

## The Concept of Evangelicalism Through the Prism of D.W. Bebbington's Quadrilateral

Florin Luduşan

*PhD, Lawyer, Ludusan Law Firm, Târgu Mures;  
Ph.D(c) „Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad, Romania  
av.florin.ludusan@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** The evangelical movement, or evangelicalism, is a landmark of extraordinary value in Christianity. Therefore, it is important to seek to understand what defines this movement, its sources, and the major theological themes of the evangelical movement. In this context, Bebbington's quadrilateral is an essential tool for clarifying evangelical identity, providing a coherent framework for analysis. The four foundational features—*biblicism*, *crucicentrism*, *conversionism*, and *activism*—not only define the evangelical movement but also highlight its impact on global Christianity. Given the growing diversity of the evangelical movement and contemporary theological challenges, we recognize that new complementary or alternative definitions may emerge in the future. Nonetheless, Bebbington's quadrilateral will continue to be an essential reference point in any attempt to define evangelicalism. Its clarity and depth make it a valuable tool for understanding evangelical identity, both past and future. Studying its sources and theological themes is not just an academic exercise but a necessity for those who wish to understand the dynamics of contemporary Christianity. Moreover, it allows us to appreciate how the evangelical movement continues to shape the Church's spirituality and mission in the world.

**Keywords:** Christianity, Evangelicalism, Biblicism, Crucicentrism, Conversionism, Activism, Patrulater

### The Evangelical Movement - main theological themes

The evangelical movement has been and continues to be a factor of change in society, promoting both spiritual reforms and social initiatives (Rotaru, 2017, 57–76). Through its strong emphasis on the authority of Scripture and the personal experience of faith, evangelicalism has contributed significantly to the development of Christian theology and practice.

The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology defines the evangelical movement as "a movement in Modern Christianity, cutting across denominational and confessional boundaries, which emphasizes conformity to the fundamental doctrines of the faith and mission done under the impulse of mercy and urgency. One who identifies with this movement is called 'evangelical' and is a man who believes and proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Elwell, 2012, 444).

The Bible defines the Gospel in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians in chapter 15, verses 1-4, as follows: "1) I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which you received, in which you abode; 2) by which you are saved, if you hold it as I preached it to you; otherwise you believed in vain; 3) I taught you before all things, just as I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; 4) that he was buried, and rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (King James Version (KJV) 1 Corinteni 15:1-4).

Theologically, the evangelical movement emphasizes the following themes: (a) the sovereignty of God; (b) Scripture - the revelation of God; (c) the total corruption of man (Rotaru, 2024, 301-318); (d) the atonement made by Jesus Christ for sin on Calvary's cross; (e) through faith in Jesus Christ one receives salvation as an act of unmerited grace; f) the proclamation of the word of God, the written word being the foundation of the preached

word; g) the visible and personal return of Jesus Christ to establish his kingdom; h) faith in the Trinity, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the virgin birth, the resurrection.

### **Sources of Evangelicalism**

According to D.W. Bebbington, in his famous work "Evangelicalism in modern Britain - A history from the 1730s to the 1980s", the American theologian Jonathan Edwards stands at the roots of Evangelicalism (Bebbington, 1994, 3).

Jonathan Edwards, considered the greatest American evangelical theologian, began his work as president of the College of New Jersey, later Princeton University, and was also the theologian of the First Great Spiritual Awakening. He described divine all-sufficiency, human sinfulness, conversion - the radical change of heart, and authentic Christianity. For Jonathan Edwards, the real Christian, who rejoices in the assurance of salvation, has a holy boldness, but he also has less self-confidence and more modesty. The real Christian is less prone than others to be shaken in the faith, but he is more inclined than others to be moved by the solemn warnings and threatenings of God, as well as by calamities that come upon others (Murray, 2021, 302).

Again Jonathan Edwards, the theologian at the origin of Evangelicalism, has shown that true religion consists largely of holy emotions, that the author of human nature has made emotions the source of all human action, and that religious things cannot be a burden on the human soul except in so far as they affect it. At the same time, Holy Scripture everywhere places religion in the sphere of the emotions, speaking of fear, hope, love, hatred, desire, joy, sorrow, grief, gratitude, compassion, zeal, and presents true religion as summed up in love, which is the highest emotion and the source of all other emotions. The religion of the most renowned saints of Scripture, consisted in holy emotions (Edwards, 2023, 23-45).

