




# Binding and loosing on earth: Evaluating the strategy for church disciplinary procedures proposed in Matthew 18:15-18 through the lenses of thinking and feeling



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Matthew 18:15–18 proposed a disciplined strategy for dealing with disputes within the Matthean emerging Christian community. The present study was designed to test the theory, proposed by the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics, that reader interpretation of this strategy is influenced by the individual readers' psychological type preferences. Participants attending two conferences in 2017 reflected on this strategy, working in groups that distinguished between feeling types and thinking types: 15 biblical scholars at the Summer School of the Urban Theology Unit, and 22 curates and training incumbents at a 3-day residential programme. Consistent with psychological type theory and with the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics, the feeling types found the whole tone of the passage uncomfortable and unsettling. The thinking types identified more readily with the Matthean strategy. These findings add weight to the reader perspective approach to the interpretation of scripture that takes the psychological type profile of the reader into account.

**Keywords:** Reader perspective; Biblical hermeneutics; SIFT; Psychological type; Preaching.

## Introduction

Matthew 18:15–18 provides a classic text for reflection on the process by which the Christian community handles matters of dispute and disagreement. The culmination of the process, when other strategies have failed, is for the offender to be regarded as a Gentile and a tax gatherer. Working within different frameworks of biblical scholarship, the passage may be seen to offer insights into the developing social and theological context of the Matthean community, or into the hermeneutical dialogue established between the passage and subsequent generations of Christian disciples.

Bacon's (1930) classic analysis of Matthew's Gospel identified the fivefold structure of narrative followed by discourse, with each discourse terminating with the closing expression, 'When Jesus had finished his teaching or sayings' (see further Weren 2006:171–200). Chapter 18 belongs to the fourth of these discourses that is most frequently described as a community rule, or guidelines for dealing with conflict (see Carter 2005:361–375; Hagner 1995:514; Morris 1992:456–458; Overman 1996:267–276). The Matthean Jesus begins this fourth discourse by maintaining that his followers will need a childlike faith and humility (vv. 1–3). The second section issues warnings about temptations (vv. 6–9). The third section offers the parable of the lost sheep (vv. 10–14). The fourth section details the procedure that must be used in dealing with 'sin' among the 'brothers' of the community (vv. 15–18). The fifth section affirms Jesus' presence when two or three are gathered together (vv. 19–20). The sixth section emphasises that forgiveness is limitless (vv. 21–22). Finally, the parable of the unforgiving servant illustrates the spirit of forgiveness that should pervade the Christian community (vv. 23–35). It is this overall structure that places the apparent harshness of the procedure outlined in 18:15–18 within a wider emphasis on forgiveness and acceptance.

Classic exegesis of Matthew 18:15–18 generally argues that the imprecise term 'sins against you' leaves open the possibility of a variety of interpretations. In the first stage of the process, the verb

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translated as 'point out' carries no intention of rebuke. The first stage of the process is to ensure privacy. The intention is to implement the model of the shepherd (vv. 10–14) in restoring the lost to the field. The second stage of the process invokes the stipulation of Deuteronomy 19:15 and draws two or three witnesses into play. This gives the process legal status. The third stage of the process calls on the whole church. Refusal to listen to the church leads to exclusion alongside Gentiles and tax collectors.

Reader perspective approaches to biblical hermeneutics recognise that contemporary interpretation of this passage on how the Christian community handles matters of dispute and disagreement may vary according to the sociological contexts in which readers are located or the psychological preferences with which readers operate. The importance of psychological preferences in shaping reader interpretation of scripture has been sharpened by Francis and Village (2008) who draw on Jung's model of the human psyche. In his classic analysis of psychological type, Jung (1971) distinguishes between two core psychological processes: the perceiving process that is concerned with gathering information and the judging process that is concerned with evaluating information. Jung's model maintains that each of these processes is reflected in two contrasting functions: perceiving is reflected in sensing and intuition, while judging is reflected in thinking and feeling. Jung's observation of human behaviour led to the hypothesis that individuals show clear preferences for one of these functions over the other: for sensing or for intuition, and for thinking or for feeling. The physical analogy for these psychological preferences is provided by handedness: preference for the left hand or for the right hand.

