

One of the perennial tasks of church historians is the definition of movements in such a way as to emphasize their meaningful identity and historical continuity. Among the more successful of such definitions has been the account of evangelicalism offered by David Bebbington in *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, a work rightly hailed for its liveliness, breadth, and light touch amid extensive documentation. As you know, Bebbington defines the four essential evangelical characteristics as conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism.¹ His definition has been widely accepted, on both sides of the Atlantic. Here, however, my interest is not so much in the defining characteristics themselves as in the way in which Bebbington uses them to date the origins of evangelicalism.

Bebbington declares that 'Evangelical religion is a popular Protestant movement that has existed in Britain since the 1730s.'² The movement did not emerge *ex nihilo*, but it was nonetheless something new which emerged in the eighteenth century. I will seek to show that the case made for this dating does not hold, though it is not my purpose here to propose an alternative dating. I am seeking to reopen the case for seeing Puritanism and the Reformation as themselves authentically evangelical movements.

Bebbington offers a detailed argument for the origins of evangelicalism in the 1730s. He believes that the movement was a child of the Enlightenment. The evidence here rests on the role which the second characteristic (activism) plays. He writes:

The activism of the Evangelical movement sprang from its strong teaching on assurance. That, in turn, was a product of the confidence of the new age about the validity of experience. The Evangelical version of Protestantism was created by the Enlightenment.³

The link from activism to the Enlightenment is made here by the evangelical doctrine of assurance. Bebbington explains that 'the dynamism of the evangelical movement was possible only because its adherents were assured in their faith'.⁴ Earlier Protestants had been concerned with assurance, but now there was a new doctrine. He writes:

Whereas the Puritans had held that assurance is rare, late and the fruit of struggle in the experience of believers, the Evangelicals believed it to be general, normally given at conversion and the result of simple acceptance of the gift of God.⁵

The final phrase here is significant: all that was needed for assurance from the start of the Christian life was 'simple acceptance of the gift of God'. The Puritans were caught up in introspective gloom, but the evangelical position was one of robust confidence in which early assurance was the norm.

Bebbington identifies the 1734-5 revival in Northampton under Jonathan Edwards as the point at which this shift took place. He asks how Edwards could give confident assurance to his people:

How could he be so bold? It was because he was far more confident than his Puritan forefathers of the powers of human knowledge. A person, he held, can receive a firm understanding of spiritual things through a 'new sense' which is as real as sight or smell.⁶

Edwards reached this epistemic confidence because he drank deeply from the empiricist waters of the English Enlightenment, in particular from John Locke. Putting it crudely, Locke said 'trust your senses', Edwards said 'trust your spiritual sense'. As did John Wesley. Thus the confident activism of evangelicalism was born from the epistemology of the Enlightenment.

Many accept this dating for the emergence of evangelicalism, and it too has crossed the Atlantic. My present aim is thus to scrutinize Bebbington's

argument that a new evangelical doctrine of assurance arose from Enlightenment epistemology and grounded a distinctive activism.⁷ I will proceed by testing the claim against the evidence which we find in selected writings of John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and John Newton, and by questioning the type of activism which Bebbington requires to discern the presence of evangelicalism.

Wesley does speak of a direct and immediate assurance normally given on conversion. In *Sermon 10* (1746) he argues against identifying the witness of the Spirit with a rational process of reflection. This supports Bebbington's argument. Nonetheless, in the same text Wesley also argues that there is a subsequent conjoined rational testimony from the believer's *own* spirit. He can even conclude in syllogistic form (how Puritan!): 'It all resolves into this: those who have these marks, they are the children of God. But we have these marks: therefore we are children of God.'⁸ What is the relation between the two witnesses? In *Sermon 11* (1767), Wesley holds that upon conversion and in times of strong temptation the witness of the Spirit exists on its own without the witness of the believer's spirit. As soon as time has passed, however, every believer must ascertain that he is not deluded by the devil: 'let none ever presume to rest in any supposed testimony of the Spirit which is separate from the fruit of it.'⁹ Both witnesses 'testify conjointly' and it is when they are joined that we cannot be deluded.¹⁰ In *Sermon 10*, Wesley goes so far as to specify self-examination as a universal Christian duty: 'it highly imports all who desire the salvation of God to consider it with the deepest attention, as they would not deceive their own souls.'¹¹ Thus for all his asseverations concerning the witness of the Spirit, Wesley still has to urge the believer to come back to self-examination.

