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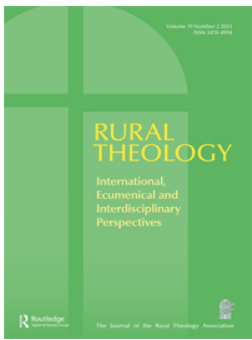
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Looking at the Birds, Considering the Lilies, and Perceiving God's Grace in the Countryside: An Empirical Investigation in Hermeneutical Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study is situated within the newly emerging interest in the concept of grace as a legitimate topic for empirical enquiry, and draws on the theoretical framework provided by the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics, an approach rooted in reader-perspective hermeneutical theory and in Jungian psychological type theory. Data were drawn from two one-day workshops with Anglican Readers (lay ministers). On each occasion the participants were invited to divide into three separate groups according to their preferences for sensing or intuition (the two perceiving functions) and within these groups to explore the messages of grace in Matthew 6: 25–30 (Jesus' invitation to look at the birds and to consider the lilies). The rich data gathered from these workshops generated insights into contemporary theologies of grace and also confirmed the hypothesis that biblical interpretation is shaped by the reader's psychological type preference for sensing or for intuition.

KEYWORDS

SIFT approach; sensing; intuition; grace; empirical theology; psychological type

Introduction

Emmons, Hill, Barrett, and Kapic (2017) argued that the concept of grace 'is foundational to spiritual life and to human wellbeing, yet is virtually ignored in the social scientific study of religion' (p. 276). They document their case by drawing attention to the small number of empirical studies that have explored grace over the past thirty years within both qualitative approaches (Bronte & Wade, 2012; Dreyer, 1990; Hook & Hook, 2010) and quantitative approaches (Bassett, 2013; Bufford, Blackburn, Sisemore, & Bassett, 2015; Bufford, Sisemore, & Blackburn, 2017; Watson, Morris, & Hood, 1988a, 1988b). In setting out to stimulate a new generation of empirical research concerning the concept of grace, Emmons et al. (2017) identified five fields in which the empirical science of grace could be further developed, drawing on psychological theories and psychological methods: 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.

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In an initial response to the challenge posed by Emmons et al. (2017), Francis, Smith, and Francis-Dehqani (2018) proposed a sixth strand of enquiry through which the empirical science of grace could be further developed. They styled this strand ‘empirical explorations into biblical theologies of grace’. Underpinning their case for this sixth strand were three key principles. The first key principle concerns the normative role of scripture in informing and shaping Christian doctrine in general and the consideration of the doctrine of grace in particular. The second key principle concerns the recognition of the systematic way in which biblical interpretation may be shaped not only by the sociological location of the reader (see Segovia & Tolbert, 1995a, 1995b) but also by the psychological type preferences of the reader (see Francis & Village, 2008). Sociological categories that have emerged into prominence within the reader-perspective approach to biblical interpretation include: power and control, leading to liberation readings of scripture (Botta & Andiñach, 2009); race and ethnicity, leading to black readings of scripture (Brown, 2004); and sex and gender, leading to feminist readings of scripture (Schottroff & Wacker, 2012). Psychological categories that have emerged into prominence within the reader-perspective approach to biblical interpretation include the two psychological processes of perceiving (sensing and intuition) and of judging (feeling and thinking) as explored in the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching as conceptualised and expressed by Francis (1997) and by Francis and Atkins (2000, 2001, 2002). The third key principle is rooted in the scientific programme established to test empirically the theoretical framework underpinning the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching. This scientific programme has conducted a series of studies in which participants have been assigned to different groups according to their psychological type preferences and invited to explore the same passage of scripture. The processes and conversations within these groups have been carefully documented and analysed, as evidenced in studies reported by Francis (2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2015, 2017), Francis and ap Siôn (2016a, 2016b, 2017) Francis and Jones (2011, 2014, 2015a, 2015b), Francis, Jones, and Hebden (2019), Francis, Jones, and Martinson (2019), Francis, Jones, and Ross (2020), Francis, McKenna, and Sahin (2018, 2020), Francis and Ross (2018), Francis and Smith (2012, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018), Francis, Smith, and Corio (2018), Francis, Smith, and Francis-Dehqani (2017, 2018), Francis, Strathie, and Ross (2019), Jones and Francis (2019), and Smith and Francis (2016).

