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Empirical explorations into biblical theologies of grace:  
Employing the SIFT approach among Anglican clergy

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study was positioned within an emerging scientific field concerned with empirical explorations into theologies of grace. The theoretical framework was provided by the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics, an approach rooted in reader-perspective hermeneutical theory and in Jungian psychological type theory, that explores the distinctive readings of sensing perception and intuitive perception and the distinctive readings of thinking evaluation and feeling evaluation. The empirical methodology was provided by developing a research tradition concerned with applying the SIFT approach to biblical text. In this study, a group of 32 Anglican clergy were invited to work in type-alike groups to explore biblical theologies of grace. Dividing into three workshops according to their preferences for sensing and intuition, the clergy explored the messages of grace in Matthew 6: 25-30 (birds and lilies). Dividing into three workshops according to their preferences for thinking and feeling, the clergy explored the messages of grace in Matthew 20: 1-15 (labourers in the vineyard). The rich data gathered from these workshops generated insight into contemporary theologies of grace and also confirmed the hypothesis that scriptural reading and interpretation may be shaped by the reader's psychological type preference.

*Keywords:* theology of grace, reader perspective, psychological type theory, SIFT approach, empirical theology

## Introduction

### The empirical science of grace

Within the Christian tradition grace is a core theological construct that challenges a number of commonly accepted assumptions that underpin modern capitalist societies. Although many such societies are currently motivated by or have their roots in the broader Christian tradition, little critical dialogue seems to have been engendered with this core theological construct. Such an observation raises questions about how church leaders currently understand the theology of grace, how seriously they engage with this construct, and how actively they seek to engage this construct in interpreting and critiquing the societies in which they live.

Fresh interest in the empirical science of the theology of grace has been stimulated by Emmons, Hill, Barrett, and Kopic (2017). In their review of this emerging literature, Emmons, Hill, Barrett, and Kopic (2017) identified a small number of quantitative studies, and a small number of qualitative studies: the quantitative studies included those reported by Watson, Morris, and Hood (1988a, 1988b), Bassett (2013), Bufford, Blackburn, Sisemore, and Bassett (2015), and Bufford, Sisemore, and Blackburn (2017); the qualitative studies included those reported by Dreyer (1990), Hook and Hook (2010), and Bronte and Wade (2012). Emmons, Hill, Barrett, and Kopic (2017) also identified five fields in which the empirical science of grace could be further developed, drawing on psychological theories and psychological methods. These are exploring: the connection between grace and wellbeing and psychological health; the obstacles to accepting and experiencing grace; the connection between religious cognition and thinking about grace; the developmental origins of receptivity to grace; and the way in which cultural factors may influence receptivity to grace. These five fields are offered as an indicative rather than as the definitive framework for future initiatives within the empirical science of grace.

The present study is positioned within the emerging tradition of empirical research in the science of grace identified by Emmons, Hill, Barrett, and Kapic (2017) and adopts their working definition of grace.

We define grace here as a gift given unconditionally and voluntarily to an undeserving person by an unobliged giver, the giver being either human or divine.

(Emmons, Hill, Barrett, & Kapic, 2017, p. 4)

The present study also proposes a sixth field within which empirical research in the science of grace might be advanced. This sixth field is located at the intersection between the psychology of religion and empirical theology and suggests that individual differences in conceptualising and expressing understanding of grace may be related to the science of biblical hermeneutics.

### **The empirical science of biblical hermeneutics**

A significant strand within biblical hermeneutics has been provided by the approach known as reader perspective. The reader perspective approach recognises that distinctive characteristics of the reader shape the interpretation of the text. In developing the reader perspective approach sociological categories have played an important part in defining the location of the reader (see Segovia & Talbert, 1995a, 1995b). Key sociological categories that have emerged in this context include: sex, leading to feminist readings (see Schottroff & Wacker, 2012); power, leading to liberation readings (see Botta & Andiñach, 2009); and race, leading to black readings (see Brown, 2004). These sociologically-informed approaches have tended to be theoretically rather than empirically driven.

Another stream within the reader perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics has been informed by psychological theory and grounded in empirical research. Within this stream Jungian psychological type theory has played an important part. Psychological type theory, as originally proposed by Jung (1971) and as subsequently developed by a series of

psychometric instruments including the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey & Bates, 1978), the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005), 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 since it *was not* concerned with evaluation, and judging as the rational process since 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 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 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.

### **Psychological type theory and preaching**

The connection between psychological type theory and biblical interpretation was first raised insightfully by Stiefel (1992) in an essay concerned with preaching. Exploring this field, Stiefel makes two main points. The first point is that the psychological type profile of the preacher may influence both the style in which the sermon is delivered *and* the content of the sermon. The second point is that the psychological type profile of the individual members of the congregation may influence their perception both of the style of the preacher's delivery and the content of the preacher's material. Stiefel illustrates these points by discussing the four components of psychological type theory in turn.

The distinction between introversion and extraversion may shape the style of preaching. Extravert preachers feel actively engaged with the congregation, with a generous use of gesture and a concern for eye contact. Extravert preachers often do well without a written text and develop ideas as they deliver them. Introvert preachers use gestures minimally or calculatedly and avoid eye contact unless specifically intending it. Introvert preachers generally have written texts or have gone to great trouble to practise preaching without a text. Stiefel suggests that introvert congregants may feel more comfortable with introvert preachers and that extravert congregants may feel more comfortable with extravert preachers.

