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Searching for the lost sheep (Matthew 18: 10-14):

Do sensing types and intuitive types find different things?

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**Abstract**

Drawing on psychological type theory and a reader-perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics, this study examines how sensing types and intuitive types read the Matthean reference to the lost sheep in different ways. Data drawn from a workshop involving 22 Anglican clergy (first year curates and training incumbents) illustrate how sensing types focus on important details in the passage, while intuitive types allow the passage to spark multiple ideas. While looking for the same lost sheep, sensing types and intuitive types are inclined to find different things and to preach different messages.

*Keywords:* reader perspective, biblical hermeneutics, SIFT, psychological type

### **Introduction**

The images of the Good Shepherd and of the lost sheep have played an important part in Christian thinking and in Christian iconography. The scriptural roots for such thinking and iconography are presented distinctively within different Gospels. In Matthew the image is positioned within chapter 18 as part of the fourth of the clearly structured five discourses (Bacon, 1930). This fourth discourse is most frequently described as a community rule, or guidelines for dealing with conflict (see Morris, 1992, pp. 456-458; Hagner, 1995, p. 514; Overmann, 1996, pp.267-276; Carter, 2005, pp. 361-375). This discourse sets out the harsh procedures for disfellowshipping offenders who refuse to listen to the church (vv. 15-18), sandwiched between the parable of the lost sheep (vv. 10-14) and the affirmation of Jesus' presence when two or three are gathered together (vv. 19-20). The whole discourse offers multiple challenges and opportunities for biblical interpretation.

The reader perspective approaches to biblical hermeneutics recognise that contemporary interpretation of the Matthean discourse on how the Christian community handles matters of dispute and disagreement may vary according to the sociological contexts in which readers are located or the psychological preference with which readers operate. The importance of psychological preferences in shaping reader interpretation of scripture has been sharpened by Francis and Village (2008) who draw on psychological type theory (Jung, 1971) to differentiate between the psychological process of perceiving (in this case how the text of scripture is perceived) and the psychological process of judging (in this case how the text of scripture is evaluated). The theory formulated by Francis and Village (2008) has been illustrated and supported by a series of empirical studies that have listened to the voices of different psychological types reading the same passage of scripture (for example, see Francis & ap Siôn, 2017; Francis & Smith, 2017; Francis & Ross, 2018).

Psychological type theory suggests that the perceiving process is reflected in two contrasting functions characterised as sensing (S) and as intuition (N). Sensing focuses on facts and information, while intuition focuses on theories and ideas. As perceiving functions both sensing and intuition are concerned with gathering information, not with evaluating that information. According to psychological type theory, individuals tend to prefer and to develop either sensing or intuition more strongly. Sensing types emerge as practical people, while intuitive types emerge as imaginative people.

Psychological type theory suggests that the judging process is also reflected in two contrasting functions characterised as feeling (F) and as thinking (T). Feeling prioritises personal and interpersonal values, while thinking prioritises objective and logical analysis. As judging functions both feeling and thinking are concerned with evaluating information and are described by Jung as rational functions. According to psychological type theory, individuals tend to prefer and to develop either feeling or thinking more strongly. Feeling types emerge as humane people, while thinking types emerge as logical people.

Psychological type theory, as originally formulated by Jung (1971) has been developed, extended and operationalised in a series of type indicators or type scales, including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey & Bates, 1978), and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). Psychological type profiling generated by this family of instruments has been employed to constitute hermeneutical communities comprising strong sensing types, strong intuitive types, strong feeling types and strong thinking types in order to explore how type-alike groups may accentuate the visibility of type preferences in the interpretation of scripture (see Francis & ap Siôn, 2017; Francis & Smith, 2017; Francis & Ross, 2018).