Research question

Responding to the challenge posed by Francis, Smith, and Francis-Dehqani (2018) to develop ‘empirical explorations into biblical theologies of grace’ the present study has identified a specific passage of scripture that is regarded as relevant to the formulation of biblical theologies of grace and proposed the aspect of psychological type theory most relevant to shaping the psychologically-informed reader perspective reflected in the interpretation of this specific passage of scripture. The passage of scripture identified is the pericope from the Matthean Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus invites his hearers to look at the birds of the air and to consider the lilies of the field (Matthew 6: 25-30). This passage, which extols God’s gracious provision for all in an ‘imaginative vision of God’s care’ (Byrne, 2004, pp. 67–68), has been cited in several classical and

scholarly explorations of theologies of grace, as well as in popular piety and sermons. Thus, it is said to illustrate ‘the reliability and durability of God’s love’ and the ‘fundamental understanding of faith as trust in reliable grace’ that lie at the heart of the message of Jesus and Paul, as well as the understanding of grace in Martin Luther and Karl Barth (Davis, 2017, pp. 94–98) and in Søren Kierkegaard’s recognition of human works as ‘enabled by the grace of God’ (Rae, 2010, p. 159). (For commentaries on the text in Matthew 6, see France, 2007, pp. 263–272; Evans, 2012, pp. 157–161.)

The aspect of psychological type theory most relevant to shaping the psychologically-informed reader-perspective reflected in the interpretation of Matthew 6: 25–30 is the perceiving process. Within psychological type theory, the perceiving process is concerned with the ways in which information is perceived, and not with the ways in which information is evaluated. The perceiving process is reflected in two contrasting functions, styled sensing and intuition. The sensing function focuses on the reality of the present situation as perceived by the senses. Sensing types tend to be concerned with specific details, rather than with the overall picture. They are concerned with the actual, with the real, and with the practical. They tend to be down-to-earth and matter-of-fact. The intuitive function focuses on the possibilities with the present situation, with deeper meaning and wider connections. Intuitive types are concerned with associations with themes, and with implications that stretch beyond the sense perceptions. They tend to focus on the bigger picture and on future possibilities, rather than on specific facts and details. Matthew 6: 25–30 is rich in content to engage the sensing function and equally to engage the intuitive function.

Method

Procedure

The two-day workshops (workshop one and workshop two) began with an overview of the theory that distinguished between the two Jungian perceiving functions (sensing and intuition). Participants were then invited to complete the perceiving scale within the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005), and in conversation with each other to select their best fit on the two preferences, choosing between sensing and intuition. Three groups were then 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. These three groups were then given a printed copy of Matthew 6: 25–30 (the section from the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus invites his listeners to look at the birds of the air and to consider the lilies of the field) and asked to address two questions: What do you observe in the 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 groups were asked to begin their workshop by appointing someone to take notes and to report back to the plenary sessions.

Participants

Each of the two one-day workshops was attended by 12 participants. The participants represented a good mix of men and women, and of long-serving and recently-licensed

readers. In dividing the participants into three groups on each occasion there were four participants in each group.

Analysis

The data presented in this study was drawn from two of the three groups: those who expressed a clear preference for sensing, and those who expressed a clear preference for intuition. One of the authors served as a non-participant observer within the group of sensing types and a second author served as a non-participant observer within the group of intuitive types, in order to take detailed notes of the process and of the discussion. The third group, comprising those who positioned themselves in the middle territory, were fully engaged in the process, but were not observed by the authors. The observers also noted the feedback given by the group to the plenary session. The results section of the paper presents a summary of the notes taken in these contexts.

Results: workshop one

Sensing types

The immediate instinct of the group of four higher scoring sensing types was to establish the context for the passage. They wanted to know what comes before and what comes after the passage, recognising that the text was derived from the Sermon on the Mount. Before any further progress was made, another voice drew the group's attention to the importance of process: who was going to feedback? Once a volunteer had been secured, a third voice was keen to earth the passage in historical practical reality. For some people in first century Palestine, this is what happens in everyday rural life.

An attempt was made to explore the bigger question of grace, with the recognition of how God underpins our security, but this soon gave way to the self-styled 'country person' – a farmer's daughter – who was taken with the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. Continually, throughout their time together, which was punctuated by periods of silence, someone would bring the group of sensing types back to the text and to the real-life pictures of birds, flowers and fields that Jesus had set before his rural audience.

The idea of the individual being of value appealed to one voice, more valuable indeed than the birds and flowers: 'You don't have to do anything: that's where grace comes in'. While one of the group was getting restless because he would have preferred to get on with writing the sermon rather than to be besieged by all these ideas, others were beginning to wonder about our own context. One voice suggested that we live in a country where people have enough, while another disagreed, suggesting that we might find ourselves preaching to those without. The 'country person' reminded the group that farmers 'worry like mad'.

