

The missionary journey of Mark 6 and the experience of ministry in today's world: An empirical study in biblical hermeneutics among Anglican clergy



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This study explores the connection between dominant psychological type preferences and reader interpretations of biblical texts. Working in type-alike groups (dominant sensing, dominant intuition, dominant feeling and dominant thinking), a group of 40 Anglican clergy (20 curates and 20 training incumbents) were invited to employ their strongest function to engage conversation between Mark's account of Jesus sending out the disciples (Mk 6: 6b–16) and the experience of ministry in today's world. The data supported the hermeneutical theory proposed by the SIFT approach to biblical interpretation and liturgical preaching by demonstrating the four clear and distinctive voices of sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking.

Introduction

Reader perspective within biblical hermeneutics argues that the conversation between the Word of God and the People of God is shaped both by the 'text' and by the 'context' of the reader (Segovia & Tolbert 1995a; 1995b). Foundational studies in this tradition were rooted in conceptual analysis and drew on sociologically-informed categories, including: power, leading to liberation readings (see Botta & Andiñach 2009); sex, leading to feminist readings (see Schottroff & Wacker 2012); and race, leading to black readings (see Brown 2004). A more recent contribution to reader-perspective hermeneutical theory has been rooted in empirical observation and psychologically-informed categories, as illustrated by the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching (see Francis & Village 2008). In this sense, the context of the reading is not defined by sociological location but by psychological profile.

The psychological model of mental functioning on which the SIFT approach builds is psychological type theory as originally shaped by Jung (1971) and subsequently developed by a series of psychometric instruments that operationalise the theory for empirical studies, including the Keirseley Temperament Sorter (Keirseley & Bates 1978), the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley 1985) and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis 2005). This model 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 helpfully described perceiving as the irrational process because it *was not* concerned with evaluation, and judging as the rational process because it *was* concerned with evaluation. The theory suggests that each process is reflected in two contrasting functions. The two perceiving functions are styled sensing and intuition. The two judging functions are styled feeling and thinking. Jungian theory suggests that optional human functioning draws on all four psychological functions: sensing (S), intuition (I), feeling (F) and thinking (T). The SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics argues that rich engagement with the Word of God is enhanced by the engagement of all four psychological functions.

In terms of the perceiving functions, sensing types focus on the given evidence of the present situation as perceived by the senses. They tend to be concerned with specific details, rather than the overall picture. They are concerned with the actual, the real and the practical. They tend to be down to earth and matter-of-fact. Intuitive types focus on the possibilities of the situation, perceiving meanings and relationships. They tend to concentrate on associations, intuitions and the wider themes that go well beyond the sense perceptions. They tend to focus on the bigger picture and on the future possibilities, rather than on specific facts and details.

In terms of the judging functions, feeling types form evaluations based on subjective personal and interpersonal values. They emphasise compassion and mercy. They are known for their tactfulness

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and for their desire for peace. They are more concerned to provide harmony, than to adhere to abstract principles. Thinking types form evaluations based on objective, impersonal logic; they emphasise integrity and justice. They are known for their truthfulness and for their desire for fairness. They consider conforming to principles to be more important than cultivating harmony.

Drawing on psychological type theory, Francis and Atkins (2000; 2001; 2002) set out to test the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching by applying that approach to the principal gospel readings proposed by the 3 year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary. This systematic application of the theory demonstrated that the approach was sustainable. They were satisfied that psychological type theory could be applied as a hermeneutical tool. What this approach did not do, however, was to demonstrate empirically that readers and preachers really do read and proclaim scripture with the distinctive voices and emphases shaped by their own psychological preferences. Subsequently, a series of 15 independent and inter-related studies has set out to examine the empirical roots underpinning the SIFT approach.

These 15 studies have followed two different conceptual routes, but employed the same basic method. The basic method involved inviting participants to explore psychological type theory and to become aware of their own psychological type preferences. Then the participants were invited to work in 'type-alike' groups in order to reflect on and to respond to a specific passage of scripture. The two different routes built on different approaches to psychological type theory and to establishing 'type-alike' groups.