The evaluation of strategies and procedures for dealing with matters of dispute and disagreement is clearly an activity that comes within the domain of the judging process. The reader perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics that takes the reader's psychological preferences into account would, therefore, hypothesise that readers with a preference for feeling would read Matthew 18:15–18 through a somewhat different lens compared with readers with a preference for thinking. This hypothesis would be sharpened by carefully listening to the account of these two functions (thinking and feeling) offered by the psychological type literature (see Francis 2005).

According to the psychological type literature, individuals who prefer *thinking* develop clear powers of logical analysis. They develop the ability to weigh facts objectively and to predict consequences, both intended and unintended. They develop a stance of impartiality, fairness and justice. Individuals with a preference for thinking are good at establishing logical order. They are not reluctant to discipline and to reprimand people when they consider it necessary. They are able to take tough decisions in a bold and confident way.

Thinking types tend to give attention to other people's ideas rather than to their feelings. They may hurt other people's feelings without recognising that they are doing so. Thinking types are able to anticipate and predict the logical outcomes of other people's choices. They can see the humour rather than the human pain in bad choices and wrong decisions taken by others. Thinking types may seem to others to be looking at life from the outside as spectators rather than as active participants. They prefer to rely on objective and impersonal criteria in reaching decisions.

According to the psychological type literature, individuals who prefer *feeling* develop a personal emphasis on values and standards. They have the knack for appreciating what matters most to themselves and what matters most to other people. They develop insights into how people respond and they wish to stand alongside others. They are recognised for their capacity for warmth, and for displaying empathy and compassion. Feeling types like harmony and will work hard to bring about harmony between other people. They tend to be reluctant to tell other people unpleasant things or to reprimand other people. While feeling types take into account other people's feelings, they need to have their own feelings recognised as well. Feeling types are good at seeing the personal consequences of choices on their own lives and on the lives of others.

Feeling types are recognised by others as sympathetic and empathetic individuals, who respond to other people's values as much as to their ideas. Feeling types look at life from the inside, engaging as committed participants. Consequently, they find it less easy to stand back and to form an objective view of what is taking place. Feeling types develop good skills at weighing human values and motives, both their own and other people's. They prize harmony and trust.

For thinking types it is their less preferred function of feeling which lets them down, especially when they are tired. When tired, thinking types fail to take into account other people's feelings, fail to predict other people's emotional reactions and can hurt other people without intending to do so. A good example is how thinking types may analyse the issues behind a conflict and then expect the people involved in the conflict to agree with and be helped by the analysis. The analysis may well be true and fair, but nonetheless deeply hurtful and capable of provoking anger.

For feeling types it is their less preferred function of thinking which lets them down, especially when they are tired. When tired, feeling types fail to be able to analyse what is actually going on in a situation. They get drawn into the situation, and they find it very difficult to stand back and to be objective. They can themselves become quite easily hurt. A good example is how feeling types may try all too hard to empathise with both sides of a quarrel, or with both parties in a conflict. Feeling types may long so much to bring comfort to those who are distressed and to introduce harmony to where there

is conflict that they end up being torn apart themselves by the situation they want to resolve.