For example, he pictures a man hearing the voice of God saying 'Thy sins are forgiven thee.'¹² This voice is known by the spiritual sense. Wesley can see the next question coming: 'But how shall I know that my spiritual senses are rightly disposed?' He answers:

Even by the 'testimony of your own spirit'; by 'the answer of a good conscience toward God.' By the fruits which he hath wrought in your spirit you shall know the 'testimony of the Spirit of God'. Hereby you shall know that you are in no delusion; that you have not deceived your own soul. The immediate fruits of the Spirit ruling in the heart are 'love, joy, peace'; 'bowels of mercies, humbleness of mind, meekness, gentleness, long-suffering.' And the outward fruits are the doing good to all men, the doing no evil to any, and the walking in the light – a zealous, uniform obedience to all the commandments of God.'¹³

This test is the rational scrutiny of good works.

The Wesleyan appeal to self-examination is a real problem for the thesis that Wesley's care-free doctrine of assurance is the explanation of evangelical activism. The Christian could only be free from self-scrutiny at the very outset of the Christian life or in the worst of times. Such brief times without scrutiny will not suffice to explain the activism of evangelicals.

From Bebbington's account we would expect to find Wesley casting spiritual sense in terms of physical sense. In this piece he does something more subtle. When he speaks of the witness of the believer's own spirit, Wesley readily draws such comparisons. But Wesley then contrasts physical sense with the witness of the Spirit of God:

The *manner* how the divine testimony is manifested to the heart I do not take upon me to explain. 'Such knowledge is too wonderful and excellent for me; I cannot attain unto it.' 'The wind bloweth; and I hear the sound thereof'; but I cannot 'tell how it cometh, or whither it goeth.' As no one knoweth the things of a man

save the spirit of a man that is in him, so the *manner* of the things of God knoweth no one save the Spirit of God.¹⁴

The manner of the two witnesses is beyond comparison since one relies on human reflection and the other on the direct work of the unfathomable Spirit of God. This means that Wesley is careful to *avoid* the epistemic step from Enlightenment views of sense-knowledge to the doctrine of assurance.

Moreover, writers on Wesley frequently point out that he found his idea of spiritual sense in diverse sources, most of them pre-dating the Enlightenment. Theodore Runyon cites this example from the patristic Macarian Homilies:

Our Lord Jesus Christ came for this very reason, that he might change, and renew, and create afresh this soul that had been perverted by vile affections, tempering it with his own Divine Spirit. He came to work a new mind, a new soul, and new eyes, new ears, a new spiritual tongue [...].¹⁵

Randy Maddox notes that the idea of spiritual sense survived in Puritan writers.¹⁶ To take one example, John Owen in his *Pneumatologia* can speak of a 'unique spiritual sense of the defilement of sin' and a 'gracious view' of the cleansing power of the blood of Christ.¹⁷ In *The Reason of Faith* (Book VI of *Pneumatologia*) he uses the language of the senses to describe the way in which the Scripture 'evinced this its divine efficacy by that *spiritual saving light* which it conveys into and imparts on the minds of believers.'¹⁸ I do not for a moment want to deny that Wesley shaped his idea of spiritual sense in the language of, and relevantly to, his times. The *leitmotif* of Bebbington's work is the claim that evangelicalism has always been fashioned by its contexts. In principle that is an unobjectionable claim, but it is quite another step to say that evangelicalism was 'created by' one of its contexts.

