

Evangelicalism—Identity, Definition and Roots. An historiographical survey

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Introduction

Amongst Historians the last 40 or more years has seen both a discovery and a retrieval of the history of Evangelicalism. This had been a much neglected area of historical study.¹ This may be considered ironic when we consider the deep impact of Evangelicalism upon church history and especially the social, political and cultural impact upon eighteenth century Britain. Historians such as David Bebbington (British, Baptist) and Mark Noll (American) have contributed significantly to this rescue operation. Both are Evangelicals. They also represent both sides of the Atlantic, a key concept in the history and historiography of the movement. Many others have also contributed, including George Marsden and Nathan O'Hatch. It is worth noting that Bebbington's major contribution has been *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. Without encroaching on the rest of this paper, it seems only right to state that *Evangelicalism* has gained huge respect and great usage, the Bebbington Quadrilateral becoming a standard definition. However, it has not been without its critics, as we shall see. It was stated in 1994 that, '... evangelical historiography is on the verge of change because evangelicalism is undergoing significant change.'² This is worth bearing in mind. Essentially this essay considers continuity and discontinuity; it is about identity, definition and roots. Throughout this paper I will refer to Calvinism/Calvinists and Calvinistic theology with the term "Reformed". This is, as opposed to the Arminian theological position. The main issue here being a difference in understanding God's Sovereignty (predestination, election and so forth) and how that fits into his Salvation plan. This will be important in our consideration of Evangelicalism. Although this paper is an historical analysis, theological considerations are central. Theology is important, not least to our subject matter, and sometimes historians have neglected it or handled it simplistically. There is an element of personal commitment from the standpoint of the writer. Some may consider the theological position of the writer to be dangerously unhelpful, or, under postmodern theoretical assumptions, that the following work cannot be in any way objective. I have repeatedly found Kloppenbergs's concept of 'pragmatic

hermeneutics' helpful here as a useful middle ground between positivism and relativism.³ The impact of postmodernism on Evangelicalism is a part of the ensuing work, as is the Enlightenment, and the issue of language, words and their definition is also important. The content of this paper, indeed the historiography in general, is very Anglo-American in focus. However, there seems to be a move (intellectually) towards considering other racial groups (and females), against a backdrop of evangelical historiography and hagiography that has been dominated by white men.⁴ The appearance and worldwide spread of 'Pentecostal and charismatic phenomena' will undoubtedly change the landscape of the historiography too.⁵

This paper will first seek to survey and consider the historiography surrounding the identity and definition of evangelicalism, with Bebbington as the focus, but analysing pre and post 1989 contribution as well. Secondly, and more briefly, we will consider Methodism (safeguarding against the problem of theoretical issues without actual historical grounding) in the context of evangelicalism and as a key part in the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival. Thirdly we will move to other much debated potential 'roots' of the movement considering Lollardy, the Reformation, Puritanism, Pietism (and the Enlightenment).

Evangelicalism: Identity and Definition

While the greatly positive reception of Bebbington and his Quadrilateral could lead us to think otherwise, other voices had spoken *before* Bebbington began contributing to evangelical historiography. It seems that the pre-existing historiography laid more emphasis on historical continuity (and, noted for the specific purposes of this section of our exploration, it extends to *identify* and *define* evangelicalism in ways that contradict the Bebbington thesis.) This is highlighted in Shaw's essay within the Symposium—*The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities*. This collection of essays is a wonderful conversational input into the critique of Bebbington and rightly demands our full attention. Shaw points to the nineteenth-century perceptions of the origins of evangelicalism. The case is made that Evangelical Anglican Historians, Milner, Simeon, Scott, Haweis and the better known J.C. Ryle and Balleine saw continuity with the Reformation and the Puritans. Evangelicalism for these participant observers (in fact, everyone else from Anglican to Dissenter the high Calvinists to the Arminians) was nothing new, they *perceived themselves* as in a 'time of renewal, and re-emphasis, but not of origination.'⁶ One of the

