



Should Christians Use The Enneagram?

Answering 7 Critical Questions

TYLER ZACH

"Use the Enneagram as a diagnosis, not a treatment."

JOHN STARKE

The growing popularity of the Enneagram has caused Christians to start asking: are personality tests helpful or harmful? Should Christians use the Enneagram or is it too conflicted in its origins? These are great questions and I genuinely appreciate those who are asking them. The Apostle Paul admonishes us Christians to be discerning and to "test everything" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

While I don't want the Enneagram to become a distraction or replacement for Scripture, I believe there's much Christians stand to benefit from its use. I have found it helpful in premarital and marriage counseling, discipleship, with church staff teams, mom's groups, and workplace trainings, to name a few. I have lost count with the amount of "aha" moments people have while discussing their personality type and its relationship to their inner struggles and outer relationships.

Therefore, I want to suggest that before some critics dismiss the Enneagram because of the growing hype or because the symbol reminds us of a pentagram (it kind of does!), let's see if we can come up with some helpful answers to the most critical questions some people are asking.

QUESTION #1 DOES THE ENNEAGRAM PUT TOO MUCH FOCUS ON SELF?

Author Sheryl Sandberg hit the nail on the head when she said, "We cannot change what we are not aware of." It's true: no self-awareness, no growth. John Calvin understood this and famously began his Institutes of the Christian Religion with, "Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."

Calvin makes the claim that self-awareness is one of the two key variables necessary for Christian growth. But this pursuit must be balanced. Too much of an emphasis on self-awareness can make you big and everyone else (including God) small. Self-awareness should not make us self-absorbed, but more consumed with becoming the reflection of God's image we were made to be. Self-awareness and tools that help raise it are not the end, but the means to cultivating a deeper union with God our Father.

According to Marilyn Vancil, the Enneagram first and foremost should point to the Imago Dei within, leading us to worship God for the ways each of our types reflect parts of His wholeness:

Type Ones: Goodness & Rightness
Type Twos: Love & Care
Type Threes: Hope & Radiance
Type Fours: Creativity & Depth
Type Fives: Wisdom & Truth
Type Sixes: Faithfulness & Courage
Type Sevens: Joy & Abundance
Type Eights: Power & Protection
Type Nines: Peace & Oneness

But the self-knowledge of the Enneagram should also lead to humility. We have all bought into the original lie that we can "be like God" because of our God-given gifts. We mistake the reflection for the reality. As a Type Three Achiever who displays God's ability to get stuff done, this looks like refusing to slow down and rest, sacrificing others to get ahead, taking short cuts, and accepting the credit that God alone deserves when I do succeed. So the Enneagram is helpful in diagnosing the ways we try to hide our weaknesses.

Unlike other personality tests (like the Myers-Briggs or StrengthsFinder) that seek to describe only our characteristics, the Enneagram's aim is to reveal our core needs—our weaknesses—driving our thinking, feeling, and behaving. Richard Rohr describes these core needs as:

Type Ones: The need to be perfect
Type Twos: The need to be needed
Type Threes: The need to succeed
Type Fours: The need to be special
Type Fives: The need to perceive
Type Sixes: The need to be secure
Type Sevens: The need to avoid pain
Type Eights: The need to be against
Type Nines: The need to avoid

Knowing our core need is very useful as it helps us to figure out what is motivating many of our life decisions. It reveals the God-substitutes we might be running toward to get our needs met and cover our failings. As Tim Keller points out, "The most profound kind of self-knowledge you can know is the particular strategies you have for running and hiding from God."

As you're beginning to see, the Enneagram is helpful because it makes general sins specific to us. I heard one pastor say that the Enneagram is useful for "sniper sanctification": God can use the Enneagram to place the crosshairs on some of the root sins and strategies in our lives.

This all happens through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, not self-awareness, that fuels sanctification. As the Apostle Paul said, even the most self-aware person in the world has "the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out" (Romans 7:18). Self-awareness is not enough; we need divine power.

The good news about being a Christ-follower is that we live our lives not by our willpower, but by God's grace. Pastor John Fooshee, founder of Gospel Enneagram, teaches us that a Christian does not live for their perfection, acceptance, success, significance, wisdom, security, joy, strength, and peace but from Christ's.

