

*THE DOMINANCE OF EVANGELICALISM:  
THE AGE OF SPURGEON AND MOODY*

By Michael Gleghorn

*The Dominance of Evangelicalism* is the third book in a five-volume series on the history of evangelicalism. Its author, David W. Bebbington, is a professor of history at the University of Stirling in Scotland. Noting that his focus in this volume is on “the evangelical movement of the English-speaking world,” Bebbington tells us right from the beginning that his attention will be concentrated on “the peoples of the United Kingdom, the United States and the settler communities of the British Empire” during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (11-12).

Bebbington sets the stage for his study by describing this period as “an age of empire” (14). The British government extended the reach of its authority over India and parts of Africa, while the United States acquired “Puerto Rico, Cuba, Hawaii and the Philippines in the wake of the Spanish-American War of 1898” (14). In addition to expanding the reach of their governmental authority, both countries also experienced a rapid growth in population and industry (16-17). Through the dramatic expansion of the railway system, the laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable, and the development of steamships, the world seemed to become a much smaller place during this period (18-19). As a result, writes Bebbington, “there was a large-scale interchange between evangelicals in different lands,” leading to “a high degree of unity” within the evangelical movement throughout the world (20).

## Chapter 1: The Evangelicals of the World

According to Bebbington, the formation of the Evangelical Alliance took place in 1846 (21). The organization's statement of faith revealed the core doctrinal beliefs which most evangelicals shared "around the middle of the nineteenth century" (21). Three of these, Bebbington claims, are particularly important for understanding the evangelical movement: the Bible, the cross, and conversion (21-22). But if we broaden these considerations to include not only what evangelicals thought it important to *believe*, but also what they thought it important to *do*, we would need to add a fourth defining characteristic to our list: activism—especially in the sense of actively spreading the gospel (22). Thus, writes Bebbington, "what we can call crucicentrism, conversionism, Biblicism and activism formed the enduring priorities of the evangelical movement throughout the English-speaking world" (23).

Two shining examples of these enduring priorities can be seen in the lives of Charles Haddon Spurgeon and Dwight L. Moody (40-51). Spurgeon was born in 1834 and converted at age fifteen (40). Although he received no formal training for the ministry, he was nonetheless "a very bookish man" who eventually assembled "a personal library of over twelve thousand volumes" (40-41). A gifted preacher, he "conveyed a message that induced 14,460 individuals to be baptized and added to the church during his ministry" (41). Through his preaching and writing, Spurgeon became well-known throughout the evangelical world. Although he certainly had his detractors, "from an early stage, favorable comment overwhelmed criticism" (43). Indeed, on his fiftieth birthday, the *Presbyterian Churchman* unashamedly described him as the "greatest preacher of modern or even of ancient times" (44).

D. L. Moody was born in 1837 in rural Massachusetts (46). Converted at the age of seventeen, he quickly got involved in ministry, serving first with the Young Men's Christian Association and then as pastor of the Illinois Street Church (46). After a fire destroyed his home and church, Moody accepted "an invitation to conduct a series of evangelistic missions in the British Isles" beginning in 1873 (46). Working with the popular musician, Ira Sankey, Moody quickly realized his calling to be an evangelist (46). His influence was immense. Thousands were

converted through his simple gospel preaching and he “shaped the trajectory of conservative evangelicalism long into the twentieth century” (50).

## **Chapter 2: Varieties of Evangelicalism**

In this chapter Bebbington describes both the unity and diversity that existed within the evangelical movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. He writes, “If the movement was recognizably one, it was also in several respects diverse. Evangelicals differed in theology, denomination, social characteristics and geographical location” (52).

Bebbington first turns his attention to theological and denominational variety (54). He observes that there was a significant evangelical presence within the Anglican communion, even if they did not constitute a majority (54-55). Among Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists and Methodists, however, the vast majority do appear to have been evangelicals (55-60). Furthermore, there were at least some evangelicals to be found among the Lutherans, Mennonites and Quakers (60-61). Besides these more familiar groups, wholly new denominations also arose within this period—the Disciples (or Churches) of Christ, the Brethren, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and the Society of Dependents (or Cokelers) (62-63). Of course, each of these denominations also had theological distinctives which served to distinguish their group from others. Although such theological and denominational division “could often flare up into heated controversy,” nevertheless, “cooperation among evangelicals was also widespread” (e.g. Bible Societies, the Evangelical Alliance, etc.) (65).

In addition to the theological and denominational divisions, evangelicals were also characterized by important social and geographical divisions. For example, the differences “between urban and rural styles of congregation” became quite pronounced during this period (67). There were also “enormous disparities in wealth,” which influenced the type of building in which congregants met for worship. The poor assembled in very humble abodes, while the rich constructed more stylish and ornate establishments (67-68). Although the geographical divisions of this increasingly global movement were important, they were mitigated (at least in part) by

“improvements in communications” which “revolutionized contact between different parts of the world” (78). Thus, in Bebbington’s view, while the “denominational, social and national divisions persisted . . . they were weaker at the end than at the start of the period” (81).