Someone else, who described herself as coming from the city, suggested that she might need different imagery in order to engage with the story. Another voice saw inclusion in the passage, whether we be kings or sparrows, which prompted someone else to suggest God provides for the needs of everyone as a matter of course. It was hard, the group agreed, to preach in a context where people are hungry. The context was important. Hurricanes destroying lives and livelihoods were in the news.

A practical voice attempted to summarise where the group had got to. One overarching phrase, drawn directly from the passage, was ‘can you add a single hour to your life by worry?’ Worrying achieves nothing. Another voice drew from a sermon that she had written for the following day on a different passage, but which she felt applied: if a man does eight hours work, he earns a wage; if he wins a sporting event, he wins a prize; if he has achieved in life in a way worthy of recognition, he gains an award. However, if he has done nothing but receives a gift, this is grace.

This engendered silence, before the country person again noted how often the word ‘worry’ appeared in the passage, suggesting that worry was the opposite of faith. The city girl remarked that this passage was about the future itself. Some will be thrown into the oven, but the message seemed to be: deal with your lot now because it will be better in heaven. Another was reminded of the Christian Aid motto – we believe in life before death. How do people in real poverty deal with the world? I would have to be more generic with a congregation that I did not know well.

The city girl, returning to the text, was continuing to muse on being thrown into the oven, identifying a reference to the transitory nature of life. Another voice wondered about humanity’s tendency to inhabit areas that fail to provide sufficient food to sustain life. Someone thought that in such an environment it was all the more important to rely on God.

The group was drawn back to a picture of the lilies of the field, appreciating their simple beauty, noting how manufactured flowers lose that simplicity and beauty. The discussion drew to a close as the group reaffirmed grace as being that which could not be earned; how lucky we were to live in this particular country and how frightening it would be to live elsewhere in the world; and being valued by God in a way that spoke to us of the importance of valuing others. The discussion was then interrupted by others returning to the plenary.

Intuitive types

The group of four higher scoring intuitive types set to the task with alacrity and enthusiasm. The passage of scripture fired their imagination and they went off in all directions to identify the big themes and to make the wider connections. The self-appointed leader set the ball rolling, ‘I would start my sermon by saying: Don’t worry about worry – it is only a potential killer after all’.

The second voice added that her biggest worry was her inability to stop worrying. She argued that, although we are told not to worry, we worry all the time. We are told to put our trust in God. We try, but we cannot stop worrying. It is not easy to be like the birds of the air. She concluded this line of thought by saying, ‘When I get very afraid. I hit myself over the head for not trusting in God more’.

The third voice wanted to start the conversation in a very different place. What he saw in the passage were lots and lots of questions. Is not life more than food? Is not the body more than clothing? Are you not of more value than the birds? Will not God much more clothe you than the grass of the field? These questions get the mind buzzing.

The fourth voice got side-tracked from the questions raised by the Gospel passage onto the questions raised by the workshop exercise. For him the first question (what do you see in the passage?) meant the same thing as the second question (what sparks

your imagination in the passage?). By answering question one I would be answering question two. For the fourth voice intuition was the only valid mode of perceiving. The fourth voice was now in full flow, ‘What I see here is a text from Hamlet (what a piece of work is a man)’. Put in dialogue with this Shakespearian cry of anguish, the Gospel teaches that to be transient is not to be without value.

The third voice came in with a very different idea. ‘What sparks my imagination are the birds. I like watching the birds. The birds spark so many ideas for me’. For the second voice, however, birds sparked a range of less positive thoughts. ‘There are people who have a real phobia concerning birds. They have nightmares about birds’.

By this time, however, the self-appointed leader was pursuing a very different line of thought. ‘I have been listening to a recorded interview with Canon Andrew White (the exiled ‘vicar’ of Baghdad). He was saying that Christian exiles from Iraq who have lost everything are nonetheless happy people. They say that they have lost everything that they had possessed, but they can never lose Jesus’.

For the third voice, the passage put her in mind of all the troubles in the world. There is a lot indeed to worry about: currently in the news there are hurricanes, earthquakes, famines, and wars. It makes you ask ‘Why does all this happen? Why does God allow it all to happen? Yet in spite of all this scripture tells us not to worry’.