One group of studies looked at the two psychological processes in turn. Firstly, the participants were divided into groups distinguishing between sensing and intuition where they were invited to explore one text concentrating on the perceiving process. Then the participants were divided into groups distinguishing between feeling and thinking where they were invited to explore a second text concentrating on the judging process. In the first study of this series, Francis and Jones (2011) focused on the resurrection narratives reported in Mark 16:1–8 and Matthew 28:1–15, working with two different groups: 26 ministry training candidates and 21 Anglican clergy and readers. In stage 1, the participants were divided according to the perceiving process and invited to discuss the Marcan narrative that is rich in material to attract sensing and intuition. In stage 2, the participants were divided according to the judging process and invited to discuss the Matthean narrative that is rich in issues to engage feeling and thinking.

Other studies in this first series include the following. Francis (2012a) explored the cleansing of the temple and the incident of the fig tree reported in Mark 11:11–21, working with three different groups: 31 Anglican clergy, 14 clergy and lay preachers, and 47 lay people and clergy.

Francis (2012b) explored the Johannine feeding narrative reported in John 6: 4–22, working with two groups of ministry training candidates: 13 women and 6 men, and 2 women and 5 men. Francis and Smith (2013) explored the birth narratives reported in Matthew 2: 13–20 and Luke 2: 8–16, working with 12 training incumbents and 11 recently ordained curates. Francis (2013) explored two narratives concerning John the Baptist reported in Mark 1:2–8 and Luke 3:2b–20, working with a small group of eight people whom Astley (2002) would style as 'ordinary theologians', people associated with their local church and attending a church-based study group. Francis and Smith (2014) deliberately built on the earlier study undertaken by Francis (2013) among 'ordinary theologians' in order to examine the responses to the same two passages (Mk 1:2–8 and Lk 3:2b–20) by those professionally engaged in preaching, working with a group of 22 clergy. Francis and Jones (2014) explored the Johannine feeding narrative reported in John 6:5–15, working with a group of 13 newly ordained Anglican priests. Francis and Jones (2015b) explored two healing narratives reported in Mark 2: 1–12 (the paralytic lowered through the roof) and Mark 10:46–52 (blind Bartimaeus), working with 23 Anglican clergy. Smith and Francis (2016) extended the study by exploring the Bartimaeus narrative working among 17 Anglican clergy. Francis and ap Siôn (2016a) explored the theme of conflict in the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree reported in Mark 11: 11–21, working with two groups: 18 clergy and lay people, and 24 clergy and lay people. Francis and ap Siôn (2016b) explored the theme of discipleship in the Road to Emmaus narrative reported in Luke 24:13–35, working with 11 participants within the Institute for Socio-Biblical Studies.

The second group of studies looked at the four psychological functions at the same time. In this context, the participants were divided into groups defined by their dominant psychological type preference, distinguishing between dominant sensing types, dominant intuitive types, dominant feeling types and dominant thinking types. In the first study of this series, Francis (2010) focused on the feeding of the five thousand reported in Mark 6:34–44, working with two different groups: 24 licensed readers in England and 22 licensed clergy in Northern Ireland. Within these dominant type groups, the participants were invited to prepare a presentation on the text (Mk 6:34–44).

Other studies in this second series include the following. Francis and Smith (2012) explored the narrative of separating sheep from goats reported in Matthew 25: 31–46, working with a group of 25 Anglican clergy. Francis and Jones (2015a) explored two passages from Mark's Gospel featuring different aspects of discipleship (Mk 6:7–14 and Mk 6:33–41), working among 73 participants at a residential Diocesan Ministry Conference. Francis (2015) explored the foot washing account reported in John 13:2b–15 in the context of diaconal ordination, working with 21 experienced preachers (clergy and readers).

Research question

Both routes described above (exploring the two processes separately and concentrating on dominant type groups) have provided effective ways of illustrating how psychological type preferences are clearly reflected in the way in which the People of God read, interpret and proclaim the Word of God. There is at present, however, an imbalance in the weight given to these 2 routes within the research tradition: 10 studies have followed the first route (examining the two processes separately) compared with four studies that have followed the second route (examining the four dominant types). The imbalance is partly a result of the latter approach needing larger groups of participants. The aim of this study is to draw on a group of 40 clergy to employ the dominant type approach to examine the narrative of the missionary journey of the disciples as reported in Mark's Gospel.

