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Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody (Book Review)

Keith C. Sewell
Dordt College

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Book Reviews

Bebbington, David W. *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody. (A History of Evangelicalism: People, Movements and Ideas in the English-Speaking World, vol. III)*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005. 288 pp. including bibliography. ISBN: 0-8308-2583-5. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor of History at Dordt College.

This is the third volume in a series of five but only the second to appear. Between the first volume, by Mark Noll, and this one, by David W. Bebbington, we expect *The Expansion of Evangelicalism* by John R. Wolfe. Bebbington is a distinguished writer in this field, having placed us all in his debt by his *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989). In this earlier work Bebbington offers his influential “quadrilateral of priorities” characterization of evangelicalism: “conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and ... crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.” These certainly capture the heart of the evangelical commitment. Where one or more of these are absent, we are not in the presence of unambiguous evangelicalism.

Bebbington carries this approach into the present volume (23-40). This is an *interior* history of evangelicalism (evangelicalism in its own terms) rather than a history of evangelicalism wholly situated in its wider cultural context. In addition, Bebbington focuses on two leading evangelicals as exemplifying the evangelicalism of their time: Spurgeon and Moody (40-50). While they are an understandable choice, it is tempting to wonder if these particular exemplars color the picture with a certain hue. Other choices might have produced a significantly different overall complexion.

A lover of Puritan literature, Spurgeon could retreat into an anti-intellectualism that was to become characteristic of later evangelicalism. At the time of the 1887 “Down Grade” controversy concerning liberalism and higher criticism, he disparaged “thinking men,” even as he and other evangelicals were unable to formulate a cogent critique of German-style “higher critical” scholarship (172-7). Such righteous bluster could not carry the day among enquiring minds. Thus it was that a deliberate and sometimes strident fundamentalism emerged (260-2, cf. 71-2). By 1900, evangelicalism had largely shed whatever it had derived from an older and more austere Calvinism. The counter tendency was limited to the emerging evangelical fundamentalism, finding what it needed in the theory of inspiration advanced at Princeton Seminary.

From the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, Methodism was the only large-scale denominational tradition that was wholly evangelical. It was conspicuous for its

adherence to Wesley’s neo-Arminianism. The nineteenth century saw evangelicals shift away from the sovereignty of God in salvation—“the doctrines of grace”—toward a much looser approach, which seemed to make everything pivot on human volition (135). People must decide for Christ before what is offered through Him can be theirs. Moody stood in this “alter call” and “enquiry room” tradition (46). Finney was his predecessor (106), and Billy Graham his successor. This tradition accorded well with Wesleyan evangelicalism and provided us with sub-biblical language such as “Have you received Jesus Christ as your own personal savior?”

The shift from doctrine to feeling certainly reflected the influence of romanticism (150-51), but there was surely more to it. Bebbington might have explored the close relationships between evangelism and marketing. Revivalist evangelism (“reaching the masses”) has been more influential on marketing and advertising than we realize, while the latter has impacted styles of evangelism more than is generally appreciated. Where there was an ever-increasing range of goods and services, “decision making” became an increasing part of so-called “secular” socio-economic life for ever more people. Evangelicals thought they were being scriptural, as in “Choose you this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15), but they were reading such texts within *their* cultural context, even while they neglected the study of culture as a worldly preoccupation. Evangelicals thought in terms of “common sense” (121-24), which predisposed them against any critical analysis of their own actual starting-point. They could be self-deceptively self-assured. As a result, even as they mounted crusades (also for human betterment and the combating of social evils [239 f.]), they were being molded by their surrounding culture more than they realized.

In addition to the emergence of fundamentalism, evangelism underwent two major doctrinal developments in this period. The first was the rise of evangelical premillennialism, especially in its dispensational form. The Puritans and early evangelicals were often of post-millennial orientation. However, as it became clear that the French Revolution was not an isolated incident, evangelicals swung towards an eschatology that was more consistent with the cultural pessimism of post-revolution conservatism. It was Edward Irving (1792-1834) who assiduously promoted the pre-millennial standpoint (191). This standpoint asserted

that the Second Advent of Christ would take place before the millennium. By 1900, this viewpoint had become pervasive, although there were always exceptions (193-96). To this pre-millennialism many added the further refinement of dispensationalism, as advocated by John N. Darby (1800-82), with its doctrine of the “rapture” (62, 197-98). Dispensationalism asserted a postponement of the kingdom of God. The gentile church became a “mystery parenthesis.” There was little or no scope here for Christian action in all spheres of life, to the glory of Almighty God. The triumph of futurist (in their interpretation of the Book of Revelation) dispensationalists was greatly facilitated by the “Scofield Bible” (199). The results “can hardly be overestimated,” says Bebbington (199-200).

