

# Christians and the Four Temperaments

Numerous Christians believe they can gain great insight into themselves and others by studying the personality characteristics of the four temperaments. Authors claim to tell you “why you act the way you do” and how to:

- “Analyze your strengths and weaknesses.”
- “Discover how God can use your gifts.”
- “Improve your relationships with others.”
- “Get ahead in your career.”<sup>1</sup>

Testimonies abound. After years of marriage, a woman reads a book about the four temperaments and believes she understands her husband for the first time. Mothers are convinced that once they discover whether their children are little Sanguines, Choleric, Melancholies, or Phlegmatics, then they will be able to understand why their children behave the way they do.

Many temperament enthusiasts believe that knowing the temperaments gives them greater ability in relating to their friends. They claim to know which type will be late for lunch, which will be prompt, and which will be early. And once they begin to use the four temperaments system, they are convinced it is accurate and reliable.

## What Are the Four Temperaments?

The four temperaments theory is an ancient system devised for understanding human nature and thereby improving the human condition. The theory divides people according to various personality characteristics that appear to make up their basic temperament. Some people attempt to distinguish between a person’s temperament and his personality by saying that temperament traits are inborn while personality traits are the result of nature and nurture. However, the distinction is not always possible or clear.

The four temperament categories are Sanguine, Choleric, Melancholy, and Phlegmatic. Each category or type is defined by a list of descriptive terms. Then people are assigned to one or more types by matching the person with the descriptions.

The following chart presents each of the four temperaments with a brief list of traits generally associated with each temperament.

<b>Sanguine</b>	<b>Choleric</b>	<b>Melancholy</b>	<b>Phlegmatic</b>
Cheerful	Optimistic	Melancholy	Calm
Friendly	Active	Sensitive	Dependable
Talkative	Confident	Analytical	Efficient
Lively	Strong-willed	Perfectionistic	Easy-going
Restless	Quick to anger	Unsociable	Passive
Self-centered	Aggressive	Moody	Stubborn
Undependable	Inconsiderate	Rigid	Lazy

The above list is both brief and incomplete. As the theory has been passed down through the centuries, the descriptions of each type have been modified and expanded. Descriptive terms for each type are not always

consistent among those who use the four temperaments system. For some, a particular characteristic, such as *leadership*, would be used to describe the Choleric; for others it would describe the Sanguine. Thus, the lists are not hard and fast. They vary according to the person who is presenting them.

### **General or Specific?**

Temperament categories are very broad and general. They are not specific. Yet, when various writers describe the temperaments, the descriptions can sound very specific and exact. Notice, for example, how specific the following description of the Sanguine personality sounds. It was written by the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant.

. . . the sanguine person is carefree and full of hope; attributes great importance to whatever he may be dealing with at the moment, but may have forgotten all about it the next. He means to keep his promises but fails to do so because he never considered deeply enough beforehand whether he would be able to keep them. He is good-natured enough to help others but is a bad debtor and constantly asks for time to pay. He is very sociable, given to pranks, contented, does not take anything very seriously, and has many, many friends. He is not vicious but difficult to convert from his sins; he may repent but this contrition (which never becomes a feeling of guilt) is soon forgotten. He is easily fatigued and bored by work but is constantly engaged in mere games—these carry with them constant change, and persistence is not his forte.<sup>2</sup>

Creativity is always involved in describing a typical Sanguine, Choleric, Melancholy, or Phlegmatic. Such temperament descriptions generally resemble characters in movies or books more than any kind of scientifically established categories by which to analyze people.

### **Why Are the Four Temperaments Popular?**

The four temperaments, which had largely gone out of vogue since medieval times, have become popular among evangelical Christians in the same way that astrology has risen in popularity among nonChristians. Perhaps because of life's ever-increasing complexities and numerous complex psychological systems, people are looking for simple ways to understand themselves and others.

And that's why the four temperaments have made a comeback. They are easy to understand and use. They offer simple explanations for the complexity of individual differences and propose simple solutions to complex problems of living. Furthermore, many Christians have confidence in the four temperaments theory because they believe it is reliable, helpful, and compatible with the Bible.

From the beginning, typologies have been designed to help people both understand themselves and improve their condition. Each of the four temperaments has positive and negative characteristics. Positive traits are called "strengths" and negative ones are called "weaknesses." Thus, the idea is to help people understand themselves and others through identifying positive and negative traits.

Then once they understand themselves according to their strengths and weaknesses, they can work to enhance their strengths and overcome their weaknesses. Furthermore, once they have put each other into boxes they won't be as surprised when negative traits surface in behavior. There will be an illusion of being able to predict behavior.

### **True and Reliable?**

The four temperaments theory also gives an illusion of truth. One can apply all descriptive traits to all humans to a greater or lesser degree. Therefore, when temperament characteristics are placed in categories, people can easily see themselves because of the universal nature of traits, such as friendly, confident, sensitive, dependable, and so on.

Then, when people are told that they may be a combination of the four temperaments, they can easily fit themselves into a classification. That does not mean the four temperaments are in themselves accurate or helpful. It only means they consist of universal traits and that people can identify with them to some degree.