Method

Procedure

Following an introduction to psychological type theory, individual participants were invited to select their best fit on the four preferences between introversion and extraversion, between sensing and intuition, between thinking and feeling, and between judging and perceiving. Dominant type preferences were identified on the basis of these best-fit preferences. Working then in dominant type groups, participants were invited to explore Mark 6:6b–16 in light of the following rubric:

Employ your strongest function to engage conversation between Mark's account of Jesus sending out the disciples and the experience of ministry in today's world.

Each group was asked to nominate one of the members to document the discussion and to feed back to the plenary session.

Participants

The participants comprised 20 curates and 20 training incumbents, 26 men and 14 women.

Analysis

Detailed notes were taken during the group discussion and during the presentation to the plenary session. The results section of this article presents a summary of the notes taken in this context.

Results

Dominant sensing

The group of dominant sensing types settled to the task quickly and in a business-like way. There was the sense that work needed to be done and that the work was to concentrate on the text in front of them. The first voice to speak drew confidentially on recent past experience: Only recently he had preached on this passage and he remembered the

approach that he had taken. What interested him most was the detailed instruction to put on only one tunic and not two. There is no need to take food, bags or money.

The second voice then wanted to add some commentary to these details. There was a purpose behind these instructions. Jesus wanted the disciples to rely on him, not on their possessions. Relying on him, Jesus gives us all we need. We do not need all the things that we think we need. Here is a very practical application of the Gospel message.

The third voice explored the background to the passage and reflected on the world view of the Gospel writer. Here is the early church reflecting on the life of the itinerant preachers going round from place to place. In those days, travellers were able to rely on hospitality: The culture was that people had to be hospitable. Here is a useful fact to draw into the conversation.

The first voice re-entered the conversation and drew attention to another detail within the narrative. Where the disciples were not made welcome, the instruction was clear. They were to get up and go, and to shake the dust off their feet. The practical application of this Gospel message is not to waste time on unfruitful soil.

A new voice entered the conversation and drew attention to the message and to the actions of the disciples. Their message was to repent. Their actions were to cast out demons, to anoint with oil and to cure the sick. The practical application invites us to do the same.

Another voice drew attention to King Herod's part in the story. The good news that people were being healed alarmed Herod. Herod thought that he had got rid of the problem by killing John the Baptist, but now Herod fears that John, whom he had beheaded, has been raised. The reference to Elijah in this passage was also a cause of interest, and it was recalled that in the opening verses of Mark's Gospel John was dressed just like Elijah in the Book of Kings. Here was another useful fact to draw into the conversation.

The dominant sensing group had indeed found the passage rich in detail and had not fully exhausted the detail when the time ran out. There was no time left for the second part of the task (the experience of ministry in today's world) to fire their imaginations.

Dominant intuition

The group of dominant intuitive types immediately went beyond the passage, referencing a contemporary missiologist who argues for the Church to identify itself as a movement rather than an organisation. A second voice developed this thought by recognising an apostolic anointing in the passage and asking the question: What does it mean for us to be *sent*? Individuals continued to select phrases from the passage that especially engaged their imaginations, while others referenced connections they had identified from Church

history such as St Francis of Assisi's conversion through the passage or the way in which vows taken at the Ordination Service focus on empowering others to go out.

There was little coherence to the manner in which the group progressed the task. As ideas emerged, one voice after another expressed them with energy and passion, but not necessarily connecting them to the ideas of others but rather to each individual's own frame of reference. One theme that different voices accessed by different routes at different times was that of the gospel being misheard and/or misunderstood. This theme included Moslems who maintain Christians worship many gods; the day of Pentecost when the disciples were mistakenly accused of being drunk, and people mishearing Christian ministers of the gospel in their everyday ministry.

Another recurrent theme was the Church as a building or not. One voice raised a question about what the Church looks like when we move out. Another voice wondered about 'churchless Christianity' with an emphasis on Kingdom rather than Church. A third voice acknowledged that there is no reference to the church building in the passage, but how would our hearing of it alter if we identified 'house' with church building.

The approach of the group was characterised by asking questions rather producing pronouncements. What does it look like, one voice asked, for Jesus' name to be known? Is the last line of the passage a foreshadowing of resurrection or is it mere superstition, another voice enquired? How do we connect as an institution was another query?

