

Village, A. (2007). *The Bible and lay people: an empirical approach to ordinary hermeneutics*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. ISBN 978-0-7546-5801-6

Andrew Village's goal is to highlight the various relationships between the type of Anglican church attended and the reading patterns engaged in by those who attend the services. His aim is both descriptive and prescriptive, seeking to show how empirical study might inform a theology of scripture.

The research is multidisciplinary. It is a cross of behavioural/attitudinal measurement and statistical analysis with biblical hermeneutics and lay readers. To collect the data a quantitative (closed inquiry, survey based) method is employed. The questionnaire is drawn from three prior pilot studies. The 200 questions focus on a test passage: Mark 9:14-29, which deals with a seemingly miraculous healing. The subjects are Anglicans from the three main streams of that tradition: broad church, Anglo-Catholic and evangelical. Eleven churches participated, with 404 returned questionnaires.

Chapter 1 outlines the motivation and theoretical framework for such research and the background to the composition of the questionnaire. Chapter 2 deals with changing methods in biblical studies and their impact on churchgoers. Chapter 3 focuses on the ordinary reader's relationship with and attitude to the Bible. Chapter 4 looks at the phenomenon of literalism as the product of two factors: prior doctrinal belief and overall historical credibility.

Chapter 5 concerns the story of the healing of the epileptic in Mark 9:14-29 and the question of hermeneutic horizons (following the designations of the hermeneutist Paul Ricoeur). Here the contrast between the ordinary reader and the academic is most marked. Chapter 6 gives an overview of the relationship between personality studies, psychology and religion and comments on the inclusion of a personality type scale in the questionnaire. Chapter 7 discusses the issue of interpretive communities and the role of individual and congregational factors in shaping such readings. Chapter 8 considers the question of the relationship between interpretation and charismatic beliefs, and the results show that the more charismatic the reader, the more the healing story under scrutiny was interpreted literally. In a concluding review chapter 9 highlights, among other things, the importance of personality type as a prime factor in interpretation and dismisses both gender and age as significant interpretive categories.

The author's research compares favourably with the prior nationwide Church Attendance Survey (1998). As such, Village's sample, while not wholly representative of the Anglican Church, still provides a meaningful analysis. Despite being denominationally Anglo-centric, the research raises universally valid questions about the gap between academic and lay scriptural readings, and whether the latter do better justice to the revelatory nature of the text than the classical historical-critical methodologies of the scholars. On the other hand, many of the results appear somewhat predictable, for instance the finding that evangelical Anglicans consistently read the Bible more literally than Anglo-Catholics.

Nonetheless Village is to be congratulated on his pioneering work. Empirical research on this topic is indeed extremely rare, primarily because of its sheer complexity and the difficulty of collecting and evaluating the data. One is constantly reminded of the adage that statistics are good slaves but bad masters, but the methodological care demonstrated throughout the project addresses this technical issue admirably. Further

work is still needed to refine the scales so as to more accurately measure the hermeneutic divide between reader, text and author. There is also a need for more qualitative studies on how the text shapes the readers' experience and vice versa. Finally, while some prescriptive advice is advanced, more could be said about ways of applying the obtained results in practice. — DAVID BOLTON, Leuven (B)