great products of the burgeoning historiography of evangelicalism has been two Biographical Dictionaries. Larsen's *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, respects and makes full use of Bebbington and Noll in its initial definitional start point; however 'evangelical forbears' are included, such that the scope of the treatment is from John Wycliffe to John Wimber via John Wesley.⁷ Bebbington contributed a (British) history from the 1730s to the 1980s. He boldly tied church history to other forms of intellectual and cultural history, and on the way managed to produce a definition of Evangelicalism, which has become the standard.⁸ The Quadrilateral Definition is that of *Conversionism, Activism, Biblicism* and *Crucicentrism*.⁹ Alongside this, Bebbington (here and elsewhere) strongly propagated the view that Evangelicalism sprang out of the Enlightenment.¹⁰ This was critiqued in *The Emergence* especially in Haykin's reassessment¹¹ which we will consider later. James (in her review article on *Evangelicalism* and *The Emergence*) notes that 'It was the emphasis on discontinuity with the Puritan and Reformed tradition which was quickly recognised as the most contentious element of [Bebbington's] analysis.'¹² So, historiography existed before Bebbington, this was contrary to his thesis, Bebbington had a very positive reception in and after 1989 and has contributed massively. He has also being followed by a wave of friendly critics, including Hempton, but markedly in *The Emergence*. Turnbull (Anglican Evangelical—Reformed) has placed Bebbington's definition *in* (and as the pioneer *of*) the *Generalist* method of definition, as opposed to the *Propositional* or *Sociological* methods.¹³ The Quadrilateral has a breadth and an ability to embrace many who would desire to use the term Evangelical. It is encompassing. It seems that as Evangelicalism has fragmented under, amongst other things, postmodern influences, the definition has become broader. Could this be a result of the desire for the designation "Evangelical" to be retained, perhaps because of its linguistic and cultural merits and status? As Don Carson (Canadian-born, evangelical theologian/author) has noted, in his treatment of 'the pluralism within evangelicalism itself',¹⁴ 'Theologians and historians and pastors alike continuously expand the definition of evangelicalism, but instead of drawing in a wider circle they are gutting what is central. The level of frustration is high.'¹⁵ At the more conservative end (Wells, Carson, the contributors to *The Emergence* and so on) there is an anti-pluralist desire to tighten our definitions. To talk of Biblicism (to use a part of the Quadrilateral) is to encompass a spectrum, solid belief in the inerrancy, authority, necessity and sufficiency of scripture, right across to merely having a fairly high regard for it, as one authority amongst

many. This raises obvious questions: What is Biblicism and who defines it? This lack of clarity and breadth of possible uses of just one of the Quadrilateral criterion makes it difficult to actually find Evangelicals both throughout history and in the many layers of historiography and more theological literature. This in turn adds to our struggle to fairly define evangelicalism.

When the Bebbington Quadrilateral is applied to reality, we are left with the other conclusion that essentially evangelicalism began in the eighteenth century. The issue of historical roots comes later. However the point is that the Reformers and the Puritans are said to have had three out of the four aspects. What they lacked was Activism. Accordingly they are excluded definitionally. The real-life problem with this has been noted by Williams (Oakhill Theological College—Conservative Evangelical, Reformed), who ‘welcomes a historical account of evangelical identity that makes Wesleyanism more marginal and Reformed traditions more central.’¹⁶ Williams reconsiders the Bebbingtonian understanding of the eighteenth century doctrines of Assurance (of salvation) and then applies that to Bebbington’s linking of these doctrines (as allegedly understood pre eighteenth century) with a lack of Activism before the 1730’s, showing that Activism (again, the word must be defined clearly) *did* exist before the 1730’s. Therefore ‘the way is opened to reconsidering the case for the Reformation and Puritanism being authentically evangelical movements.’¹⁷ The implications Williams then draws out are important. Reformed theology becomes the true mainstream of real evangelicalism for 300 years and Arminianism finds no historically based foundational status.¹⁸ As different agendas emerge identity, definitional, and terminological complexity grows.