### **Chapter 3: The Practice of Faith**

In this chapter Bebbington explores aspects of evangelical faith and practice which are often neglected by historians. These include discussions of evangelical spirituality, worship and mission (82).

Evangelical spirituality was characterized, first and foremost, by a commitment to prayer (83). Evangelicals prayed privately as individuals and corporately as families and congregations (84). Evangelical piety was decidedly Christocentric and believers “cherished the conviction that Jesus was their personal Savior” (85-86). This was important, for evangelicals also recognized that they were deeply flawed people. Temptation, whether through the world, the flesh, or the devil, was an ever present reality against which the faithful constantly had to contend (86). Sometimes these struggles could lead to doubts about the assurance of one’s salvation (86). But it was important to overcome such doubts because evangelicals “nurtured the ideal” of facing death with a “calm assurance of faith” (87).

Evangelicals viewed worship as “a regular part of Christian duty” (89). A typical worship service included the singing of hymns, prayer, Bible reading, announcements, and the sermon (89). While all of these were important, the sermon was usually viewed as “the climax of worship” (91). Nevertheless, as Bebbington observes, it was the “musical dimension of worship” that “tended to become livelier during the period” (93). In this respect, possibly the biggest change in evangelical worship services was precipitated by “the introduction of organs” (95). Although initially resisted by some congregations, organs could be found in most houses of worship by the end of the nineteenth century (96).

Finally, we must consider mission. As a general rule, evangelicals of this period were remarkably active in propagating their faith. Home missionary work was conducted by both

ministers and laypeople through a wide variety of mediums including Bible classes, athletic clubs, musical societies, camp meetings, ministries to the poor, the creation of orphanages, and the dissemination of Bibles and Christian literature (96-102). Through Sunday schools, the Y.M.C.A., and other organizations, evangelicals helped bring Christian instruction to the young (102-05). And through their ongoing commitment to revivals, evangelicals continued to have regular periods of intense gospel preaching in which unbelievers were converted and believers were re-energized in their devotion to Christ and His church (105-09).

Of course, most evangelicals not only saw it as their duty to spread the gospel at home; it was also their duty to proclaim this message abroad (109). The emphasis on foreign missions, both in Britain and the United States, made evangelicalism a powerful movement that increasingly “covered the globe” (116).

#### **Chapter 4: The Legacy of the Enlightenment**

Although it may initially sound surprising, Bebbington claims that “evangelicals of the later nineteenth century” were deeply influenced by Enlightenment presuppositions (117). While evangelicals rejected the religious skepticism of David Hume and the “rationalism” of biblical higher criticism, they were not so much opposed to the use of human reason, as they were to its “intrusion . . . into the proper sphere of revelation” (120). So long as reason did not overstep its proper bounds, many evangelicals were quite willing to follow its lead (121). Among other things, this led to the widespread adoption of the “commonsense philosophy” of Thomas Reid and the natural theology of William Paley. In the minds of many evangelicals, Reid’s philosophy offered a potent response “to the skepticism of David Hume” (123), while Paley’s work on the *Evidences of Christianity* provided powerful empirical support for an intelligent Designer of the cosmos (125).

In addition to influencing the thinking of evangelicals in philosophy and apologetics, Enlightenment presuppositions also had an important impact on the formulation of Christian doctrine. For example, what many Americans referred to as “the New England Theology,” a

school of thought at least partly indebted to the work of Jonathan Edwards, “constituted a species of Calvinism that was willing to accept that freedom of choice is a reality and that there is no ought without can” (132). According to Bebbington, both of these affirmations were “classic contentions of the broader Enlightenment” (132). Indeed, although Calvinism continued to have capable advocates, like Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary, the “theological tide” among evangelicals in this period “seemed to be flowing in favor of Arminianism” (133-39).

Bebbington implies that at least one of the reasons for this change was that evangelicals were increasingly attracted to the Arminian doctrine of a universal, or unlimited, atonement. “The confidence that everybody could be saved,” he writes, “can itself be seen as connected to the spirit of the Enlightenment” (138).

Enlightenment views influenced not only Christian doctrine, but also Christian practice. This was especially evident in the flexible approaches taken by evangelicals of the time to both missionary activity and church order (141-47). According to Bebbington, evangelicals viewed both church and missionary organizations “as instrumental agencies, and so there was a willingness to adapt them . . . to the needs of the times” (144). Indeed, it was at least partly for these reasons that “evangelicalism was so influential in the middle years of the nineteenth century” (147).

