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PSYCHOLOGICAL TYPE AND THE INTERPRETATION OF SACRED TEXT: INTRODUCING THE SIFT APPROACH TO HERMENEUTICAL THEORY

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The interpretation of sacred text engages the human psyche. The SIFT approach to the interpretation of sacred text draws on three fundamental theological principles:

- that the human psyche is created by God;
- that the interpretation of sacred text is an activity to be engaged collectively by the community of readers under the inspiration of God, rather than to rest within individual readers in isolation;
- that the study of the human mind can bring insight into the collective interpretation of sacred text.

In light of these three principles, the SIFT approach is grounded in psychological type theory. The aim of this paper is to:

- provide an introduction to psychological type theory;
- illustrate the distinctive approach to sacred text by different psychological type preferences;
- discuss the idea of hermeneutical communities shaped by psychological type theory.

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Psychological Type Theory

Psychological type theory has its origins in the work of Carl Jung (1971) and has been developed and extended by psychometric instruments like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers-McCaulley, 1985), the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey-Bates, 1978), and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, et al. 2017). Psychological type theory identifies four defining characteristics of the human psyche, and conceptualises each of these four characteristics as being expressed in two contrasting ways. A good analogy for this contrast concerns physical handedness. Human beings are generally equipped with two hands, but generally prefer one hand over the other. This is the hand that they trust and develop, with the comparative neglect of the other. Jung understands psychological opposites in a similar way.

The four components of psychological type theory are defined in the following way:

- two orientations, distinguishing between introverted types and extraverted types;
- two perceiving processes, distinguishing between sensing types and intuitive types;
- two judging processes, distinguishing between thinking types and feeling types;
- two attitudes toward the outer world, distinguishing between perceiving types and judging types.

Only the perceiving process and the judging process are crucial to the SIFT approach to the interpretation of sacred text. However, this introduction provides an overview of all four components, since it is helpful to see how the whole theory works.

Introverted Types and Extraverted Types

Introversion and extraversion describe the two preferred orientations of the inner world and the outer world. Introverts prefer to focus their attention on the inner world of ideas and draw their energy from that inner world. When introverts are tired and need energising they look to the inner world. Extraverts prefer to focus their attention on the outer world of people and things and draw their energy from that outer world. When extraverts are tired and need energising they look to the outer world.

Individuals who prefer *introversion* like quiet for concentration. They want to be able to shut off the distractions of the outer world and turn inwards. They often experience trouble in remembering names and faces. They can work at one solitary project for a long time without interruption. When they are engaged in a task in the outer world they may become absorbed in the ideas behind that task.

Introverts work best alone and may resent distractions and interruptions from other people. They dislike being interrupted by the telephone, tend to think things through before acting, and may spend so long in thought that they miss the opportunity to act.

Introverts prefer to learn by reading rather than by talking with others. They may also prefer to communicate with others in writing, rather than face-to-face or over the phone; this is particularly the case if they have something unpleasant to communicate.

Introverts are oriented to the inner world. They focus on ideas, concepts and inner understanding. They are reflective, may consider deeply before acting, and they probe inwardly for stimulation.

Individuals who prefer *extraversion* like variety and action. They want to be able to shut off the distractions of the inner world and turn outward. They are good at remembering faces and names and enjoy meeting people and introducing people. They can become impatient with long, slow jobs. When they are working in the company of other people they may become more interested in how others are doing the job than in the job itself.

Extraverts like to have other people around them in the working environment, and enjoy the stimulus of sudden interruptions and telephone calls. Extraverts like to act quickly and decisively, even when it is not totally appropriate to do so.

Extraverts prefer to learn a task by talking it through with other people. They prefer to communicate with other people face-to-face or over the phone, rather than in writing. They often find that their own ideas become clarified through communicating them to others. Extraverts are oriented to the outer world. They focus on people and things. They prefer to learn by trial and error and they do so with confidence. They are active people, and they scan the outer environment for stimulation.