Tighter definition is found in Larsen, with the jokingly termed ‘Larsen Pentagon’: Orthodox Protestantism, linkage to the eighteenth century traditions, Bible, Christ’s Atonement (leading to reconciliation) and lastly the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Packer (British, Anglican Evangelical theologian/author) and Marsden have also offered tighter definitions. Thompson in Tinker’s *Churchman* article *The Influence of Liberalism upon Evangelicalism* identifies the beliefs at the heart of evangelicalism as: Bible, Sin, Penal Substitutionary Atonement, Justification by Faith Alone and the Necessity of the New Birth.²⁰ There is clearly a striving to include Reformation ‘*Solas*’, and to have *doctrine* as criteria rather than manifestations of doctrinal belief. Hence Stott (Anglican Evangelical) boils things down to (divine activity) a *Trinitarian definition*, leaving human activity to be

assumed as secondary and in response to the theology.²¹ Tighter, more doctrinal definition has come from Conservative Evangelicals (especially, Reformed) a newer generalist wave has emerged under the influence, arguably of postmodernism and the lack of regard for doctrine/truth and church history (historical/doctrinal roots) that it produces. ‘The movement has always had its variety of emphasis,’²² however, could it be that ‘evangelical’ is becoming a useless term?²³ When its varying tribes and tenets can be likened to Heinz with its 57 variations, perhaps we should be awaiting the next big terminological paradigm shift?

Evangelicalism: From Theory to Reality—Methodism

We move now to earth what has been a rather theoretical exploration of Evangelical historiography, identity and definition, in Methodism and the eighteenth century. Methodism has a different historiography to Evangelicalism, though no doubt the two intermingle. Writer’s such as Bready, Wearmouth, Halevy, Rattenbury, Davies, Walsh and Hobsbawm have contributed. However Hempton appears to (more recently) dominate the landscape. Hempton’s *Methodism, The Religion of the People: Methodism and popular religion c.1750-1900* and *Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750-1850* (the former two written *before* Bebbington’s landmark study) combine as a weighty contribution to the historiography. Hempton identifies ‘most of the many contested areas of Methodist historiography [as] ultimately [going] back to rival explanations of its growth and decline...’²⁴ Bebbington in his chapter entitled *Response*, within *The Emergence*, highlights Methodism, and states that the Reformed camp (and to some degree, his own critics) downplayed it, and twentieth century Arminianism has exaggerated it. By ignoring Methodism the evidence is skewed in favour of Reformed continuity between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁵ The crux of the matter being that: ‘Methodists were full participants in the Evangelical Revival. Their contribution ensured that the movement as a whole was in many respects discontinuous with earlier Protestantism as well as in other ways continuous with it.’²⁶ So we consider Methodism in order to ground theory in reality, and importantly, to be above reproach in responsibly handling the *full breadth* of evidence.

Hempton, with Bebbington, makes a case for Evangelicalism springing out of the Enlightenment.²⁷ This is a newer tradition in historiography, prior to Bebbington, the consensus was that Evangelicalism was essentially opposed to the Enlightenment and its values, with the obvious examples of higher criticism

of the Bible, evolutionary theory and reason over revelation. The question is, does Bebbington's broad thesis, especially the Quadrilateral adequately define/handle (eighteenth century) Methodism?

We now engage with the Bebbington Quadrilateral. Bebbington makes it clear that the 'Puritans were conversionist, biblicist and crucicentric.'²⁸ According to Bebbington it is in Evangelicalism/Methodism that we find Activism. Activism is a novelty. We have already considered some of the argumentation against this. By this standard the term Evangelical cannot be used of anyone prior to the Wesley's and the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival. Hempton footnotes Dreyer, Brantley, Haas, Bebbington and so forth in claiming that 'Wesley could be regarded more as a product of the Enlightenment than a reaction against it.'²⁹ Wesley's Methodism was a place of 'creative tension between...enlightenment and enthusiasm.'³⁰ Noll, however, in his *Turning Points* makes it clear that 'Important as the Wesley's adjustments to traditional Protestantism were they also marked an important turning point in church history because of how much of the Protestant heritage they retained.'³¹ Methodism drew deeply from the deep wells of continental Protestantism, theology, piety and spirituality (as we shall see in our consideration of Evangelical 'roots'). However, Methodism produced (according to Bebbington) Activism, or at least new *forms of* activism (this is a debateable issue). Hence Walsh could say 'Early Methodism did more than regroup and revitalize existing pockets of piety. The Revival was also a missionary movement, reaching out to the unchurched.'³² We see this in the ministries of the Wesley's and Whitefield (interestingly, Reformed), the development of lay preachers, itinerant preaching, open air preaching, ignoring of parish boundaries and when we consider the journals of many of these key characters—'Activism' is descriptively accurate. Frantic activity, perhaps may be a more apt description. Methodism was a part of the 'cross-pollinating revivalistic and evangelistic atmosphere of Britain and North America...'³³ So, Methodism was Activist. However, as we consider Bebbington's definition of Activism,³⁴ we see it encompasses heavy preaching schedules, evangelical commitment to parish duties, huge quantities of ministerial visitation, publications, evangelical philanthropy (Shaftesbury, Wilberforce etc) and so forth. Most of this can, arguably, be found in pre-eighteenth century individuals and movements, (especially Puritans) as we shall see. Again the definition is broad. The other three attributes of evangelicalism, are less disputable and contentiously applied, Bebbington admits they pre-existed the 1730s. Perhaps

