The empirical approach in practical theology: a discussion with J A van der Ven

Hennie Pieterse

1 INTRODUCTION

J A van der Ven is a prominent practical theologian from Nijmegen in the Netherlands, who is widely read in the Western world. Since his visit to South Africa as a guest of the Department of Practical Theology at Unisa, his work has also been appreciated in this country. In his latest book Practical Theology: an empirical approach (Van Der Ven 1993) (the English version of the German edition Entwurf einer empirischen Theologie, Van Der Ven 1990), the reader is confronted with a magisterial systematic account of modern practical theological methodology. This article intends to be a discussion with Van der Ven's book, especially the fundamental thrust of it.

Van der Ven's project during the past decade was to introduce a new method in theology that would stand alongside the literary, historical and systematic approaches, namely an empirical approach. In this book his purpose is to develop an empirical paradigm for practical theology from the frame of reference of empirical theology.

The relevance of an empirical approach in practical theology and for all of theology is spelled out on the back cover of his book:

The fundamental task of Western theology is to provide an answer to the question how the major themes of Christian faith can be made more relevant to present and future generations. One of the most important problems is whether modern theology can adequately connect to the daily life of people and groups. Until now, it has failed to provide systematic and methodical answers to empirical questions and to incorporate these answers in theological thought. For instance, when and how do modern people have religious experiences, which religious attitudes have an impact on their individual and social life, how do they participate in the life of the church community, and how does the relation between church and society take shape in ordinary life?
These questions should surely be researched and answered from a distinctive theological point of view.

Van der Ven's quest is focused on the fundamental problem of theology, namely the relation and the balance between our Christian tradition and the modern situation of Christian religious experience. It has to do with understanding the relationship between tradition and situation. How do we go about carrying out our theological task of relating religious experiences that have their origin in a particular context in the past to those predominating in a particular present day context? (Van der Ven 1993:19). The present day context is characterised by the effects of the Enlightenment.

The gist of Van der Ven's work is, to my mind, an effort to grapple with the sense of the Christian religion in a situation of modernity. This effort is a valid quest in the field of practical theology, because this discipline has the task of theorising on communication of the Christian faith in the contemporary context.

There is also the problem of modern theology as practised within the walls of the universities, which has developed in isolation from the church and the Christian community (Van der Ven 1993:23). How could this gap be bridged? Van der Ven believes that it can be bridged by an empirical theology which meets the criteria for scientific research in a university setting and by emphasising the praxis of the church and pastoral care in the cultural and social context as its object. Church and pastoral praxis is characterised as a hermeneutic-communicative praxis (Van der Ven 1993:41). This involves an understanding of the gospel in the concretely examined church-in-society praxis which focuses strongly on the religious experience and understanding of common believers, and the communication of this understanding (thoroughly discussed in theological debate) through the praxis of the church.

The objective of this review article for the specialist is to discuss the question whether the empirical approach of Van der Ven is a contribution to the efforts of theology to address the fundamental problem of theology.

2 EMPIRICAL THEOLOGY WITHIN THE FRAME OF REFERENCE OF CRITICAL-CORRELATIONAL HERMENEUTICS

In order to address (from his perspective) the fundamental problem of theology, namely the relation between tradition and (modern) situation, Van der Ven links up with Tracy's approach of critical-correlational hermeneutics. Tracy (1989) has explained that the Anglo-American empirical theologies belong to the group of hermeneutical correlational theologies. Tracy's approach seeks to strike a balance between tradition and situation by critically relating past interpretations to contemporary interpretations and