EMPIRICAL THEOLOGY:
TOWARDS AN EVANGELICAL–CHARISMATIC HERMENEUTIC*

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Introduction

‘Empirical theology’ is a phrase which is treated with suspicion by social scientists and theologians alike. This is partly because the nature of the discipline is still unclear to many. So, with this in mind, I begin with a brief definition. Empirical theology is a sub-discipline of practical theology which aims to explore, describe and test theological ideas using empirical methods. It naturally focuses upon the faith in God of those being researched, and it is, therefore, concerned with belief and practice. The only paradigm of empirical theology which has been published is by Johannes van der Ven, Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands.¹ This model is based upon the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas and in particular his theory of communica-

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1. Johannes van der Ven, Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993); the German edition, Entwurf einer empirischen Theologie (Theologie und Empirie, 10; Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1990); cf. J.A. van der Ven, ‘Practical Theology: From Applied Theology to Empirical Theology’, Journal of Empirical Theology 1.1 (1988), pp. 7-27. The only centre in the UK that I am aware seeks to integrate empirical and theological disciplines in an inter-disciplinary manner is based at Trinity College, Carmarthen, staffed by Professor Leslie Francis and Dr William Kay.
tive praxis. While this paradigm has some merits in terms of methodology and an understanding of empirical theology as an intra-disciplinary approach, its conceptual framework defined in terms of communicative praxis makes it problematic. Alongside this aspect is a political-liberation theological commitment which serves to enhance the problematic nature of the conceptual framework.

However, the intention of this study is not to consider van der Ven's approach in any detail, but to suggest a hermeneutical framework which stems from an evangelical-charismatic commitment. While the hermeneutical approach is one which may be found to be helpful in general, its specific orientation is in relation to empirical theology. This is, arguably, pertinent to Pentecostal and Charismatic theology since contemporary charismatic phenomena invite both empirical and theological research. An empirical-theological approach would consider such phenomena from social scientist perspectives, but would also wish to integrate such perspectives within a theological framework. This paper suggests a possibility for such a framework and begins, first of all, by drawing upon