The distinction between sensing and intuition begins to shape the content of preaching. Preachers who prefer sensing may concentrate on the details of the scripture passage and fail to engage intuitive types in the congregation. Preachers who prefer intuition

may concentrate on the big themes and ideas raised by the scripture passage and fail to keep the attention of sensing types in the congregation.

The distinction between thinking and feeling also shape the content of preaching. Preachers who prefer thinking are likely to focus on theological concepts and to present them with well-ordered clarity, but fail to engage the hearts of feeling types in the congregation. Preachers who prefer feeling are likely to focus on God's relationship with humankind and to emphasise the fellowship and warmth of the Christian community, but fail to engage the minds of thinking types in the congregation.

The distinction between judging and perceiving may shape the way in which preachers prepare their sermon, and as a consequence the immediacy with which their ideas emerge in the pulpit. Preachers who prefer judging are likely to prepare sermons days, weeks, or even months in advance. Preachers who prefer perceiving are likely not to find the inspiration they need for preaching until the last minute. It is this fundamental difference between preferences for judging and preferences for perceiving that may cause deep tensions within ministry teams.

While Stiefel's insights were theoretically driven, the approach advanced by Bassett, Mathewson, and Gailitis (1993) was empirically driven. In their empirical study, Bassett, Mathewson and Gailitis (1993) set out to establish the link between preferred interpretations of scripture and psychological preference established partly by psychological type theory and partly by a model of problem-solving styles. Participants in this study were asked to read four passages from New Testament epistles and then offered a choice of interpretations that were intended to express preferences for thinking or for feeling (as defined by psychological type theory) and preferences for collaborative, for deferring, or for independent approaches to problem solving (as defined by their problem-solving typology). Although mixing two theoretical models makes the findings from their study difficult to interpret, their data at least



provided some empirical support for a link between an aspect of psychological type preference and choice of interpretation. Most obviously, those classed as feeling types showed a preference for feeling type interpretations.

### **Psychological type theory and biblical hermeneutics**

The connection between psychological type theory and biblical hermeneutics has been raised insightfully in a series of studies by King (2010, 2012, 2015) where he introduces the notion of personality-critical analysis to biblical scholarship. Exploring this connection King makes two points. The first point is key aspects of authors' personality are likely to be reflected in the language, themes and emphases of their writing. The second point is that this insight might hold a fresh key for unravelling a complex issue in biblical studies, namely that of distinguishing between multiple authorship, either within a single document or within a designated corpus of writings attributed to a single author.

In his first study on personality-critical analysis, King (2010) revisited the classic problem of distinguishing between the author of the Johannine letters and the author of the Fourth Gospel. In his analysis of the first of the Johannine letters, King identifies 98 instances of sensing characteristics, with 37 additional instances of the combined sensing-judging temperament, against a remarkable absence of intuitive characteristics. He identified 49 instances of feeling characteristics, compared with only two instances of thinking characteristics. Analysis of the second and third Johannine letters confirmed the identification of an author who preferred sensing and feeling. This profile of the author of the Johannine letters stands in strong contrast with Duncan's (1993, pp. 68-69) characterisation of the author of the Fourth Gospel as a strong intuitive type. In his later study in personality-critical analysis, King (2015) returns to exploring the psychological type profile of the Fourth Evangelist and presents him as INFJ.

In his second study in personality-critical analysis, King (2012) revisited the classic problem of distinguishing between the multiple authors of the Pauline corpus. First King applied personality-critical analysis to the seven Pauline letters which he argues are generally accepted as genuine (1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Philemon, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Romans). His data suggests that these letters all show considerable uniformity pointing to an ESTJ author. Second, King's analysis of Colossians and Ephesians points to a common author (Deutero-Paul), an INFP, who, while completely opposite to Proto-Paul (ESTJ), was ideally competent to promote Paul's teaching in a more colourful and persuasive style. King's analysis of 2 Thessalonians points to a third author, another ESTJ, but one with a more authoritative style than Proto-Paul. Finally, King's analysis of the Pastoral letters points to a common author (Tertio-Paul), an ISTJ, who, according to King, is extreme enough in SJ temperament to be classed as a control-freak.

### **The SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics**

Independently of the earlier initiatives by Stiefel (1992) and Bassett, Mathewson, and Gailitis (1993), Francis (1997) and Francis and Atkins (2000, 2001, 2002) developed the theory underpinning the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching and tested the capacity of this theory to illuminate the principal Sunday Gospels proposed by the Revised Common Lectionary. Subsequently Francis and Village (2008) developed more fully the theoretical underpinning for this approach. Building on these theoretical foundations a rigorous programme of empirical research has set out to test the theory and to document the ways in which individual preferences for sensing, for intuition, for thinking, and for feeling are reflected in distinctive readings of scripture.

The basic approach within the programme of empirical research involved inviting participants to explore psychological type theory and to become aware of their own psychological type preferences. Then participants were invited to work in 'type-alike' groups

in order to reflect on and to respond to a specific passage of scripture. Two different routes built on different approaches to psychological type theory to establishing 'type alike' groups. One route looked at the two psychological processes in turn. First 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 in 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 one, 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 two, 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.

The second route 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 in 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 (Mark 6: 34-44).

Following these two routes a range of studies have now been published exploring the following passages of scripture: 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), and the missionary journey of the disciples in Mark 6: 6b-17 (Francis, Smith, & Francis-Dehqani, 2017). More recently this research tradition has also been developed in Poland by Chaim (2013, 2014, 2015).