The general thesis that psychological type preferences are influential in shaping reader interpretation of scripture (in terms of both the perceiving process and the judging process) has been tested by a series of studies that invited type-alike groups to discuss their interpretation of scripture and then to share their interpretation with each other. The following passages from the Gospels have been explored in this way: the feeding of the five thousand reported in Mark 6:34–44 (Francis 2010); the resurrection narratives reported in Mark 16:1–8 and Matthew 28:1–15 (Francis & Jones 2011); the cleansing of the Temple and the incident of the fig tree reported in Mark 11:11–21 (Francis 2012a; Francis & ap Siôn 2016b); the Johannine feeding narrative reported in John 6:4–22 (Francis 2012b); the narrative of separating sheep from goats reported in Matthew 25:31–46 (Francis & Smith 2012); the birth narratives reported in Matthew 2:13–20 and Luke 2:8–16 (Francis & Smith 2013); two narratives concerning John the Baptist reported in Mark 1:2–8 and Luke 3:2b–20 (Francis 2013; Francis & Smith 2014); the Johannine feeding narrative reported in John 6:5–15 (Francis & Jones 2014); two passages from Mark exploring different aspects of discipleship reported in Mark 6:7–14 and Mark 6:33–41 (Francis & Jones 2015a); the foot washing account reported in John 13:2b–15 (Francis 2015); two healing narratives reported in Mark 2:1–12 and Mark 10:46–52 (Francis & Jones 2015b); the narrative of blind Bartimaeus reported in Mark 10:46–52 (Smith & Francis 2016); the Road to Emmaus narrative reported in Luke 24:13–35 (Francis & ap Siôn 2016a; Francis & Smith 2017); the call of the first disciples as recorded in Luke 5:1–7 (Francis & ap Siôn 2017); the missionary journey of the disciples reported in Mark 6:6b–17 (Francis, Smith, & Francis-Dehqani 2017); the theme of grace reflected in Matthew 6:25–30 and Matthew 20:1–15 (Francis, Smith & Francis-Dehqani 2018); and the pericope on Pilate and Judas reported in Matthew 27:3–10, 19–25 (Francis & Ross 2018). More recently, the general thesis that psychological type preferences are influential in shaping reader interpretation has been applied to the Psalms: Psalm 1 by Francis and Smith (2018) and by Francis, McKenna, and Sahin (2018), and Psalm 139 by Francis, Smith, and Corio (2018). This research tradition has also been developed in Poland by Chaim (2013, 2014, 2015).

## Research question

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to test the power of the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics to explain different reader perspectives on the strategy for church disciplinary procedures proposed by Matthew 18:15–18. Because the key problem raised by this passage concerns the evaluation of how people are treated within the Christian community, this is a matter addressing the judging process, distinguishing between the thinking function and the feeling function.

## Method

### Contexts

The research was conducted in two different but complementary contexts during the second half of 2017. The first context (biblical scholars) was provided as part of the 3-day Summer School of the Urban Theology Unit among participants engaging with the stream concerned with Community in the New Testament. This Summer School provides an interesting context for such an investigation, working with a group of scholars who take seriously both the study of scripture and the context within which scripture is studied and applied. The second context (Anglican clergy) was provided as part of the 3-day residential programme arranged for first-year curates and their training incumbents within a Diocese of the Church of England. Both contexts dedicated time for exploring the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and agreed to participate in the research programme.

### Procedure

Participants within both contexts were invited to complete a recognised measure of psychological type and to explore Matthew 18:15–18 in groups organised according to their judging preference (thinking or feeling). The passage was printed from the NSRV, and the following task was printed below the passage: What do you think and feel are the strengths and weaknesses in this approach to the Christian community in Matthew? (see Appendix 1).

### Measure

Psychological type was assessed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis 2005). This instrument proposes 40 forced-choice items to distinguish between the two orientations (extraversion or introversion), the two perceiving functions (sensing or intuition), the two judging functions (thinking or feeling) and the two attitudes towards the outside world (judging or perceiving).

#### Participants: Biblical scholars

The 16 participants were divided into three groups: strong thinking types ( $N = 6$ ), strong feeling types ( $N = 5$ ) and participants who reported less strong preferences ( $N = 5$ ).

#### Participants: Anglican clergy

The 22 participants were divided into three groups: strong thinking types ( $N = 7$ ), strong feeling types ( $N = 6$ ) and participants who reported less strong preferences ( $N = 9$ ).

## Analysis

In both contexts, one of the authors joined the group of strong feeling types and one of the authors joined the group of strong thinking types (Francis and Hebden with the biblical scholars, and Francis and Jones with the Anglican clergy). Within these groups, the authors carefully noted both the process and the content of the discussion. The authors checked their account and their interpretation with the participants.

## Results: Biblical scholars

### Feeling

As the passage was being read slowly and deliberately, a growing sense of unease seemed to grow among the five individuals who comprised the group of strong feeling types. This sense of unease brooded over a period of uncomfortable silence until one voice broke into the silence:

'There is a passage of scripture that says be merciful as our heavenly father is merciful. Judge not that you be not judged. I do not see this reflected in what we have just heard. The passage is strong on judgement, weak on mercy.'

Voice two followed on very quickly:

'I feel very uncomfortable with this whole passage. There is a power game going on. There is one group, the majority group, the group with the power, making the judgement. Then there is another group, the group that is cast out and does not have any recourse to appeal.'

