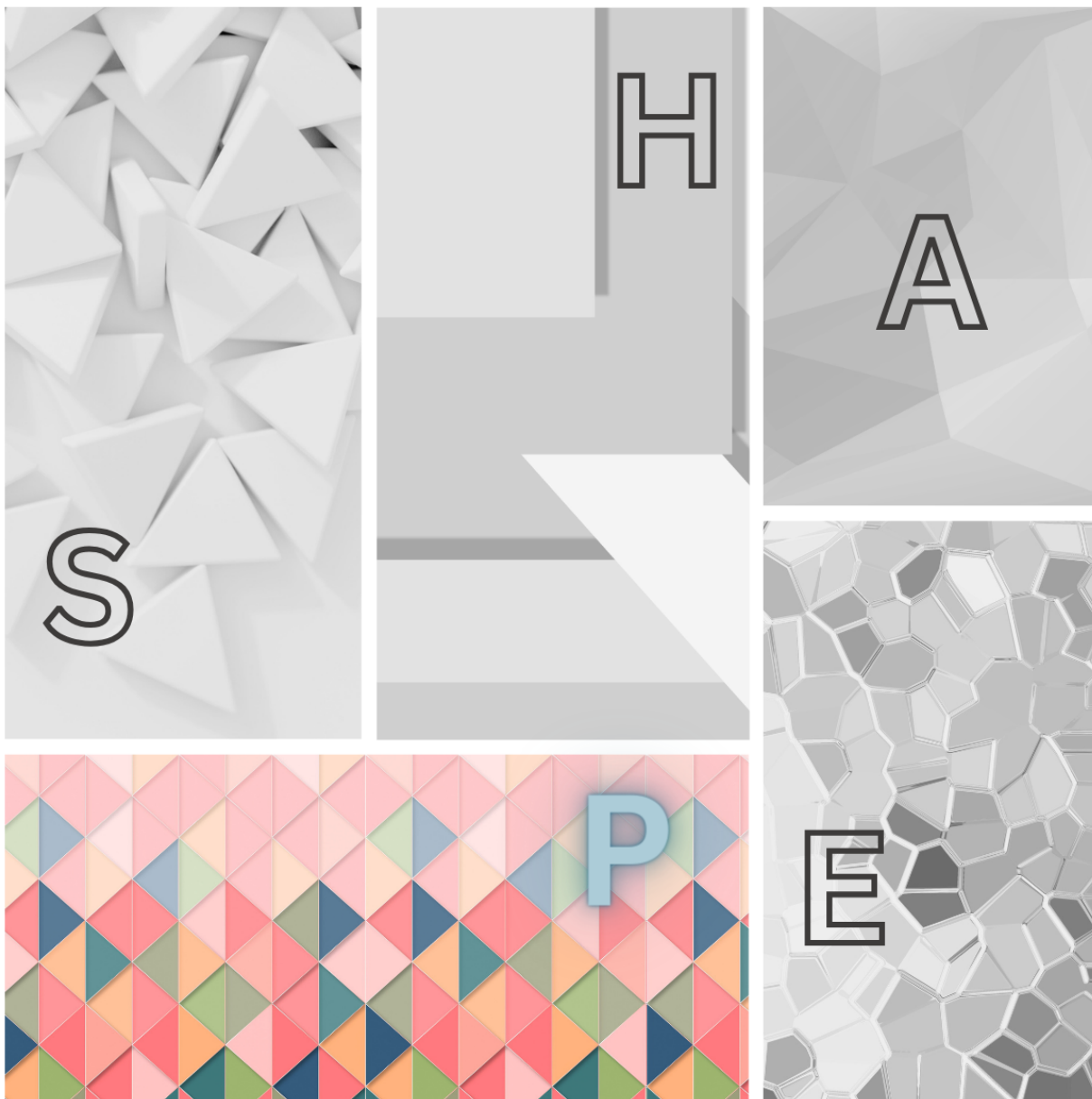


# SHAPE

your gifts for God's good purposes



PART FIVE  
**PERSONALITY**





## Part Five: Personality

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

### Why do we do that?

Ever notice that most couples go one of two ways with the dishwasher? One frisbee tosses dirty dishes into the thing from across the room and the other neatly organizes them—usually washing the dishes before they put them in?