### **Research aim**

Building on this tradition of qualitative studies designed to explore the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics, the aim of the present study was to identify two passages from Matthew's Gospel capable of stimulating theological reflection on grace in the light of biblical materials. One of these passages was selected to raise matters relevant to the perceiving process (sensing and intuition). The other passage was selected to raise matters relevant to the judging process (thinking and feeling).

### **Method**

### **Procedure**

Following a reminder of the basic principles of psychological type theory, the participants were invited to complete the self-report form of the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005) and to select their best fit on the two preferences between sensing or intuition and between thinking or feeling. In the first instance three groups were formed distinguishing among those who expressed a clear preference for sensing, those who expressed a clear preference for intuition, and those who positioned themselves in the middle territory. In the second instance three groups were formed distinguishing among those who expressed a preference for thinking, those who expressed a strong preference for feeling, and those who expressed a less strong preference for feeling.

The groups organised according to the perceiving process (sensing and intuition) were given a printed copy of Matthew 6: 25-30 (birds and lilies) and asked to address two questions: What do you observe in this passage about grace? What in the passage sparks your imagination about grace? They were also asked to decide what they would preach on the passage about grace. The group organised according to the judging process (thinking and feeling) were given a printed copy of Matthew 20: 1-15 (labourers in the vineyard) and asked to address the two following questions: What touches your heart in the passage about grace? What stretches your mind in the passage about grace? They were also asked to decide what they would preach on the passage about grace. On each occasion the groups were asked to begin their workshop by appointing someone to take notes and to report back to the plenary session.

### **Participants**

The participants comprised 16 curates (7 women and 9 men) and 16 training incumbents (3 women and 13 men).

### **Analysis**

One of the authors served as non-participant observer within each group in order to take detailed notes of the process and the discussion. The observers also noted the feedback given by the group to the plenary session. The results section of this article presents a summary of the notes taken in these contexts.

### **Results: Birds and lilies**

#### **Sensing**

The group of ten sensing types began by clarifying the task, reading again the two questions (What do you observe in the passage about grace? What in the passage sparks your imagination about grace?) and noting the third phase regarding a presentation on preaching about grace from the passage. Having clarified the task, the group appointed one of their number to report and then settled to address the first question.

So, then, what do you observe about grace in the passage? This group of sensing types made a slow start because it was not clearly obvious for them that the passage was about grace. The obvious reading of the passage was really about worry. Worry was mentioned three times in the passage. Looking closely at the text it clearly said: Do not worry about your life. Do not worry about what you will eat. Do not worry about what you will drink. Do not worry about what you will wear.

With a little more reflection, however, this group of sensing types began to list the things that they observed about grace in the passage. The last sentence held the clue. There God clothed the people who had no faith (the text describes them as ‘you of little faith’). Those of little faith did not deserve to be clothed, and yet God clothes them. This is grace. The birds neither sow nor reap and do not gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. This is grace. The lilies neither toil nor spin, and yet God clothes them. This is grace. Observing the reference to being valued is also important. Being valued, irrespective of what you do, is

about grace. This group of sensing types was still committed to working systematically through the text searching out observations of God's grace.

The group of sensing types observed in the passages that God's grace is for the whole of creation. It is for the birds of the air and for the lilies of the field. Here the group drew on their theological training to distinguish between the observations of 'common grace' (given to all creation) and 'special grace' or 'saving grace' (bestowed on those whom God elects). Closer analysis of the text revealed that this passage about common grace points beyond itself to the need for saving grace. The text says that life is more than food or clothing. We should not be content with common grace, however, good it is.

Time was beginning to press, so someone suggested that the group should move on to the second question: What in the passage sparks your imagination about grace? Not all members of the group were ready for this transition yet. They pressed for finding out more about the passage, especially seeking out where Matthew had located the passage. What came before and what comes after. Investigation revealed the location within the Sermon on the Mount and the concluding verse (omitted from the passage printed for the group) exhorted the listener not to worry about tomorrow. Adding this extra verse did spark the imagination. This passage is about living for the present. The focus on living for the present did, however, raise some questions about God's grace for these practically-minded sensing types. What does this passage say to refugees and to people suffering from famines and natural disasters? Will God's grace really see that they are clothed and that they are fed? Are they not right to be anxious? There was further close examination of the text to see if this problem could be resolved by exegesis. The text was not immediately helpful, so recourse was once again taken to consideration of the notion of 'common grace'. Part of the way in which God provides for his 'common grace people' is through the Church. Throughout history the Church has provided schools, hospitals, and foodbanks. Now here are deep insights into how

God relies on the recipients of special grace to extend the reach of God's common grace to everyone.

If the verse into which the passage under discussion led did not really solve the problem, investigation was turned more closely to what had preceded the passage. After all, the passage had begun with the linking word 'therefore'. So what had come before? The preceding verses had offered the stark challenge that you cannot serve both God and wealth and with the exhortation not to store up treasures on earth. Here is a clear message about priorities. We need to be clear about our priorities. If the Kingdom of Heaven is important to us, we need to start out feeding the hungry and by proclaiming the good news of God's Kingdom.

Uncertain that the group was really addressing the task assigned to it, a new emphasis was placed on exploring what sparks the imagination. Once again, the group returned to the text to examine the detail more closely. Now imagination was sparked by the rich pictures. Picture the birds sowing, reaping, and gathering into barns. This is a ridiculous picture. But it is not the whole story. Jesus could have drawn attention to the birds building nests to provide a home for their young, or to squirrels building store cupboards to hoard their winter supplies. However, this line of enquiry proved unfruitful. It was losing sight of the focus on grace.

