

Are the Christian Skeptics Right About the Enneagram?

The Enneagram seems to be the current personality test rage. I had a few people ask me what my “type and wing” were, to which I could only blink like an owl abruptly yanked into the daylight.

A wing? I am of the *homo sapien* persuasion; we don’t have wings.

That said, I will take any BuzzFeed quiz that tells me what TV show character or type of octopus I would be. I scoured the internet for a free Enneagram quiz and was told “You’re a type 2, maternal and the embodiment of an ‘ideal parent.’ However, becoming over-involved and manipulating others is your ‘shadow side.’”

Maternal? Over-involved? That sounds ... not like me.

I took another free test and was told that I was a type 5. Upside: independent, innovative and highly intelligent. Downside: eccentric, nihilist and antisocial.

No. I think not.

I complained to a friend that this “Enneagram nonsense” was about as accurate as a newspaper horoscope, and she patiently (and kindly) suggested a book called *The Road Back to You*. I borrowed it from her and started reading, already a hardened skeptic. Each chapter covered a different personality type, and I stumbled into mine like a deer onto a six-lane highway.

With a convulsion of recognition and a certain measure of mortification, I read some stranger describing things that secretly frustrated me deeply, and I experienced internal contradictions I struggled to explain to myself, my closest

friends or family.

Putting Yourself in a Small Box

How can a single test completely capture the complexity of each individual's personality? Even if the tests' inaccuracies are excused, the inevitable conflicts between nature and nurture must surely muddy the waters.

Even putting all that aside, a personality test couldn't possibly account for the transformative work that the Holy Spirit can, and often does, produce in a person.

High school teacher and university minister Nate Claiborne noted that " ... these tests tend to measure the existential dimension of the person. By that I mean it measures how they tend to interact with their world. What it leaves out are the actual experiences that make up a person's identity (i.e., memories and such). It also leaves out the beliefs and philosophical commitments that shape the way they see and think about the world. A person's cultural taste is also missing in the equation."

What's worse is that this inherently flawed rubric of our personalities flows directly into others' tendency to box us into "that type," limiting us to certain flaws or strengths.

As one writer on ActiveChristianity said, "When I think about myself and the personality test, I noticed how reluctant I was for others to find out about my personality type, for them to establish preconceived expectations of me before they'd even gotten to know me."

Beyond questions of accuracy and judgment, many believers find the origins of personality tests suspect.

The Enneagram has stirred up controversy with its roots in the human potentialist movement and modern psychiatric work, with some Christians pointing to conflicts between it and

Calvinistic theology.

Other personality types are not without criticism, either. Myers-Briggs has been accused of claiming that each personality type is innate and unchangeable. The Four Temperaments test is based off the ancient Greek belief that imbalances of your bodily fluids—blood, phlegm and bile—affected your personality. (Obviously, modern science would beg to differ.) Mind Styles is a phenomenological test, focusing exclusively on how our brains process information, as if we were biological machines and no more.

No test is perfect or perfectly accepted, and the debate over which is most accurate could carry on *ad nauseam*.

Finding a Useful Tool for Community

Criticisms notwithstanding, the popularity of personality tests cannot be ignored. People are clearly drawn to these for a reason.

“One of the most common sources of division within churches stems, not from doctrinal differences, but from personality clashes. The Twelve apostles had far different personality types and quite often we see personality differences lead to disputes,” one church pointed out on their website where they ask potential volunteers to consider taking a personality test.

“We should take great efforts to understand how God created us all different and to see that this does not mean war. Peter and Paul clashed at times, but they worked together and loved one another.”

Reflecting on the recent, wild popularity of personality tests, Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center Ed Stetzer mused in Christianity Today, “These truths—that God created and intimately knows each and every one of us—are certainly the starting point to any fruitful journey of ‘self-

discovery,' but by no means should we stop there.

"Although many skeptics might disagree, I see personality tests as helpful tools we can use to keep the conversation going as we seek to better understand the gifts and abilities that the Lord has so generously given us."

Part of that is better understanding what our strengths are so we can put them to good use. God's honored when we use our talents and abilities for His glory.

The other side of this coin is seeing our own flaws more clearly. A personality test should never excuse our problem areas; rather, they should help cut through our myopia concerning our own sin.

Desiring God writer Greg Morse explained, "Ever since the fall, being yourself is the opposite of what God desires. Since the fall, our authentic selves are unsurpassed in self-absorption; they hate God by refusing to treasure him above all things. Therefore, the authentic you is worthy of death."

Personality tests need to be balanced between identifying our strengths and also discovering the areas that could do with some sanctification. For example, Myers Briggs tells me that I'm an extravert. I'm fueled by my time with other people, and that's good. It can bring groups together and get people talking about things they might've stayed silent about otherwise. However, I can easily fall into gossip rather than productive conversation, and if I insist on social time with others when they need rest, that's selfish and sinful too.

Now that this inclination has been highlighted for me, I can pray for the Spirit to put a check in my heart when I fall—oh, let's be honest: when I dive—into this problem area.

Seeking the Soul's Master-Maker

Not always, but often, practical tools can be immensely

helpful in our spiritual walk as we pursue a life in Christ and learn how to do better in relationships.

On his podcast, Gary Wilkerson talks about how surface-level attention to sin issues almost never works. “Moralism ... or legalism will almost always present itself publicly through dealing with the secondary issues. Now, I’m not saying sin is secondary in the sense of its importance or need to be dealt with, but it is a result of something that is working underneath the surface inside. Jesus called it inside the cup.”

Poor behavior and sinful habits we’ve struggled with for years, or even all of our lives, sometimes require us to plunge into the dark heart of what is continuously driving us back to that particular pain or offense. On that journey, we may find that personality tests and other tools help us move toward healing.

Even if we’re not wrestling with past trauma, personality tests can still be useful.

As Hope Bolinger, literary agent at . and writer for Writer’s Digest as well as Crosswalk, sagely points out, “Your identity lies as a citizen of heaven and child of the Most High. Any other label placed onto you does not compare with these things.

“However, self-evaluation can help us with our spiritual growth. If we understand we operate a certain way, we might better determine good ways to develop our quiet time, prayer life, ministry, and evangelistic efforts with others.”

All the personality tests in the world will never encapsulate the wild complexity and creativity God used to make you, but they can help you better understand how to draw close to the master maker of our souls. {eo}

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