An Empirical Approach to Mark’s Account of Discipleship:
Conversation between the Word of God and the People of God

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Abstract

This study invited the participants at a residential Diocesan Ministry Conference (N = 73) to function as a hermeneutical community engaging in a conversation between the Word of God and the People of God on the theme of discipleship. Building on the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics, the participants worked in groups structured according to dominant psychological type preferences: sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking. This process facilitated rich and varied insights into what God may be saying to the People of God about the place of discipleship within the contemporary church, grounded on the Word of God in scripture and, in this case, contextualised within one specific rural diocese.

Keywords: hermeneutics, psychological type, Bible study, discipleship
Introduction

How the People of God read, interpret and apply the Word of God is more than a matter of mere academic interest; it is a matter of vital and practical concern for the life of the church, for herein is a source of revelation, a source of God’s self-communication. The invitation to lead the Bible Study at a residential Diocesan Ministry Conference convened to explore the theme of discipleship caused us to reflect on the process of reading, interpreting and applying the Word of God in this way. How we decided to proceed was based on two fundamental principles.

The first principle conceives taking seriously reading, interpreting and applying the Word of God as a community activity owned by the gathered People of God, rather than as a solitary activity claimed by any one individual. It is what happens when the Word of God is read aloud in the midst of the People of God and actively discussed by the gathered community. Now such an understanding flies in the face of much of what the church practices when the reading, interpretation and application of the Word of God is assigned to the scholar in the academy, or to the priest in the sanctuary who is hired to think and to speak on behalf of the People of God. Invited to lead the Bible Study at a residential conference of ordained and lay authorised ministers, we opted to model good practice by handing the work back to the People of God assembled in that place.

The second principle concerns taking seriously some contemporary strands in the reader perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics. The reader perspective approach acknowledges the contribution brought to biblical interpretation by the individual readers. The sociological location of the reader was noted to be of particular significance in the early days of the reader perspective approach (Sergovia & Tolbert, 1995a, 1995b), observing the distinctive voices of women in feminist readings of scripture, the distinctive voices of the oppressed in liberation readings of scripture, or the distinctive voices shaped by ethnicity or
by sexual orientation. More recently, psychological insights into the reader have revealed the distinctive voices of different psychological types. This case was argued and illustrated by Francis and Village (2008) in their application of psychological type theory to illuminate reader perspective in biblical hermeneutics.

Psychological type theory distinguishes between the two core psychological processes of perceiving (P) and judging (J). The perceiving process is concerned with gathering information, while the judging process is concerned with evaluating information. Psychological type theory then distinguishes between two distinctive ways of perceiving and two distinctive ways of judging. The two ways of perceiving are defined as sensing (S) and intuition (I). Sensing focuses on facts and information, while intuition focuses on theories and ideas. The two ways of judging are defined as thinking (T) and feeling (F). Thinking prioritises objective logic, while feeling prioritises personal and interpersonal values. According to the theory of type dynamics, one of these four functions occupies the strongest or dominant position in each individual, helping to shape that individual’s dominant outlook on life. Sensing shapes the practical person, intuition shapes the imaginative person, thinking shapes the logical person, and feeling shapes the humane person.

Applying psychological type theory to the reader perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics, Francis and Village (2008) proposed the SIFT approach suggesting that sensing types, intuitive types, feeling types and thinking types may all bring different insights to the conversation between the Word of God and the People of God. This theory has subsequently been tested in a sequence of nine studies, each of which has focused on specific passages from the Gospels. Francis (2010) explored the feeding of the five thousand from Mark 6: 34-44. Francis and Jones (2011) explored the resurrection narratives from Mark 16: 1-8 and Matthew 28: 1-15. Francis (2012a) explored the Johannine feeding narrative from John 6: 4-22. Francis (2012b) explored the cleansing of the temple from Mark 11: 11-21.

A clear consensus has begun to emerge from the cumulative evidence generated by these seven studies, supporting the view that psychological type preferences are linked with distinctive approaches to reading and to proclaiming scripture. In accordance with the theory, sensing types tend to focus on details in the passage, but find it hard to identify the larger themes. Intuitive types tend to identify imaginative themes, but show less interest in the details. Thinking types tend to identify and to analyse the big theological issues raised by the passage. Feeling types tend to give greater emphasis to matters of the human heart illustrated by the passage.

Having responded to the invitation to lead the Bible Study on discipleship at a residential conference of ordained and lay authorised ministers by deciding to hand the Word of God to the People of God assembled in that place, we went one stage further by inviting the participants to work in small groups organised according to psychological type preferences, that is with dominant sensing types working together, dominant intuitive types working together, dominant feeling types working together, and dominant thinking types working together.