Conscious that time was running out, this group of sensing types pressed to consolidate their work by organising material for preaching. This is what they decided. They would prefer to concentrate on a larger passage of scripture, beginning a few verses earlier and finishing a few verses later. They would prefer to design an expository sermon working through the text rather than a thematic sermon focusing on grace. The group agreed that they had not started out seeing Matthew 6: 25-30 as primarily concerned with grace, that they had seen more in the passage about grace than they had expected, but that the passage was really



about worry and about a really radical approach to worry. The last word on the passage was this: Jesus did not say, 'Do not worry less', but Jesus said 'Do *not* worry'.

### **Intuition**

The group of eleven higher scoring intuitive types did not pause to clarify the task, but began by debating who should give feedback in the plenary session at the end of the workshop. Unlike the group of sensing types, this group of higher scoring intuitive types did not press this highly practical task to a practical conclusion. No volunteer was immediately forthcoming, so this objective was abandoned in favour of a more engaging pursuit. One member of the group suggested an imaginative and novel way of working. Following this lead the participants divided into multiple small conversations involving two or three individuals. True to their psychological type these eleven higher scoring intuitive types overlooked one of the explicit objectives of the exercise, namely to arrive at a group consensus and preferred to ventilate as many disparate ideas as possible. Multiple small groups allowed for this proliferation of ideas.

Once the small groups were called back together, the big ideas and the big themes began to tumble out. The first idea that sparked imagination was that 'grace is big, just as God is big'. This big idea was used to put into perspective the many little things referenced in the passage. Little things like clothes and food are only there to demonstrate the extravagance of God's grace. Grace is big. This big idea engendered some debate. On the one hand, the passage does demonstrate the gratuitous nature of God's care for us. On the other hand, the passage itself belonged to the wider genre of Semitic hyperbole. Beyond this passage was the big idea of how biblical language worked.

This reference to food and clothes sparked another big idea concerning the part played by food and clothes in modern society. There is a substantial industry promoting food and clothes; and this industry is designed to make people worry about what they eat and wear.

The big idea is that Jesus is really counter-cultural. This Gospel passage invites us to take a counter-cultural stance on the food and clothing industries.

The idea that we should not worry about food and clothing sparked the big idea about the worries that will not go away. What about the people who worry about the life-style of their children, or about the progression of their advancing cancer?

At this point in the discussion, one member of the group seized on the big idea of how his preference for intuition was shaping his response to the passage. Jesus starts with details, such as lilies of the field, but I am much more interested in the big ideas about God's abundance and about how grace is undeserved.

Completely unrelated to the previous observation, another member of the group forged a link with the idea of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). There is a fear in today's society that others are having a better experience than we are. The idea of FOMO was linked by one person with Matthew's text suggesting that the pagans ran after such things and that such things are directly opposed to seeking God's kingdom.

The big idea that emerged time and again in this group of higher scoring intuitive types was that creation itself is evidence of God's grace. God's grace is seen in the lilies. They can neither labour nor spin. They are known and valued for what they are, not for what they do. Grace is seen in the birds. The way in which the birds live their lives is more in tune with God's purpose than the people who were listening to Jesus talk about the birds. When creation is as it is meant to be, then God's grace ensures that there is enough for all. This affirmation is there in the creation narrative of Genesis that testifies how creation is made to be fulsome and to be good.

A related big idea linked the contemplation of the natural world with reduced anxiety levels. This linkage is shown by scientific research. From time to time this group of higher scoring intuitive types recalled that it is a mistake to focus too closely on the details of a short

passage like the one under discussion. This passage is an integral part of the larger Sermon on the Mount. The big debate concerns how the Sermon on the Mount should be read and interpreted. For one participant this bigger context spoke of the New Torah, the relationship between God and God's people. Here is a relationship of grace. For another participant this bigger context spoke of a New Wisdom Literature, where everyday wisdom unlocked windows into God's grace.

The group of higher scoring intuitive types released energy and displayed creativity by sparking new ideas. Little interest was shown in developing these ideas systematically or in linking them. One lone voice in the group was often quick to challenge whether these ideas could legitimately be said to be found in the passage under discussion. This repeated challenge, however, did nothing to deter others from advancing their own theories and ideas. In essence the disconnected contributions continued to bounce across the following main ideas: the nature of grace, variously considered to be not working to earn God's favour; human agency, in the sense that it is not all dependent on me; and the foolishness of worry, since worry about things offers no guarantee that we will be spared bad things happening to us. Overall little attempt was made by this group of higher scoring intuitive types to engage the sensing function. There was some attempt to weight the practical applications of the passage, and to discuss what congregations (that are not normally full of intuitive types) need to hear from the passage. However, the answers to these core questions tended to consist of big claims rather than of down-to-earth advice. Three of these big claims were as follows: Grace undermines our culture in which scarcity is the baseline; if we are in relation with Christ, God's grace secures our future; and the goodness and faithfulness of God will always support us.

Energy levels remained high as the ideas continued to be generated and to bounce around the room. However, the group entirely failed to reach any consensus about the

passage. Indeed they failed to achieve any coherence to the discussion. There was little by way of genuine dialogue, as each individual pursued his or her own grand idea of what the passage was about. The discussion, which seemed to have the capacity to go on for ever, only concluded when another group returned for the plenary session and disrupted the flow. The group of higher scoring intuitive types went into the plenary session, still having neglected to appoint someone to feed back.

