Focus On Spiritual Formation: The Enneagram

*Job 26:10* - *He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness.*

*John 8:31-32:* *Jesus’ words, “know the truth and it shall set you free...”*

The Practice

In its most common form, Enneagram practice focuses on nine different personality types, each of which is characterized by a primary motivating desire and fear. These powerful and often unconscious forces, combined with particular life experiences, drive one’s ways of thinking and being. To the extent that a person’s inner directives and motives are in harmony with their God-created or true self, they will be able to experience deeper and more loving connections with themselves, others and God. To the extent that they are out of harmony, these connections will be damaged or broken. Enneagram practice is thought to identify typical warning signs or wake-up calls for each of the nine personality types and to provide the means for honest assessment of healthy and unhealthy patterns of life. Teachers and dedicated students of Enneagram practice emphasize that, like any journey of spiritual growth, it is a lifelong process requiring courage and perseverance that needs to be approached in a spirit of humility and compassion.

When used properly, the Enneagram is a framework for growth in our understanding of ourselves and in our relationships with others and with God. It is not an end in itself, but a framework or means by which to better understand the individual human personality, thereby living more authentically and abundantly. Although not exclusively Christian, the Enneagram has been a tool employed by Christians and others over many centuries with the purpose of opening the door to a fuller awareness of our God-created selves, selves that have been obscured to some extent in each of us. In engaging the Enneagram, the task is to submit to its "converting honesty" through which insights are gained about one’s greatest strengths and most humbling weaknesses. These insights can empower a person to live a more loving and compassionate life. The goal of Enneagram practice is not to make the individual more self-aware simply for the sake of personal enlightenment. Rather, its intent is to free the individual from the stubborn bonds of small and distorted self-centeredness in order to live more faithfully as a true, God-created self, fit for God's loving purposes in the world.

**ENNEATYPES**

An important part of the Enneagram “framework” is its personality “types” (sometimes referred to as “Enneatypes”). The most frequently encountered Enneatypes are the following nine:

Type One - The Reformer is principled, purposeful, self-controlled, and perfectionistic.

Type Two - The Helper is demonstrative, generous, people-pleasing, and possessive.

Type Three - The Achiever is adaptive, excelling, driven, and image-conscious.

Type Four - The Individualist is expressive, dramatic, self-absorbed, and temperamental.

Type Five - The Investigator is perceptive, innovative, secretive, and isolated.

Type Six - The Loyalist is engaging, responsible, anxious, and suspicious.
Type Seven - The Enthusiast is spontaneous, versatile, distractible, and scattered.

Type Eight - The Challenger is self-confident, decisive, willful, and confrontational.

Type Nine - The Peacemaker is receptive, reassuring, agreeable, and complacent.

THE ENNEAGRAM FIGURE

A central part of the practice is to go on to relate these Enneatypes to one another in specific and suggestive ways. The relationships among Enneatypes are illustrated by use of a figure called an Enneagram, which often takes the form of a nine-pointed star-like shape inside a circle:

By assigning each number on the figure to a particular Enneatype, the relationships between the nine Enneatypes are suggested. For example, in this figure, the number 2 is connected and related to the numbers 8 and 4, etc. When the “Helper” personality type is assigned to the number 2, it will be seen that the “Helper” has some relationship or affinity to the “Individualist” (type 4) and the “Challenger” (type 8). In some systems, a specific “holy idea,” “basic fear,” “basic desire,” “temptation,” “vice/passion,” and “virtue” is also associated with each Enneatype. For example, the “Helper” is said to have the holy idea of hope, the basic fear of being unloved, the basic desire to be loved, the temptation to manipulate, the vice/passion of pride and the virtue of humility.

Getting Started /At Trinity

Getting started in the practice will certainly require individual reading and study (see Resources below), but the most productive approach involves engagement in group study/participation. In early 2015 at Trinity, a series of classes were offered at Trinity by Todd Evans (see wwwenneagramhorizons.com) to introduce participants to the basic concepts of Enneagram practice. Each session began with a meditation, followed by a teaching to extend the class’s understanding of the Enneagram. Next, in groups of two or three, the class members explored their experiences in light of the teaching. Finally, the entire class reconvened to share insights, observations, and questions. It is anticipated that there will be additional offerings at Trinity focusing on the Enneagram as a spiritual practice for Christians.

Background
The concept of the Enneagram (from the Greek words ἐννέα [ennea, meaning "nine"] and γράμμα [gramma, meaning something "written" or "drawn"]), is of uncertain origin. Some trace its beginnings to the 4th Century Christian mystic, Evagrius Ponticus, who identified certain “deadly thoughts” rooted in love of self that must be remedied or overcome. Oscar Ichazo (b. 1932), a Chilean-born Psychiatrist, is generally recognized as the principal source of the contemporary Enneagram. More recent advocates of the system include Helen Palmer, Don Richard Riso, Richard Rohr and Elizabeth Wagele. Richard Rohr has co-authored a book entitled “The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective” (2001) which has been said to demonstrate both the basic logic of the Enneagram and its harmony with the core truths of Christian thought from the time of the early Church forward. On the other hand, in 2000, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine produced a draft report that commented: "While the enneagram system shares little with traditional Christian doctrine or spirituality, it also shares little with the methods and criteria of modern science... The burden of proof is on proponents of the enneagram to furnish scientific evidence for their claims." Perhaps it is best to say that the practice should be approached with open hearts and minds as well as a healthy degree of constructive questioning.

Further Resources

- Todd Evans' website: http://www.enneagramhorizons.com/abouttheenneagram.html
- Take a Test to Learn your Enneatype: http://www.enneagramtest.net/
- For a somewhat negative view of the practice, see: http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/994/a_dangerous_practice.aspx