Lastly, the self-knowledge of the Enneagram is not meant to be reduced to a fun exercise, but to lead toward a healthy fear of the Lord. This is what led Franciscan Richard Rohr to write his groundbreaking Enneagram book over 30 years ago:

When I, Richard Rohr, first learned about the Enneagram in the early 1970s, it was one of the three great overwhelming spiritual experiences of my life. I could literally feel how something like scales fell from my eyes, and it became clear to me in a flash what I had previously been up to: I had always done the right thing (that's a key concern for us ONES) —but for false motives. It's embarrassing to recognize and admit this. That is why the rule of thumb holds: If you don't sense the whole thing as somehow humiliating, you haven't yet found your number. The more humiliating it is, the more you are looking the matter right in the eye. Anyone who says, "It's wonderful that I'm a THREE" is either not a THREE or hasn't really understood how disastrous this pattern is.

Rohr's use of the Enneagram is vastly different than many out there who use it for self-reinforcement only. The Enneagram should lead us to a fear of the Lord because the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all knowledge (Proverbs 9:10).

QUESTION #2 IS THE ENNEAGRAM A CHRISTIAN-BASED TOOL?

Some Enneagram authors have claimed that the roots of the Enneagram can be traced back to the Christian monk Evagrius as well as the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the Fourth Century. It's hard

to know for sure because there isn't a lot of clear evidence, but here's a very brief overview of what we do know about Enneagram history:

The first mention of the Enneagram was by Russian Philosopher P. D. Ouspensky, who attributed it to his teacher Greek American Philosopher Georges I. Gurdjieff. Gurdjieff considered the Enneagram a symbol of the cosmos (oneness) but made no connection with it to personality types. It's been said that he learned the Enneagram from a group of Sufis (Muslim mystics) he encountered. One theory is that the numerology origins of the Enneagram came from them.

Bolivia-born Óscar Ichazo sought to connect the Enneagram to personality. Chilean-born psychiatrist Claudio Naranjo, one of Ichazo's students, said that Ichazo is the one who passed along information to him on what we know as the "centers" (head, heart, and body). But Naranjo was the first to connect the Enneagram to nine basic personality types (Enneatypes) according to a June 2010 interview.

In 1970, Naranjo brought a group of 50 students to Chile from the Esalen institute in California in order to learn the Enneagram from Ichazo. When Naranjo returned he began to teach the Enneagram to people such as Helen Palmer and Fr. Robert Ochs. It was because Fr. Ochs taught the Enneagram to the Jesuit School of Theology that Franciscan Richard Rohr encountered it. Rohr was told by his spiritual director that laypeople could not handle the Enneagram with care and wisdom and was entreated not to pass it on. But after several years, Rohr was personally convicted by the Enneagram's work in his life, so he decided to break the silence so that others could have the same experience.

Jesuit Don Riso was also taught the Enneagram after it spread through Catholic communities and in 1997 co-founded the widely known Enneagram Institute.

Suzanne Stabile, from the United Methodist tradition, was a student of Fr. Rohr and began teaching the Enneagram herself, where she taught psychologist and Episcopal priest, Ian Cron. Eventually, these two co-wrote the widely popular primer *The Road Back To You*, which has been given credit for launching the Enneagram into Protestant and Evangelical circles.

The primary takeaway here is that the Enneagram has roots across several traditions within the Christian faith, as well as many psychologists and other like-minded thinkers and teachers.

QUESTION #3 IS THE ENNEAGRAM DANGEROUS AS A SPIRITUAL TOOL?

Pastor Kevin DeYoung, a vocal critic of the Enneagram, pointed out that what he thinks is most troubling about the Enneagram is that it's been "infused with spiritual significance." He makes the case that if the Enneagram were just another StrengthsFinder tool it wouldn't be a big deal. But, because of its mixed spiritual sources, we should pause and ask: Where (if anywhere) is the Enneagram at odds with the language of Scripture? What spiritual language could be confusing or misleading for Christians?

While views vary from different Enneagram teachers, this diagram is my best attempt to answer those questions with a highly-generalized summary:



Understanding these differences I think will serve us well as we read books and listen to podcasts because different Enneagram authors are all over the spectrum between a Biblical and Secular worldview.

One final word of caution is that there are an infinite amount of Christian resources sitting on our bookshelves and available online that have troublesome doctrine. It would be foolish to accept all teachings that come from Christian sources without practicing discernment (a caution that shouldn't be reserved only for the Enneagram).

QUESTION #4 IS THE ENNEAGRAM REDEEMABLE?

Knowing that the Enneagram is infused with spiritual significance from a plurality of religious sources the critics have asked: Is the Enneagram redeemable for Christians?

From my own observation, the self-knowledge that the Enneagram brings is eerily accurate. Why is that? I believe that the very best of what we've received about the Enneagram that Christians are benefiting from today comes from modern advances in the field of psychology.