A further theme that emerged was that of authority and vulnerability. It was recognised that these two facets are placed alongside each other in the passage. A connection was made with the mission of the Church today by one individual suggesting that we would be making sandwiches and knitting for the disciples before sending them out. Another opined that going into a Boxing Club seems very risky without the extra tunic.

The group of dominant intuitive types were animated by the task, clearly finding that there was insufficient time to exhaust all possible applications of the passage. It was able to make many connections with the wider ministry of the Church, but felt no urgency to arrive at a coherent account of what the practical application of the passage might be. In the same way, while one idea might spark another, the group was equally comfortable with each voice bringing new insights connected to the passage, but not necessarily connected to the previous contribution.

Dominant feeling

The group of dominant feeling types read the passage out loud, and then there were several moments of silence before the discussion ensued. The conversation started with an interest in the interpersonal dynamics of being sent out in

pairs. Some found it comforting that the disciples were in pairs, so that they had company: No one was alone, but each had someone to share the journey. Others, however, expressed anxiety about the way in which the pairs may have been formed: What if they did not like each other, and what if they could not get on together?

The conversation then turned to the interpersonal dynamics of being sent to people whom they did not know and who might not want to welcome them. Jesus' instruction to shake the dust off and to leave if you are refused a welcome was hard to hear. Some did not like giving up on people, whereas some found it hard to deal with the feeling of being rejected.

At the same time, there was concern for those on whom the disciples would be imposing themselves uninvited. Stepping out in faith, they were imposing the burden of hospitality on others. This may be a serious concern in today's western culture which is very individualistic, although possibly of less concern in the culture in which Jesus was living.

The narrative also gave rise to comments about the relationship between Jesus and those whom he sent. Jesus is asking a lot of them: There must have been a great deal of trust going both ways. The narrative also gave rise to comments about the relational nature of the whole missionary exercise envisioned by Jesus: The sending out was seen as relational, because it was to bring transformation to those to whom they were sent.

Herod's position in the story was a matter of particular concern. The problem, someone said, is that we do not hear the tone of Herod's voice: He could be speaking out of fear, out of anger, out of regret. One person had sympathy for Herod and felt perhaps Herod is misrepresented in the Gospels. Perhaps Herod stands for each of us (or for members of our congregations?) when we get things wrong and make bad decisions.

For some, John the Baptist seemed to be a precursor of Jesus in many ways – there is even a reference to resurrection. For others, there was a connection between John the Baptist and a recognition that ministry may lead to suffering. This connection led neatly into the second part of the task (the experience of ministry in today's world). Reflecting on her experience since ordination, one newly ordained deacon commented that she did not think she could have done what Jesus asked: 'I still wonder if I can do this ministry business'.

Others responded to the challenges and suffering of ministry by drawing on the implication of the passage itself. It is important to remember that we do it because we are called and empowered by Jesus. This is linked to the authority given by Jesus to cast out demons – something the disciples could not do in their own power. Inevitably, there must be a cost (as there was to John the Baptist and to Jesus himself), but on our side there must be a relationship of trust and response to the authority of Jesus.

The dominant feeling group concluded the exercise having given due consideration to the human story and people within the text of scripture and to the human story at the heart of this personal experience of ministry.

Dominant thinking

The group of dominant thinking types settled to the task with an agenda clearly focused on analysis. After reading the passage out loud, they set out to identify the theological issues raised by the passage. After listening to a range of ideas, they identified three main issues.

The first issue concerned the Christological question: Who is Jesus? The question was raised for Herod by what he heard second-hand from others. Herod heard that mighty powers were at work in Jesus, as evidenced by demons being cast out, and by sick people being restored to health. Herod also heard others speculate that Jesus was a prophet, like one of the prophets of old. He heard some speculate that Jesus was Elijah come back. But, drawing on his own experience, Herod concluded that Jesus was John the Baptist whom he had beheaded and who had been raised. Later, the same Christological question was posed by Jesus himself to his closest disciples at Caesarea Philippi. Now, these people who had lived alongside Jesus had gained much closer insight than Herod. They recognised him to be the Christ.