If, having read these contrasting descriptions, you are still puzzled about your real preference between *introversion* and *extraversion*, a very good test

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is to examine what makes you tired and then how you react when you are feeling tired.

For introverts, it is the outer world of people which makes them really tired and which can do so quite quickly. When introverts spend a full day working with people and talking with others, they will go home worn out, exhausted and puzzled as to how extraverts keep going in the company of others. In fact, at the end of such a day extraverts seem even more full of life than when the day started.

For extraverts it is the inner world of ideas and thoughts which makes them really tired and which can do so quite quickly. When extraverts spend a full day working with books and writing alone, they will go home worn out, exhausted and puzzled as to how introverts keep going in their own company. In fact, at the end of such a day introverts seem even more full of life than when the day started.

At the end of a tiring day there is nothing introverts want to do more than to go home, close the door, and be on their own. They re-energise and re-charge their batteries by being on their own.

At the end of a tiring day there is nothing extraverts want to do more than to go out and to enjoy the company of others. They re-energise and re-charge their batteries by being with other people.

The list of characteristics presented in Table 1 distinguishing between introverted types and extraverted types has been taken from the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). You may like to assess your own preferences against the list. Remember you may see yourself in both sets of items, but always check on what you would really prefer if you were given the choice. Then check whether your less preferred option sometimes is difficult when you are tired, and indeed may sometimes let you down when you are tired.

Table 1. *Two Orientations*

Introverted types	Extraverted types
Reflective	Active
Private	Sociable
A few deep friendships	Having many friends
Dislike parties	Like parties
Drained by too many people	Energised by others
Working alone	Working in groups
Socially detached	Socially involved
Reserved	Talkative
An introvert	An extravert
Think before speaking	Speak before thinking

Sensing Types and Intuitive Types

Sensing and intuition describe the two preferences associated with the *perceiving process*. They describe different preferences used to acquire information. Sensing types focus on the realities of a situation as perceived by the senses. Intuitive types focus on the possibilities, meanings and relationships, the ‘big picture’ that goes beyond sensory information.

Individuals who prefer *intuition* develop insight into complexity. They have the ability to see abstract, symbolic and theoretical relationships, and the capacity to see future possibilities. They put their reliance on inspiration rather than on past experience. Their interest is in the new and untried. They trust their intuitive grasp of meanings and relationships.

Individuals with a preference for intuition are aware of new challenges and possibilities. They see quickly beyond the information they have been given or the materials they have to hand to the possibilities and challenges which these offer. They are often discontent with the way things are and wish to improve them. They become bored quickly and dislike doing the same thing repeatedly.

Intuitive types enjoy learning new skills. They work in bursts of energy, powered by enthusiasm, and then enjoy slack periods between activity.

Intuitive types follow their inspirations and hunches. They may reach conclusions too quickly and misconstrue the information or get the facts wrong. They dislike taking too much time to secure precision.

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Intuitive types may tend to imagine that things are more complex than they really are: they tend to over-complexify things. They are curious about why things are the way they are and may prefer to raise questions than to find answers.

Intuitive types are always striving to gain an overview of the information around them. In terms of an old proverb, they may prefer to pay attention to the two birds in the bush rather than the one in the hand.

Intuitive types perceive with memory and associations. They see patterns and meanings and assess possibilities. They are good at reading between the lines and projecting possibilities for the future. They prefer to go always for the big picture. They prefer to let the mind inform the eyes.

Individuals who prefer *sensing* develop keen awareness of present experience. They have acute powers of observation, good memory for facts and details, the capacity for realism, and the ability to see the world as it is. They rely on experience rather than theory. They put their trust in what is known and in the conventional.

Individuals with a preference for sensing are aware of the uniqueness of each individual event. They develop good techniques of observation and they recognise the practical way in which things work now.