### **Middle group**

The middle group of ten participants brought together those who reported less clarity on preference between sensing and intuition. This group was given its initial structure by someone who displayed a practical and sensing approach. He took the lead by asking if someone would like to chair the group and feed back. Since no one else volunteered he took on that role himself. Having established control he implemented a sensing way of working, suggesting that participants spend several minutes reading the passage silently, noting any words or phrases that specifically related to the two tasks (What do you observe in the passage about grace? What in the passage sparks your imagination about grace?). The group took a long time to do this, and a long silence ensued before the leader invited comment.

The group observed how the phrase 'do not worry' is repeated through the passage. Grace takes away worry, both for small things and for big things. The passage speaks of how the natural world is sustained by grace on a daily basis. The passage speaks of growth and abundance in the natural world that is clothed in glory and splendour. All of this is the fruit of grace. The passage shows the need for total reliance on God. This in itself is a graceful response to worry.

The group observed how in this passage Jesus speaks as someone who already knows the human condition inside out. He knows what our natural tendencies are. At the same time, Jesus also speaks as someone who knows the meaning of God's grace in his own life.

The group observed how this passage was not just about people, but about the whole of creation. However, there is an emphasis that it is we who are valued especially, and we in turn must value creation. Because God values creation we should value creation too. Now tired of just observing, a more intuitive member of the group allowed the passage to spark her imagination. The passage brings to mind Julian of Norwich and her vision of the world as a hazelnut, small and fragile held in the hand of God. The world exists because of God's grace and love.

Another more intuitive member of the group forged a new link. For him his imagination was sparked by the question, 'Are you not more valued than these?'. This question brings to mind the Christian doctrine of creation. We are created in the image of God, in a way that the rest of creation is not; and it is this that adds special value to us.

Before following more of these speculative links, a sensing member of the group wanted to pin down more clearly what the group was talking about when they spoke of grace. For this individual grace was defined as unmerited favour that comes from God. Now because the passage speaks so clearly of God as our father, it suggests that all the grace in the whole world is freely available to us.

Thinking more about the clarity and direction of the passage, one member of the group was struck by the grace of Jesus in the way in which he teaches. Jesus starts where the people are and moves them on. This is a proper challenge to the way in which we sometimes package things up in complicated theological language which is miles from where people are. In this context the phrase 'you of little faith' made the group stop and think. Could this be a word of judgement rather than of grace? The group preferred the reading of this phrase as seeing Jesus getting alongside the people, putting an arm around them, standing with them where they are, or working to move them on. This passage is much more about grace than about judgement.

At this point the self-appointed leader wanted to summarise what he thought had been said. He drew people back to examine how the passage emphasised the unearned and abundant nature of grace, and how the passage was really about liberation. The point is that grace sets us free to live life without worries. God speaks according to our need, sometimes with a little sternness and sometimes full of gentleness, but always full of grace.

A strong sensing perspective came back into play with a desire to re-visit the details of the text. Also we need to remember that Jesus was speaking to a Jewish audience of his time. Unless we study the context we cannot properly understand what is being said. Would we use the same imagery today to speak of God's grace (birds of the air and lilies of the field)? We must take into account the different economic circumstances of people in different situations. Yet behind all this there is something timeless about the human situation captured by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and something timeless about our need for God's grace to sustain us, to care for us, to feed us and to clothe us. In all this we are called to be God's hands and God's feet to bring God's grace to others. We should be dressed in grace.

### **Results: Labourers in the vineyard**

#### **Feeling (group one)**

The group of nine higher scoring feeling types began by discussing different ways of working together. One of those who had experienced working in small groups of two or three in the earlier workshops was keen to repeat that experience, since it had worked well for her. Another of those who had experienced the small groups was less keen to do so. Running true to type, members of this group did not wish to impose their personal preference on the group. So some time was taken arriving at the consensus that embraced working in small groups. Animated conversations ensued as participants worked closely together. This process of reaching an agreement on how to conduct the discussion completely eclipsed any concern with reflecting on how to report back to the plenary session.

Once back into plenary mode, the individual who had initially proposed dividing into small groups now volunteered to feedback, keen to initiate the process of sharing the separate conversations and of pooling diverse insights. The first individual to report back described how her small group had talked a lot about fairness. The group had come to the conclusion that our idea of fairness and God's idea of fairness might be different. They had explored this theoretical problem through a human analogy. Children hold one idea of fairness, while a different understanding of fairness is prevalent in the workplace. Perhaps God's way of construing fairness has less in common with the workplace or more in common with the outlook of the child. To some the action of the landowner may just have seemed unfair. However, to make sense of the landowner's action it is necessary to go back to the context in which the story is set. The context is given by the rich man wondering what he must do to *earn* eternal life. Now here is the point of the story and the point of God's grace. The heart of the Gospel is based on grace, not on *earning* a reward. Grace is amazing news for all who receive it.

