

## Book Reviews

*Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History From the 1730s to the 1980s.* By David W. Bebbington. London: Unwin Hyman, 1989. ISBN 0-04-941018-0. Pp. xi+364.

David W. Bebbington's bold revision of evangelical historiography in Britain corroborates the theory that culture shaped Protestant evangelicalism more than evangelicalism changed the culture. Like other concurrent Christian traditions, evangelicalism too has changed immensely over the past two and a half centuries as it responded to the shifting philosophical assumptions of Western civilization, as well as to changing socio-economic and political milieus.

The book begins with a definition of evangelicalism broad enough to include not only the groups forming the sectarian mosaic within Britain but also groups within the larger traditional churches. The four characteristics identified by Bebbington as essential include: "conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in action; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross." Although the definition at first appears to be merely descriptive, reference to this quadrilateral of priorities as a "permanent deposit of faith" which has been, and still needs to be, preserved makes it clear that Bebbington uses the four attributes in a credal sense also. These four features form the threads of continuity throughout the 250 years examined in this volume.

The historical survey itself begins with the thesis that the enlightenment created the conditions which conceived the version of Protestantism known as evangelicalism. Its genesis coincides with the work of George Whitefield, Charles Wesley and the influence of Jonathan Edwards. Although these individuals were all thoroughly steeped in Puritanism, their innovations marked a radical discontinuity with the previous tradition. The dynamism driving the movement was made possible by the doctrine of assurance, which liberated adherents from the earnest pursuit of salvation, and freed them for the essential task of propagation. The presence of the empiricist method, the unbridled optimism of postmillennial eschatology, an aversion for abstract theological systems, a pragmatism which continually evaluated actions on the basis of their usefulness, and the dominance of benevolence as an ethical value, all

reflected the degree to which the enlightenment had permeated the movement.

Early in the nineteenth century, a small group of radicals — most notably Edward Irving — began transposing evangelicalism into a romantic key. The rising supernaturalism characterizing this group manifested itself in a preference for various forms of premillennialism and the anticipation of the cataclysmic advent of Christ, as well as a more exalted estimate of scripture (e.g., development of the doctrine of inerrancy). Well-educated and mobile, this group remained wary of trends towards theological and social liberalism. However, it was not until decades later that evangelicalism as a whole began to feel the full force of romanticism. The desire to see divine involvement in the world spawned the Keswick conventions, which popularized a more passive approach to sanctification (and to social action) and shaped evangelical piety for much of the twentieth century. The varied responses to the encroachment of liberalism towards the end of the nineteenth century broadened the continuum of evangelical opinion, but also polarized the conservative and liberal extremes. The subsequent internecine wars not only fragmented the movement into a multiplicity of disparate groups, but also diverted much energy from the task of mission to disputation.

The interwar period of the twentieth century marked the emergence of modernism as a third major cultural challenge. The new cultural forces were received and adapted during the 1920s and 30s by the youthful and well-educated members of Frank Buchman's "Oxford Group" (later known as "Moral Re-Armament"). Much more effective, however, in penetrating evangelicalism with an adaptation of cultural modernism has been the charismatic movement. Many characteristics of the Oxford Group (e.g., spontaneity, direct messages from God, mutual confession, house groups, etc.) found a more general acceptance during the 1960s and 70s. Interest in "inner healing" with its affinities to Jungian depth psychology, the exaltation of "insight" over reason, a new appreciation for the creative arts, the popularity of "community" as a new buzzword, and an anti-structural bias are all additional modifications fashioned according to the spirit of the age. The more positive stance towards culture, concludes Bebbington, is nurturing a gradual evangelical resurgence in the late-twentieth century.

This volume marks an important addition to a growing body of critical fundamentalist/evangelical historiography published in the last decade. It could be said that what George Marsden and others

have done for the history of evangelicalism in America, Bebbington has begun to do in Britain. Like Marsden, Bebbington also identifies himself as a "participant-observer" (he is active as a Baptist deacon and lay preacher). The insider perspective of these "participant-observers" has not only made the endless number of subtle nuances among evangelical groups more intelligible and accessible to the scrutiny of outsiders, it has also nurtured within the movement itself a growing ability and willingness to be self-critical. Bebbington's demonstration of the way in which every embodiment of faith is an inextricable part of its cultural setting will come as a bit of a shock to those evangelical groups who pride themselves in thinking that their brand of Christianity is the pristine form once delivered to the saints. The example of evangelical groups that resisted cultural contextualization in the past — or did it poorly — thereby consigning themselves to obscurity, should serve as an apt warning.

One-volume surveys are inevitably accompanied by certain inherent weaknesses: it is simply impossible to give every aspect detailed coverage. The work could be fruitfully expanded by making connections to the philosophical trends of each period more explicit, as well as highlighting the impact of significant political moments on the movement. A distinct predilection for the period of evangelical dominance during the mid-nineteenth century mars the expectation of a more proportionate treatment of each century — the eighteenth century in particular gets short shrift. Such a general survey risks attributing single factors to events that, upon closer scrutiny, reveal a convergence of influences. For example, Bebbington attributes the functional style of church architecture to the influence of the enlightenment without any mention of the older tradition of Reformed aesthetics. Although the entire work is undergirded by a formidable array of primary sources, interaction with the secondary literature remains camouflaged by a hundred pages of endnotes. Readability would have been enhanced by the use of page bottom footnotes.

The blemishes, however, pale when placed next to the work's notable achievements. The work is undoubtedly destined for recognition as a significant point of reference for subsequent scholarship in the field. The remarkable range of research, along with its even-handed, yet sympathetic tone, combine to make this a superb volume, one to be recommended to all students of religious history.