Bebbington's focus on what actually *happened* in the eighteenth century has necessitated a discontinuity thesis? Especially when he himself points to the early days of revival as focussed on the core doctrines; John Wesley emphasised Justification and the New Birth, Methodism homed in on Original Sin, Justification by Faith and the New Birth, Milner had Conversion, Original Sin, Justification by Faith (Christ/cross) and spiritual renovation as his four essentials and '...the early phase of Evangelical history [by which Bebbington refers to 1730s onwards] concurred with the late Puritan divine Matthew Henry in dwelling on the three R's: ruin, redemption and regeneration.'³⁵ From this we see Evangelicalism as steeped in early (creedal) and reformation (Protestant) Christianity. What we also see is a defining criterion which is rooted in doctrine, not praxis (and assumes practical outworking i.e. Activism as inevitable fruit). Definition is doctrinal. This takes us *back* to our consideration of identity. The postmodern has emphasised pragmatics, diversity and externals whereas the older tradition holds to objective truth, doctrine and internals. This then moves us *forward* to consider potential Evangelical roots.

Evangelicalism: Its Debated Roots

The phrase 'Eighteenth Century Evangelical Revival' is in frequent usage. The very term itself would seem to suggest resurgence, a *re-emergence* of something which needed to be revived? Surely the many secular authors who use the term are *not* referring to the *spiritual* revival that Evangelicals will gladly refer to? If this is the case, then either this terminology is used without thought or out of ease of communication. Words are important. Coffey, a critic of Bebbington, notes that 'Current evangelical historiography runs the risk of obscuring evangelicalism's place within the older and broader tradition of evangelical Protestantism.'³⁶ Indeed, 'Historians of evangelicalism are right to stress the innovatory nature of the movement, but they sometimes underplay its traditionalism.'³⁷ As we've already seen, the most contentious issue with Bebbington's input into the historiography is the ensuing rejection of pre-1730s 'potential evangelicals'. This is tied to the Reformed/Arminian divide and also the search for historical legitimacy, durability and continuity with those we wish to be associated with. Gordon³⁸ (Baptist) and Stott³⁹ both make cases for evangelicalism as 'original, biblical, apostolic Christianity.'⁴⁰ Though this is a huge claim, it's clear that Evangelicalism, while having perhaps a *different emphasis* and bringing (perhaps) an unseen-before Activism, brings nothing new—it seeks to *return* to Scripture.

As Activism is the criteria where Bebbington finds *least continuity* with prior movements, we will consider it and analyse the surrounding historiography through the lens of the various potential roots.