The heart of the story resides in the character of the landowner and in the landowner's relationship with others. In one way the landowner highlights the sovereignty of God. The landowner in the story *chooses* to give and is free to do whatever he wishes with what is his. This is how God's grace works. Nonetheless some members of the group still felt uncomfortable with what must seem like signs of unfairness. They picked up on the resonance with the parable of the Prodigal Son, recalling the protest of the older son that the extravagant welcome given to the prodigal's return was so unfair. One member of the group tried to press the point that everyone receiving the same daily wage in return for such variations in the hours worked was *unfair*. This individual quickly realised that his case was not being well received and the case petered out with the apology 'I am not explaining this very well'. Immediately there was a loud chorus of disagreement from the group.

The tension caused by this incipient disagreement within the group of higher scoring feeling types was dissipated by a change of direction in the discussion. This change of direction gave individuals permission to explore themes more central to the concerns of the feeling function. Time was given to empathise with the individuals left behind in the market place. Hearts went out to the disabled, the sick and the aged, to those unfit for work in the vineyard. Hearts went out to the landowner who himself kept coming back to the market place to give others the chance of earning a wage for at least part of the day.

Another issue that touched the hearts of this group of higher scoring feeling types concerned the way in which people are valued by how much they earn. Values are important to feeling types. So who is it who decides that a banker is worth more than a fire fighter, a finance offer more than a nurse? Who decides anyway that income is really a measure of an individual's worth? This worldly economy contrasts with heaven: in heaven there are no second-class citizens. Bringing this conversation closer to home and closer to personal experience, the group began to explore how clergy value people in church. How do we look after those who have laboured in the church all their lives? How do we welcome the newcomers? Bringing the narrative so close to home caused some to recognise how easy it was for those who have been labouring in a church for thirty years to resent newcomers who may steal the limelight and shape the agenda.

Exploring more deeply the notion of grace this group of higher scoring feeling types focused attention on the idea of 'gift'. The landowner regarded his resources as being there for sharing. Drawing again on personal experience, one member of the group referenced the experience of 'harvest' where everything was celebrated as a gift and where, as a result, everything was seen to be for sharing. In this context work and labour were identified as 'gift' for sharing.



Another member of the group referred to the unfair vulnerability of those living on benefits and on the welfare system. How often have you heard the outcry, 'I can't believe they're getting all that'. This story of the landowner may make us reflect more deeply on the implications of taking to heart God's unrestricted grace.

Inevitably, pressing really close to home, this group of Anglican clergy could not avoid referencing the Parish Share system, prompted by a passage that invited them to contemplate Christian attitude to money. One thought it was a useful passage for quoting at anyone demanding parish share payment, while another in a multi-parish benefice confessed that his challenge was persuading the rich parish that it should pay more. If we are seriously to take to heart the Gospel of God's unrestricted grace the implications are far reaching for how we prioritise our values.

Finally, and almost reluctantly, this group of higher scoring feeling types recognised that, although they had not appointed a scribe and someone to report to the plenary session, they would be required to say something about grace in that session.

### **Feeling (group two)**

The group of ten lower scoring feeling types was also influenced by the experience of the earlier intuitive group breaking into small groups of two or three. So that strategy was employed again, and it produced a number of fruitful points for discussion. To begin with this group was not really convinced that the two questions with which they were working were really that distinct (What touches your heart in the passage about grace? What stretches your mind in the passage about grace?). That which touches our heart is the same as that which stretches our mind. The passage is deliberately provocative and demonstrates the grace and generosity of God by subverting what we expect. Grace is amazing - that is what both touches the heart and stretches the mind.

There is surprise at the extent of generosity. This really does touch our heart. It is a story about transformation, about transforming grace. Grace is generous. Grace is about giving, not about taking.

This story is being told to those who were envious and did not feel that it was right for the landowner to distribute as he wanted what was his to use as he pleased. The story makes us recognise that God is very generous with divine grace, but we are not. We may be recipients of grace, but we are not so willing to share that grace with those whom we consider less worthy of it. The war on grace is envy. The passage is all about the value of grace, not the value of work. Grace is limitless. This really does touch our heart. We tend to value things by how much work is done. The currency of heaven, however, is the currency of grace, not the currency of work.

The passage is about grace, but it doesn't work from a business perspective. The employer only gets value for money from those who do the full day of work. No business could be sustained like that.

The passage makes us reflect on the people within our own church, and on ourselves among them. We are aware of grumpy people who feel that they do all the work at church and as a consequence believe that they are owed more than others. This is a Martha complex. This passage is both a challenge and an encouragement, both to those who feel that they are not doing enough and to those who feel that they deserve more than others. Both are wrong because the passage is not speaking about work, but about grace.

At this point one member of the group of lower scoring feeling types drew into play a favourite strategy employed by feeling types. She invited participants to locate themselves within the story and to feel the story from the perspectives of key characters. Once inside the narrative it is easier to identify with the key experiences. In the context of the world of work, a full day's work is due a full day's wage, and a half day's work is due a half day's wage. In

the context of the narrative the concept of grace challenges this way of looking at things. The context here is the Kingdom of God, not the world of work. In the world's economy there is a meritocracy, but in God's economy this is not so. In one sense this is not unfair at all. Those who did a full day's work got what they were due. We only experience the situation as unfair because some people got more than they deserved. This really does touch the heart. Grace is undeserved.

Once inside the characters of the narrative, members of the group of lower scoring feeling types placed themselves in the shoes of those who found no work and were still there at the eleventh hour hoping that they would get some work. They were probably left behind because they were not the best workers. There would be the old, the sick, and the infirm passed over at each time more were offered work. But then God still called them and gave them the full day's wage. Here is something to touch the heart.