**Research question**

The theoretical background, explored above and building on the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching, has argued: that the conversation between the Word of God and the People of God is best conducted as a community activity; that this community activity needs to take seriously the four voices of the SIFT approach, namely
sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking; and that these four voices are themselves best released when small groups of individuals who share the same dominant type preference work together exploring a common passage of scripture. The opportunity to test this theory was provided by the Ministry Conference 2014 convened by the Anglican Diocese of Sodor and Man at Lancaster University for licensed clergy, licensed readers and other key guests of the Diocese.

**Method**

**Procedure**

As part of a four day residential conference on the subject of ‘Discipleship’, the participants were invited to complete a recognised measure of psychological type and to explore two passages of scripture within groups constructed on the basis of their dominant type preferences. Members of each group were asked to employ their strongest psychological function to engage conversation between the selected passage of scripture and God’s call to discipleship. The four voices of psychological type were defined in the following way.

- **Sensing.** The sensing voice asks about the facts, about the context, and about the details within the passage. There is concern for historical and textual analysis.

- **Intuition.** The intuitive voice asks about the big ideas and about the possibilities within the passage. There is concern for future possibilities and for vision.

- **Feeling.** The feeling voice asks about the human story and about the people within the passage. There is concern for people, for relationships, for values, and for the God of mercy.

- **Thinking.** The thinking voice asks about theological issues and about theological coherence within the passage. There is concern for matters of doctrine and for the God of justice.
The first time the groups met the selected passage of scripture was Mark 6: 7-14 (the commissioning of the twelve). The second time the same groups met the selected passage of scripture was Mark 6: 33-41 (the feeding of the five thousand). The participants were invited to work on these tasks and to agree a common presentation of their conclusions within a plenary session.

**Measure**

Psychological type was assessed with the 1995 edition of the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey, 1998). This instrument proposes ten items to discriminate between introversion and extraversion and three sets of 20 items to distinguish between sensing and intuition, between thinking and feeling, and between judging and perceiving. The preferences between introversion and extraversion is assessed by questions like: At a party do you (a) interact with many including strangers, or (b) interact with a few, known to you? The preference between sensing and intuition is assessed by questions like: Are you more drawn to (a) hard data, or (b) abstract ideas? The preferences between thinking and feeling is assessed by questions like: Do you tend to be more (a) dispassionate, or (b) sympathetic? The preference between judging and perceiving is assessed by questions like: Do you tend to choose (a) rather carefully, or (b) somewhat impulsively? Following the advice of Francis, Robbins and Craig (2007), tied scores on the Keirsey Temperament Sorter were assigned to introversion, intuition, feeling and perceiving.

**Participants**

The workshops were attended by 73 participants, 43 men and 30 women, comprising 39 clergy (29 male and 10 female), 24 readers (12 male and 12 female), and 10 lay people (2 male and 8 female). Table 1 presents the psychological type profile of the 73 participants. The key information for the present analyses concerns the dominant type preferences:
MARK’S ACCOUNT OF DISCIPLESHIP

thinking (6), intuition (12), sensing (20), and feeling (35). On the basis of this distribution of dominant type preference, eight groups were identified: one group of dominant thinking types, one group of dominant intuitive types, two groups of dominant sensing types, and four groups of dominant feeling types.

Analysis

The four presentations made at the plenary session (by one of the two sensing groups, the intuitive group, one of the four feeling groups, and the thinking group) were recorded and transcribed. These transcribed presentations together with the written text on which they had been based provided the data for analysis. The results section of this paper presents a summary of the written and spoken presentations in order to allow the different perspectives emphasised by the groups to become clearly visible.

Results: Commissioning the twelve

Exploring the first passage (Mark 6: 7-14), the participants were presented with the following material.

Mark 6: 7-14

*Employ your strongest function to engage conversation between Mark’s account of the commissioning of the twelve and God’s call to discipleship.*

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, ‘Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If 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.’ So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.
Then King 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.’

Dominant sensing

The dominant sensing group worked together with a clear focus to move through the passage in a systematic way, noting the issues as they occurred in the text. They noted that Jesus sent the disciples out two-by-two and not on their own. They noted that the disciples were given authority under Jesus to deal with unclean spirits. They noted that the disciples were to take nothing with them.

