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*Christianity Today, October, 2016*

# An Evangelical's Guide to the Enneagram

What's behind the popular self-assessment tool making its way to your church.

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**T**ools are fashioned in the image of their user. Hammers are productive in the hands of carpenters and malignant in the hands of an angry mob. Spiritual tools are a little more complicated than material tools, because souls are complicated. Prayer walking, guided meditation, and lectio divina can wield wonders in the hands of a mature Christian, counselor, or

spiritual director. They can also wield destruction in the hands of someone who has only read a pamphlet or written a blog post.

Like every tool, a popular self-assessment test known as the Enneagram has the capacity to heal or to harm, depending on how it's used. In the first Enneagram resource from an evangelical publisher, InterVarsity Press's new release *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery*, coauthor Ian Morgan Cron calls new Enneagram fans "number thumpers." They "run around typing people and pets, hacking off family members, and alienating people who have no idea what they're jabbering about," he writes.

The Enneagram is not a spiritual tool, per se, but it is increasingly being used as one in church classes and faith-based counseling settings. Its origins are obscure. We do know that it was introduced in the West in the 1970s by Chilean psychiatrists, then adopted by Jesuit priests and popularized in 1992 by Franciscan spiritual director Richard Rohr's *Discovering the Enneagram: An Ancient Tool for a New Spiritual Journey*.

My description thus far probably doesn't give evangelicals warm feelings. Indeed, some connect the Enneagram's roots to Sufism (Islamic mysticism), while others see in the Enneagram a Gnosticism that encourages users to find their "hidden," true self.

As a pastor in a confessional and evangelical tradition, I want the people I counsel and lead to trust in the sufficiency of Scripture, the power of the gospel, the regular graces of gathered worship, the preaching of God's Word, and the Lord's Supper for spiritual growth. Leaders who share my convictions have been suspicious of using tools like the Enneagram. Even still, I believe the Enneagram can enhance, not replace, our participation in the normal means of Christian grace and growth.

## What's Your Number?

Most simply, the Enneagram is a system of categorizing people with a number—one through nine—that represents a core motivation or orientation to others and the world. Clearly these "types" do not explain or capture the whole of a person—and clearly we can imagine many more types of people than nine. Rather, the numbers are what Cron calls "imprecise maps" for how a person moves through the world. Most of the time, each person is a combination of at least two numbers.

Most personality tests such as the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator seek to identify personality "traits," like introversion or intuition. The Enneagram goes deeper, looking at the motivations behind our traits. Traits are "partial giveaways" to what's really going on, write Cron and Suzanne Stabile in the IVP book. The Enneagram aims to take users to the root.

The language of "blindness" is helpful here. Blindness assumes blind spots. Put in the right hands, the Enneagram is a tool to show people how their inner life blinds them to certain patterns and motivations—even to certain virtues. But blindness also assumes focus. At its best, the Enneagram aims to show why we impulsively go a particular direction in our imagination, why our hearts burn for one thing over another, or why we are exceptionally driven in certain areas and not in others.

Below is a description of each:

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### 1 – "I want to be good."

Ones see the world through the lens of right and wrong. They want people to follow the rules, and they care about why the rules exist in the first place. When they are spiritually and emotionally healthy, they live with conviction and strength, and are able to make courageous stands and not give in, even if it means going it alone. Their vice is judgment of others and, often, themselves. It's hard for Ones not to be disappointed in people who fail them.

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### 2 – "I want to be needed."

Twos live to serve. They eschew upfront attention and always seem to know what you need before you ask for it. They're more comfortable giving than receiving. When they are spiritually unhealthy, their need is to be needed, and sometimes they serve in ways that ultimately serve themselves. The virtues of Twos are obvious, however. When they are healthy and self-aware, they can serve sacrificially without needing praise.

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### 3 – "I want to achieve."

