

# The Relevance of Bebbington's Patrullater in Defining Evangelicalism

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**ABSTRACT:** D. W. Bebbington's Patristicism occupies a prominent place in defining the evangelical movement, although initially the four distinctive characteristics of evangelicalism (conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism) were only stated out of a desire to best summarize what was considered common knowledge. Over time, however, the model proposed by D. W. Bebbington, modifications and adjustments have been proposed, aimed at: separating historical evangelicalism from contemporary evangelicalism, mentioning the historical moment of the movement's emergence and the Christian traditions from which it originates, including the role of the Holy Spirit's involvement in the convictions and ministry of the movement's initiators, the dynamic analysis of the movement, but also the conviction that among the basic elements that unite evangelicals is the struggle to meet the demands of personal faith in an increasingly secularized world, accompanied by a careful concern for affiliation to the body of the community. So, while D. W. Bebbington's quadrilateral has its merits, a current definition of evangelicalism must take into account not only the current state of the movement or the different forms the movement takes in various parts of the globe but also its evolution over time.

**KEYWORDS:** Bebbington's patristic, evangelicalism, conversionism, activism, biblicism, crucicentrism

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we will analyze Bebbington's Patristicism, its contribution to the definition of evangelicalism, and proposed adjustments to that definition, with the aim of showing the relevance of Bebbington's patristicism in defining the evangelical movement. Since Bebbington summarizes the main characteristics of evangelicalism using a quadrilateral model, the four proposed components will be briefly analyzed, providing brief descriptions by D. W. Bebbington in the introduction to *Evangelicalism in a Modern Britain: A history from 1730s to the 1980s*. In the same section, I will show how his patristicism helped define evangelicalism, becoming the working definition for many subsequent studies. In the second part of the article, I will consider the relevance of patrullater to the general evangelical landscape, as well as contemporary, noting some of the modifications and adaptations proposed by other scholars.

From a methodological point of view, we will start from D. W. Bebbington's definition and briefly follow how the researcher described each component of his definition. We will then try to find out how this definition has been perceived, by looking at its relevance from the perspective of others, over the period of time that has elapsed from its emergence to the present. In the second part, we will try to identify, again through the lens of other scholars, possible modifications and adjustments that can be made to this

definition. All this, with the aim of observing how relevant this definition is still in the current evangelical context; and if it is no longer sufficiently relevant, what elements need to be added.

## **2. The quadrilateral Bebbington and its contribution to defining evangelicalism**

In terms of initial attempts to define evangelicalism, early in the movement's emergence, the notion of evangelical meant in the main "of the gospel," though some outside the denomination did not consider the label valid (Bebbington 2015, 1). Specifically, the term "evangelical" which derives from the term Gospel or Good News was intended to affirm the relevance of the Gospel to this religious movement (Noll 2019, 13). Although in the beginning, a few key concepts were outlined to define the movement, of course as the movement evolved, there were differing views as to the importance and relevance of these key characteristics. For example, in the cent. 20th century, in the view of the General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, the pillars of evangelicalism were: the need for evangelism, the need for conversion, trust in the Holy Spirit to sustain the new life and the priesthood of all believers. In the view of others, but especially conservatives, there have been instances when more authority has been attributed to biblicism (Bebbington 2015, 4).

Through careful and extensive research into the history of evangelicalism in Britain, D. W. Bebbington has become one of the leading interpreters of the history of evangelicalism (Harris 2008, 202). In his study *Evangelicalism in a Modern Britain: A history from 1730s to the 1980s*, he establishes a close link between the context and the expression of evangelical faith (Harris 2008, 202), explaining how evangelical religion was shaped by the environment in which it developed. At the same time, it has also paid attention to how evangelicalism itself has changed over the historical period under analysis (Bebbington 2015, VI). The research that underpinned the definition of the concept is supported by a significant and important body of literature. From monographs, biographies, and periodicals generated by the evangelical movement, the author also drew on experience gained through direct observation of worship services (Bebbington 2015, VII).