The four temperaments are broad, arbitrarily defined categories of universally applicable descriptive words that apply to large numbers of people. Yet, when people apply categories to themselves and others, they think they have specific information. Actually they may have some broad approximation which might be partly true in a very general sense. This is referred to in research literature as the Barnum Effect, named after the circus showman P. T. Barnum.

In their book *Astrology: Do the Heavens Rule Our Destiny?* John Ankerberg and John Weldon declare that the “chart of any person is potentially relevant to every other person,”<sup>3</sup> Just as in astrology, a particular four temperaments category is potentially relevant to everyone. As we will show later, there are more variation possibilities among the twelve zodiac signs than with the four temperaments. Thus, their statement would be even more applicable to the four temperaments.

In spite of the lack of scientific evidence or biblical scholarship, books about identifying and transforming temperaments often sound authoritative. They include both plausible information and wild speculation presented as proven fact. Once a person is hooked into such a system of understanding self and others, he will see everything from that perspective. Also, once a person is convinced that he fits a particular category or combination of categories, he will look for and notice confirming evidence. He will look for validation and find it even when it is not there. He will even tend to act according to his new understanding. In other words he will make himself fit that category.

Peter Glick, in his article “Stars In Our Eyes,” says the tendency to look for and notice confirming evidence explains why, “despite the lack of any evidence of their validity . . . millions of people turn daily to horoscopes for clues to leading their lives.”<sup>4</sup> The same is true of the four temperaments. They appear to be true because people want them to be true. They appear to work because people want them to work.

### **Greater Understanding?**

Another reason for their popularity is that knowledge of the four temperaments may also give the illusion of exceptional insight into oneself and others. By using lists of descriptive words and phrases, people assign themselves and others to Sanguine, Choleric, Melancholy, and Phlegmatic categories. The assumption is that once they have placed someone in a category, they can understand and know that person better. However, the whole process of putting a person into a category leads to no substantial additional understanding of anyone.

The process of categorizing self and others relies on previous subjective knowledge. All that happens is that the subjective knowledge one already has about a person is organized according to an artificial arrangement and given a name. For instance, if you “discover” that your child is “Phlegmatic,” you were already familiar with enough of his characteristics to line them up with the adjectives listed under “Phlegmatic.”

All you have done is to match descriptive characteristics and come up with a name: “Phlegmatic.” But, since the list could not have included everything about your child, the word *Phlegmatic* may be inaccurate and misleading. You might actually understand your child less for having matched the available adjectives, because you might now focus on those characteristics and ignore others that might be far more important.

Knowing the temperament traits and categories can actually hinder knowing and understanding ourselves and others. For instance, one characteristic may be noticed in a person in a particular situation. Then, as quick as a flash, that person is popped into a category and assigned the other characteristics associated with that temperament, whether or not the other characteristics specifically apply. As soon as a person is placed into a temperament category, there is a tendency to view that person accordingly. Then the temperament user may simply react to the label, rather than respond to him as a real, living person.

Using temperament or personality typologies undermines the complex variety of individual differences expressed within the vast possibility of social interactions and circumstances. People are not exactly the same in

different circumstances. One who may appear reserved and quiet in some circumstances may be highly expressive and outgoing in others.

### **An Excuse for Behavior?**

Another reason for the four temperaments' popularity may be their fleshly appeal. Those who encourage Christians to utilize the four temperaments for spiritual growth consistently warn against using temperament weaknesses as excuses for behavior. Unfortunately, that is a great temptation—to move from “understanding” why I act a certain way to “excusing” sinful behavior because of “my temperament.” Whenever sinful behavior is relabeled “weaknesses,” there is a dwindling sense of responsibility and a gnawing sense of being trapped in helplessness. Once resigned to one's weakness, one may attempt to “make up” for that “weakness” by developing and focusing on the so-called “strengths” of the particular temperament one thinks he has.

### **An Appeal to the Flesh and Pride?**

While some may be tempted to use their temperament type to excuse behavior, others may be attracted to positive qualities associated with their particular type. Every category has positive characteristics that a person may apply to himself.

It is easy for many people to fit themselves into several categories through lists of positive characteristics. It is when negative characteristics come along that people tend to shy away from certain categories and limit themselves mainly to one category—as long as the positive outweighs the negative. The four temperaments seem to work because of positive illusions people have about themselves.

The further temptation then is to become proud of one's own temperament and one's own self. “Oh, yes, I'm a Sanguine. I'm outgoing, friendly, warm, and enthusiastic. However, I'm not inconsistent, so I must be partly Phlegmatic.” Indeed, one can pick and choose among the characteristics and come up with a very enticing, deceptive conception of self simply by applying attractive characteristics to oneself.

Whenever there is a system which encourages people to analyze themselves, the self-focus can lead to pride. Or, it can lead to reverse pride—self-pity or any of the other self-preoccupying activities of mind and heart.

### **Better Communication?**

Other reasons for the four temperaments' popularity are the direct and implied promises for improving communication. When temperament book authors suggest ways to improve communication through understanding the four temperaments, there is an underlying requirement to figure out the temperament of one's spouse, children, business associates, and others with whom one might desire better communication. All kinds of people who profess Christianity are analyzing themselves and others according to the four temperaments. Rather than communicating on the basis of love and truth as revealed in Scripture, they are attempting to manipulate the relationships to fit temperament strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, using the temperaments can turn spontaneous interactions into manipulative interchanges.