Sensing types like to develop an established way of doing things and gain enjoyment from exercising skills which they have already learnt. Repetitive work does not bore them. They are able to work steadily with a realistic idea of how long a task will take.

Sensing types usually reach their conclusion step by step, observing each piece of information carefully. They are not easily inspired to interpret the information in front of them and they may not trust inspiration when it comes. They are very careful about getting the facts right and are good at engaging with detail.

Sensing types may fail to recognise complexity in some situations, and consequently over-simplify tasks. They are good at accepting the current reality as the given situation in which to work. They would much rather work with the present information than speculate about future possibilities. They clearly agree with the old proverb that the bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Sensing types perceive clearly with the five senses. They attend to practical and factual details, and they are in touch with physical realities. They attend

to the present moment and prefer to confine their attention to what is said and done. They observe the small details of everyday life and attend to step-by-step experience. They prefer to let the eyes tell the mind.

If, having read these contrasting descriptions, you are still puzzled about your real preference between sensing and intuition, a very good test is to examine how you react when you are feeling tired. It is your less preferred function which is most likely to let you down.

For intuitive types, it is the less preferred function of sensing which lets them down when they are tired. When tired, intuitive types fail to notice things, begin to lose things, and get basic facts wrong. A good example is when the intuitive type drives to a meeting in an unfamiliar town, parks the car in a side street while thinking about the meeting, gets out of the car and completely fails to pick up any clues about the location. Cars parked in this way can be very hard to find after the meeting.

For sensing types it is the less preferred function of intuition which lets them down when they are tired. When tired, sensing types fail to see how the pieces fit together, cannot work out what things really mean, and begin to sink under piles of undigested information. A good example is how the sensing type may puzzle for hours over an apparently intractable problem and just cannot get a new angle on it, or see it from a new perspective. Problems tackled in this way can be very hard to resolve.

The list of characteristics presented in table 2 distinguishing between sensing types and intuitive types has been taken from the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). You may like to assess your own preferences against the list. Remember you may see yourself in both sets of items, but always check on what you would really prefer if you were given the choice. Then check whether your less preferred option sometimes is difficult when you are tired, and indeed may sometimes let you down when you are tired.

Table 2.: *Two Perceiving Functions*

Sensing types	Intuitive types
Facts	Theories
Practical	Inspirational
The concrete	The abstract
Prefer to make	Prefer to design
Conventional	Inventive
Concerned about details	Concerned for meaning
Sensible	Imaginative
Focused on present realities	Focused on future possibilities
Keep things as they are	Improve things
Down to earth	Up in the air

Thinking Types and Feeling Types

Thinking and feeling describe the two preferences associated with the *judging process*. They describe different preferences by which decisions are reached. Individuals who prefer thinking make decisions based on objective, logical analysis. Individuals who prefer feeling make decisions by subjective values based on how people will be affected.

Individuals who prefer *thinking* develop clear powers of logical analysis. They develop the ability to weigh facts objectively and to predict consequences, both intended and unintended. They develop a stance of impartiality. They are characterised by a sense of fairness and justice.

Individuals with a preference for thinking are good at putting things in logical order. They are able to put people in their place when they consider it necessary. They are able to take tough decisions and to reprimand others. They are also able to be firm and tough-minded about themselves.

Thinking types need to be treated fairly and to see that other people are treated fairly as well. They are inclined to respond more to other people's ideas than to other people's feelings. They may inadvertently hurt other people's feelings without recognising that they are doing so.

Thinking types are able to anticipate and predict the logical outcomes of other people's choices. They can see the humour rather than the human pain in bad choices and wrong decisions taken by others. Thinking types prefer to look at life from the outside as a spectator.

Thinking types are able to develop good powers of critical analysis. They use objective and impersonal criteria in reaching decisions. They follow logically the relationships between cause and effect. They develop characteristics of being firm-minded and prizing logical order. They may appear sceptical.