Voice three tried to defend the process, arguing that it is in nobody's interest to let members of the church who are sinning to go on sinning. We cannot stand by as if endorsing their behaviour. But then voice four interrupted. He did not like the implications of this line of argument:

'This is really difficult. If they are doing antisocial behaviour we may need to admonish with tough love. It is difficult to get the balance right. Sometimes I just want to look them in the eye and give them a big hug.'

Voice five followed this line of approach. 'I pray for discernment'. Voice five argued that there are reasons for people sinning. So we have to look behind the behaviour to the motivation. Nothing is gained by pushing people out. It only makes them worse.

Voice one re-entered the conversation, drawing on a story from the Old Testament. Nathan had a very different approach. Telling a story can sometimes help people to see their behaviour in a new light to make informed judgements about themselves. Nathan brought King David to see the mistake of his ways. 'I have found that the direct approach does not work. A more indirect approach leads people to convict themselves'.

Voice four identified with this line of argument. He argued that we need to give people time and space to reflect. Then sometimes people can hoist themselves with their own petard. But it is not us who are judging them. They are judging themselves.

Voice two took the group back to the passage. The first steps in the process are very good. There is a lot to be said for taking someone to one side and addressing the problem in private. It is so much healthier than bearing grudges and marginalising the offender. Things are less easy, however, when disputes are taken up the hierarchy. People can get really hurt by the process.

Voice three came back into the conversation, reflecting on the life experiences that may have shaped Matthew's position on this issue, and Matthew's wider commitment to a Gospel of judgement where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth, and the brutal separation between sheep and goats. Voice three argued that if Matthew really had been a tax collector, he might still be burdened by guilt and so project his feeling of deserving punishment onto others.

Voice two tried once again to take the group back to the passage. The problem is that the passage is too black and white. Life is more complex than that. People are more important than that. Voice three jumped in saying that:

'There really needs to be a mediating process. Someone needs to get the two parties together and to get them talking openly with each other, even if that only leads to them agreeing to disagree. The situation cannot really be allowed to escalate into excluding someone from the Christian community.'

Voice two did not want to be deflected from dealing with the full affront of the passage. 'I really struggle with the final sentence. I would not want that authority to bind things on earth that held lasting consequences in heaven'. Voice two would not want to assign even sinners to be classified with two groups that are utterly despised (Gentiles and tax collectors). This really feels like taking God's place and that is just not acceptable.

Voice five tried to deflect the negative sense of judgement by celebrating the complementary gift of the power of absolution. But voice two was not to be so easily deflected. Surely there can be no grounds to withhold forgiveness? Does not scripture command us to forgive our enemies and to love those who hate us?

Recognising that time was running out, voice four offered a fitting closing comment that seemed to sum up the overall mood of the group and was totally consistent with the way in which voice one began the session:

'When a problem like this arises in my church, we put the kettle on, make a cup of tea and cut a slice of cake. We then just talk about it.'

### Thinking

The six individuals who comprised the group of strong thinking types did not begin with the passage at all, but rather with an analysis of the process with which they had been asked to engage and with a conversation about psychological types – wanting to be a step ahead of the research in which they were participating. This keenness to keep a perspective one step outside the process was maintained throughout the conversation, even when the text was the main focus. When they approached the text, it was first read out loud to the group and the question was re-read too. There was no tension in the conversation about this text; the group was animated and the conversational tone was mostly light-hearted, even when serious personal stories

were shared. These personal stories clearly narrated difficult experiences, but the emotional difficulty was not explicitly referenced.

The first priority for some members of this small group was to clarify the nature of the 'sin' referred to in the passage. One participant noted that it was the first time that he had been struck by the phrase 'against you' in regard to this sin. There was a broad consensus that the sin was likely to be something like speaking against, or plotting against, another member of the community. There was also consideration given to whether this sin might be 'bullying' or the 'misuse of power', although these definitions came later in the conversation after reflection on the stories shared. The group wondered if it was less about a break in a moral code, but rather a subjective sense of having been wronged by the sinner and wanting redress.

Participants in this group were also interested in the status of the tax collector and whether this person was an administrator one step removed from the sources of revenue, or a toll collector and therefore poor and outcast himself. The group wondered about contemporary equivalents to the tax collector.