If Threes set their mind to an accomplishment, they'll likely reach it. Success is important; failure can be crippling. They can also be performers. If they have a drive to be an expert, they're tempted to overextend their competencies so that others might assume their expertise. Their vices aren't subtle. They overwork and can see relationships as obstacles to

accomplishments. Their virtues show up in faithfulness. Healthy Threes display a long obedience in the same direction. They choose confession and authenticity over achievement. Spiritually mature Threes have learned the value of Sabbath and limit their dependence on email and iPhones.

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#### **4 – “I want to be unique.”**

The Four is the “Original Person”; they believe there is no one in the world quite like them. Authentic emotions and experiences matter greatly. They want their leaders to show their “messy” sides. They often feel misunderstood and can be tempted to look down on those who misunderstand. Their vice is navel-gazing to the point of narcissism. They are sensitive to what’s wrong in the world because they are sensitive to what’s wrong in themselves. But a healthy Four can help a community acknowledge the range of emotions, from joy to lament. They know how to be patient with their sadness and have developed ways of pulling themselves out of pits.

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#### **5 – “I want to think things through.”**

Fives will read the manual. They trust their thoughts more than their feelings. They are happy to think through a problem long before addressing it. Fives tend to stand back and analyze in ways that can seem cold. Their vice is that they can actually be cold. But their virtues are important, especially for community. If Fives have a healthy relationship with Christ, their thoughts on God can be theological masterpieces. They connect dots in the Bible and reveal treasures left unseen apart from their help. Spiritually mature Fives know how to love with their analysis. They solve problems and resolve tensions, turning everything to light.

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#### **6 – “I want to be safe.”**

To a Six, the world is a dangerous place. Sixes don’t make quick decisions, because bad decisions can have disastrous consequences. Therefore, Sixes are not risk-takers.

Unpredictable situations are dangerous and are to be avoided. That generally means that Sixes are loyal. They stay where they have been because that’s what they know. The vice of Sixes is fear. They often resent people who cause change in their lives or disturb their routines. But the virtues are just as pronounced: They stay and plant roots. And self-aware Sixes have learned to second-guess their fears.

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#### **7 – “I want to have fun.”**

Sevens are the people who call for “one more round!” They pump energy into a conversation. They have interests ranging from cooking to skydiving. Routines get old fast. They relish anticipating a joy as much as experiencing it. Their vices come in different forms: They are often uncomfortable with uncomfortable feelings. They find ways to numb sadness, including through addiction. They have learned how to put on a face of positivity. Yet self-aware Sevens understand their aversions to emotions they need to feel, like sadness and lament, and try to tap into them.

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#### **8 – “I want to be in charge.”**

Eights are people who change a room just by walking into it. They don’t go halfway. They work hard and aim big, and can be blunt and aggressive. They work for justice and defend the underdog. They feel more comfortable when in control and can romanticize the “lonely leader.” Unhealthy Eights lust for blind ambition and will blow past people in their way. But healthy Eights tame their ambition and use it for godly purposes. They can envision a hopeful future when others can’t. When they are self-aware, they lead with power—for the sake of the weak.

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#### **9 – “I want to be at peace.”**

Nines make you feel as if they get you, because they probably do. They have an unusual ability to empathize and put themselves in others’ shoes. In an argument, they make good mediators because they help opposing parties see each other’s side. They tend to see the world through the lens of resolved and unresolved. Which leads to their vice: Unhealthy Nines run from conflict. They can pretend everything is fine or avoid difficult conversations. But healthy Nines are true reconcilers. People often feel understood by mature Nines, which is incredibly healing. They often make good friends and wise counselors.

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## Diagnosis & Healing

At this point, we need to go beyond simply knowing our and others' numbers and apply self-knowledge toward spiritual growth. It's here where things can get tricky. Using information for transformation takes wisdom and care. Here are two principles for wise use of the Enneagram:

**See self-knowledge as part of sanctification.**

Part of maturing as a follower of Christ is maturing in our knowledge of self. This has been true since God warned Cain of the sin crouching at the doors of his heart (Gen. 4:7); since David asked God to search his heart and exposes any grievous ways (Ps. 139); since Augustine's Confessions; since Calvin's famous opening to his Institutes: "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."