We need to recognize that Naranjo was an intelligent, well-trained, and well-studied psychologist who started out as a medical doctor and later moved into psychiatry. After leaving Chile, he came to America to dive into the study of personality, first at Harvard as a visiting scholar and later at Berkeley. He learned under many well-known philosophers across the religious spectrum, such as Paul Tillich and Karen Horney.

The most problematic thing about Naranjo is that he claimed to receive the Enneagram Types through a practice called automatic writing whereby you relax your mind and allow messages to flow through you from either a subconscious or divine source. Even more problematic is that Naranjo's teacher Óscar Ichazo claimed to receive knowledge from an archangel.

Let's just get to the heart of the matter and ask the question: If some of the Enneagram's origins do have occultist roots—should this fact alone be enough for Christians to stop using the Enneagram?

In the pluralistic world in which the New Testament came about, we don't see the Apostle Paul reacting in such a fashion. In Acts 17, we see Paul studying up on the false gods that surrounded him—idols created from demonic or very questionable sources to say the least. Rather than

tearing them down, we see Paul making use of them, directing his audience to an idol dedicated “to an unknown god” as a way of pointing the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers to a known Savior.

Throughout Paul's ministry, he made use of pagan philosophies like Platonism and Stoicism to put the gospel in a language that others could understand. John, in the first chapter of his Gospel, describes Jesus Christ as the incarnate Logos to connect the dots for ancient esoteric thinkers. St. Thomas Aquinas, seeing the rise in popularity of Aristotelianism during the recovery of Ancient Greek and Roman texts (first in the Muslim world, later in Europe), put the Christian message in that idiom. He held that some of Aristotle's ideas were true (but not the whole truth) and brought them under the truth of Christian revelation.

Furthermore, one overlooked fact is that Biblical authors such as Solomon made use of knowledge from pagan and occultist cultures. While we must outright reject practices such as necromancy and mediums that existed in those pagan cultures, scholar Derek Kidner observed that Solomon showed us that it is possible to take advantage of much of the wisdom the world has to offer if it is placed within a proper Biblical context.

The Apostle Paul assures us that we can engage a pluralistic society with a variety of worldviews because the indwelling Holy Spirit gives us the confidence to be able to “test everything and hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5: 21).

QUESTION #5 DOES USING PERSONALITY CATEGORIES DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD?

Categorizing our world is an embedded practice in our lives more than we think. As we go to the library to find a book, discuss different animal species with our kids, browse the paint swatches at the local home improvement store, garden in the backyard with different kinds of seeds, or study systematic theology, we begin to realize that it's almost impossible to live without classifying the gifts God has given us.

The Enneagram is helpful in the same way. Yes, it could feel “boxy” if we are rigid about the labels, but with wings, stances, and paths of “integration” and “disintegration” the Enneagram is the most dynamic tool currently available.

Christian Enneagram author Marilyn Vancil notes that the personality Types of the Enneagram should be viewed like the primary colors of the color wheel. We start with primary colors, then secondary colors, and mixing those leads to an infinite amount of hues and shades.

Creating a distinction between the personality types helps us to remember that we all see the world differently. Pastor Andy Stanley, when interviewing Ian Cron on his leadership podcast, explained that the reason he thought Enneagram categories were helpful for his staff team is that it was a reminder that there are "9 Normals." All of us naturally think that the way we see the world is "normal" and forget that there are other ways to see the world that we hadn't previously thought about. The Enneagram allows us to take off our individual lenses and try on someone else's, hopefully leading us to hold our perspectives with more humility and interact with others more empathically.

For example, my wife, as a Type Six Loyalist, sees potential danger everywhere through her lens, whereas mine only has an "optimism" shade. This is why, for example, the process of buying homes has been so problematic for us in the past: where I see potential, she sees problems. But the Enneagram has helped me to put on Lindsey's lens and see the situation differently. Whereas I once was skeptical of her "pessimism," I've now learned to happily embrace her protective personality. It's saved me more than a few times.

Where the Enneagram can lead to pain and hurt is when we say to someone, "I know you're a Two" or "You are being such a Six" or "You did that because you're an Eight." Remember, don't put people "in a box" but rather remind them of their identity in Christ.

QUESTION #6 DOES THE ENNEAGRAM HELP OR HINDER EVANGELISM?

It seems as if everyone is talking about the Enneagram right now. If St. Augustine were around today, I think he would urge us to see the great cultural moment that we have in front of us to point people to God. James K.A. Smith points out in his book *On the Road with Saint Augustine* that the bishop was asking many of the same questions on his journey to Rome (articulated in his *Confessions*) that many postmoderns are asking. He went on a quest to find his true self and didn't shy away from expressing his deepest doubts.

