

## Character in the Age of Personality

*“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”* Ephesians 3:16-17

Profiling personalities is fun and even a little addicting. Personality traits set us apart and draw us together. Everyone is unique and alike simultaneously. We map the traits that we inhabit, and we assign letters or numbers. According to the calculus of Myers-Briggs you might identify as ESFP, which means your personality preferences extroversion, sensing, feeling, and perceiving. Or, if you identify as INTP, your preferences are introversion, intuition, thinking, and perceiving. If you use the Enneagram diagram, you are trying to figure out your number. Am I a type eight, a challenger, who is dominating, self-confident, decisive, and confrontational? Or am I a type two, a helper, who is caring, generous, loyal, and demonstrative? The Enneagram paradigm has the aura of the ancient sages and the novelty of a brand-new way of seeing ourselves. These self-assessment tools promise to lead us on a path of self-discovery. They help us solve the persistent identity question. In a culture that is as fixated on the self as ours is, there is an advantage to self-defining: “I’m an ESTJ,” or “I’m a five.”

There is considerable attention given to understanding ourselves in this therapeutic age. Narcissus and Prometheus are inspiring role models for this valiant effort. The burden of the modern self is extraordinary. We are tasked with creating our own essence. Humans are now responsible for creating their own meaning, morality, gender-identity, sexual orientation, and happiness. Everything depends on the individual self. Our therapeutic age has rooted everything in the *self*. Modernity enshrines our basic instinctual me-first orientation in a philosophy of life. Your “I am” is fundamentally the only thing you can depend on. It is the fundamental building block for everything. “Personal desire achieves the status of an ethical norm,” wrote Daniel Yankelovich forty years ago.<sup>1</sup> “By concentrating day and night on your feelings, potentials, needs, wants, and desires, and by learning to assert them more freely, you do not become a freer, more spontaneous, more creative self; you become a narrower, more self-centered, more isolated one. You do not grow you shrink.”<sup>2</sup>

We may need to ask ourselves whether we are more fascinated with figuring ourselves out than we are knowing God? The bigger question may be how do we transform our self-centered impulse into something that brings us to our knees before God? Calvin saw the solution in terms of exploring our sinfulness in the light of God’s grace. Granted, we need tools to subvert our instinctive psychological defenses, but isn’t that why Jesus told the parables rather than drawing a nine-point diagram? What are the biblical tools for obtaining self-awareness? Would it be better to concentrate on the Book of Proverbs, the Psalms, and the life of Job? How does Jesus’ life and teaching lead us into greater self-awareness and intimacy with God?

Our oldest grandson is just like his dad. Nature and nurture have joined forces to create a

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Bantam, 1981), 187.

<sup>2</sup> Yankelovich, *New Rules*, 239.

thoughtful, perceptive, generous, and creative introvert. His sister is an extrovert. She is expressive, dramatic, spontaneous, and self-confident. Since grandparents are often one-stepped removed from parenting, they may even profile their grandchildren more objectively. There are many personality-shaping influences including, birth order, family dynamics, relational support, education, emotional stability, physical safety, and economic security. Personality traits are fascinating, but they're not definitive and they are more fluid than we might imagine.

Pastor-theologian Todd Wilson in his new book *The Enneagram Goes to Church* promotes the transformative power of the Enneagram. For Wilson, "The Enneagram is a stored treasure of human insight into how people work."<sup>3</sup> It is a wisdom tradition that offers insight, not just information. It is "the protein shake of personality inventories" and a "potential goldmine for pastors and their congregations."<sup>4</sup> Wilson is confident that Christians can readily transpose the Enneagram into a higher key, a Christian key.

"Sharing in the divine essence" *becomes* "Made in the image of God;"  
"Sleepwalking through life," *becomes* "Dead in trespasses and sins;"  
"Compassion for self and others," *becomes* "Humility before God and neighbor;"  
"Discovering your true self," *becomes* "Putting on the new self;"  
"Focus of attention/chief passion," *becomes* "Signature sin/characteristic idol."<sup>5</sup>

But the question can be asked, why go to the effort of transposing a pagan theory of personality types when we have the biblical wisdom tradition? What does the Enneagram have that the Bible doesn't? How should Christians think of the relationship between character and personality given the Bible's focus on character? The Enneagram's premise is that our personalities are a cover-up, a coping mechanism, masking our true selves. Our pressing need is self-awareness and self-understanding, and the Enneagram is a tool designed for that purpose. We are led on a journey of self-discovery with its simple yet intriguingly complex nine-point-personality diagram. One of these nine different ways to engage the world has your number. Wilson promises that in a short time you can know the Enneagram well, but you will never exhaust its riches over a lifetime (just like the Bible). There are three triads:

1. The feeling or heart triad (#2 helper, #3 performer, #4 romantic),
2. The thinking or head triad (#5 investigator, #6 loyalist, #7 enthusiast),
3. The doing or body triad (#8 challenger, #9 peacemaker, #1 perfectionist).

The wisdom of the Enneagram is assumed by many sincere Christians. Everyone fits one of these numbers, everyone has a Preferred Center, a Support Center, and a Repressed Center. The calculus of the Enneagram is intriguing, complex, and self-defining. And Wilson contends that it is necessary if we hope to translate information into transformation. Wilson laments that there are many knowledgeable pastors, who are steeped in theology and the Bible, but they do not know themselves: "Sadly, I meet learned Christians like this all the time. They know all about Augustine and Edwards and Romans and Galatians, but they don't know who they are. . .