The second issue concerned the doctrine of salvation. Jesus sent the disciples out to proclaim the call to repentance to *all* people. All had the opportunity to hear that call to repentance, but not all chose to respond. So the mission was good news to those who chose to respond – they embraced salvation. But the mission was bad news to those who refused to hear the call – the disciples shook the dust from their feet as a testimony against them.

The third issue concerned consideration of the Church's mission in the contemporary world. Like Jesus himself the Church today must grasp the potential – for the harvest is vast. The resources that Jesus had at his disposal were scarce for the task – the labourers are few (and Jesus started out with only a dozen disciples). As then, so now time is precious and those scarce resources need to be well targeted. There is little point in wasting time hanging around those who refuse to hear the invitation. The call is always to move on and to work among those who properly welcome us.

The model that Jesus employed sending the disciples out in pairs may also be well worth further scrutiny. Support and companionship in ministry may come in a number of different ways. Loneliness and isolation may not be the best platform from which to work.

The dominant thinking group concluded the exercise having analysed both the text of scripture and the experience of ministry in today's world, with a fruitful conversation emerging between the two fields.

Conclusion

The theory underpinning the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching as analysed by Francis and Village (2008) and exemplified by Francis and Atkins (2000; 2001; 2002) suggested that the reader approach to biblical interpretation should take into account not only the social location of the reader, but also the psychological profile of the reader. In taking the psychological profile of the reader into account, the SIFT approach drew on Jung's model of psychological functioning, distinguishing between the two core psychological processes of perceiving (the irrational process) and judging or evaluating (the rational process). According to this theory, each process is expressed through two contrasting functions. Sensing and intuition describe two contrasting ways of perceiving. Feeling and thinking describe two contrasting ways of judging.

Jungian psychological type theory, as operationalised and developed by instruments like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley 1985), the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey & Bates 1978) and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis 2005), proposes that optimal human functioning requires the development and conscious engagement of all four psychological type functions (sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking). The SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching proposes that the conversation between the Word of God and the People of God also requires the conscious engagement of all psychological type functions.

The empirical enquiry reported for the first time in this paper is part of a connected research programme designed to explore and to test the theory underpinning the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching by observing the ways in which psychological type preferences are reflected in different forms of biblical interpretation. This research programme has published 11 studies that have explored the SIFT approach as a two-stage activity: First working with groups distinguishing between sensing and intuition to examine the perceiving process, and then working with groups distinguishing between feeling and thinking to examine the judging process. This research programme has now also published five studies that have explored the SIFT approach as a one-stage activity: Working with groups distinguishing between the four dominant functions, namely dominant sensing, dominant intuition, dominant feeling and dominant thinking.

All 16 studies have provided evidence that supports the theory that psychological type impacts biblical interpretation. The key questions now concern the theological and practical implications of these findings.

From a theological perspective, these empirical observations raise questions concerning the revelatory nature of scripture and the role of scripture in mediating or transmitting the Word of God among the People of God. A metaphor that may illuminate this process concerns the notion of the

conversation between the Word of God and the People of God. The basic point made by the reader perspective is that the Word of God is heard differently by different psychological types. The fullest reading of the Word of God or the richest conversation between the Word of God and the People of God comes about when the four different voices of the sensing perspective, the intuitive perspective, the feeling perspective and the thinking perspective are shared.

This notion of enriching and deepening the conversation between the Word of God and the People of God by drawing together the four voices of sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking can be implemented in two quite different ways. These different ways reflect different psychological approaches to applying psychological type theory to the goal of human development and different theological approaches to human teleology. In one understanding, the weight is placed strongly on the individual journey and the individual path to salvation. In the other understanding, the weight is placed strongly on the corporate journey and on the collective path to salvation embraced by the People of God. Ultimately, how the Church may decide to translate the insights of the present connected research programme (designed to explore and to test the theory underpinning the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching) into ecclesial practice will rest largely on the balance of weight given to these two contrasting emphases rooted in different approaches to soteriology.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

L.J.F., G.S. and G.F.-D., equally contributed to the research and writing of this article.

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Appendix 1

Mark 6: 6b–16

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them'. ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

¹⁴King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him'. ¹⁵But others said, 'It is Elijah'. And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old'. ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised'.

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