The dominant sensing group felt comfortable with the command for the disciples to stay put in the places where they were made welcome. That made sense to them, to have a house, a place, where people could find them. They felt less comfortable with the treatment of those places that did not make them welcome. They tried to dig down to the root of the command to shake the dust off their feet. That in itself did not imply a rejection of those places or even the commitment not to return another time. Yet the saying to shake the dust off ‘as a testimony against them’ seemed more final. The group had tried to source other translations of the passage that may have been less final but had failed to find any that satisfied them.

At that point in the conversation the group tried to identify the implications for discipleship today. The implications concern working as a team, working under God’s authority, not burdening ourselves with unnecessary baggage, trusting God to provide, finding somewhere to be the secure base for our lives and where we feel welcome and secure.

The dominant sensing group had almost run out of time before it got to the final section about Herod. This passage reminded them that even today disciples may come under
personal attacks. Other people may not see us as we really are and be suspicious about our authority.

**Dominant intuition**

The dominant intuitive group reported that they had skated over the surface of the passage quite quickly and had come up with a number of different ideas. But they could not agree about anything. Indeed there were too many ideas generated by the group to be recorded, although five surfaced for delivery in the plenary session. The five big themes that emerged from the discussion were inspirational in nature but not clearly connected one to another.

The first big theme was about ‘letting go’. Jesus was letting go of things and handing everything across to a rag-bag of people, a group of partly-formed disciples. Jesus was taking real risks in giving away his authority to this group. What does that say about how the church should work today?

The second big theme was about Jesus taking away with one hand and giving with the other hand. Jesus took away all the support on which the disciples usually relied (food, money, shoes) and in its place gave them his authority. He stripped away the physical things and gave back spiritual things. On what should disciples be relying today?

The third big theme was about being dependent on God. These disciples were not even sure when there would be a roof over their heads. How much should the church today rely on God like that?

The fourth big theme was about how Jesus dressed the disciples up like Old Testament prophets with a staff in their hands. No wonder Herod mistook Jesus (and them) for John the Baptist raised from the dead. Is there any relevance here for the distinctive appeal and appearance of disciples today?
The fifth theme was about the tension between staying in one place and moving from place to place. Today are disciples called to find a niche where they are made welcome and to stay there? Or are they called to keep moving on?

After reflecting on these five big themes, the intuitive group got side-tracked into considering how different denominations kept control over their ministers.

**Dominant feeling**

The dominant feeling group examined the passage through the lens of the impact the events may have had on the principal actors within the narrative, the disciples themselves. The salient points were reported back in the order in which they emerged as important to the participants.

The first concern was to empathise with the disciples as they first heard their commission. The command to take no bread, no money, no shoes was very scary. It made the disciples feel so vulnerable. Yet the sense of urgency, the sense of being so uncluttered, the sense of being ready for action could offset that feeling of vulnerability with the feeling of empowerment; like the Franciscan order, those early disciples were stepping out with a fresh agenda, radical and shocking.

The second concern was to feel with those disciples the sense of calling. Calling can be so elitist, so excluding, so disempowering of others. How did these disciples cope with being special without it all going to their heads?

The third concern was to explore the effect of the whole experience on those who were commissioned. Sometimes they were welcomed into people’s homes and felt so at home staying there. At other times they were made to feel as outcasts, so much so that they could do nothing other than shake the dust off their feet. Here is the whole range of emotions. They had taken enormous risks to go off, out of their comfort zone, out into the unknown, out to do unthinkable things messing with demons.
The fourth concern was to make sense of Herod’s appearance at the end of the story. Herod himself was a man under threat. He had abused his power over John the Baptist and now he felt that John had come back to haunt him.

**Dominant thinking**

The dominant thinking group produced the most succinct of the reports, in the form of a crisp analysis of the matters relevant to grasping the structural context within which the passage was set.

The whole commissioning was set in the context of urgency. There was a lot to be done and little time in which to do it. The disciples were to take nothing that could slow them down. Jesus had given them no clear instructions about what to teach and simply issued them with authority over unclean spirits.

The environment is harsh and hostile. They cannot expect a welcome everywhere and they cannot afford to waste time where they are not welcome. They are to shake the dust off their feet to show their rejection of those who reject them.

Yet the disciples are not sent out alone. They are sent in power. Travelling two-by-two offers them companionship and strengthens their credibility. The witness of two people is stronger than the witness of one. The idea that Jesus *began* to send out the disciples suggests that they were not all commissioned at the same time. They were sent out in pairs when they were ready to be sent out. In spite of the urgency, Jesus seems to have taken care to ensure that individual disciples were ready for their commissioning.

The unwillingness of people to welcome those disciples and to respond to their call to repentance means we should not be discouraged when we receive the same treatment today. We cannot expect people to want to receive the good news of forgiveness if they do not first perceive the need for repentance.