### **Self-Improvement or Sanctification?**

Best-selling books on the four temperaments and other similar typologies give people the idea they can change themselves for good as long as they have this special knowledge. Some people think that through this particular knowledge they can replace their weaknesses with their strengths and thereby enhance their own identity and improve their behavior. Promises of improvement and change abound in books that offer “transformed temperaments.”

Some books equate the sinful human nature with the four temperaments and the fruit of the Spirit with the so-called new temperament a Christian gets when he is born again. The books offer even more than self-improvement; they offer a brand new temperament to bring out and enhance the strengths of the existing

temperament, which has already been identified as the sinful nature. Thus, through the religion of the four temperaments, new birth supposedly gives one a new temperament, which supposedly improves and enhances the old, sinful, natural temperament. Obviously attempting to wed the four temperaments theory with the doctrines of salvation and sanctification leads to a great deal of theological confusion.

Rather than clarifying the biblical doctrines of man—creation, salvation, and sanctification—focusing on the four temperaments muddies the water. Worse yet, the four temperaments theology poisons the pure water of The Word.

When one uses the Bible to promote pet theories and transmogrifies the fruit of the Spirit into temperament traits, one ends up with a religion of works. At best, studying the four temperaments may aid in very superficial self-improvement. But, even that possibility has not been scientifically verified. The crux of the matter is this: should Christians learn and utilize the four temperaments theory of personality or any other psychological theory of personality for purposes of understanding human nature and progressing in their spiritual life?

### **Compatible with Scripture?**

Many Christians are captivated by the popularized four temperaments doctrines, because they have been convinced that the teachings are compatible with Scripture. We are living in a psychologized society. Many Christians have become counseling psychologists who attempt to integrate their pet psychological theories and therapies with Christianity. Each psychologist or counselor who tries to integrate psychological theories with Christianity believes that his combination is biblical. He may be incorporating personality theories of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Abraham Maslow, Fritz Perls, Carl Rogers, Albert Ellis, and/or Viktor Frankl. However, there are serious problems with attempts to integrate psychological theories of personality with the Bible.

The primary problem is that such personality and counseling theories offer unbiblical explanations about who man is, how he should live, and how to change him. While there may seem to be points of agreement, such as the importance of love, at base such theories are antithetical to Christianity. Each presents a world view devoid of God. Each gives an unbiblical philosophy of life (who man is, why he is here, and how he should live). And, each offers another means of salvation and sanctification. Therefore psychological theories of personality are actually rival religious systems.

The four temperaments and other personality type systems did not originate from Scripture. They are part of that philosophical/psychological pool of man-made systems and personal opinions which attempt to explain the nature of man and present methods for change. Christian authors promoting the four temperaments and similar typologies base their ideas on unproven psychological theories and subjective observations which are based on neither the rigors of scientific investigation nor the rigors of exegetical Bible study.

Personality theories and temperament typologies are filled with human notions about the nature of man, how he is to live, and how he changes. Temperament tests and personality inventories also are based upon the same flimsy foundation of psychological subjectivity rather than on science or the Bible.

### **What Kind of Psychology?**

As in our other books, when we speak of psychological theories, therapies, and techniques, we are **not** referring to the entire discipline of psychology. Our concern is with that part of psychology which deals with the very nature of man, how he should live, and how he changes. Because such theories deal with the nonphysical aspects of the person, they intrude upon the very essence of biblical doctrines of man, including his fallen condition, salvation, sanctification, and relationship of love and obedience to God. Psychological theories offer a variety of alternative explanations about the human condition, but they are merely scientific-sounding opinions and speculations.

Throughout this book we refer to research studies, because if a case can be made for the use of any kind of psychology, it must be supported in the research. We want to make it perfectly clear, however, that we believe

the Bible stands on its own. It does not need scientific verification or support. Christian presuppositions begin with Scripture, and any information culled from the environment is answerable to Scripture, not vice versa. Therefore, we do not use research results to prove the Bible is right. That is totally unnecessary. We cite research to reveal the unscientific nature of the kinds of psychological theories and techniques that seem to be popular among evangelical Christians.

As we continue here to address our concerns about the prevalent promotion of psychological opinions, we will look at the history and development of the four temperaments and how they relate to the practice of astrology. We will also examine other personality typologies, personality inventories and profiles, and the basic assumptions underlying their use, in terms of whether they are scientifically valid, practically useful, or biblically sound. And finally, we will consider a biblical alternative to personality typologies and tests.

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1. Tim LaHaye. *Why You Act the Way You Do*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1984, front cover of the Living Books Edition.
  2. Hans Eysenck. *Fact and Fiction in Psychology*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965, p. 56.
  3. John Ankerberg and John Weldon. *Astrology: Do the Heavens Rule Our Destiny?* Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, p. 189.
  4. Peter Glick, "Stars In Our Eyes." *Psychology Today*, August 1987, p. 6.

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