvinism, and is best represented by Wesleyanism.

contemporaries saw it⁶. Wesley's Arminianism and Perfectionism were considered quite un-evangelical by many of his contemporaries. According to J.I. Packer the "Puritan and evangelical movements have to be studied together; their links with each other are much stronger and more numerous than is sometimes realised", and "the private oddities of John Wesley's theology" are the exception⁷. Without questioning Wesley's Evangelical identity, one may wonder what makes him "more Evangelical" in Bebbington's eyes than, let's say, the Puritan Matthew Henry, Whitefield's spiritual mentor. The problem with this approach is even deeper if we consider the American scene, where Wesleyan Methodism was entirely absent from the Great Awakening and did not take roots until the last quarter of the 18th century⁸. In Iain Murray's opinion, "The explanation is largely doctrinal. The Great Awakening of the 1740s had been led by men whose reformed and Puritan convictions made them unsympathetic to Wesley's evangelical Arminianism."⁹

The other methodological problem is connected to Bebbington's *application* of his definition of Evangelicalism. When he gives his reasons as to why Evangelicalism only emerged in the 1730s, he names the single underlining factor of discontinuity with earlier forms of British Protestantism as "a shift in the received doctrine of assurance". This, however, begs the following question: *is a certain view of assurance a fifth characteristic of Evangelicalism?* If Evangelicalism is a new phenomenon *because of* a new view of assurance, how could Bebbington leave this factor out of his definition? If a new view of assurance accounts for the discontinuity, is there such a thing as Evangelicalism *without* this view of assurance? It seems inconsistent that Bebbington did not mention assurance in line with conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism. If, on the other hand, assurance is not a fifth characteristic, why did Evangelicalism emerge only in the 1730s? It would be more logical to say that the Evangelicalism of the 1730s was a different *type* of Evangelicalism from that of the 1520s or 1640s, but not a new phenomenon. If assurance is not one of the hallmarks of Evangelicalism, why is the shift in the 1730s different than later shifts like the one that made the Evangelicalism of the 1850s so different from the Evangelicalism of the 1980s?

⁶ See Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol 1-2. (Banner of Truth Trust, 1995). According to Dallimore, after Whitefield's death Evangelicals within the Church of England dropped the name 'Church Methodists' and chose the name 'The Evangelical Party' to distance themselves from Wesley's doctrinal peculiarities (Vol. 2, p. 315-6).. In the previous century Arminianism had been considered to be practically synonymous with high church Laudism, the least Protestant branch within the C of E. (See, O. Chadwick, *The Reformation*, ch. 7)..

⁷ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p. 46-7. (Crossway Books, 1990).

⁸ "The Methodists in Virginia and elsewhere were preceded by generations of preachers of the Calvinistic doctrines of the Reformers and Puritans. The Methodists' success was not due to what was distinctive in their teaching, but rather to what they held in common with others... Orthodoxy and evangelism in America had for so long been identified with the creeds of the Reformation and Puritan eras that it was no small task for Christians of Arminian persuasion to set about to change the landscape. By the 1790s Methodists were making a major effort to effect just such a transformation." (Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858*, BTT, 1994, pp. 85-86, 179).

⁹ Murray, p. 69.

Although in the last chapter of the book Bebbington names *activism*, and not assurance, as the “novelty that set Evangelicals apart from earlier Protestantism”¹⁰, I think it is only a further sign of inconsistency in his methodology.¹¹ Besides this, one could easily argue that the Reformers and the Puritans were just as much activists as later Evangelicals, though with different emphases. The Reformers’ and Puritans’ social activism could put to shame 19th century premillennialists or Keswick disciples. If by activism gospel preaching or missionary efforts are meant, it should have been made explicit¹². But then the question might be raised again: is it justifiable to take a certain type of evangelistic activity¹³ as a persistent characteristic, but *not* take premillennialism, Calvinistic theology, or other so-called non-essentials? Is Bebbington not “ensnared in the narrow perspective of a particular period”¹⁴? Does he give “the right” of the Reformers and the Puritans to “to call themselves Evangelicals”¹⁵?

Beside the methodological problems, it is possible to challenge Bebbington’s thesis on another ground, too. It is a historical-theological question if there really was an unprecedented major shift in the understanding of assurance in the 18th century. In 1976 R.T. Kendall opened a hot debate with his thesis that the Puritan tradition seriously departed from John Calvin in its understanding of saving faith and assurance¹⁶. Paul Helm answered Kendall’s dissertation by arguing that there was no essential difference between Calvin and the Puritans¹⁷. In 1999 Joel R. Beeke entered into the discussion with his extensive study on the development of the doctrine of assurance beginning from the Reformers through mature Puritanism¹⁸. He maintained that “Calvinism’s wrestlings with assurance were *quantitatively* beyond, but not *qualitatively* contradictory to, that of Calvin”¹⁹. The debate will probably go on for a while.

The interesting thing, however, is that on both sides of the debate there is strong agreement that the Reformers believed in immediate assurance. The Reformers were almost unanimous in their conviction that assurance was an *essential element* of saving faith. One can easily prove that enjoying full assurance of salvation as a general experience predated the 18th century, and therefore is not a novelty of lockean Enlightenment influence on Protestantism. Even if the Puritans seriously departed

¹⁰ Bebbington, p. 271.

¹¹ He seems to contradict his earlier observations here: “The three symptoms of discontinuity in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of conservative Protestantism... are bound together by an underlining factor, a *shift in the received doctrine of assurance* with all that it entailed.” (Bebbington, p. 42, emphasis mine)

¹² Alister McGrath in fact made it explicit when in his *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1994) he mentions “the necessity, appropriateness and urgency of evangelism” as one of the four Evangelical characteristics (the other three are basically the same as Bebbington’s).

¹³ Puritan evangelism or the preaching of Whishart, Knox, Bradford, and Ridley might differ from later types of evangelism, but are nevertheless evangelistic activities. Calvin’s Geneva even had a strong missionary activity in Catholic France.

¹⁴ Bebbington, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ The thesis was published in book form in 1979 under the title *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (first published in the UK in 1981 by Oxford University Press).

¹⁷ Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1982)

¹⁸ Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1999)

¹⁹ Beeke, p. 3-4.

from the Reformation understanding of assurance, which is an open question²⁰, there was a tradition handed down through the centuries that the Evangelical Revival could build on. Wesley's teaching on assurance was by a hairbreadth from the teachings of the Reformers. Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield and Howell Harris could easily identify with the wordings of the Westminster Confession *and* enjoy the same full assurance that Luther, Calvin, or even William Guthrie had written about. The case is certainly much more complicated than the way Bebbington, on weberian grounds, wants us to see.

I am not convinced, therefore, that beside practical purposes, it is justified to call 18th century Evangelicalism a new phenomenon. The discontinuity with previous forms of Protestantism could easily be explained with the help of the same arguments that Bebbington applies when he interprets discontinuity of the Evangelical tradition in later centuries. The normative experience of assurance in the 1730s does not seem to explain why Evangelicalism should be seen as a novelty. The methodological problems connected to the definition of Evangelicalism further weaken the thesis.

²⁰ Even the Puritans differed in their emphases on assurance. While John Preston and Thomas Goodwin emphasised the extraordinary character of full assurance, Richard Sibbes and John Owen saw assurance as more easily attainable and in some ways even a normal experience of the Christian life.