D. W. Bebbington himself mentioned that when he wrote the introductory chapter of the book in which this concept is explained, he wanted to summarise what he thought everyone already knew. He did not wish to formulate a new concept, but rather he sought to capture the consensus of opinion among scholars of the movement on the subject (Bebbington 2019, 175-176). Moreover, as evidence of this, immediately after the book's publication, although most reviews acknowledged the value of the work, it seems that few were aware of how influential the definition he proposed in the introductory section would become over time. Thus, of the forty-four reviews of the book tracked by Timothy Larsen, fewer than five highlighted the value of the quadrilateral as a possible functional and working definition of evangelicalism. However, it seems that no other definition is as generally accepted, and sometimes it is considered "the most useful general definition" (Larsen 2007, 1-2). In short, the four notions proposed as key components of evangelicalism are conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism.

As for conversionism, D. W. Bebbington suggested that it was both the collective purpose of evangelical churches and the purpose of individual members, and was one of the main themes of evangelical literature produced at the time. With this in mind, gospel preaching was focused on conversion, sometimes even appealing to the fear of hell. As a procedure, conversion was linked to major theological convictions such as 'justification by faith' or 'assurance of salvation', seeking to give converts a firm belief that through Christ their reconciliation with God is achieved. In terms of the age of conversion, it can be said that the period of adolescence or youth was considered optimal (Bebbington 2015, 6). There was no consensus regarding the process of conversion, as some approached it as a one-time,

short-lived moment, while others always considered it long-lived (Bebbington 2015, 7-8). However, regarding the means of conversion, in general, the primary role fell to the Holy Spirit, although the idea of a kind of self-conversion was occasionally embraced, thus reducing the mysterious involvement of the Holy Spirit (Bebbington 2015, 8).

Their activism involved a great emphasis on service, which meant in particular preaching the Gospel and participating in charitable work. The average religious service during the period analysed by the researcher, was 2.52 services/Sunday, with the followers of Wesley (one of the evangelical denominations that emerged in the British space) expected to work a 90-100 hour week (Bebbington 2015, 11). Their attention was directed to the mission fields but also to the unconverted in their own parishes (Bebbington 2015, 12). Their activism was also felt through their involvement in campaigns that sanctioned the slave trade or other actions considered morally unsound. As evidence of this, they were involved in numerous attempts to change the legislative framework, which was not always favourable to them (Bebbington 2015, 12).

As for biblicism, D. W. Bebbington argued that respect for the Bible, occupied a central place in their thinking, and there was generally agreement among all evangelicals that the Bible was fully inspired by God (Bebbington 2015, 13). They were convinced that its pages contained truth, but also that their own interpretation was most faithful to the intent of its authors. For this reason, D. W. Bebbington stated that the respect accorded to Scripture generally kept them from doctrinal extremes (Bebbington 2015, 13). As preferences go, it seems that New Testament passages were in great demand, especially the texts of the Gospel of John, although the most used verse, according to a survey conducted in 1896, was Galatians 2:20 (Bebbington 2015, 13). According to D. W. Bebbington, in the early days of the movement there was no question of the need to develop a theory of the infallibility or inerrancy of Scripture, since no doubts hovered over the text either (Bebbington 2015, 12). It was only later that the first views questioning its infallibility appeared.

As for the crucifixion, D. W. Bebbington points out that for them the doctrine of the cross was the central point of the Gospel. For this reason, some outside the movement felt that they had made the atonement an obsession, one that eclipsed even the incarnation (Bebbington 2015, 14-15). Christ was considered to have died as a substitute for sinful humanity, which made human beings valuable not on the basis of their status but rather on the basis of their potential to be saved. Moreover, there was a close connection between atonement and the pursuit of sanctification (Bebbington 2015, 15-16). Disputes between those who did and did not embrace Calvinist convictions also raged in this area, as some accepted Christ's sacrifice only for the elect and others attributed it to all. According to D. W. Bebbington, it seems that the dispute began to be abandoned in the early nineteenth century on the grounds that they considered it unproductive in producing new converts, and at the same time considered it too mysterious and impractical (Bebbington 2015, 16-17).