If you know anything about your own self, it can often feel like a deep dark cavern where we have only the light of a matchstick to see and know our depths. We are a mystery to ourselves. The Enneagram is a tool that can turn the light of a matchstick into a torch. A torch light is still imprecise, but it provides a wider grasp of the terrain, can expose uncharted ground we need to explore, and keeps us from going down destructive paths.

The Enneagram helps shed light on the deep underlying emotions of fear, guilt, or shame. These emotions motivate us towards vice and self-destructive behavior. For example, Threes are often motivated by the shame of not being worthy of love, and use activity and accomplishment in order to "earn" love and acceptance. In moments when Threes find themselves rushing from one accomplishment to the next, they can practice simply *being* in God's presence and receiving his unconditional love, through silent prayer or enjoying creation.

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

Christians who are new to the Enneagram might start to see every new glimpse of self-knowledge as a sign of transformation. And there is healing that comes when we connect another dot of our story and see wounds that have never been addressed before. For some, linking past experiences to current shame, guilt, or fear can seem revolutionary. But like a diagnosis is only the first step of healing the body, a deeper self-awareness is only the first step for more effective soul care. The Enneagram is a tool to use to find sins to repent of, wounds to be healed, and fears to be comforted.

This is where Christian Enneagram users will look different from many mainstream users, who use the tool to find the "authentic you." A strong cultural narrative says that healing means finding your authentic self and living out of that reality. But Christians believe we will be our "true selves" insofar as we are truly living out our new life in Christ.

Our union with Christ means we have access to infinite resources for healing and restoration. The Enneagram helps us see how fear might be controlling us, how shame might be motivating us, how guilt might be crippling us. Like a tracer chemical in the blood stream that helps identify the disease, the Enneagram brings to the surface indicators of what might be motivating sinful or harmful actions and patterns.

With those resources, we can press into Christ, seeking healing in the gospel. Living out of fear, guilt, or shame as a central motivator means that we are not fully experiencing our life in Christ and the power of the gospel. Therefore, we must go to the sympathetic High Priest (Heb. 4:15). Jesus Christ himself experienced the full range of human emotions: He knew the anxiety of judgment at the Cross. He knew the shame of being exposed and abandoned in death. He knew the guilt of becoming sin. Though he was without sin, he knew firsthand the consequences of sin, since he became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21).

The Enneagram exposes to us where we need to come to Christ and seek transformation. In Christ, by the power of participation in his Spirit, we can experience healing of our fear, guilt, or shame. But also, in Christ is the power to imitate his virtues. So then, in Christ:

Ones can be freed from having to be morally perfect, learning to imitate Christ's patience with the failures of others.

Twos learn that they are needy themselves and that in Christ they are loved and cherished by the Father, growing in service without expecting anything in return.

Threes learn they are not defined by their effectiveness and learn to find true rest.

Fours learn that though they feel misunderstood, they are known fully by God and can imitate Christ's empathy towards others.

Fives can experience the generous friendship of God and can then follow Christ in being generous in their friendships and community.

Sixes learn that they are safe in Christ and so therefore can live with risk on earth.

Sevens learn that sadness can't steal true, abiding joy but can actually deepen it.

Eights learn that they are not defined by their accomplishments and can follow Christ in laying down their power.

Nines find their peace ultimately in Christ, not in circumstances, and so can be true peacemakers among their friends.

The strength of the Enneagram is that it exposes where we might need healing and what vices might be causing division with others and even within ourselves. As Christians, we use the Enneagram as a tool to find healing not by becoming our true selves but by finding ourselves more truly in Christ. And we become more virtuous not by authenticity but by imitation.

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