From his early works onward Edwards, like Wesley, held to a high view of the new sense given to the believer by the Holy Spirit. His sermon *A Divine and Supernatural Light* argues for the necessity of a Spirit-given revelation of God. This is a direct, unmediated sense of divine excellency which affects the 'heart'. Such evidence might suggest that Edwards did indeed preach and write about an immediate, early assurance for Christians. But *Divine and Supernatural Light* is a sermon concerned exclusively with the objective truth of the gospel, and not with the truth of the claim that any individual is saved. Edwards does not advocate an immediate sense in the Christian that he or she is saved. It is also necessary to consider the provenance of even this emphasis on the objective truth of the gospel.

The 1746 *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* is often said to be Edwards's most revealingly Lockean text. In it, he defends the concept of a new spiritual sense against its detractors, and he grants that it is 'what some metaphysicians call a new simple idea.'¹⁹ The exact relation between Edwards and such metaphysicians is, however, a matter of great and lively contention. Where did his concepts come from? On the one hand Perry Miller famously emphasized the Lockean identity of Edwards. Norman Fiering countered by emphasizing his debt to Nicolas Malebranche. Fiering writes of Miller's work as 'an unaccountable lapse in the scholarship of one of the greatest of American historians.'²⁰ Similarly, Conrad Cheny identified Edwards as 'first and last a Puritan theologian' rather than an Enlightenment thinker.²¹ Now it is vital to Bebbington's reading of evangelical origins that Edwards was decisively influenced by Locke, a claim which is at the centre of this controversy.

Some kind of assessment is thus unavoidable. In short, I find that there are two insuperable problems with the attempt to class Edwards as in any significant way a Lockean. First, he disagrees with Locke on a number of philosophical issues central to both their intellectual projects. Many examples of clear divergence between Edwards and Locke could be cited, but two brief and pointed instances will suffice to show the extent of the problem. Like Locke, Edwards speaks of simple ideas generated by perceiving a particular content and reflecting on that content with reason. And yet, going far beyond and against Locke, he understands the content of spiritual perception to be divine excellency and holds that it can only be perceived through the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit in the individual, creating in him a new sense. This particular supernatural claim was entirely unacceptable to the philosopher. Consequently, even here, where Edwards is using language definitely attributable to Locke, he is giving it a quite contrary meaning. Another major instance of disagreement is this: the whole *Religious Affections* can be understood as a rejection of Lockean-style hostility to religious enthusiasm. Edwards sets out to establish the centrality of affections in perception and thus disagrees with Locke in arguing that the Christian individual is strongly *inclined* to the divine excellency which is spiritually perceived. These and many other examples show that, as Brad Walton puts it, Edwards has 'a panoply of un-Lockean concepts' which are deployed at crucial points in the *Affections*.²²

The second insuperable problem with a strongly Lockean Edwards is the sufficiency of the Augustinian-Reformed theological heritage as an explanation for the language and concepts which he uses. Edwards himself takes us to the Scriptures to

show the origin of his concept of spiritual sense, and in terms of the more immediate background, he repeatedly cites long passages from Puritan writers in his footnotes. For example, he gives the following passage from John Owen on spiritual perception:

The true nature of saving illumination consists in this, that it gives the mind such a direct intuitive insight and prospect into spiritual things, as that in their own spiritual nature they suit, please, and satisfy it; so that it is transformed into them, cast into the mould of them, and rests in them.²³

At this point it is important to note the recent work of Brad Walton on the *Religious Affections*.²⁴ Walton has done something which, in the light of the footnotes in the *Affections*, ought to have been very obvious. He has worked his way through a long list of Puritan writers to search for the kind of religious psychology which we find in Edwards. And he has found it abundantly. He carefully traces the pre-history of the Edwardsean conceptions of, *inter alia*, assurance, illumination, spiritual sense, the affections, authentic signs, and the heart. One of Walton's most apposite Puritan examples is Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) sounding just like Edwards on a new sense: 'whenas God regenerateth any man, and constitutes him a new creature, lo, that man hath a new eye to see, an ear to hear, and all sorts of new senses to take in all sorts of spiritual things.'²⁵ With page upon page of such evidence carefully detailed and expounded, Walton has further undermined any conception of an Edwards decisively shaped by Locke. But he has also raised serious questions about attempts to make any *other* Enlightenment thinkers decisive for the shape of Edwards's thought.