In terms of the evolution of the patristic over time, some eighteen years after the volume's publication, Timothy Larsen notes that he has identified no fewer than ninety-seven books that cite D. W. Bebbington's definition of evangelicalism. The same researcher notes that if one were to count all those who have explored this approach, the list would be very long (Larsen 2008, 21-22). According to him, Bebbington's quadrilateral came to occupy a top position, and because various scholars who wanted to delimit the scope of their own studies needed a working definition of evangelicalism. This is why even those who are dissatisfied and who propose replacing the patristic acknowledge that the four proposed characteristics have the most citations (Larsen 2008, 23 & 26). Some thirty years after the volume appeared, D. W. Bebbington himself noted that most reviewers recognized the value of this synthesis of the movement.

### 3. Proposed changes to the Bebbingtonian quadrangle

Although most reviewers recognized the value of this synthesis of the evangelical movement (Bebbington 2021, 2), D. W. Bebbington's descriptive approach also generated controversy, which in turn generated an appropriate literature. In general, what has been proposed to the definition, has been the addition of new features to show more clearly the limitations of the movement (Atherstone & Jones 2019, 10-11). However, in D. W. Bebbington's view, those unhappy with the quadruplet have only raised a series of questions that stimulate much more reflection, but not significant change to the definition. In his view, there is no compelling call to add anything to the four elements of the patroller (elements that reflect the nature of evangelicalism) and at the same time no reason to abandon any of them. He declared himself surprised because he discovered himself to be advocating a modern equivalent of the Vincentian canon, according to which Christian truth was what was believed *ubique, semper et ab omnibus* (everywhere, always and by all). Thus, in his view, he maintained the conviction that the emphasis on the cross, the Bible, conversion and activism reflected the reality of the *ubique, semper et ab omnibus* evangelical movement (Bebbington 2019, 187).

One of the other contemporary scholars of the movement, Timothy Larsen, felt that in attempting to define evangelicalism, it was imperative to keep in mind that it was tied to orthodox Protestantism and the tradition of global Christian networks resulting from the 18th century revival movements of John Wesley and George Whitefield. Following on from his proposed definition, he considered that within evangelicalism, a prominent place was occupied by the Bible, which was regarded as inspired and the final authority on matters of faith and practice. Furthermore, in his view, evangelicalism emphasized reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross and emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual to bring about conversion and a continued life of fellowship with God. Moreover, this fellowship also involves serving God and one's fellow human beings, including the task of all believers to participate in the proclamation of the Gospel (Larsen 2007, 1). Summarizing, we can note that T. Larsen, adds to D. W. Bebbington's four characteristics, the first two mentions and combines conversionism and activism as aspects of pneumatology.

Thomas S. Kidd, drawing on the history of the great revivals of the eighteenth century, discusses the involvement of and reliance on the Holy Spirit as a possible additional component of the quadrilateral. He shows that the work of the Holy Spirit has been one of the most controversial issues in evangelical Christianity since its inception. In his view, from the very beginning of the movement, "belief in the active and immediate ministry of the Holy Spirit" (Kidd 2019, 137) was what made evangelicalism as new and controversial as it was and is. Specifically, the originators of the movement daily tested the limits of all that could be expected of the Holy Spirit in terms of their assurance, comfort, understanding, and guidance. For this reason, Kidd even resorted to concrete examples. One of the examples he turns to is George Whitefield, showing that there was no newer and more controversial issue in Whitefield's ministry than pneumatology (Kidd 2019, 137-139).