### **Chapter 5: The Permeation of Romanticism**

Although Enlightenment thinking remained very strong throughout the nineteenth century, a new way of looking at the world arose to challenge its dominance. In many ways this new philosophical movement embraced values that were the polar opposite of those held by Enlightenment thinkers. Often termed Romanticism, this new movement gloried in “will, spirit and emotion,” rather than reason (148). It was so enamored with nature that it often verged on pantheism, the view that all is God. Two of its primary proponents in England were William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (148). In America, it was championed by the Transcendentalists (149).

Naturally, it wasn't long before Romantic notions were influencing evangelicals. By the middle of the nineteenth century there were quite a few Anglican Evangelicals "who professed ideas with a distinctively Romantic provenance" (151). Soon the movement also began to influence church architecture. The Gothic style was all the rage and many evangelicals couldn't resist constructing their new church buildings in this vein (153).

Along with the change in architecture, however, came a growing change in liturgical practice stemming from the "ritualist heirs of the Oxford movement" (154). According to Bebbington, "Their aim was to reproduce the patterns of worship of the Catholic past, as perceived through Romantic eyes, replete with color, mystery and elaborate ceremony" (154). At first, many evangelicals reacted so violently against these new practices that there was a tendency to actually denigrate the significance and value of the sacraments (156-58). Before long, however, others, especially in the Anglican Church, began "to adopt higher forms of liturgical practice" (158). Thus, evangelicals were largely divided over the extent to which they were willing to embrace these new ideas and practices.

In America, Horace Bushnell and Henry Ward Beecher each played a significant role in bringing Romantic ideas into evangelical theology (163-64). Bushnell once wrote that given "the infirmities of language," doctrinal formulations could never be "pressed to the letter for the very sufficient reason that the letter is never true" (164). In Bebbington's view, this "essentially literary perception was the germ of the theological liberalism that began to make its way into the evangelical movement" (164).

As one might expect, a number of Christian doctrines were affected by all these new ideas. Whereas God had previously been viewed, under the influence of Enlightenment notions, as a perfectly just lawgiver, He became increasingly conceived as a loving heavenly Father (166-67). This, in turn, influenced the doctrine of the atonement. The theologian John McLeod Campbell argued that "the Father did not need to have his attitude to humanity altered by the sacrifice of Christ from wrath to mercy because, despite his anguish over sin, from eternity he had been full of paternal pity" (168). In light of ideas such as these, it's really not surprising that

evangelicals also experienced some significant changes in their attitudes toward hell (170). Although many continued to hold the traditional view of the eternal punishment of the lost, others began to embrace alternative positions like universalism, future probation (i.e. a second chance for salvation after death), and conditional immortality (170-72).

In addition, evangelicals also began to entertain new ideas about the Bible (172). While some propounded the verbal, plenary view of inspiration, others argued that only the religious content of Scripture was inspired. The latter group believed that the Bible could, in fact, be in error on other matters (173-74). Although these issues were hotly debated, “as the century drew to a close, the broader school of thought was gathering strength” (177).

Finally, with the publication of Charles Darwin’s book, *The Origin of Species*, in 1859, evangelicals were confronted with a serious challenge to the biblical doctrine of creation (177). Although evangelicals were initially quite dismissive of Darwin’s theory, this attitude gradually began to shift (177-78). By the end of the nineteenth century, many evangelicals “had come to accept that Darwin’s discoveries could be interpreted within a Christian framework” (179). As the full implications of Darwin’s theory were increasingly understood, some evangelicals began to downplay the need for God’s miraculous intervention in history. In Bebbington’s view, “The seed was being sown for the liberal evangelicalism of the early twentieth century” (182).

## **Chapter 6: Conservative Theological Trends**

As liberalism began creeping into the evangelical church, a conservative backlash ensued (184). In this chapter, Bebbington examines three areas in which this backlash was especially prominent: 1) a resurgence of interest in living by faith; 2) a renewed fascination with premillennialism; and 3) a renewed dedication to holiness.

The “faith principle” arose “in the context of the philosophy of missions” (185). In 1824 Edward Irving, under the influence of the Romantic poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, preached a sermon to the London Missionary Society in which he called for missionaries to “take

Christ at his word” and “go to their fields relying on the Almighty alone for their support” (185). Although Irving’s sermon did affect the future of missions, the best known example of someone actually choosing to live this way is probably George Müller. Müller served as co-minister of Bethesda Chapel in Bristol and also started a thriving orphanage that typically helped about two thousand children at any given time. His entire ministry operated on the “faith principle.” “The needs were publicized, but no other effort was made to collect funds” (186). In Müller’s view, the entire project visibly demonstrated that the Almighty was “as willing as ever to *prove* Himself to be the LIVING GOD, in our day as formerly, *to all who put their trust in Him*” (186).