Walton's is the most radical non-philosophical reading of Edwards. A less dramatic and equally suggestive account holds that Edwards was engaged

in an apologetic project in which he used the language and concepts of philosophers to his own theological ends. There are pointers in this direction in various commentators – Norman Fiering and Michael McClymond pursue similar lines of argument. Fortunately, I do not have to adjudicate here on the precise extent of the terminological influence of the Enlightenment. It is enough to note that at the least the substance of Edwards's thought is not derived from the Enlightenment, while at the most even its language was derived from elsewhere. Either way, recent work has dismantled the conception of Edwards on which Bebbington's assessment of the origins of evangelicalism depends. When in the *Religious Affections* Edwards considers how an individual can discern true, saving spiritual affections, he again employs the concept of spiritual sense, this time with reference to knowledge of true personal religious affections, knowledge that I am saved. Edwards gives an account of assurance which is quite distinct from that held by Wesley. Specifically, he refuses to count as evidence for authentic spiritual affection the same phenomena which Wesley endorses. As we saw above, Wesley favourably cites the example of a man hearing the statement 'Thy sins are forgiven thee.'²⁶ For Edwards, this is just the kind of thing which someone deluded by Satan might use as the basis for his assurance. Edwards holds that anything which could be emulated by the devil is automatically excluded as a ground of assurance.

The difference can be set out with an example which Bebbington himself uses when he asserts the novelty of the evangelical epistemology. In the middle of an account which makes no distinction between Edwards and Wesley, Bebbington tells us that the rank and file 'formulated their experience in the same way' as their leaders. He provides this example:

'By the eye of faith,' wrote an early Methodist about his sense of pardon through the work of Christ, 'I had as real a view of His agony on Calvary as ever I had of any object by the eye of sense.' The understanding of faith in terms of self-validating sense impressions was a striking novelty.²⁷

Edwards refers to just such an instance:

Some have had ideas of Christ's hanging on the cross, and his blood running from his wounds; and this they call a spiritual sight of Christ crucified, and the way of salvation by his blood.²⁸

Does Edwards affirm such a witness? On the contrary, the idea the man has of Christ 'is no better in itself, than the external idea that the Jews his enemies had, who stood round his cross and saw this with their bodily eyes'.²⁹ For Edwards, such imagination is the prime instrument which Satan uses in deceiving people about their spiritual status. True affections may produce lively imaginations, but lively imaginations are no assurance of true affections.

The feeling one gets when reading the *Religious Affections* as a Christian is a feeling of gradual, painful deconstruction. Piece by piece Edwards removes the spiritual props which so many rely on. He anticipates the reader's growing concern. He writes, 'But here, some may be ready to say, what, is there no such thing as any particular spiritual application of the promises of Scripture by the Spirit of God?'³⁰ His reply unmistakably affirms such an application, but in a way that contradicts what will be Wesley's doctrine of assurance and Bebbington's picture of Edwards himself. The application of the promises is to be found in the fruit of the Spirit: 'A spiritual application of the Word of God consists in applying it to the heart, in spiritually enlightening, sanctifying influences.' The application of the offer of the gospel entails 'giving the man evidence of his title to the thing offered'.³¹

We must consider carefully the use of the term 'evidence' here under the account of the first authentic sign. Where Wesley posits a direct, unmediated witness, Edwards routes all assurance via evidence considered by the individual's conscience, in these cases the sanctifying influences of the Spirit and an obedient response to the gospel. Edwards writes adamantly that 'there are no propositions to be found in the Bible declaring that such and such particular persons, independent on any previous knowledge of any qualifications, are forgiven and beloved by God.' He finds that people have been misled by the term 'witness' into denying that the Spirit uses evidence. They have done this by failing to note how the words 'witness' and 'testimony' are used in the New Testament. There, he points out the idea of witness entails evidence being adduced. Having routed all assurance via evidence, Edwards argues that there is no twofold witness: 'When the apostle Paul speaks of the Spirit of God bearing witness with our spirit, he is not to be understood of two spirits, that are two separate, collateral, independent witnesses...' ³² There is one witness: the Spirit through his fruits.