**Results: Feeding the five thousand**
Exploring the second passage (Mark 6: 33-41), the participants were provided with the following material.

**Mark 6: 33-41**

*Employ your strongest function to engage conversation between Mark’s account of the feeding of the five thousand and God’s call to discipleship.*

Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.’ But he answered them, ‘You give them something to eat.’ They said to him, ‘Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?’ And he said to them, ‘How many loaves have you? Go and see.’ When they had found out, they said, ‘Five, and two fish.’

Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all.

**Dominant sensing**

The report from the dominant sensing group was provided by a set of verbatim notes taken in the sequence in which issues had been discussed. The discussion began by recognising the need to locate this account of the feeding of the five thousand within the context of what had gone before. The disciples had gone to find a quiet place and instead they
found a huge crowd of people. But the group could find no compelling connection in the flow of the narrative that placed the account of the feeding just there.

The dominant sensing group noted the number ‘5,000’ and how that number referred just to the men. The total number including women and children must have been so many more. They wanted to find out what the commentaries had to say about the significance of the number 5,000.

The dominant sensing group noted the description of the crowd as like ‘sheep without a shepherd’. The crowd must have been there looking for something, but we are not told what. Jesus was there teaching but we are not told what he taught. But we are given all the detail about the feeding. There were five loaves and two fishes.

The dominant sensing group noted that the disciples wanted to send the people away to find their own food. But we are told nothing about the terrain. We do not know whether there were villages close by.

The dominant sensing group noted that Jesus was trying to get away from the crowds and to be alone with his disciples. Yet Jesus set aside his need for solitude and responded to the needs of the crowd.

The dominant sensing group noted that the boy (who appears in one of the other Gospels to offer the loaves) is not mentioned in Mark. They wanted to find out what the commentaries had to say about this.

The dominant sensing group noted how Jesus passed the responsibility back to the disciples to deal with the situation. That seems often to be the way in which prayer is answered as well.

**Dominant intuition**

The report from the dominant intuitive group was organised as a series of themes. The group began by identifying the theme: small beginnings. Something really tiny like a loaf of
bread points to the kingdom. A tiny move of generosity leads to something big: a crumb of generosity provides an atomic explosion. The smallest thing becomes amazing. History is shaped by people (like Wilberforce) who start movements, cause ripples, and change the world.

The group identified the theme: compassion. Practical works come out of compassion. Jesus had compassion on the crowd and that led to the action of feeding them.

The group identified the theme: the you-gift. Jesus turns things over from himself to us. We need to pick up the gifts that Jesus puts in our hands and pass those gifts on to others.

The group identified the theme: learning to be disciples. The whole story provides an example of how Jesus taught the disciples. Through this experience the disciples learnt how to trust Jesus; and they learnt how to trust themselves.

The group identified the theme: being consumed by Jesus. The disciples had become so caught up with Jesus’ teaching that they completely forgot their need for food. Their attention was on how Jesus was satisfying their spiritual hunger. They had forgotten about their physical hunger. Jesus, however, was concerned with both and attended to both.

The group identified the theme: management of church growth. Jesus dealt with a church of 5,000 by breaking them down into groups of 50 or 100 which could be overseen by his twelve colleagues. Here is a lesson for the early church and for the church today, knowing when to split off to form new churches.

The group identified the theme: pattern for the eucharist. Here the gospel is giving a pattern that has shaped the eucharistic liturgical tradition. Jesus took the bread, blessed the bread, broke the bread, and distributed the bread.

The group identified the theme: the deserted place. Jesus went out to a deserted place – a place without vegetation, without food and without people. Jesus transformed that place
by going there. He filled the place with people, filled it with so much food there was lots left over, and covered the ground with rich green grass.

**Dominant feeling**

The report of the dominant feeling group showed real concern for the experiences of the people in the narrative, the disciples, the crowd and Jesus himself.

The group began by looking at things through the eyes of the disciples. Jesus was concerned about the disciples. He asked them to come away to a quiet place because they were in need of rest. Jesus wanted to resource their ministry by ensuring that they had time away from pressures, time to reflect.

The group looked at things through the eyes of the crowd. The crowd were like sheep without a shepherd and Jesus was concerned about them. Why did they look like sheep without a shepherd? Why did they look so harassed? Had they been disturbed by news of the death of John the Baptist? Were they perhaps John’s disciples on the run? Whatever was going on, Jesus felt concern for them.