Individuals who prefer *feeling* develop a personal emphasis on values and standards. They appreciate what matters most to themselves and what matters most to other people. They develop an understanding of people, a wish to affiliate with people and a desire for harmony. They are characterised by their capacity for warmth, and by qualities of empathy and compassion.

Individuals with a preference for feeling like harmony and will work hard to bring harmony about between other people. They dislike telling other people unpleasant things or reprimanding other people. They take into account other people's feelings.

Feeling types need to have their own feelings recognised as well. They need praise and affirmation. They are good at seeing the personal effects of choices on their own lives and on other people's lives as well.

Feeling types are sympathetic individuals. They take a great interest in the people behind the job and respond to other people's values as much as to their ideas. They enjoy pleasing people.

Feeling types look at life from the inside. They live life as committed participants and find it less easy to stand back and to form an objective view of what is taking place.

Feeling types develop good skills at applying personal priorities. They are good at weighing human values and motives, both their own and other people's. They are characterised by qualities of empathy and sympathy. They prize harmony and trust.

If, having read these contrasting descriptions, you are still puzzled about your real preference between thinking and feeling, a very good test is to examine how you react when you are feeling tired. It is your less preferred function which is most likely to let you down.

For thinking types, it is the less preferred function of feeling which lets them down when they are tired. When tired, thinking types fail to take into account other people's feelings, fail to predict other people's emotional reactions, and can really hurt other people without intending to do so. A good example is how the thinking types may analyse out the issues behind a conflict

and then expect the people involved in the conflict to agree with and be helped by the analysis. The analysis may well be true and fair, but nonetheless deeply hurtful and capable of provoking anger.

For feeling types, it is the less preferred function of thinking which lets them down when they are tired. When tired, feeling types fail to be able to analyse out what is actually going on in a situation. They get drawn into the situation, and they find it very difficult to stand back and to be objective. They can themselves become quite easily hurt. A good example is how feeling types may try all too hard to empathise with both sides of a quarrel, or with both parties in a conflict. Feeling types may long so much to bring comfort to those who are distressed and to introduce harmony to where there is conflict that they end up being torn apart themselves by the situation they want to resolve.

The list of characteristics presented in table 3 distinguishing between thinking types and feeling types has been taken from the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). You may like to assess your own preferences against the list. Remember you may see yourself in both sets of items, but always check on what you would really prefer if you were given the choice. Then check whether your less preferred option sometimes is difficult when you are tired, and indeed may sometimes let you down when you are tired.

Table 3. *Two Judging Functions*

Thinking types	Feeling types
Justice	Harmony
Analytic	Sympathetic
Thinking	Feeling
Tend to be firm	Tend to be gentle
Critical	Affirming
Logical	Humane
Truthful	Tactful
Sceptical	Trusting
Seek for truth	Seek for peace
Fair-minded	Warm-hearted

Judging Types and Perceiving Types

Judging and perceiving describe the two preferred attitudes toward the outer world. Individuals who prefer to relate to the outer world with a judging

process present a planned and orderly approach to life. They prefer to have a settled system in place and display a preference for closure. Individuals who prefer to relate to the outer world with a perceiving process present a flexible and spontaneous approach to life. They prefer to keep plans and organisations to a minimum and display a preference for openness.

Individuals who prefer *judging* schedule projects so that each step gets done on time. They like to get things finished and settled, and to know that the finished product is in place. They work best when they can plan their work in advance and follow that plan. Judging types use lists and agendas to structure their day and to plan their actions. They may dislike interruption from the plans they have made and are reluctant to leave the task in hand even when something more urgent arises.

Judging types tend to be satisfied once they reach a judgement or have made a decision, both about people and things. They dislike having to revise their decision and taking fresh information into account. They like to get on with a task as soon as possible once the essential things are at hand. As a consequence, judging types may decide to act too quickly.