Meanwhile, however, the self-appointed leader had gone off on another train of thought. ‘This makes me think about how the wildflowers are getting fewer, about how the pesticides are killing off so many things. I have seen fewer bees this year, fewer butterflies, fewer wasps’. The world of nature (birds and flowers) was important to Jesus and should be important to us too.

The fourth voice came back into the conversation, identifying another source of worry. ‘Donald Trump is a big worry for the world today’. It would be silly not to be worried about the danger that can be caused by unstable world leaders. In the USA, the evangelical right wing is spinning the narrative that Trump is God’s chosen leader. Others are saying that Trump is the False Messiah.

Then the third voice set a new line of enquiry pursuing how sustainable it is to argue that we do not have to worry because God is in control. If God really is in control, then we have lost free will and responsibility.

By this point time had run out long before the passage had ceased to spark new ideas and new lines of enquiry. Here was one simple section from the Sermon on the Mount that had sparked connections with Shakespeare, Donald Trump, and the theological debate concerning free will. For this group of intuitive types this passage seemed to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration, although remarkably little attention had been given to the actual context or content of the passages. Almost no attention had been given to exploring the implications of the passage from the perspective of an understanding of grace.

Results: workshop two

Sensing types

The group of five sensing types commenced their time together with a long silence, before the first voice suggested a methodical approach to the task and recommended beginning

with question one. This concrete proposal at last released some energy into the process, as a second voice remarked that it was easy to read, but very hard to live. Indeed, this was a perennial theme for this group. Sensing types are known for their ability to make realistic assessments of how things are. The realistic assessment of this group was that worry was real and often valid. A third voice readily endorsed this, earthing her claim in a down-to-earth real-life scenario of someone on a zero-hours contract with bills to pay, with the adamant conclusion: I stress and worry. The second voice who had introduced the theme of the impossibility of implementing Jesus' instructions developed it further: how do we *ever* not worry? He confessed that his non-Christian wife often challenged him about his worrying by quoting scripture to him.

Meanwhile, the first voice was keen to remind the group of the task: to explore grace. The definition suggested was God's abundance providing for our needs, resulting in undeserved blessings. The second voice agreed that 'undeserved' was a good word. The first voice was not yet finished defining the task: we need a volunteer to report back, he observed. Someone, who had hitherto been silent, readily volunteered. The second voice continued to explore the phenomenon of worry: why do we aspire to a big house when God provides all that we need, he asked rhetorically? In response, the task oriented first voice opined: I love pictures.

A new voice now joined the conversation, remarking that it was the word 'value' that had struck her, observing that she did not put value on herself. This prompted a reference from the second voice to Maslow's pyramid of needs, with the recognition that it would be hard for anyone right at the bottom not to worry, those who could not guarantee even meeting their material needs for food, clothing and shelter.

This was enough for the original voice who suggested a methodological approach to the text. Now he thought it was time to move onto the second question: what in the passage sparks your imagination about grace? He continued according to type: I love visual things. You can *see* birds and flowers. These serve as visual reminders now and ever afterwards. Could Jesus' audience thereafter see birds of the air and fail to remember God's provision, he wondered?

The group moved on to enquire how this very practical passage could be translated for today, when our basic needs were different from the basic needs of the first hearers of the parable. They agreed that it was important to interpret the passage, but recognised how adults learn from children's services. This reminder was helpful to those who were new to church and/or new to learning.

The practical voice wanted to press the precise words of the text, observing how dramatic the language sounded – alive today and then thrown into the oven – emphasising the transitory nature of life. Another voice noted the final four words of the text: you of little faith. This spoke about grace, for grace seemed to thrive regardless of the magnitude of their faith. One of the worried voices opined that love and fear were opposites: the loving offered themselves, while the fearful retained themselves.

It was at this point that one of the group, alert to the immediate environment, noticed a text on the wall of the room in which the discussion was taking place, from Joshua 1: 9. This prompted the first contribution from the notetaker, reiterating what she thought was the central message of the passage: he will feed the birds – animals – but values us a lot more. The practical voice was continuing to rehearse lines from the text, concluding that it was fruitless to worry because you could not 'add a single hour to the span of life'.

He developed this with the remark: worry is about the future. A further practical comment from another voice noted that worry doesn't actually help you. The notetaker made a second contribution, again attempting to summarise and remind the group that they were meant to be exploring grace. The comment resulted in a further period of silence.