On this road, Augustine shifted his focus from the outward world to his inward self. The road he took was one of self-examination. But for him, this journey of self-reflection, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, doesn't lead us to pride but rather greater knowledge of our inherent limitations. On this road of searching for the true self, if you get to the very end, you will find God.

After decades of the church deploying reason-based apologetics, the door is wide open for us to use a self-awareness tool like the Enneagram to connect the hearts and minds of a culture that has split itself. We can go on the same journey of discovering the imago dei within as Augustine and invite others to join us.

QUESTION #7 CAN THE ENNEAGRAM ITSELF SAVE US?

French secular philosopher Luc Ferry, in his book *A Brief History of Thought*, proposed that every human, religious or not, seeks salvation: "If religions can be defined as 'doctrines of salvation', the great philosophies can also be defined as doctrines of salvation (but without the help of a God)." Ferry points out that every philosophical worldview promises salvation not through a Savior but rather through the pursuit of greater understanding and reason.

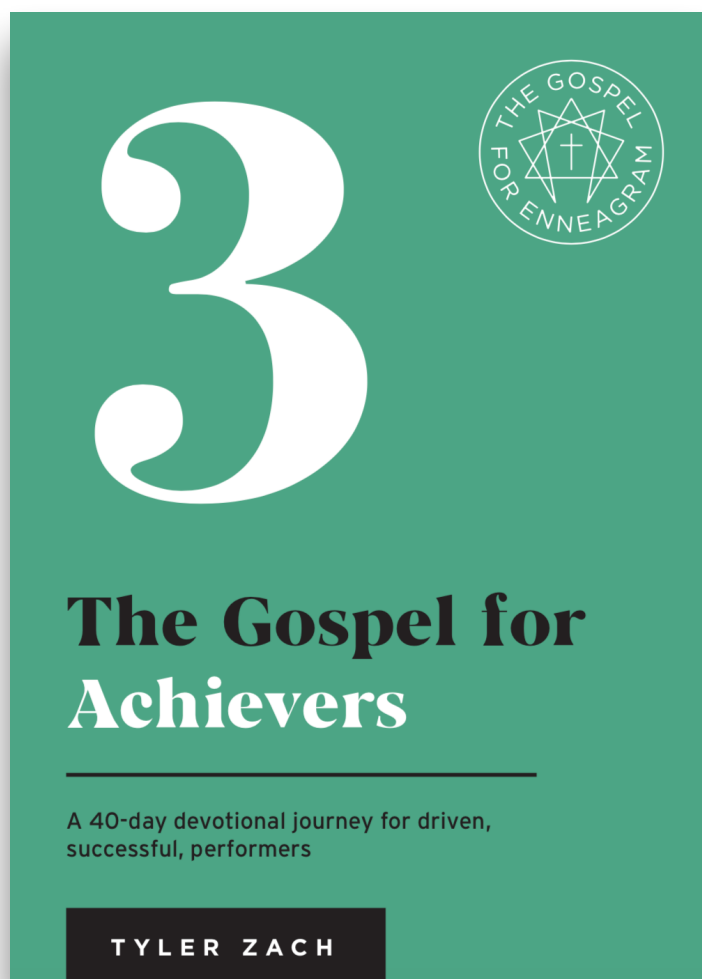
The Enneagram is appealing for the very same reason. It promises spiritual freedom through self-knowledge. Claudio Naranjo claimed that all human beings long for liberation; to find freedom from "the flesh" (i.e. passionate realm). But once again, psychology's path of salvation comes only through greater understanding and the end of the road is a "better you." But that destination falls short of the Christian gospel.

Whereas the Enneagram can diagnose our core fears and needs, only the gospel can provide the treatment. Only in the gospel is there hope that we will be united with God and our loved ones in the life to come. Only in the gospel will we find our true meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. Only in the gospel do we receive the supernatural power to change. Only in the gospel do we find someone who will never fail or forsake us. After all, our ultimate hope is not grounded in psychology but an actual person—Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul exhorts us to see that any philosophy which involves a path of salvation apart from the gospel cannot deliver on its promises. Those beliefs may promise freedom and enlightenment, but will leave us captive and deceived (Colossians 2:8). That's why Garrett J. DeWeese, in his book *Doing Philosophy as a Christian*, says that "true wisdom is Christocentric in its origin and application." In other words, Christ must be at the center. As we study philosophy or engage tools like the Enneagram we should do it "in a way that aims intentionally at the ultimate goal of personal transformation into the image of Christ." After all, Jesus Christ is our "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Therefore, as we use the Enneagram, let's make sure the road that we are on leads to Jesus.

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