When individuals take a judging attitude toward the outer world, they are using the preferred *judging process*, thinking or feeling, outwardly. Their attitude to life is characterised by deciding and planning, organising and scheduling, controlling and regulating. Their life is goal-oriented. They want to move toward closure, even when the data are incomplete.

Individuals who prefer *perceiving* adapt well to changing situations. They make allowances for new information and for changes in the situation in which they are living or acting. They may have trouble making decisions, feeling that they have never quite got enough information on which to base their decision.

Perceiving types may start too many projects and consequently have difficulty in finishing them. They may tend to postpone unpleasant tasks and to give their attention to more pleasant options. Perceiving types want to know all about a new task before they begin it, and may prefer to postpone something while they continue to explore the options.

When perceiving types use lists they do so not as a way of organising the details of their day, but of seeing the options in front of them. They may choose never to act on these options. Perceiving types do not mind leaving things open for last minute changes. They work best under pressure and get a lot accomplished at the last minute under the constraints of a deadline.

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When individuals take a perceiving attitude toward the outer world, they are using the preferred *perceiving process*, sensing or intuition, outwardly. They are taking in information, adapting and changing, curious and interested. They adopt an open-minded attitude toward life and resist closure in order to obtain more data.

If, having read these contrasting descriptions, you are still puzzled about your real preferences between judging and perceiving, a very good test is to examine how you react best under pressure or when you are tired. Judging and perceiving types react in very different ways. Once again it is your less preferred function which is most likely to let you down.

For judging types, it is the less preferred function of perceiving which lets them down when they are tired or under pressure. When tired, judging types become less flexible and more rigid. They are unable to respond to new challenges and panic about their ability to achieve things on time. A good example is when a judging type is asked to make a public presentation at short notice, even about something on which he or she is well skilled. The judging type begins to make lists of what needs to be prepared, despairs that there is insufficient time to get everything organised, and freezes in panic. For the perceiving type, on the other hand, an invitation given at the last minute provides the very pressure needed for a good presentation.

For perceiving types, it is the less preferred function of judging which lets them down when they are tired or under pressure. When tired, perceiving types become more difficult to pin down, more elusive when decisions are required, and more reluctant to engage in realistic planning. A good example is when a perceiving type is asked to plan an event month before it is due to take place. Somehow the perceiving type is completely unable to think ahead, to anticipate what is needed, and to make the essential arrangements well in advance. It is not until the last minute that everything begins to fall into place and others are expected to comply. For the judging type, on the other hand, an invitation to plan well in advance provides the very structure and framework needed for a good presentation.

The list of characteristics presented in table 4 distinguishing between judging types and perceiving types has been taken from the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). You may like to assess your own preferences against the list. Remember you may see yourself in both sets of items, but always check on what you would really prefer if you were given the choice. Then check whether your less preferred option sometimes is difficult

when you are tired, and indeed may sometimes let you down when you are tired.

Table 4. *Two Attitudes*

Judging types	Perceiving types
Happy with routine	Unhappy with routine
Structured	Open-ended
To act on decisions	To act on impulse
In control	Adaptable
Orderly	Easy-going
Organised	Spontaneous
Punctual	Leisurely
Like detailed planning	Dislike detailed planning
Certainty	Uncertainty
Systematic	Casual

The SIFT Approach

Drawing on psychological type theory the SIFT approach to the interpretation of sacred text was developed by Francis and Village (2008). In essence, the SIFT approach to the interpretation of sacred text addresses to each passage of sacred text in a systematic way the four sets of questions posed by the four psychological functions of sensing and intuition (the two perceiving functions) and of thinking and feeling (the two judging functions). The two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition) are applied first, as the perceiving process is concerned with gathering information and ideas. This is the irrational process unconcerned with making judgements or with formulating evaluations. The two judging functions (thinking and feeling) are applied second, as the judging process is concerned with evaluating information and ideas. Both feeling and thinking are rational functions.