In Bebbington's *Response* his first major port of call regarding the continuities and discontinuities in evangelical history is the issue of Activism. Bebbington notes that some of the contributors to *The Emergence* seem to follow in the footsteps of Trueman's work *Reformers, Puritans and Evangelicals: the lay connection* in contending for continuous connection and that 'activism was no novelty in the eighteenth century.'⁴¹ I find Trueman's argument quite satisfactory. Of course this is only one factor in Activism—lay participation—Bebbington admits this, and also responds: 'activism had existed before the 1730s, but it is also true that its scale and dimensions altered significantly...'⁴² Bebbington's strength lies in his next (linked) point that there was a lack of 'transcultural missions', based initially in the Reformers insistence on a 'Protestant government' prior to the effective evangelisation of a nation.⁴³ This is well evidenced. However, Coffey does point out instances of missions and more convincingly points to recent (post Bebbington 1989) scholarship which shows that, 'the English *state* became Protestant decades before the English *people* and [our concern here] for generations Protestant energies were sunk into evangelizing their own populations.'⁴⁴ Sometimes it seems like Bebbington's critics are 'scraping the barrel' in terms of finding Activism and evangelistic zeal in pre-1730s individuals, indeed one critic (Morgan—regarding Wales) falls in line with Bebbington in seeing, 'startling effectiveness', 'unprecedented appeal' and 'energies' that 'created a new state of affairs'.⁴⁵ However the other arguments that find *hidden manifestations* of activism (pre- eighteenth century) and those that see Bebbington's activism as *new manifestation* of the old activism are very convincing. Surely it would be difficult to contest the assertion that Richard Baxter (Puritan) was an activist?⁴⁶ Indeed, 'the novelty lay in the *practical methods* of the new evangelicalism' so that while, 'The evangelical Protestant world had never seen anything quite like it before.' continuity can still be emphasised.⁴⁷

We move now away from the *specific issue* of Activism and 'roots', to a more general survey of other debatable continuities.

Briefly, the old historiography started by Tyndale, then Foxe and championed

by Dickens drew continuity between Lollardy and the English Protestant Reformation. Considerable debate surrounds this. Having written on the topic elsewhere, it seems most helpful to accept the theological, personal, generational and literary *continuities* and also consider potential *modifications* (i.e. rejecting the Wycliffe as ‘Morning Star’ thesis) and *blatant discontinuities*, rather than ignoring the continuity thesis outright. In this I stand more with Foxe (Protestant and polemical) and Dickens (traditional historiography), Hudson and Ryrie (recent and respected) and Aston—*Lollards and Reformers*—than with Rex, though *The Lollards*⁴⁸ is a very accessible, albeit sceptical, contribution to the historiography. If Lollardy grows into the Reformation and the Reformation feeds Puritanism and Pietism, then that is a long continuity, a rich heritage.

In the Reformation we find a much bigger source of debate and many potential foci. Etymology is worthy of our attention. MacCulloch, Marshall and Ryrie stand in a more recent tradition of describing the English reformers as ‘evangelicals’ or ‘gospellers’.⁴⁹ ‘Reformers spoke of themselves as brethren, as gospellers or evangelicals or simply as true Christians.’⁵⁰ It would seem that this picks up on the concept of ‘gospel people’, an allegedly continuous strand running throughout Christian history. The ‘Good News of the Evangelion’⁵¹ is perhaps the etymological key. Secondly, just as many Lollards were hidden and elusive,⁵² so were early Evangelicals, Ryrie’s chapter is entitled *The evangelical underground* as ‘Henrician evangelicals took active steps to conceal themselves and their opinions.’⁵³ Persecution results in *hidden evangelicals*. This is hidden evidence.

Bebbington’s (*The Emergence*) critics have arrayed a strong case in the form of various studies on the Reformation. McGowan considers, *Evangelicalism in Scotland from Knox to Cunningham*, Beeke tackles *Evangelicalism and the Dutch Further Reformation*, MacKenzie *The Evangelical character of Martin Luther’s faith*, Helm *Calvin, A.M. Toplady and the Bebbington thesis* and Null *Thomas Cranmer and Tudor Evangelicalism*. If anything Bebbington’s *Response* deals least with these particular contributions. More generally, ‘The momentum of the Symposium is maintained, as each of these contributors writes with clarity and authority and each demonstrates that there is a powerful case to be made for continuity in the evangelical tradition.’⁵⁴ We may add Lady Jane Grey as an example of a little known (English Reformation) Evangelical as well. The Reformation (historiography) is a rich soil for continuity debates

and I would argue is a root of Evangelicalism, indeed it seems that Evangelicals existed during and after the Reformation.