But if we consider Mark Noll's view, he believes that we must distinguish between historical and contemporary evangelicalism. Therefore, he believed that when evangelicalism is conceptually defined as a particular form of Protestant Christianity with a number of interconnected and recurring characteristics, we are talking about an evangelicalism that has constituted a historical reality. If, on the other hand, the definition is concerned with actual theological movements, networks, groups, individuals, activities and convictions, we are dealing with a very great complexity of data and research directions. Therefore, speaking of the current attempt to define evangelicalism, he believes that the best way forward is to re-examine how modern histories of evangelicalism have been written.

This is all the more so because the landmark statements on the history of evangelicalism, in his view, reveal a remarkable combination of clarity and complexity, and they themselves provide an excellent vantage point for this endeavor (Noll 2019, 1-2). Therefore, Noll believes that past trajectories in defining evangelicalism must be related to recent debates about evangelicalism. In his view, the careful conceptual definitions that historians have used to write histories of evangelicalism relate only in part to the evangelicalism evoked so casually in contemporary polemics. Thus, in his view, what David W. Bebbington has described in his research analyzing a two-hundred-year period of British history overlaps to some extent with that popular use of evangelicalism, but not comprehensively, coherently, and completely with what evangelicalism is today (Noll 2019, 7, 13).

Molly Worthen, a historian of 20th century evangelicalism and observer of American religious life, also wondered whether the definition given by D. W. Bebbington covers the rise of the new evangelical-type groups. He admits that in his work investigating twentieth-century evangelicals, the distinctive qualities proposed by D. W. Bebbington did not always give him the tools he needed. Therefore, although the elements of the patristic have remained constant over time, in his view the current definition of evangelicalism needs a dynamic framework that identifies the agents of change. For this reason, he considered the definition far too static, at odds with the nuanced role it has played in UK evangelicalism. In his view, three elemental concerns unite Protestants labelled evangelical: the desire to repair the rift between spiritual and rational knowledge, the desire to have categorically salvation or a true relationship with God (in popular parlance: to encounter or know Jesus), and the resolution of the tension between the demands of personal faith and the constraints of an increasingly secularised public space (Worthen 2019, 171-172).

Darren Dochuk, associate professor of history at the University of Notre Dame, also pointed out that through emerging research on 20th century evangelicalism, another hallmark of evangelicalism that should be added to Bebbington's definition is fellowship and total commitment to the whole body of the community. Thus, in defining one's evangelicalism, but also evangelicalism itself, membership itself becomes a kind of existential, but also theological, very important threshold. Darren Dochuk refers to the National Association of Evangelicals' statement of faith, which specifies that the spiritual unity of believers in Jesus Christ is as indispensable a truth for the believer as absolute faith in the Bible, the cross, or the Trinity (Dochuk 2019, 150-151).

Following an analysis that takes as its starting point the question of whether the four descriptors of the movement remain valid today, Brian Harris considers that contemporary evangelicalism is best described as a movement of fervent piety, arguing that by claiming a holistic understanding of each of D. W. Bebbington's characteristics, it is possible to create an evangelical identity better suited to a postmodern age (Harris 2008, 201). His investigation examines evangelical identity both theologically and sociologically to ensure that it is not statically situated in the realm of theological theory, or in the world of sociology (Harris 2008, 202). In his view, for contemporaneity, it would be desirable for the title evangelical to define an aspiration rather than an identity, suggesting that it should be viewed beyond the four concepts proposed by Bebbington, understanding holistically their deeper meaning (Harris 2008, 213).

Although the list of possible additions or corrections proposed to D. W. Bebbington's definition could go on, it can be seen that these various working definitions of evangelicalism are often closely related to the researcher's source material and the object of research. For this reason, it is clear that the approach differs according to the perspective pursued or according to the elements that are taken into account. Therefore, if we analyze evangelicalism through the prism of revival and holiness movements, the results will differ from those based on the fundamentalist controversies of the twentieth-century evangelical movement (Atherstone & Jones 2019, 11).