The group looked at things through Jesus’ eyes. Jesus comes across in the story as very human. Jesus himself was in need of rest and wanted to escape with his closest friends. Jesus was probably sad and downcast. John’s death must have cast a long shadow across Jesus’ life as well. When it came to dealing with distributing the bread, Jesus could not face up to the task himself. He needed the disciples to step in and to help him.

The dynamic of the way in which Jesus threw the responsibility back onto the disciples must have put them under pressure. They had wanted to send the crowd away because they did not know how to cope with them. Jesus pushes them back into the front line with what seems such inadequate resources.
The narrative points us to how we should be working as disciples of Jesus. We should work together as a team alongside Jesus. We should be moved in compassion to serve others and to feed the poor.

The narrative points us to how we should be prepared to step aside, to take rest, and to trust others to do the job. The passage has a lot to show us about how Jesus appreciates and respects our needs as human beings.

**Dominant thinking**

The report of the dominant thinking group started by saying that the group seemed more concerned to raise questions than to find solutions. A number of questions could be raised like the following one: What was missing from the story? Why had it stopped short without reference to the 12 baskets that were filled with the food that remained after everyone had been fed?

But the passage also gave insight into a number of practical and strategic issues. What seemed to be worrying the disciples most was the impossible cost of feeding this crowd. Two hundred denarii was equivalent to six month’s wages. The disciples had cause to be cautious. Cost has to be taken into account.

Yet the disciples still had the challenge thrown back to them. Problems (even costly problems) have to be solved. What Jesus may have understood (and we do not) is the basic generosity of the poor people with whom he was dealing. Once he held up the five loaves and showed his willingness to share them, they dug into their own resources and began to share as well. Once we start to share there really is enough to go round.

There are strategic lessons here about delegation. Jesus was not delegating anything to the disciples that he could not have done himself. But the very act of delegation was enabling.

There are strategic lessons here about organisation and management of the church. The emphasis on getting the people to sit down in groups of a manageable size is a fine
model of crowd control. There are strategic lessons here about the liturgical structure of the eucharist: taking, blessing, breaking, and distributing. There are strategic lessons about succession planning. While he was living alongside them Jesus empowered the disciples to do what he was doing, so that when he was no longer living alongside them they would carry on that tradition.

**Conclusion**

This study invited the participants at a residential Diocesan Ministry Conference to function as a hermeneutical community engaging in a conversation between the Word of God and the People of God on the theme of discipleship. The Word of God in this case was presented in terms of two passages from Mark’s Gospel: the commissioning of the twelve (Mark 6: 7-14) and the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6: 33-41). The People of God in this case were organised into groups according to dominant psychological type preferences: dominant sensing types, dominant intuitive types, dominant feeling types and dominant thinking types. Two fundamental principles underpinned this arrangement. The first principle proposed taking seriously reading, interpreting and applying the Word of God as a community activity. The second principle, located within the reader perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics, proposed attending to the distinctive voices of different psychological types.

The experience of working in this way, as documented by the results and findings presented above, released energy among the participants. In so doing, it generated rich and varied insights into what God may be saying to the People of God about the place of discipleship within the contemporary church, grounded on the Word of God in scripture and, in this case, contextualised within the rural Anglican Diocese of Sodor and Man.

**Acknowledgement**
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References


Table 1

**Type Distribution for Participants at Ministry Conference**

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<td>n = 6</td>
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|        | ISTP | ISFP | INFP | INTP | I | n |       |       |
|--------|------|------|------|------|   | n |       |       |
| n = 1  | n = 4 | n = 7 | n = 2 | 29 | 39.7% |
| (1.4%) | (5.5%) | (9.6%) | (2.7%) | 14 | 19.2% |
| + | ++++ | ++++ | +++ |     |     |
| + | | | |     |     |

|        | JSTP | ESFP | ENFP | ENTP | S | n |       |       |
|--------|------|------|------|------|   | n |       |       |
| n = 0  | n = 1 | n = 2 | n = 0 | 27 | 37.0% |
| (0.0%) | (1.4%) | (2.7%) | (0.0%) | 6 | 8.2% |
| + | +++ | | |     |     |

|        | ESTJ | ESFJ | ENFJ | ENTP | T | n |       |       |
|--------|------|------|------|------|   | n |       |       |
| n = 3  | n = 17 | n = 7 | n = 0 | 13 | 17.8% |
| (4.1%) | (23.3%) | (9.6%) | (0.0%) | 14 | 19.2% |
| ++++ | ++++ | ++++ | ++++ |     |     |
| ++++ | | | |     |     |
| +++ | | | |     |     |

**Jungian Types (E)**

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N = 73  
(NB: + = 1% of N)
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