### **Defining Evangelicalism through Bebbington's quadrilateral. The relevance of the quadrilateral**

D. W. Bebbington's quadrilateral still occupies an important place today in defining the evangelical movement (Anca, 2024, 115-116), since the four proposed characteristics provide a functional definition of evangelicalism, having received the most criticism in the literature. Thus, the four key concepts proposed to define evangelicalism are: conversion, activism, biblicism/biblicalism, and crucicentrism (Bebbington, 1994, 3-17).

**Conversion**, the first characteristic of evangelicalism, is linked to major theological convictions and is the common goal of evangelical churches and their members. According to D. W. Bebbington, conversion was the only gateway to living Christianity, it was less likely as a person grew older, and it was essential that the preacher himself be converted. At the same time conversion brings prosperity to the church and solves many social problems because a converted person works hard, saves money and helps his neighbor.

**Activism** - the second significant feature of evangelicals symbolized the great emphasis on service, with members of the communities expected to be actively involved in serving others (Anca, 2024, 115). The spreading of the gospel and the active involvement in ministering to others flowed from the first feature, conversion. Efforts to spread the gospel took the form of attending meetings, visiting the sick, preaching sermons five or six times a week, giving encouragement, teaching and admonitions, organizing Bible classes, creating missionary societies, giving up precious time for the study of literature that was not imperatively necessary, doing work in the mission fields to bring "roads" since action was considered the life of virtue and the world the theater of action (Bebbington, 1994, 10-12).

**Biblicalism** - is the reverence for the Bible and the conviction that the whole truth of God is found in the pages of this book. The evangelicals' devotion to the Bible has led them to

spend hours and hours in study, convinced that they can thus enter into the presence of the infinite and eternal God (Rotaru, 2012, 5).

The evangelicals' belief concerning the Bible could be summarized as follows: a) the Bible is inspired by God; b) the Bible is absolutely true; c) it is truth without any mixture of error; d) the message of the Bible must be conveyed and its devotional use encouraged; e) the most widely read books of the Bible were the Gospel of John, the first epistle of John, Psalms, Genesis, Isaiah; f) the Bible verse that inspired most preaching was Galatians 2: 20 - "I have been crucified with the Christ, and I live; yet it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Bebbington, 1994, 12-14).

**Crucicentrism** - The Evangelical movement set out to bring back the great Theme of the Cross and all that it entails, with nothing more important than the doctrine of the Atonement. Among evangelicals, the atonement eclipses even the incarnation, the Cross of Christ being the salvation of men, what distinguished evangelicals from other theological schools was precisely their belief in a substitutionary atonement. Crucicentrism, as an essential element of the evangelical movement, emphasizes that Christ's death on the cross is the central point of the divine plan of salvation. This conviction derives from a theological vision in which the Cross is not merely a symbol of suffering but the essence of the whole work of redemption (Rotaru, 2005, 33-160).

In the Gospel tradition, the Cross is not just an episode in salvation history, but the very heart of the Gospel. Through Christ's sacrifice, man receives forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God, which makes the doctrine of the atonement even more important than the incarnation. This profound emphasis on the Cross determines not only the personal faith of the evangelicals, but also the way in which they proclaim the Gospel message, transforming the whole theology into one centered on Christ's substitutionary sacrifice. Thus, regardless of modern theological challenges, for evangelicals, Crucicentrism will remain the central focus of their faith and message, the foundation on which their entire spirituality is built.

## Conclusion

Bebbington's quadrilateral is indeed an essential tool for defining the evangelical movement, providing a clear and concise framework of the fundamental features of evangelicalism: biblicism, crucicentrism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism. Although scholarly discussions on the nature and limits of evangelicalism continue, the definition proposed by David W. Bebbington remains one of the most influential and widely used in theological and historical studies. The flexibility and clarity of this model explain why it has been so widely accepted by scholars and religious leaders around the world. However, given the growing diversity of the evangelical movement and contemporary theological challenges, we appreciate that new complementary or alternative definitions may emerge in the future. Despite modern theological challenges and evolving perspectives, the fundamental features ensure that the evangelical movement retains its distinct identity and enduring impact on Christianity.

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