---

<sup>3</sup> Todd Wilson, *The Enneagram Goes to Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, *The Enneagram Goes to Church*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, *The Enneagram Goes to Church*, 21.

.They're in the know about everything, except the most important thing — themselves.”<sup>6</sup>

Wilson “takes the Enneagram to church” and discovers nine types of pastors (principled, generous, effective, creative, thoughtful, loyal, energetic, visionary, and steady). He assures the reader that the purpose of the Enneagram is not to put anyone in a box. On the contrary, it is designed “to raise our awareness of the ‘box’ called personality we’re already in. If anything, the Enneagram is meant to open the box of your personality so that your personality doesn’t imprison you in patterns of habitual action and reaction without you even being aware of it.”<sup>7</sup>

Wilson suggests that if Jonathan Edwards had used the Enneagram to become more self-aware of his perfectionistic tendencies, he might never have left his Northampton ministry. I’m not sure what that says about Edwards’s spiritual maturity, his conviction regarding the Halfway Covenant, or the providence of God, but it says a lot about Wilson’s confidence in the Enneagram. I was surprised that Wilson did not suggest an Enneagram number for the apostles Peter and Paul. Nor did he explore how their personalities changed after meeting the risen Lord. If I’m not mistaken the occult masters of the Enneagram believe that if a person could be all nine types they would be like God. One wonders how the Enneagram applies to Jesus.

Evangelicals have a history of focusing on the self in ways that parallel popular culture. The biblical tools for exploring self-understanding and self-examination, like the Psalms, the Wisdom books, the Prophets, the Sermon on the Mount, the Upper Room discourse, and the apostles’ letters seem sadly neglected for “the protein shake of personality inventories.”

No matter what your Enneagram number is, the Beatitudes do a number on your personality. Jesus cuts to the chase, ignores the numbers, and does a deep dive into character. He lays out a comprehensive profile of the grace-based believer, whose personality has been transformed by the character impact of the gospel. When it comes to personality, Jesus intended character to be in the driver’s seat. Self-analysis takes a back seat to Spirit-inspired character-formation. All those inborn personality traits that make you, you, are not the deciding factors of how you relate to others and to the world. Self-knowledge independent of the Spirit’s self-examination is misleading at best. The Spirit of God plays a big role in who we are and who we are becoming. Gospel truth transforms our personality traits.

Ian Cron and Suzanne Stabile entitle their “Enneagram Journey to self-discovery” as *The Road Back to You*. However, given what we know about *the real you*, that may not be the best road to take. C. S. Lewis didn’t think so. His pursuit of Joy convinced him that the object of his desire was clearly “no state of my own mind or body at all.” He states:

“I had tried everything in my own mind and body; as it were asking myself, ‘Is it this you want? Is it this?’ Last of all I had asked if Joy itself was what I wanted; and labeling it ‘aesthetic experience’ had pretended I could answer Yes. But that answer too had broken down. Inexorably Joy proclaimed, ‘You want – I myself am your want of – something other, outside, not you nor any state of you.’ I did

---

<sup>6</sup> Wilson, *The Enneagram Goes to Church*, 157.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, *The Enneagram Goes to Church*, 65.

not yet ask, Who is the desired? only What is it? But this brought me into the region of awe, for I thus understood that in deepest solitude there is a road right out of the self, a commerce with something which, by refusing to identify itself with any object of the scenes, or anything whereof we have biological or social need, or anything imagined, or any state of our own minds, proclaims itself sheerly objective.”<sup>8</sup>

In our self-centered age, Tom Greggs reminds us that “sanctification is the nonprioritization of the self (even in the quest for the holy life): in place of a life ordered towards the self comes a life ordered outwards towards God and the world.”<sup>9</sup> Whereas, “sin is the prioritization of the self” over God and others. “Sin causes the heart to turn in on itself, and this turning in on itself alters the relationship not only with God, but with other humans.”<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of our personality type, the beatitudes describe the Christian’s state of grace. They describe believers who by the grace of God know they are utterly dependent upon the Lord; they mourn for their sin and the sin of the world; they submit to the will of God; they hunger and thirst for righteousness; they show mercy because they have received mercy; their passion for God is single-minded and wholehearted; they are peacemakers; and they are persecuted because of righteousness. As the gospel builds our character, it changes our personalities. The process may be slow and difficult, but the journey of transformation and spiritual discipline is necessary.

All believers are gifted by the Spirit and there is no indication that these gifts are assigned according to a personality profile. All believers should manifest the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This alone is bound to have a huge impact on our personalities, checking our sinful tendencies, and empowering the new creation *character* created in Christ Jesus. We can’t hide behind our personality nor claim that since the Enneagram says I’m a type eight, I can yell at you, or because I’m a type nine, you can walk all over me.

We’ve seen repeatedly the danger of judging ministry effectiveness based on personality. It is a mistake to confuse a dynamic, charismatic, fun-loving personality with a Christ-centered, cruciform character. The Jesus way insists on character-shaped personalities rather than personality-shaped characters. Anyone who is clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, is undergoing a *personality* transformation. Regardless of their Myers-Briggs profile or their Enneagram number, they are being conformed to the image of Christ Jesus and it shows.

---

<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Fontana, 1972), 176-177.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology: The Priestly Catholicity of the Church*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), lxvii.

<sup>10</sup> Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, 34.