In addition to Müller, several other prominent evangelicals of this time also chose to live by the “faith principle.” These included Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, and Henry Guinness, who launched the East London Training Institute, the Regions Beyond Missionary Union, the Livingstone Inland Mission, and the Congo Balolo Mission (188-90). The principle also influenced several organizations in America. It was, in fact, “one of the most potent bequests of nineteenth-century evangelicalism to the succeeding century” (190).

Although most evangelicals appear to have entered the nineteenth century as postmillennialists, premillennialism was destined to make a remarkable comeback during this period. Basing its views on a literal interpretation of Scripture, premillennialists held that Christ would return to earth *prior* to the millennium, during which he would rule as king. Edward Irving provided the initial impetus for the new doctrine and in spite of some initial skepticism it gradually gathered more and more converts (190-91). In Britain, it was embraced by most of the Brethren, some of the Baptists, and virtually all Evangelical Anglicans (193-94). In America, it was popularized through Bible conferences by men such as Arthur T. Pierson and D. L. Moody (194-95). According to Bebbington, “By the late 1890s the newer understanding of the future had been widely adopted in the circles around Moody” (195).

Finally, evangelicals of this time also experienced a renewed interest in holiness teaching (200). Although different in certain respects, the new teaching was quite reminiscent of John Wesley’s doctrine of “Christian perfection” or “entire sanctification” (200-06). Through the

work of people like Phoebe Palmer, Charles Finney, Asa Mahan, and W.E. Boardman, holiness teaching enjoyed something of a renaissance in both Britain and the United States.

One of the movements spawned by this renewed interest in holiness was the Keswick movement, which began in England in 1875 (207). Although some on the fringes of this movement taught that sin could be entirely eradicated in this life, the “official line” maintained that sin was merely subdued as the believer, by faith, availed himself of the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit (208). This emphasis on the Holy Spirit, a hallmark of the various holiness movements, also helped birth the Pentecostal movement around the beginning of the twentieth century (212). In Bebbington’s view, the three movements considered in this chapter became “the chief sources of strength for the cause of resisting liberalism” (213).

### **Chapter 7: Evangelicals and Society**

Bebbington begins this chapter by discussing the role of women in nineteenth century evangelicalism. Although most evangelicals believed that “women should play a different and in many ways subordinate role” to men, there were nevertheless a number of different ways in which women could get involved in the life and ministry of the church (216-20). For instance, women played a crucially important role in visiting the sick, raising funds for church and missionary work, teaching Sunday school, serving as overseas missionaries, and (at least on occasion) preaching the word (220-26). Thus, while evangelicalism could at times restrict the role of women, it could also greatly enlarge their opportunities for influence and service (226).

Evangelicals had a rather mixed record on race relations during this time (227). On the one hand, they had helped abolish the British slave trade and emancipate slaves in the British territories (227). On the other hand, the institution of slavery “remained firmly entrenched in the American South, where most evangelicals maintained that it was divinely sanctioned” (227). In addition, many white evangelicals, even among those who were opposed to slavery, believed in the inherent inferiority of other races (228-31). It is therefore not surprising that many black Christians in America, as soon as they were able, chose to establish their own churches (231).

According to Bebbington, these churches quickly became the most important agencies for improving the lot “of those who had once been slaves” (233).

Another controversial topic of the time concerned how evangelicals were to relate to the surrounding culture. At the beginning of this period, it was considered completely improper, if not downright sinful, for evangelicals to attend the theater or participate in dancing (233-35). Although these standards were gradually relaxed, evangelicals continued to expend a great deal of energy resisting what they saw as harmful societal forces (239). They campaigned in defense of keeping the Christian Sabbath, opposed the evils of Roman Catholicism, fought to end the sexual exploitation of women and children, and waged holy war against the use and abuse of alcohol (239-46). In addition, they also made an important, and usually discerning, contribution to the social gospel movement. While remembering that the gospel “was primarily a matter of spiritual salvation,” they also recognized the importance of striving for “social reform” (248).

### **Chapter 8: The Dominance of Evangelicalism**

In this chapter, Bebbington essentially sums up the work as a whole. He notes that in the second half of the nineteenth century evangelicals continued to be concerned, above all, “with the cultivation of vital Christianity” (252). The evangelistic thrust of the movement provided a steady stream of converts and sustained the movement’s growth around the world (253-55). Of course, the movement also encountered difficulties. Increased prosperity and respectability often led to a lukewarm spirituality and a willingness to embrace more liberal theological views (258-59). But these developments were also counterbalanced, at least to some degree, through an emphasis on the “faith principle,” the “growth of premillennial teaching,” and a renewed emphasis on holiness (259). While it’s true that “there was a great deal of diversity” within the global evangelical movement, nevertheless it also remained tightly bound together through “the growing web of international communications” (263). All things considered, Bebbington concludes, “Between 1850 and 1900 the evangelical movement was a dominant force in the English-speaking world” (267).