Different passages of scripture more readily engage either the perceiving functions (sensing and intuition) or the judging functions (feeling and thinking). Passages rich in details

and images more readily engage the perceiving functions, while passages rich in human and theological issues more readily engage the judging functions. The fourth of the Matthean discourses contains both kinds of materials in adjacent sections. The harsh procedures for disfellowshipping offenders who refuse to listen to the church (vv. 15-18) may more readily engage the judging functions, with thinking affirming the logic and fairness of the outcome, and with feeling struggling to accept the human hurt and the disruption of harmony within the Christian community. This thesis was recently tested in a study reported by Francis, Jones, and Hebden (under review), conducted among two groups of readers: biblical scholars and Anglican clergy. The rich details and imagery of the one lost sheep, and of the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine on the mountains may more readily engage the perceiving functions, with sensing concentrating on the details of the mathematical problem of setting one alongside ninety-nine, and with intuition drawing imaginative links with contemporary situations.

### **Research question**

Against this background, the aim of the present paper is to build on and to complement the work of Francis, Jones, and Hebden (under review), who explored a section of the fourth Matthean discourse (vv. 15-18) through the lenses of thinking and feeling, by exploring a second section of the fourth Matthean discourse (vv. 10, 12-14) through the lenses of sensing and intuition. These five verses focus on respect for ‘these little ones’. The opening verse (10) is the injunction not to despise one of ‘these little ones’ (and refers to their angels seeing the face of the Father in heaven). The closing verse (14) affirms that it is not the will of the Father in heaven that one of ‘these little ones’ should be lost. The two intervening verses (12-13) insert the parable of the shepherd who has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray. Verse 11 has been omitted in light of its absence from core texts (see France, 2007, p. 684).

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

In the context of a residential programme for curates and training incumbents, participants were given the opportunity to complete a measure of psychological type and then to take part in workshops designed to provide an experience of exploring scripture in type-alike groups. For the present study workshop groups were constituted according to preferences on the perceiving process, distinguishing between sensing and intuition. Once in these groups the participants were invited to read Matthew 18: 10, 12-14 from the New Revised Standard Version (Anglicised Edition) and to address the following question: What do your senses and imagination perceive in this teaching given in Matthew's Gospel? The groups were also asked to appoint one of their members to take notes and to report back to the plenary session at the end.

### **Measure**

Psychological type was assessed by Form G (Anglicised) of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985). This 126-item instrument uses a forced-choice format to indicate preferences between the two orientations (introversion and extraversion), between the two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition), between the two judging functions (thinking and feeling), and between the two attitudes to the outside world (judging and perceiving). Preference between the two perceiving functions is assessed by questions like: Do you usually get along better with: (1) imaginative people (intuition) or (2) realistic people (sensing)? Francis and Jones (1999) provided broad support for the reliability and validity of the Myers Briggs Type Indicate within a church-related context in England.

### **Participants**

The workshop was attended by 22 participants. Although in the general population in the UK sensing types outnumber intuitive types (Kendall, 1998), as is consistent with other

research among Anglican clergy (Francis, Craig, Whinney, Tilley, & Slater, 2007), among the present sample of Anglican clergy there were four sensing types and 18 intuitive types. For the workshop these 22 participants were divided into four groups: four sensing types (with scores of 41, 35, 29, 11); six high scoring intuitive types (with scores of 49, 43, 39, 37, 35, 35); and two other groups of lower scoring intuitive types.

### **Analysis**

The analysis is based on observation of two of the four groups: the four sensing types and the six high scoring intuitive types. One of the authors attended each of those two groups as non-participant observers and were given permission to note both the process and the contents of the discussion. The results section of this article presents a summary of the notes taken in this context.

## **Results**

### **Sensing types**

The group of sensing types consisted of four participants. Three of the group were male and one was female. A discussion was held as to who was to take notes to report to the plenary session at the end. The group began by trying to understand the question. The comment was passed that this is an intuitive question and that they really did not understand it. The group then discussed how they would make their contributions to the discussion, and it was agreed that people would just 'lob' in their points.