The first step in the SIFT method is to address the sensing perspective. It is the sensing perspective that gets to grip with a text itself, giving proper attention to the details of a passage, and that may wish to draw on the insights of the historical methods of scholarship in order to draw in data from other scholarly perspectives. The first set of questions asks, ‘How does this passage of sacred text speak to the sensing function? What are the facts and details? What is there to see, to hear, to touch, to smell, and to taste?’

The second step in the SIFT method is to address the intuitive perspective. It is the intuitive perspective that relates sacred text to wider issues and concerns. The second set of questions asks, 'How does this passage of sacred text speak to the intuitive function? What is there to speak to the imagination, to forge links with current situations, to illuminate issues in our lives?'

The third step in the SIFT method is to address the feeling perspective. It is the feeling perspective that examines the human interest in sacred text and learns the lessons of God for harmonious and compassionate living. The third set of questions asks, 'How does this passage of sacred text speak to the feeling function? What is there to speak about fundamental human values, about the relationships between people, and about what it is to be truly human?'

The fourth step in the SIFT method is to address the thinking perspective. It is the thinking perspective that examines the theological interest in sacred text and that reflects rationally and critically on issues of principle. The fourth set of questions asks, 'How does this passage of sacred text speak to the thinking function? What is there to speak to the mind, to challenge us on issues of truth and justice, and to provoke profound theological thinking?'

Initially, this theory was set to work in a series of three books exploring the three-year cycle of principal Gospel readings proposed by the Revised Common Lectionary (see Francis-Atkins, 2000, 2001, 2002). Our idea was that, if the theory really worked, the approach would be effective across a range of material. Writing those three volumes convinced us that we were on to something worthwhile. The exercise itself was a fascinating experience of collegiality between two different psychological types, one a bishop and the other a professor of practical theology, one working in New Zealand and the other working in the United Kingdom.

Employing Hermeneutical Communities

While the SIFT approach to the interpretation of sacred texts had its origin in extrapolation from psychological type theory, subsequently an extended programme of empirical research has been designed to test this approach. Key to this programme of research has been the idea of working in hermeneutical communities comprising individuals who share psychological type preference in common. This is known as working in 'type-alike groups'.

This programme of research has been conducted through workshops convened for clergy, seminarians, lay preachers, and members of congregations.

Typically these workshops comprise two sequential sessions, the first session working on the perceiving functions (sensing and intuition) and the second session working on the judging functions (feeling and thinking). In this situation different kinds of questions are posed for the two sessions in order to focus on the process being examined (perceiving or judging). For the perceiving process, two key questions are: What do you see in this passage? What sparks your imagination in this passage? For the judging process, the two key questions are: What issues in this passage touch your heart? What issues in this passage stretch your mind?

Working in ‘type alike groups’ organised according to the perceiving processes allows sensing types to work together, undisturbed by intuitive types. This helps to concentrate their skill in attending to details. Likewise, this allows intuitive types to work together, undisturbed by sensing types. This helps to liberate their imagination in sparking ideas and capturing links. When the two groups come back together to share their insights, each group is enriched by the distinctive insights offered by the other group.

Working in ‘type alike groups’ organised according to the judging process allows feeling types to work together, undisturbed by thinking types. This helps to focus their attention on the issue that touch their hearts. Likewise, this allows thinking types to work together, undisturbed by feeling types. This helps to focus their attention on the issues that stretch their minds. When the two groups come back together to share their insights, each group is enriched by the distinctive insights identified by the other group.

To be most effective for the perceiving process, a passage of sacred text is selected that is rich in material to stimulate perception. To be most effective for the judging process, a passage of scripture is selected that is rich in material to stimulate evaluation. Recent examples of studies in this tradition conducted among Christian educators are provided by Francis, Jones, and Ross (2020), Francis, Smith, and Evans (2021), and Francis, Smith, and Astley (2022a, 2022b). Recent examples of studies in this tradition conducted among Muslim educators are provided by Francis, McKenna, and Sahin (2018, 2020).

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