During the discussion, two personal anecdotes, from two participants were shared and thoughtfully received and reflected on. In both cases, personal details were omitted and only pertinent information was given for the group to get an idea of the processes that were followed, the rationale for following them and the outcome. This gave the group enough information to consider how closely the anecdotes related to the process described in the text and whether the process was good and effective. In both stories, the individuals who committed the sin left the group voluntarily, albeit at a point when it was made clear that their continued presence was excessively detrimental either to the whole community or to significant and powerful members of it. In both cases an implicitly utilitarian case was made for the expulsion, and the expulsion was deemed unfortunate but appropriate. Both stories were told with a dispassionate abstraction that faithfully reflected the same approach in the text being studied.

Participants in this group were comfortable with the process offered by the text for dealing with conflict. They did not go so far as to say that it was the best process, but offered more general approval, for example, 'I like that there are steps to it and they are good steps'. What was commended was the logic and transparency of the process advanced for conflict resolution and the way it valued the inter-subjectivity of the stage where increasing numbers of people are brought into the dispute to be observer-participants and part of the final resolution. As one participant put it, 'The good of having several people is that they hear different things and give different perspectives'. The conflict was always seen in the context of the community in which the two principal actors belonged, rather than as a private dispute between

two people. This was clearly about resolving a disruption of wider community rather than a disruption of a personal relationship.

This group thought about the feelings of those involved in the process. Their criticism of the process was that there seemed to be 'no mechanism for saying "sorry"'. In recognising this, two members of the group wanted to refine the difference between 'being listened to' and being 'heard properly'. This was partly about what actions might follow the hearing but also about whether the person sinned against might just feel better for having been heard properly by the one who sinned. The passage seemed unclear on this matter to several of the group because of the brevity of the text. It is worth noting that this group of six people who identified themselves as thinking types included only one woman. This needs mentioning because gender was raised by the one woman in the group, who asserted that 'Women will react to this process (described in the passage) differently to men', and this assertion was not challenged. The same woman also argued that 'When women listen, they empathise; when men listen, they come up with solutions'. Again there was a great deal of agreement on this.

The group often returned to the meta-process of their own role in interpreting the text as self-identified thinking types. This led one participant to ask, 'Is the priority harmony or justice? Thinking or feeling?'

In conclusion, the model given in Matthew 18 was not considered a great model, but one that had merit because it was developed from tried and tested experience. The passage assumes that the sinner has in fact sinned. This is not about whether or not they have sinned, but rather what we do about it. Although one member did ask the others how they 'felt' about the passage, this question was not engaged with. To listen must mean to change – this is implicit in the act of listening and the textual use of the word 'listen', according to a consensus of the group. The group agreed that they wanted resolution. Some resistance was noted to throwing people out, but realism and the need for resolution was maintained. This group of thinking types was clear that we should try very hard to keep people in *until* they 'cross a line'. Communities need, however, to establish lines that cannot be crossed. Although the group of thinking types raised questions about the welfare of the excluded person who is thrown out, they did not dwell on how they felt for the excluded person, but rather focused on liberal Christian principles of compassion.

## Results: Anglican clergy Feeling

The group of high-scoring feeling types comprised six people: three women and three men. The group began by assigning someone to feed back to the main group. The text was read by individuals before an open discussion took place. There was a general feeling of nervousness in the group about going to confront someone for a wrongdoing.

They felt comforted by the fact that they would not have to go to the person on their own to discuss their wrongdoing. One member of the group even stated that there was 'safety in numbers'.

While the group felt that the appointed text was harsh, they took comfort in the preceding piece of scripture which gave the reader the message that no one was lost. In light of this affirmation, they re-assessed the process offered by Matthew when disagreements arose in the community and were hopeful that they would not get to stage three and have to dismiss anyone from the community. While the group found confronting people difficult, they did register that attending to the issue in stage one or stage two would stop gossip and toxicity. The problem emerged when the process was allowed to proceed to engage stage three.

The group reflected on their parish ministry and the times when one or two parishioners had caused hurt to the vicar and other parishioners. In this instance, they recognised that they had a greater responsibility to others and to the bigger picture. This recognition did not, however, alleviate the stress and anxiety that would be felt in having to deal with the situation. Their prayer was that matters could always be resolved before stage two.