By implication, the story is about life in the Church. Those who have given their whole life to God will receive the same reward in heaven as those who experience death bed conversion. The Church should be a place where the early comers celebrate and rejoice in the arrival of late comers, those who by God's grace share in the same rich salvation. There are echoes of God's same extravagant generosity in the story of the return of the Prodigal Son. This is how God's grace touches our heart.

### **Thinking**

The group of ten thinking type was keen to work out the logistics of the process. The first question was, 'Who is going to report back?'. But this was raised more as a rhetorical question. The person who asked the question also answered it by being the first to volunteer.

Once the procedures had been established, the group settled to analyse the first task: What touches your heart in the passage about grace. The self-appointed scribe set the ball rolling, 'What touches my heart is this guy just going out to hire people, any people'. The

group reflected on the experiences of those who had been waiting in the market place all through the day, with a family to feed at home and with no promise of any money at the end of the day. Here indeed is a narrative calculated to touch the heart, but somehow this group of thinking types had little appetite for this approach. Rather there was much more appetite to pursue the landowner's closing remark, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong'. For these thinking types the passage was about what is right and what is wrong, about what is fair and what is unfair.

For this group of thinking types there is a logic to fairness. The owner of the vineyard was not treating anyone unfairly. He had contracted with those engaged at the beginning of the day to pay them the usual day's wage. With those engaged at nine o'clock, at noon, and three o'clock he contracted to pay 'whatever is right'. Those engaged at the eleventh hour appear to have gone to work with no assurances given. Then when the day ended and the labourers were paid they all received the living wage for the day. What was unfair was the way in which there was not enough work to go round at the beginning of the day. What was unfair was that some were given a job and that work was withheld from others. What was fair was the way in which the owner treated everyone equally and met their needs for a living wage. This exemplifies God's grace. This also exemplified socialist principles underpinning the benefit system, the welfare system, and the public health service, services that are free at delivery in response to individual need.

However, under more stringent analysis, this manifesto for a socialist welfare system and this account of the nature of God's grace grounded in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, began to struggle. The difference between the labourers who signed their deal at first light and those who did so at the eleventh hour is that the first group actually earned their wage, while the latter group did not do so. The first were paid as people deserving the daily wage, while the latter were paid aide entirely in light of the owner's generosity. The first had

received their reward for works, while the latter group did not do so. The first were paid as people deserving the daily wage, while the latter were paid entirely in light of the owner's generosity. The first had received their reward for works, while the latter had received their reward by grace. According to this analysis, God's grace is not for all, but only for those who do not deserve it.

Now this sharp analysis led to two disputes within the groups of thinking types. The first dispute concerned just how much weight could be placed on any one given passage of scripture. Stories like the parable of the labourers within the vineyard need to be read alongside other stories exemplifying God's grace. In the case of the parable of the two sons (otherwise known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son) neither brother fully deserved the father's love, although the father's love or acceptance was given to each unreservedly. The second dispute concerned the legitimacy of interpreting the parable of the labourers in the vineyard as a treatise on grace. The objector argued that this was an example of the reader perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics reinterpreting a narrative that, set in its gospel context, was more specifically about God's acceptance of the Gentiles fully into the narrative of salvation history. Drawing on his wider knowledge of the Patristic literature, one of the group affirmed that this was also the dominant Patristic interpretation of the parable. Both disputes were constructed with the spirit of forthright challenge that characterises a group of thinking types, yet nonetheless leave even some thinking types feeling uncomfortable and vulnerable.

In order to explore more fully Matthew's reading of the parable through the way in which he had located it within his narrative structure, one member of the group noted how its meaning was shaped by following the rich young ruler's quest for external life and by preceding James' and John's quest for priority seating within the Kingdom of God. These two markers of location can also nuance our understanding of grace. In response to the rich

young ruler's quest to *do* something to earn eternal life, the parable affirms that the young ruler was asking the wrong question. The reward is God's free gift. The reward comes by grace not by works. In response to the quest of James and John for priority seating, this parable affirms that they are looking for the wrong rewards. There is no hierarchy in the Kingdom of God. All are rewarded exactly the same by God's grace.

Conscious that the group would soon be required to report back to the plenary session, one member of the group of thinking types summarised what he would wish to say in a sermon. I would tell a story about a vineyard that stood for the Kingdom of Heaven. The owner of the vineyard (God) is responsible for everyone he calls to work in his vineyard and he makes sure that each one is rewarded with a full day's wage (salvation) at whatever time of day they chose to respond to the call. I would also say that the same principles apply within the local church. Some people have been members there all their lives and toiled through the heat of the day. Others have been called at the eleventh hour. But all are equal in the eyes of God and need to be treated equally in the local church.

This gospel of fairness is extremely important to thinking types within the church. Consequently this succinct reading of the parable met with some approval. But it also met with some discontent. The first complaint was that this reading was consistent neither with the full account of the parable nor with our personal experience of local churches. The more serious complaint is that it raised important questions of an eschatological nature about the reach of God's grace. Is God's salvific grace available only to those who turned up in the market place to hear the call? What about those who turned up in the market place to hear the call? What about those who turned up in the morning, but then, having missed out on the first call, the nine o'clock call, the midday call, and the three o'clock call, turned round and went home before the five o'clock call? What about Muslims and those in secular cultures who have no one to proclaim God's call within their hearing?