The position which Edwards takes on evidence emerges most clearly in the treatment of the twelfth authentic sign, defined by the claim that 'Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice.' ³³ In terms of the structure of the book and, the direction of the argument, this sign is the centrepiece. Edwards takes great care in explaining it. He argues that genuine Christian practice is shown by perseverance, defined as 'the continuance of professors in the practice of their duty, and being steadfast in an holy walk, through the various trials that they meet with.' ³⁴ For the individual Christian, practice is 'the chief of all the evidences of a saving sincerity in religion, to the consciences of the professors of it.' ³⁵ One's own scrutiny of practice involves scrutiny of the inner

life, the acts of the soul, as well as outward actions. At one point Edwards turns to address the question of instant assurance, aware that his view might be taken to exclude even its possibility. In a statement the tone of which hardly suggests a new, bold evangelicalism, he allows that early assurance can be experienced: "'Tis possible that a man may have a good assurance of a state of grace, at his first conversion, before he has had opportunity to gain assurance, by this great evidence I am speaking of.' ³⁶ But quickly Edwards moves on to assert that this does not hinder the view that actual obedience is *better than* an early sense of certainty that one will obey.

In the light of such arguments it is no surprise that in the course of the work Edwards urges a thorough, suspicious and relentless self-examination, most notably on the issue of pride and humility. ³⁷ His sustained urging sounds far more like the voice of the Puritan of Puritans than of a carefree evangelical ready for action. In the *Religious Affections* we therefore find a doctrine of assurance based not on Enlightenment epistemology but on a close attention to the language of Scripture. We find a doctrine concerned to urge not reliance on a direct witness, but careful scrutiny of on-going good works done in a filial disposition amid trials and temptations.

It is notable that it was *after* writing this treatise, perhaps a more cautious treatment than his earlier revival writings, that Edwards himself worked among the Indians in the frontier town of Stockbridge. Where we would expect from Bebbington to find the earlier, possibly more confident theology fuelling evangelistic activism, we find that Edwards's activism followed his attack on the idea of a direct witness. Perhaps the opposite of Bebbington's view is the case; that a more reserved

view of assurance encourages activism in an attempt to provide the evidence which comforts the conscience.

If we have not already seen enough to demonstrate that there was not a new carefree view of early assurance, let alone a consensus on the subject, let me mention the treatment which the *Religious Affections* received at the hands of John Wesley. Wesley produced abridged editions of many works as part of his *Christian Library*, one of which was the *Affections*. Only a sixth of the work survived his editorial knife, with the twelve signs of Part 3 being reduced to eight. Wesley did not like the work as he found it because he thought that it was a defence of the doctrine of the final perseverance of all true believers. He described the treatise as a 'dangerous heap, wherein much wholesome food is mixed with much deadly poison.'³⁸ There was clearly no uniform, agreed rejection of the Puritan emphasis on self-examination.

The lack of early evangelical uniformity on assurance is further highlighted by the teaching of John Newton. Bebbington cites Newton as an example of an evangelical who departed from traditional Puritan theological distinctions. But for our purposes Newton is interesting because of his doctrine of assurance as it is found in his sermon 'Of the Assurance of Faith'. Like Wesley, Newton speaks of assurance as a common privilege of Christians. In his own day he trusts that 'there are more than a few' who have it, though 'the greater part [...] live far below their just right and privilege.'³⁹ The reason for this hesitation becomes clear when he discusses the ground on which assurance is established:

Assurance is the result of a competent spiritual knowledge of the person and work of Christ as revealed in the Gospel, and a consciousness of dependence on him and his work alone for salvation.⁴⁰

The young convert lacks these. Hence, Newton says, with a significant choice of words, 'though his eyes are opened, his sight is not yet confirmed, nor his spiritual senses exercised.'⁴¹ Newton sounds more like one of Bebbington's Puritans than one of his evangelicals: 'Remember that the progress of faith to assurance is gradual. Expect it not suddenly; but wait upon the Lord for it in the ways of his appointment.'⁴² At least this evangelical did not believe assurance to be general, normally given at conversion and the result of simple acceptance of the gift of God.⁴³ There comes a point where the whole idea of a marked distinction between Puritanism and evangelicalism must be re-examined.