Once again the group of feeling types re-affirmed that the passage under discussion was sandwiched between two stories that spoke of grace and forgiveness. The group saw it as their responsibility to bring the person back into the fold, allowing them to experience forgiveness and the grace of God.

The final part of the meeting looked at the Greek word for you and whether the word was plural or singular. There was relief when the use of 'you' changed from the singular to the plural, so confirming the fact that the cleric would be undertaking the issue with others and making the decision with others.

## Thinking types

The group of high-scoring thinking types comprised seven people, all men. The group was keen to get started and to get focused on the task. One member of the group offered to serve as note-taker and set the discussion going by saying that it is really important to have established procedures in place for dealing with matters of dispute. He had recently needed to issue a formal warning to a staff colleague who had crossed the line.

Another member of the group suggested that the Church of England was not good at implementing such procedures. We are too anti-confrontational and passive aggressive. We are reluctant to challenge each other in areas of sinfulness. People just talk around each other. Here in this passage is good common sense.

If you have a problem with someone, talk about it. We need good communication that is brave enough to say what you think.

A third member of the group explained that in his church he encouraged vulnerability and honesty. Recently, a GP in his congregation had stood up and confessed how bad her mental health had been in recent days. That was very brave but very healthy too.

The group then began to explore other personal experiences. While not endorsing a culture of public shaming, one member of the group affirmed that when the congregation know something is amiss they expect something to be done about it. His example concerned one of his group leaders who had moved in with her boyfriend. He suggested to her that she stood down from her leadership role in the church and she had done so. He wondered whether it would be wise to advise her not to take communion while living in sin, but he had not taken the issue that far.

This narrative led to an account of something that had happened in a neighbouring house church where one of the female leader's daughters had experienced under-age pregnancy. This woman was called in front of the elders to give an explanation for her daughter's behaviour and had been stripped of her leadership role. That had done a lot of damage to the woman.

It was this account that led to a closer analysis of the passage, dealing with two specific issues. The first issue focused on the reference to binding: what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Here was the frightening responsibility of leadership for those who took seriously scriptural authority in such matters.

The second issue focused on the model of the church implied in Matthew's teaching. The context for this analysis was grounded in an appreciation of how today people behave quite differently in smaller family groupings and in larger public groupings. In the smaller family group, there is an intimacy in which you can challenge people effectively and helpfully, while in the larger public groupings to do so may be both inappropriate and counterproductive. Now it is likely that Matthew envisaged small Christian communities operating within households like an extended family. To use the Matthean model of sequential challenge in that context could work to the good, while to confront Miss Jones for living with her boyfriend in front of the Sunday morning congregation could lead to a disaster.

Here is a fine example of how the thinking type's approach using careful analysis and clear distinctions could, at least for some individuals in the group, both remain loyal to procedures grounded in scripture and at the same time learn from careful observation of how such procedures may impact individual lives.

Once this clear distinction had been put in place the group began to explore what kind of issues (if any) should be spoken about before the whole congregation. One member of the group had experienced a member of the congregation defrauding others of money. He had systematically built relationships and abused the trust others had placed in him. This is something that needed to be made known publicly. And the same goes for child abusers and sexual predators. Such people do indeed need to become as Gentiles and tax collectors. So many churches now have problems because they failed to implement the final step of Matthew's outlined procedures.

This group of thinking types closed on time thinking that they had helped to clarify an important, if inevitably uncomfortable, matter.

## Conclusion

The research question posed by the present study was to test the hypothesis that the psychological type profile of the reader impacts the perspective taken on the strategy for church disciplinary procedures proposed by Matthew 18:15–18. Because judgement and evaluation are involved in assessing a strategy of this nature, the focus of the study was placed on the comparison between feeling types and thinking types. Data provided by participants in two different but complementary contexts confirmed the view that feeling types and thinking types approached the Matthean strategy in different ways. Thinking types were more inclined to endorse the logic of the Matthean strategy, while feeling types were more inclined to feel uncomfortable about the human consequences of such a strategy. Three main conclusions can be drawn from these findings.