The group began by individually reading the passage. No attempt was made to put the passage in context, but one participant commented that this was not a translation he was used to. Then, after a brief pause, the conversation began by trying to define what the passage was really about. The first member of the group to speak suggested that the passage was about God's love. It was about the love of God. It was about God's love that was for all and a corporate love. The love of God is so inclusive that God does not leave anyone out.



Content that they had successfully defined the main theme of the passage, the group then spent some time trying to define what was meant by being lost. Was the lost sheep lost to the church or lost to the faith? This was a difficult question and the group turned attention to defining to whom the sheep really referred. It was suggested that in the story the ninety-nine sheep were the Jewish community.

The group analysed further the detail in the passage and it was suggested by one participant that the maths did not work for us in today's world. This participant thought that in today's society it was the ninety-nine who were lost and that the one left was the Christian Church.

The group were keen to see how the story could be interpreted and what message could be delivered to the congregation. Some time was spent discussing exegesis and eisegesis. The group felt that it would have been helpful to know where the piece of scripture was situated in the Gospel of Matthew. Questions were asked about what the teaching could be in the light of the constraints of not knowing the whole context and what the congregation would do in the light of the reading. A number of personal stories were given as possible examples of how to interpret the text. Yet, there remained a real feeling in the group that people needed time to look at commentaries and to reflect on the passage.

At the end of the session, the person who had agreed to report to the plenary session summed up the group's discussion by saying that, in order to preach on the passage, the group of sensing types would: use real stories from their own experience to illustrate the points; have a clear message; and have a clear response to the passage.

### **Intuitive types**

The group of high scoring intuitive types were curious about the task. The passage was rich in ideas and rich in stimulating ideas. It was rich in surprises too, not just the well-known Lucan parable of the Good Shepherd. The story sparked imagination because it came

out of context and with some unexpected or unfamiliar details. No one wanted to be the person taking notes to report to the plenary session and, as a consequence, feeling held back from contributing. No one really wanted to waste time working out procedural issues. The ideas began to flow without concern that there was no note-taker poised to capture them.

The first speaker set the style by just putting out there two unconnected but powerful ideas. 'For me this passage says that there is grace everywhere. I like this passage. Then these words jump out at me: in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven! The angels are continually rejoicing'. Already three big themes had emerged: grace, angels, and rejoicing.

The second speaker underlined the theme of grace. Just before this passage Jesus had called the child to the centre of attention and warned that those who cause the child to stumble would be stopped. There grace is shown for the child.

The third speaker underlined the theme of rejoicing. The heart of this passage is rejoicing. Jesus puts mission as the real priority. This story is really outrageous. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine out there on the mountain; they are not even safe in the field. He just leaves them there and goes after the straggler. This is a really helpful image for fresh expressions of church. It annoys those who are left behind in inherited church. They are annoyed that they do not seem to matter anymore.

A new voice came in at this point, directing attention elsewhere. For this speaker the passage speaks of the heart of God. God does not want anyone not to know him. God does not want one of these little ones to be lost.

The image of the angel stimulated further reflection. These little ones already have their angel in the presence of the Father. They are not lost at all. This is saying that everyone has access to God, and that is ground-breaking. These children are already linked to the Father. So here is a good passage to support the case for infant baptism.

The ninety nine sheep wandering on the mountain sparked another idea and did so in sharp contrast with the Johannine account of the ninety nine sheep being safely in the field and the shepherd going off to bring in the last one before lying down in the gateway to seal the field and to make it secure. What goes on in Matthew's story seems rash but it challenges my image of God. There is no suggestion that the sheep is at fault or to blame. We so often grumble about those who do not come with us. What is wrong with them? Why don't they come? If God is really like this shepherd, it is not the lost sheep that is in the frame, but the ninety nine, those who have the privilege of relationship with God.

At this point the reading sparked a very different idea, as if out of nowhere. One of the group was now questioning whether he really liked the shepherd. Was he not being down right irresponsible? Here was a good question about which to speculate, but one that seemed to have no obvious answer.