What's at play here is our personality.

As psychologist Brian Little likes to say, personality 'tries to make sense of how all of us are like all other people, like some other people, and like no other people.'<sup>[1]</sup>

Christians can be divided on the importance of personality, prone to overblowing or undervaluing it. But in Scripture we have a clear command to think about ourselves.

*For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*

- Romans 12:3-5

### 1. Think About Yourself (Go Ahead, It's OK)

The word 'think' appears four times in this passage. A paraphrase that captures the sense of the verse could run like this:

"Don't *think* more highly of yourselves than is right for you to *think*, but *think* with sober and accurate *thinking* about who you are in Christ."<sup>[2]</sup>

Commentator Craig Blomberg says of this passage:

"Romans 12:3-8 suggests that determining and then faithfully using one's spiritual gifts is the next most important task in a Christian's life after the fundamental cognitive and moral transformation that accompanies conversion."<sup>[3]</sup>

The command seems broader than just our gifts. It demands we judge ourselves soberly and insinuates that something is at stake if we don't.

What's at stake?

The effective functioning of the body of Christ as the Father's redemption plan for the cosmos.

What does it look like to think about ourselves wrongly?

<sup>[1]</sup>Brian Little, 'Who Are You, Really? The Puzzle of Personality' TED 2016.

<sup>[2]</sup>Douglas Moo, *NIV Application Commentary: Romans*, 402

<sup>[3]</sup>Craig Blomberg, *NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 250.

It looks like introverts burning themselves out by being too involved in social ministries. Like people poor in administration taking administrative roles and damaging church systems. Like angry and anxious people in senior leadership finally snapping one day and doing irreparable damage.

In Acts 6, we have an example of the early church making decisions based upon their SHAPE. The distribution to the widows was having problems and the apostles say "...it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables." (Acts 6:2b)

Yes because of their Spiritual Gifts—to teach and preach.

Yes because of their Heart Desire—to see the Gospel go to the world.

Yes because of their Abilities—they already demonstrated they weren't good at feeding people in the desert.

But Personality might play into it as well. Peter was flighty, impulsive, and adaptable. Managing a complex system might not be right for him long term. Literally the Greek of the verse is 'this is not desirable for us' as in, we don't want to do it.

## 2. Stewardship of Self (And How Knowing Personality Helps)

Personality is usually described as a certain combination of 'traits'. Oxford scholar Daniel Nettle defines traits:

"[Traits are] stable individual differences in the reactivity of mental mechanisms designed to respond to particular classes of situation."<sup>[4]</sup>

Put simply, traits make up personality so...

*Personality is our default mode of operation. It is the unique way we are conditioned to behave by our biology, experience, and environment.*

Notice those key words—default, conditioned. Personality is not all you are. It's your natural way of behaving and you are free to move with or against that tendency.

Stewardship is the theological shorthand for our care of creation, our finances and, ultimately, the use of the investment of ourselves.

We learn about our personality to be better stewards of the investment God has made in us. To be used *well* for His kingdom purposes.

## 3. What Personality Isn't

- a. Personality is not identity; Jesus gives us our identity.

A core tenant of Christian faith is that we are *not* what we do. As Paul writes "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Also, our personality will not predict or dictate all our behavior. It's just the easiest way for us to act.



[4] Daniel Nettle, *Personality: What Makes You Who You Are*, pg. 43.

b. Personality is *not* Calling, but it can be part of it.

The other thing some of us think is that if we find our personality the goal of life is to line up our personality, and usually our desires and interests, with our paid occupation and we've found our 'calling'.

Our calling emerges from our unique SHAPE and the commandments of God through scripture and to us personally. Some aspects of our personality are shaped by our pain and can actually get in the way of our calling.

c. Personality is *not* Character, but it can determine how easy or hard some characteristics are for you.