The first conclusion concerns the significance of the findings for the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics. The SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics is rooted in the reader perspective approach to biblical interpretation, giving primary attention to the psychological characteristics of the reader rather than to the sociological location of the reader. The present study adds further weight to the evidence marshalled by the series of earlier studies cited in the introduction to this article. The weight added by the present study is of particular value in light of the difference between the two groups of participants. One group of participants comprised individuals engaged with the academic study of scripture, while the other group of participants comprised individuals engaged with pastoral ministry. The style of workshops employed by these studies enables the type characteristics of the reader to emerge more clearly when readers of like type are placed together. For example, in the present study thinking types were able to pursue their logical analysis of the strategy uninterrupted by the intervention of feeling types. Similarly, feeling types were able to pursue their concern for the human actors affected by the strategy uninterrupted by the intervention of thinking types. Such an approach to reading scripture (or to studying the bible) may help to release the richer meanings of the text.

The second conclusion concerns the significance of the findings for the SIFT approach to liturgical preaching. Preachers who are not consciously aware of the impact of their own psychological type preferences on their characteristic interpretation of scripture may inadvertently disturb or distress some of the participants exposed to their preaching. For example, in the present study the feeling types were eager to show mercy and inclusiveness to the point of resisting the third stage of the Matthean strategy. This Gospel message preached clearly from the pulpit may frustrate thinking types within the congregation who expect their church to grasp the nettle in such situations. At the same time, in the present study the thinking types were prepared to see the Matthean strategy implemented to the point of exclusion. This Gospel message preached clearly from the pulpit may upset feeling types within the congregation who expect their church to show mercy and kindness.

The third conclusion concerns the significance of the findings for the implementation of church disciplinary procedures within the local congregation or within regional, national or international denominational contexts. The findings show that feeling types and thinking types can both draw on the authority of scripture to support their own reading of church policy and practice. The difference is simply that the feeling types gave greater weight to the location of the Matthean teaching on exclusion within the wider context of teaching on forgiveness and on inclusion. This appeal to the authority of scripture elevates the difference of psychological preference to a matter of theological significance. Core disagreements regarding the ways in which churches decide who is included and who is excluded may be re-examined through this psychological lens.

The psychological lens distinguishing between feeling types and thinking types is of particular significance for many Christian churches for two reasons. The first reason is that many church congregations are heavily weighted in terms of female participants (see, e.g. Francis & Penny 2014). Normative population data on the psychological type profiles of men and women demonstrate a greater preference for feeling among women and a greater preference for thinking among men. For example, the population data for the United Kingdom published by Kendall (1998) found that just 35% of men reported as feeling types, compared with 70% of women. In other words, the feeling approach to evaluating the strategy for church disciplinary procedures proposed in Matthew 18:15–18 is likely to sit more comfortably within a community shaped by women than shaped by men. The second reason is that studies of clergy across a range of denominations have found that clergymen are much more likely to report as feeling types compared with men in the general population. For example, in a study among 626 Anglican clergymen in England, Francis et al. (2007) found that 54% reported as feeling types; in a study of 693 male Methodist circuit ministers in Britain, Burton, Francis and Robbins (2010) found that 64% reported as feeling types; and in a study of 413 clergymen serving in the Presbyterian

Church (US), Francis, Robbins, and Wulff (2011) found that 66% reported as feeling types. In other words, the feeling approach to evaluating the strategy for church disciplinary procedures proposed in Matthew 18:15–18 is likely to sit more comfortably with male church leaders than with men in general. These two reasons taken together may help to explain why some men either fail to be attracted to mainline Christian denominations or struggle to maintain commitment to them. Their preferred ways of making decisions or of handling conflict do not seem to resonate with their experience of engaging in local church life.

The limitations with the present study are that the specific focus on exploring the reader perspective on evaluating scriptural strategies for church disciplinary procedures has been restricted to one small passage from Matthew, and to two groups of readers (totalling 38 participants), both recruited within the same cultural context (England). Such limitations can be addressed by studies that replicate or extend the present research.

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L.J.F. designed and structured the research programme and the article. S.H.J. and K.H. fully contributed to the generation and analysis of the data, as well as to the interpretation of the findings.

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### Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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Appendix starts on the next page →

## Appendix 1

### Matthew 18:15–18

'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven'.

**What do you think and feel are the strengths and weaknesses in this approach to the Christian Community in Matthew?**

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