The silence was broken by one sensing type wrestling with the intuitive dimension in the passage: that Jesus was using concrete examples to talk about more abstract things. The group continued to want to explore the practical value of this. We will become very insular if we look inwards. How can you take Christ into the world if you're not thinking about other people? The second voice wondered if we're talking about things we don't have any control over, needless worrying; thereby suggesting it was legitimate to worry a little about immediate realities.

A different voice returned to the refrain: He will provide by grace. Interestingly, different voices repeated this aphorism on a regular basis, each time as if discovering it afresh. The practical voice reported to the group that the passage was about senses, with its references to birds, fields and flowers, noting how much they had been talking about fixing and repairing things. He then reminded the group that time was almost up. The notetaker summarised by noting that the group had talked about worry as much as grace.

Intuitive types

The group of four high scoring intuitive types wasted no time discussing how the group would work or bothering to determine who would have the responsibility to report back to the plenary session. The first voice to speak set the ball rolling by posing the big question, 'Why is this passage chosen? What has it to do with grace? What is grace?' Such a big and interesting question sparked a lot of brainstorming. Grace is a gift. Grace is about giving, giving unconditionally, giving without questioning, giving way and beyond. None of these responses addressing the big question drew specifically on the biblical text in front of them.

Then there was a pause. Then the first voice brought the group to life again by suggesting that the passage is about God's plan: 'God has a plan so there is no need to worry'. This sparked a quick response from the second voice, 'Perhaps we spend too much time worrying?' If we look at nature, at the birds and at the lilies, they don't spend time worrying. God just provides for them unconditionally. That is grace. Our response to such grace should be trust.

The idea of trust sparked the first voice to reflect on how his church was experiencing expansion and trusting God to provide. His church had spent a fortune on employing a part-time administrator and a full-time children and family worker. We are trusting God to keep the income flowing. The first voice and the second voice then engaged in a creative conversation about the respective roles of sensing and intuition in enabling the church to deal with such developments. Intuitive types are needed to have the vision, but sensing types are needed to ensure that the resources are there to deliver the vision. Sensing types are needed to focus the practical questions (how, what, and where). This thread put the third voice in mind of the Gospel story about the people who designed a tower but needed to check out the resources needed to complete it.

This thread put the fourth voice in mind of how we test that God may really wish us to build a tower in the first place.

Then there was a pause. The first voice once again brought the group back to life by offering another big idea. There is a worry in this passage. There is nothing here about our settling down and planning. The second voice did not immediately see why this should be a worry. Surely the passage is about our having faith. The mention of faith sparked another big question in the mind of one participant: ‘So what is faith?’ Such a big and interesting question sparked another round of brainstorming. Faith is believing, trusting, following, obeying.

Then there was a pause. The first voice had been reflecting: Now the birds of the air may not reap, they may not sow, but they do build nests for their young, and they do fly off to warmer climates to find food during the cold months of winter. This idea sparked another conversation between the first voice and the second voice on how and why the birds do these things instinctively. Now this conversation sparked reflection on what makes human beings different from the birds of the air. Such reflection embraced creation in the image of God, free will, and the invitation to share God’s creativity.

The mention of free will brought the conversation back to how God’s grace interacts with and possibly overrides our free will. The second voice explored how prayer and reflection should help us to hear God speaking to us. The third voice questioned just what was meant by God speaking to us. The first voice and the second voice both gave examples of how local church planning did not proceed as the planners had hoped. The grant applied for was not given. The money needed to repair the roof was not raised. Yet in both cases, God was seen to be active in steering for the best interests of the local church. The second voice interpreted these stories as showing that God’s grace is revealed not in providing what we think we want, but in providing what we need, when we need it and how we need it. It is like that with the birds: God provides for the birds everything they need.

The first voice was still intrigued by the compatibility between the idea of free will and the idea of God providing what we need, when we need it and how we need it. ‘I do not see, then, why God gave us free will?’ Another participant came to the rescue by rehearsing the argument that God loves us, and for us to receive God’s love we have to choose to do so. Love cannot be imposed.

Then there was a pause. This time the third voice broke the silence, ‘What worries me is the question: Are you not of more value than they?’ The fourth voice was quick off the mark to protest that we are not of more value than the birds. Then we were back with the question about what God had in mind in creating human beings in the image of God. By this stage the first voice was becoming quite frustrated by the limited theology of the passage. ‘The problem is that there is no reality check here. God does not clothe me like God clothes the lilies. God gave me free will and intellect enough to clothe myself. By creating us in God’s image, God gave us the initiative to be creative’.