Having looked at three individuals, some more general remarks are necessary on the idea of evangelical activism. As we have seen, Bebbington ties the origins of evangelicalism to the emergence of activism. Such claims highlight the importance of ascertaining exactly what the activism in question entailed. In most of Bebbington's publications he deploys the four characteristics of evangelicalism with a number of examples of each. Detailing these examples suggests a wide array of evangelical activism from across the centuries: preaching, visiting, distributing tracts, prayer meetings, Sunday schools, evangelism, pastoral care, missionary work, general philanthropy, and social reform. Surely here Bebbington grants too much in his definition of activism. Allowing such breadth to the acceptable types of activity will result in finding the beginning of evangelicalism not in the eighteenth but in the sixteenth century.

The Reformers themselves were undeniably activists on these terms. John Calvin and the Huguenots provide an excellent example of the Reformation concern for evangelism. The list drawn up for Admiral de Coligny in 1562 indicates that there were by then 2,150 Huguenot churches in France,

and McGrath estimates a total membership above two million (more than a tenth of the population).⁴⁴ This was within thirty years of Calvin's own conversion. In England we need only think of a John Bradford preaching in the north of England, or Hugh Latimer urging practical reform on the young King Edward. Into the seventeenth century we find the quest for souls amply represented among the Puritans. Even in a writing which represents the height of John Owen's Reformed Scholasticism, his *Dissertation on Divine Justice*, we find a conclusion on the uses of the doctrine which directly addresses the unbeliever with a personal appeal.⁴⁵ Richard Baxter held to as complex a theological system as any of the Puritans, but from his work in Kidderminster he could hardly be thought of except as an activist.

It is no surprise then that when Bebbington denies the activism of the Puritans he immediately specifies the absence of foreign missions.⁴⁶ This is a much tighter definition of activism than he suggests elsewhere, but it is the only one which will sustain his argument. The dating of evangelicalism to the 1730s will only work if we say that preaching, pastoring, evangelism and social concern do not count as examples of evangelical activism. To my mind, and it would seem from his other examples to Bebbington's, that is far too specific, and would be a better designation for a particular expression of evangelicalism than for the movement *per se*. If my argument in this paper is correct, then the way is opened to reconsidering the case for the Reformation and Puritanism being authentically evangelical movements. Whatever differences pertained between the various evangelical movements would then be understood as differences of accidents rather than substance.

In closing, I wish to step out of the realm of history by commenting briefly on the consequences of this possibility for evangelical self-understanding. If we think that evangelicalism began in the 1730s, then Wesley and Edwards become its most important fathers. This means that evangelicalism was from its origin *equally divided* between Reformed and Arminian theology; neither could claim to be the mainstream doctrinal position. In this sense it is easy to see how Bebbington's analysis serves to give a strong foothold to Arminianism within the evangelical movement by making foundational one of its most noted proponents. If, however, we reconsider the origins of evangelicalism and find that it is a Reformational and Puritan phenomenon, then the picture looks very different. The Magisterial Reformers on the Continent and in England during the sixteenth century and the Puritans of the seventeenth were almost without exception (e.g. Melancthon) committed to a Reformed account of the doctrine of election. Evangelicalism considered as continuous from the sixteenth century becomes aboriginally Reformed on the doctrine of election rather than divided, and the position taken by John Wesley on election becomes a minority report much like that of Arminius. With such an historical perspective, Reformed theology constitutes the authentic, evangelical mainstream of three centuries, and the historical case for the foundational status of Arminianism is undermined.

References

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23. *Works*, 2:250; see Owen, *Works*, 3:238,
24. See n.22 above.
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36. *Works*, 2:443.
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Garry Williams is Lecturer in Church History at Oak Hill Theological College, London.