The challenge to view the parable of the labourers in the vineyard through the construct of grace had generated both energy and insight among this group of thinking types.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study was developed within the context of an emerging scientific field concerned with empirical explorations into theologies of grace (see Emmons, Hill, Barrett, & Kapic, 2017). The unique contribution to knowledge by the present study was made by introducing to the emerging scientific field concerned with explorations into theologies of grace the theoretical framework advanced by the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics (see Francis & Village, 2008) and the empirical research tradition that has underpinned this theoretical framework (see, for example, Francis & ap Siôn, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). Within this context new data were provided by 32 Anglican clergy who worked in type-alike groups to explore biblical theologies of grace rooted in two specific passages from Matthew's Gospel. Dividing into three workshops according to preferences for sensing or intuition, these clergy explored the messages of grace in Matthew 6: 25-30 where Jesus invites his listeners in the Sermon on the Mount to look at the birds of the air and to consider the lilies of the field. Dividing into three workshops according to their preferences for thinking and feeling, the clergy explored the messages of grace in Matthew 20: 1-15 where Jesus develops the parable of labourers in the vineyard. Two main conclusions emerge from the data generated by this qualitative study with implications for shaping further academic research. A third conclusion emerges for ecclesial practice.

The first conclusion is this. The disciplined approach to reading scripture promoted by the SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics has uncovered a wide range of insights and perspectives held by Anglican clergy regarding biblical theologies of grace. Here is a method that may be of wider relevance and application in fostering the further development of the emerging scientific field concerned with empirical explorations into theologies of grace. At

the same time, the theoretical framework underpinning the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics has provided a frame within which the wide range of insights and perspectives held by Anglican clergy can be analysed and interrogated. This reader-perspective approach, rooted in Jungian psychological type theory, suggests that different components or different aspects of the diverse and divergent theologies of grace may be related to the strength of the different psychological functions that individuals may bring to engaging with biblical texts and with the theological concepts raised by those texts.

In terms of the theological framework, the present study has drawn attention to the essential differences between the two psychological processes of perceiving (concerned with data and ideas) and of judging (concerned with evaluating with logic and with values). Within each of these psychological processes the present study has drawn attention to the essential differences between two contrasting functions. In terms of the perceiving process the functions are sensing and intuition. In terms of the judging process the functions are feeling and thinking. The workshops exploring Matthew 6: 25-30 (birds and lilies) has illustrated how sensing types and intuitive types see and interpret Jesus' message in the Sermon on the Mount in quite different ways. For both sensing types and intuitive types the passage speaks of the signs of God's grace, but in this passage God's grace is seen and conceptualised in different ways by sensing types and by intuitive types. The workshop exploring Matthew 20: 1-15 (labourers in the vineyard) has illustrated how thinking types and feeling types engage with the narrative and evaluate the characters and the situations in quite different ways. For both thinking types and feeling types the passage speaks of God's grace at work, but in this passage God's grace is seen to raise different kinds of questions and pose different kinds of challenges for thinking types and for feeling types.

In terms of contributing specifically to the emerging scientific fields concerned with explorations into theologies of grace, the limitations with the present study concern the focus



on one group of readers (32 Anglican clergy) and the focus on two passages of scripture (Matthew 6: 25-30 and Matthew 20: 1-15). These limitations should be addressed by replication studies that engage other communities of readers (lay and ordained, familiar and unfamiliar with Christian scripture) and other passages of scripture that are relevant to the development and critique of biblical theologies of grace.

The second conclusion is this. While this study was established with a specific focus on applying reader-perspective hermeneutical theory to two biblical passages of particular relevance to biblical theologies of grace, the findings of the study carry wider relevance for the empirical science of hermeneutical theory when set alongside the other studies listed in the introduction to this paper. As the systematic replication of this model of research is extended to diverse passages of scripture and conducted among diverse groups of readers, so the scientific evidence underpinning this approach to biblical hermeneutics is developed.

The third conclusion is this. The workshops in which the 32 Anglican clergy engaged to explore biblical theologies of grace were conducted with clarity and rigour to generate qualitative data of scientific value. However, at the same time the workshops served an educational function among these clergy. The experience of working in type-alike groups sharpens the focus of the four functions and enables each function to be more productive. While working within these groups the individual participants experienced the satisfaction of working with like-minded people on a common task and were surprised by the speed with which they could access deeper common understanding. When the groups came back into plenary the individual participants were confronted by well-presented and clearly-articulated alternative perspectives. They were enriched by seeing how the reading and interpretation of text was enriched by contrasting approaches. Listening to sensing types report on what they had observed in the passage, intuitive types wonder just how they had missed so many details. Listening to intuitive types report on what in the passage had sparked their

imagination, sensing types are amazed by the richness that they had overlooked. Listening to thinking types report on what had stretched their mind in the passage, feeling types may be astounded by the cold detachment and clinical judgement. Listening to feeling types report on what had touched their heart in the passage, thinking types may be amazed by the personal involvement and human engagement. Theologically speaking, listening to, and embracing such diversity within biblical interpretation, may itself sharpen awareness of 'a gift given unconditionally and voluntarily to an undeserving person by an unobliged giver' (Emmons, Hills, Barrett, & Kopic, 2017, p. 4).

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**Appendix 1****Matthew 6: 25-30**

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?’

**What do you observe in the passage about grace?**

**What in the passage sparks your imagination about grace?**

**Appendix 2****Matthew 20: 1-15**

‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.” When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, “Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.” When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But he replied to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

**What touches your heart in the passage about grace?**

**What stretches your mind in the passage about grace?**

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