The pre-Bebbington historiography reflects the view that many streams ran into one river. This has continued. Walsh (major historiographical contributor) identifies the three ‘taproots of the Revival’ as, ‘High Church Piety’ (C. Smyth, 1940), examples being Wesley and Simeon, ‘a reaction to early eighteenth century rationalism’ (A.C. M’Giffert, 1911) and ‘an eruption within the Church of England of the traditions of seventeenth century Puritanism...’ (J.H. Faulkener, 1926).⁵⁵ Noll identifies the Wesley’s as renewing ‘doctrines of God’s grace that had grown stale in the English church.’⁵⁶ A very popular and plausible model in the historiography is that of the dual input of (Continental) Pietism (e.g. Moravian’s) and Puritanism. Coffey points to ‘Reformation doctrine’ and ‘Pietist fervour’.⁵⁷ There is an emphasis in contemporaries and modern evangelical scholarship on *head* and *heart* Evangelical religion. Doctrine and doxology combine. Turnbull’s diagram of ‘Word’ (of God) and ‘Cross’ (of Christ) channelled into ‘Protestant doctrine’ (thence through ‘Puritanism’ to Evangelicalism and into the ‘Reformed’ camp) and ‘Personal encounter’ (thence through ‘Pietism’ and ‘Holiness’ traditions into Evangelicalism and then into the ‘Charismatic’ expression), all interlinked, is both comprehensive and convincing.⁵⁸ Newton made a strong pre-Bebbington contribution in *Methodism and Puritanism*, arguing for strong continuity via Wesley and his home background.⁵⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have considered Evangelicalism its identity, definition and roots. These three foci are interrelated. The complexity of the subject is self-evident. We cannot ignore or down play Bebbington’s significant input into Evangelical historiography. Much of the none-Bebbington (post 1989) material at least acknowledges his input and often has to work around and in relation to his thesis. The issue of continuity and discontinuity is extremely contentious. We have seen throughout that we have to consider carefully words, their definition and use, perhaps ultimately the word ‘Evangelical’. Carson’s comment seems to be both fair and accurate, ‘Bebbington’s discussion of [the quadrilateral categories] has much to commend it, however much the labels themselves leave something to be desired.’⁶⁰ Carson’s critique is helpful and illuminating. It does seem that something of the ‘organic wholeness’ of our ‘beliefs and

practices' with a central core of 'submitting everything to the bible' is missing.⁶¹ What also seems to have been made clear in the historiography and the more Conservative Evangelical/historically, sociologically and philosophically aware critique is that *doctrine matters*. Carson points to Wells—that 'evangelicals have always been *doctrinal people*.'⁶² Whilst not wishing to accuse Bebbington of unthinkingly going along with postmodernism, there is little doubt that it has had a negative effect. Indeed, there has been something of a blind panic amongst Evangelicals regarding being associated with the Enlightenment. We haven't had time to discuss this old zeitgeist as we would have wished. However it seems that, something did arise in the Enlightenment which had its effect upon Evangelicalism. Haykin in his *Evangelicalism and the Enlightenment: a reassessment* concedes that eighteenth century Evangelicalism did share some of its cultures assumptions.⁶³ The fear is that we appear to be un-biblically of *the world*, this doesn't have to be so. Bebbington himself admits that 'Though not created by the Enlightenment, evangelicalism was embedded in it.'⁶⁴ This opens the door for a pre 1730s Evangelicalism, which has been in many ways, the thrust behind much of our historiographical survey. Continuity with the magisterial Reformation is to be found with links which are not obscure but solidly doctrinal. This brings us to contest the very underpinnings of our understanding of 'definition' and identity. Bebbington uses belief *and practice*, others would emphasise beliefs first and *practice as an outworking*. Of course this has manifested itself in the Activism debate, which has rightly dominated the post 1989 critique and historiography.

The critique, responses and reassessments will continue, however our 'touchstone' is not the Evangelical Awakening, but the Bible.⁶⁵ We would argue for doctrinal continuity as well as other continuities and indeed discontinuities. Definition should be doctrinal. Evangelicalism has attracted its own historiography. It is not a modern novelty; it is not a new creation.

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