We are called to be like Jesus, to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). These are not personality traits, they are character—habitual actions shaped through our effort and the work of the Holy Spirit.

#### 4. The Big Five Aspects of Personality

Among psychological researchers, one personality assessment has risen to the top in terms of accuracy, predictive power, and verifiability through neuroscience. It is the Big Five Aspects of personality.

- I. *Openness to Experience*—Tony Stark
  - a. Our comfort with abstract ideas and the broadness of our mental associations.[5]
- II. *Conscientiousness*—Spock
  - a. Our ability to control our impulses and our tendency towards dutiful achievement.
- III. *Extraversion*—Pippin
  - a. Our sensitivity to positive emotion, especially those related to seeking rewards.
- IV. *Agreeableness*—Luke Skywalker
  - a. Our tendency to modify our behavior based on our perception of other people's mental states.

V. *Neuroticism*—Batman

- a. Our sensitivity to negative emotion.

#### 5. Working With Your Personality

Personality traits are not moral. There are benefits and drawbacks to all traits. What these traits do tell us, however, is about our default mode of operation. Which is to say, the place where we feel life is easy, where we can rest, recharge, and heal.

So, in exploring whatever you are called to do, you don't want to put yourself in a position where you are always working against your personality. That's a recipe for burnout.

But you also can't expect to get to do something that is always perfect for you either.

A good rule is the 60/40-70/30 rule. The idea is that you want to be in a place where you can operate out of your default 60-70% of the time. But 30-40% of what you're doing stretches you and goes against your natural tendencies.

#### 6. Working Against Your Personality (or, Not Overdoing Your Strengths)

One way to think about our so-called 'weaknesses' are as overdone strengths. For example, people high in agreeableness are caring and empathetic. They can also tend to be too submissive and fail to advocate for themselves. This is not a weakness, it's an overdone strength.



[5] These definitions are blended from Daniel Nettles, *Personality: What Makes You Who You Are*, the descriptions at [truity.com](http://truity.com) and the Understanding Myself personality assessment.

Our SHAPE may require us to step outside of our personality at a consistent rate. Doing this is called a ‘free trait’:

“Free traits: when we enact a script to advance a core project in our lives.”[6]

Someone wise once said that we don’t learn about personality to learn who we are. We learn about personality, so it doesn’t get in the way of who God is calling us to be.

What is important to know is that exercising those ‘free traits’—becoming extraverted for a few hours at church when you aren’t that way naturally—it will cost you more in terms of energy. You’ll need to prepare yourself and you’ll need to take time to recover.

## 7. Being the Body

Romans 12:4-6 stated:

*For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.*

You are not learning about you for you, you’re doing it for others.

In the same way, you don’t have to be all things to everyone. You don’t have to do it all. You’re part of a body. Where you are weak, someone else is strong.

Think about yourself soberly and find your way back into the good thing God is doing among us.

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[6] Brian Little, *Ibid.*

# DISCUSSION

## Open up

How do you feel about 'personality' in general?  
What has informed the way you feel?

(It might be a good idea to do one of the quicker Big Five assessments together to give you a common language if people are open. There is a simple free version at [personality-quizzes.com](http://personality-quizzes.com) that takes about 15 minutes. Results only stay up for 15 minutes with the free version so take a screen shot so you remember)

## Dig In

Read **Romans 12:3-8**

1. What is at stake when we think of ourselves 'more highly than we ought'? Do you have examples?
2. How does thinking about yourself as an investment God affect you?
3. How do you keep yourself from conflating personality with identity, calling, or character?

## Examine Your Lives

These questions can be shared about openly in your group, or you can give people space to think and pray on them individually.

1. In your life as it currently is, are there aspects of your 'default operating mode' you are neglecting? (Remember the 70/30 Rule)
2. In your life as it currently is, where you are 'overdoing your strengths'? Where is your personality getting in the way?