In addition, we also find instances where some have lamented these perennial attempts to define evangelicalism. Either they have found them useless or impossible. However, in most situations it has been recognized that they are necessary and cannot be abandoned. Noll, in contrast, understanding the complexity and sensitivity of these definitions, considered the difficulties encountered in describing evangelicalism as manageable, of course if common sense prevails (Atherstone and Jones 2019, 11-12). And as Molly Worthen observes, no matter how many scholars complain about the problems with defining the term evangelical, and no matter how much it is suggested that it be dropped, "a lot of people, outsiders and believers alike, will continue to use the word" (Worthen 2019, 175). In his view, it is almost impossible to drop it.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Although the models for defining evangelicalism have differed, D. W. Bebbington, in his study, makes a thorough analysis, offering concrete and sound arguments in support of his claims, which make his analysis a serious starting point in the study of the concept. Thus, the four key concepts proposed for defining evangelicalism are conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism. The first of these was conversion, which was linked to major theological convictions and was the common goal of evangelical churches and their members. Activism, represented the great emphasis on service, with members of the communities expected to be heavily involved in serving others. Then, respect for the Bible and the firm belief that all of God's truth is contained within its pages was another basic element of the movement. And as far as crucicentrism is concerned, evangelicals saw in the sacrifice of Christ not only the central point of the Gospel but also the sufficient substitute of God for the salvation of the human being.

This model, in the form of a quadrilateral, occupies a prominent place in defining the movement, although initially the four distinctive characteristics of evangelicalism were only listed out of a desire to best summarize what was considered common knowledge. Over time, however, this brief description has become more and more widely known, becoming a kind of generally accepted definition that has garnered many citations. Its success, it seems, was also due to the concise way in which it was formulated, but also to the fact that many scholars needed a working definition of evangelicalism in order to delimit their own studies.

However, over time, the model proposed by D. W. Bebbington, has been proposed modifications and adjustments. Although D. W. Bebbington took them into consideration, he nevertheless maintained his conviction that the suggestions made, although thought-provoking, did not bring significant changes to the definition. In general, it was proposed to add references to the historical moment of the movement's emergence and the Christian traditions from which the movement originated. In addition, it was also proposed to modify the definition by including the role of the Holy Spirit's involvement in the convictions and ministry of the movement's initiators and continuers. Another view questioned the relevance of the definition, given the way evangelicalism itself has changed over time. It was therefore proposed to separate historical and contemporary evangelicalism. This is also because the current activities and theological beliefs of evangelicals differ significantly from the historical period considered by D. W. Bebbington.

In order to identify and locate these agents of the movement, a dynamic analysis of the contemporary evangelical framework has been proposed, suggesting that among the basic elements that unite Protestants labelled evangelical are other concerns. The desire to reconcile rational (Rotaru 2005,36) and spiritual knowledge, without losing sight of the real possession of a saving relationship with God, is one of them. In addition, the struggle to meet the demands of personal faith in an increasingly secularised public space secularizat (Rotaru 2006, 251-266), and fellowship with and affiliation to the whole body of the

community, have also been proposed as specific elements of contemporary evangelicalism. In addition, an in-depth holistic understanding of its components was proposed, taking into account the relevance of each from both a sociological and theological point of view.

For our part, we believe that Bebbington's quadrilateral has particular merit in that it sums up fairly well the most significant features of the evangelical movement. However, even those who propose changes to this definition need to be examined, since over time the evangelical movement has also taken on new forms of manifestation. Therefore, one of the essential factors in defining the concept is the historical period under analysis. And while Bebbington's quadrilateral has excellently summarized that historical period, we believe that a current definition of evangelicalism must take into account the current state of the movement. Another factor influencing the definition of the concept is the different forms the movement takes in different parts of the world. Since it is difficult to achieve uniformity, I believe that it is most appropriate that general definitions can be customised to the different variations of movement. And for a better understanding of the concept, we believe that contemporary evangelicalism should be put in relation to the original evangelicalism, looking not only at the evolution over time, but also at the perspective pursued by the protagonists of the movement over time.

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