The second doctrinal development in evangelism was the emergence of the “holiness movement,” with its emphasis on the “higher Christian life,” which served as a prelude to the burgeoning of the Pentecostal movement in the early twentieth century and the charismatic movement from the 1960s onwards. This second development was entirely consistent with the first. It was a movement towards individual, interior, personal holiness—as if the inner and the private (as in the “quiet time” spent “alone with the Lord”) were to be a sort of refuge from the encircling pre-millennial gloom. The roots were Wesleyan. The desire was for a personal (read *individual*) “baptism of the Holy Spirit”—a mountaintop experience—beyond the process of sanctification.

The influences of perfectionism were certainly behind this quest for the “higher Christian life,” which found its apogee in the Keswick Convention movement that spread around the globe from the 1870s (200-210). However, Keswick never went “the whole hog”—it resisted the apparent consequences of its own starting-point. It rejected any notion of the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” that resulted in immediate perfection, and it declined to seek charismatic gifts (210-14). Eventually, Keswick was upstaged by the burgeoning Pentecostal movements of the twentieth century. Evangelicals did not retreat from all social action, but by the latter nineteenth century, cultural pessimism and individualism had left their mark. Evangelicals were mainly involved in intense rear-guard actions dictated by moral priorities (239 f.). They aspired to change individual lives and address particular evils. The reformation of structures was not on the agenda.

All of this leaves us wondering about the thesis implied in the title of the book. Was evangelicalism truly dominant between 1860 and 1900? It was certainly pervasive within Protestant denominations (50-51, 253-54), but was it so influential as to be prevalent? It was the norm within many branches of the principal Protestant denominations within the United States. As of 1900, the big loss of ground was yet to take place in America, but Bebbington tells us that even in America the “evangelical hegemony...a reality in the middle years of the century, was fading *before its end*” (75, italics mine). The fact that it was fading would suggest

that assertions of “dominance” are misleading.

What about the British Isles? In truth, an assertion of dominance would seem to apply even less to Great Britain than to North America. In England, evangelicals were losing ground within their base-church, the Church of England (254). Moreover, its characteristic pragmatism meant that evangelicalism could not resolve the issues between the established Church of England and the Free Churches (64, 66). Within the Church of England, the evangelical party struggled with the mounting influence of Anglo-Catholicism (73, 154-58). Notwithstanding the “Second Evangelical Awakening” of 1858-60 (107 f.), evangelicals did not dominate the ecclesiastical culture of the British Isles after 1860 or, still less, the national agenda.

Individual exceptions aside, evangelicalism as a broad movement was prone to depreciate the intellectual. It knew what it did not like, but it was incapable of dominating the intellectual agenda with a mixture of reaction, repudiation, and denunciation. Initially many evangelical leaders accepted Darwin’s theory of evolution and only later became increasingly uncertain (173-83). The response to higher critical biblical scholarship was insecure and tended to become shrill (261). Although Bebbington writes of an “evangelical hegemony,” he has to depict it as “insecure” (257). Such equivocations are so weighty that the broad thesis fails to convince. Evangelicals may well have *permeated* significant *portions* of the Anglophone world to *some* degree, but by 1900, they did not *dominate* it.

In an earlier work, Bebbington referred to the nineteenth century as “the Evangelical century,” but he greatly qualified this description, particularly with reference to the period covered in this present volume, by speaking of “decay” from the 1860s onwards (*Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 1989, 149, cf. 141-46). Now, with Mark Noll, Bebbington is a co-general editor of this “A History of Evangelicalism” series. He seems to have shifted his opinions to suit the overall outlook of the series. He is one with Noll and George Marsden in supporting evangelicalism while decrying the anti-intellectualism of the earlier twentieth century. The language of foreboding (decay, fading, insecurity) is present in *The Dominance of Evangelicalism* but in a manner rendering it more compatible with the overall orientation of the series as implied in the titles of its individual volumes.

If we accept the idea that evangelicalism was once pervasive without being either “dominant” or “hegemonic” and that it undeniably went into decay, it is worth asking why. It may be argued that the “quadrilateral of priorities,” which Bebbington uses to identify evangelicalism, represented such a reduction of the full teaching of scripture and scope of Christian discipleship as to systemically handicap evangelicals in facing the challenges that emerged in the nineteenth century. To confront those challenges with authority and insight would require of evangelicalism that it exceed the limitations of its own character. That did not happen.