Someone else then found a different starting point by turning attention away from the shepherd to the sheep. Who is this sheep who went astray? Is it a tax collector, a despiser, a Gentile? Here was another good question that seemed to have no obvious answer.

The group had ran over time, but had not begun to run out of steam. No one was ready to feedback, but one of the group did want to close with a short prayer, 'Father we rejoice that your word is surprising to us'. Amen.

### **Conclusion**

The images of the Good Shepherd and of the lost sheep have played an important part in Christian thinking and in Christian iconography. These images have been employed in different contexts and in different ways within different Gospels. The aim of the present study was to explore how the psychological type perceiving preference of the reader (distinguishing between sensing and intuition) may influence the way in which the parable of the lost sheep (as presented in Matthew's Gospel) is perceived and interpreted. The data

illustrated richly the contrast between the approach of the intuitive types and the approach of the sensing types in terms of the energy invested in the task, in terms of the confidence with which the task was embraced, and in terms of the ideas generated.

In terms of energy, the intuitive types were clearly energised by generating ideas and sharing those ideas with each other. Hearing one idea arise from the passage gave energy to other members of the group to raise other ideas. The sensing types, on the other hand, were drained rather than energised by the activity. While intuitive types wanted the workshop to have more time, sensing types longed for the workshop to end.

In terms of confidence, the intuitive types trusted their own inspiration and affirmed the inspiration of others in the group as new and sometimes startling connections were forged. The sensing types, on the other hand, were much more diffident about trusting their reading of the passage. Sensing types would have liked time to go in search of commentaries and to seek ideas from other sources. They needed to know more about the passage before they could really begin to offer an interpretation. They wanted to find out more about the context of the passage, and they wanted to find out what the commentaries had to say about to whom the reference to the ninety-nine sheep really referred.

In terms of context, sensing types wanted to identify the unambiguous, simple, and true meaning of the narrative. The image of the lost sheep was about the love of God who did not want anyone left out. They needed a clear point that they could share with others in their preaching, and they needed to encapsulate that point within personal stories. It was also more difficult for sensing types to identify with the passage. The experience today is that the ninety-nine are lost and only the one is safe and found. The empirical evidence from the present lived reality led the sensing types to distrust the narrative. The intuitive types, on the other hand, wanted to savour many different perspectives arising from the parable. For them the passage was so rich in sparking multiple ideas and themes. The passage was not so much

about sheep, as about angels, about grace, and about rejoicing. For the intuitive types the connections that they made were ‘more real’ than the narrative from which they worked.

Two main conclusions emerge from these findings. The first conclusion concerns the science of biblical hermeneutics. The evidence generated from this new study supports and adds to the growing body of knowledge, as summarised in the recent reviews by Francis and ap Siôn (2017), by Francis and Smith (2017), and by Francis and Ross (2018) that supports the theory advanced by Francis and Village (2008) concerning the significance of the psychological type preferences of the reader in shaping biblical interpretation. In other words, there is real dialogue between the reader and the text in shaping biblical hermeneutics.

The second conclusion concerns the implications of the findings for informing the practice of preaching. Preachers who are aware of the effect of their psychological type perceiving preferences (distinguishing between sensing and intuition) on their interpretation of biblical text need also to recognise how the psychological type perceiving preferences of those listening to their preaching may shape both their expectations of the preacher and their capacity to follow the preacher’s trajectory of thought. Sensing-type listeners caught up in reconciling the narrative of the parable (talking about one lost sheep) with their experience of the world today (where it is the ninety-nine who are lost to the Church) may be frustrated by the intuitive-type preacher’s flight of imagination. Intuitive-type listeners caught in following up in their own minds the imaginative connections sparked by the ancient parable may be frustrated by the sensing-type preacher’s apparent lack of imagination.

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**Appendix****Matthew 18: 10, 12-14**

‘Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.