By now time had run out. This group of four intuitive types began to recognise that they had not appointed someone to report back, that they had not given much attention to the text, and that they had not really noticed the two specific questions that they had been asked to address. But they had been energised by the discussion.

Conclusion

The present study located within the developing field concerned with the empirical science of grace, applies the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics to the exploration of a passage of scripture identified as relevant to informing a biblically-based Christian theology of grace. The SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics is rooted in a reader-perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics that recognises the formative influence of the individual reader's psychological type preference in shaping biblical interpretation. The passage of scripture identified for exploration (Jesus' invitation to look at the birds and to consider the lilies reported in Matthew 6: 25-30) is a passage that readily engages the perceiving process, being rich in content to engage the sensing function and equally rich in content to engage the intuitive function.

Working with two groups of Anglican Readers (lay ministers), each group was structured to design contrasting hermeneutical communities (one of clearly defined sensing types and one of clearly defined intuitive types) with a third group of those who positioned themselves in the middle territory. By designing hermeneutical communities that separate participants on the basis of their preferred perceiving function, sensing types were set free to work with their sensing function unfettered by intuitive types, while intuitive types were set free to work with their intuitive function unfettered by sensing types. In these contexts, sensing types excel at examining the content and the context of scripture, focusing on the details and on the factual background, while intuitive types excel at spotting the connection between the text and their wider experience, seeking insight into the future. In the present study, the sensing types and the intuitive types generated different and distinctive perspectives on the Christian theologies of grace.

The accounts of the hermeneutical communities of sensing types were already rooted in the rural environment, in the real-life pictures of birds, flowers and fields that Jesus has set before his audience. These real-life pictures spoke clearly and loudly of God's concern to provide for the needs of everyone as a matter of course. Here are pictures of people doing nothing to earn a reward: pictures of people doing nothing and yet receiving a gift. This is grace. Here are pictures of God's abundance providing for our needs, resulting in undeserved blessings. This is grace. Such pictures worked well for sensing types and, once heard, served as a constant reminder of God's grace. When sensing types now see birds of the air and lilies of the field, they cannot but see God's (unlimited) provision to us (undeserving) recipients. This is grace. Listening to the precise language of the scriptures, the exclamation 'you of little faith' carried full weight. Grace is undeserved, not even earned by faith. For sensing types the journey from scripture to formulating insights into the Christian doctrine of grace is quite straightforward.

The accounts of the hermeneutical communities of intuitive types were buzzing with bigger themes and wider connections. Here were people who were eager to examine the connections between grace and trust, between grace and worry, between grace and human transience. For intuitive types grace was so much more complex. The doctrine of God's grace needs to be tested against news of hurricanes, earthquakes, famines, and natural disasters. The doctrine of God's grace needs to be tested against news of wars and the experience of exiled and displaced people. For intuitive types the connections between Jesus' picture of birds and grace were more complex. For some people birds bring fear, rather than good news. For intuitive types the connections between

Jesus' picture of lilies and grace were more complex. For some people the sight of lilies in the field bring to mind how pesticides are killing off so many things – the wildflowers, bees, and butterflies. When asked to consider the concept of grace, the intuitive types were reluctant to be constrained by or limited to the selected passage of scripture. The intuitive function stimulated much wider discussion and wanted to link the theological concept of grace with discussion of the nature of God's activity in God's world, with discussion of the nature of revelation, and with discussion of what makes human beings different from the birds of the air. Such reflection embraced discussion of creation in the image of God, free will, and the invitation to share God's creativity. Eventually, for intuitive types the whole enterprise of informing the doctrine of grace by reference to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field broke down, with the recognition that God does not clothe us like God clothes the lilies. Rather, God gives us free will and intellect enough to clothe ourselves. For intuitive types the journey from scripture to formulating insights on the Christian doctrine of grace is far from straightforward.

The present study was located within the developing field concerned with the empirical science of grace and has illustrated the contribution that can be made by the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics to this developing literature, complementing the earlier study reported by Francis, Smith, and Francis-Dehqani (2018). Here is a research tradition that is worth extending, drawing on other passages of scripture identified as relevant to illuminating Christian theologies of grace. A clear weakness with reliance on the findings of the two studies that have provided the foundation for this research tradition is that both studies have been conducted in England among those trained as clergy and as lay preachers within an Anglican context. It remains for future studies to ascertain whether such clear distinctions exist between the interpretations of sensing types and of intuitive types within other, and possibly more conservative theological traditions.

Disclosure statement

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