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# AN ASSESSMENT OF THE MYERS BRIGGS TYPE INDICATOR FROM A PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to assess the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®) from a Reformed perspective of a Trinitarian biblical hermeneutic of hope. It examines and assesses the compatibility of its assumptions with a theory of personhood derived from a Reformed perspective. It then suggests why it has made such an impact among Christian counsellors, what its popularity means to the church, and makes recommendations to practitioners. It is not intended to be a formal psychological assessment.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®) has met with mixed reaction in Christian circles. In 1992 Long criticised MBTI® writing,

The main problem (with MBTI®) has to do with the uncritical, theologically naive, rigid, and overly confident manner in which Myers-Briggs categories are often employed in various church settings (Long 1992:293).

In 1996 the respected Anglican author Leech (1996) produced a sustained critique.

Some Christian leaders are sceptical of PT (Personality Typing) and anxious about its growing popularity in the churches. A few are frankly hostile (Lloyd 2007:111).

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It still meets with this mixed reaction. Yet it is widely regarded as a valuable tool in many countries of the world for understanding oneself and for relating to and working with others. Despite the above criticisms, MBTI® has had a significant impact within the Christian church, certainly in the USA and the UK.

MBTI® has been advocated as an indicator of how successful ministers will be in leading a church into change (Malphurs 1993:64-68), improving teamwork (Malphurs 2005:110), and as a tool for assessing how a congregation will react to this change (Douglass 2008). It is being used by the church to make employment decisions, establish leadership styles, regulate staff relationships, and advise people about everything from marriage roles to prayer techniques (see Duncan 1993). On two different occasions two qualified psychologists administered the MBTI® to the author, a Presbyterian minister.

It is therefore wrong to dismiss the MBTI® out of hand. The Bible's Wisdom literature genre indicates that through reflection on nature and human life in general wise insights may be gained that can be appropriated by the righteous. This implies that the Christian world has a great deal to learn from sources other than revelation, such as the natural and operational sciences, folk wisdom and culture (Osmer 2008:88ff.), and this may apply to such psychological tools as MBTI®. However, ideas from these sources should not be accepted and used without a critical theological examination.

As far as the author can ascertain, there do not appear to be any Practical Theological studies formally and methodologically assessing MBTI®. Practical Theology is equipped to undertake this topic in a systematic fashion, taking into account the interaction between theology and social context. This Practical Theological assessment of the MBTI® interrogates its assumptions from the hermeneutical-critical approach advocated by Heitink (1999:178ff.). This approach is based on the assumption that the purpose of Practical Theology is to ensure that God's Word reaches people and is embodied in their lives.

## 2. THE HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH AS A MEANS OF ASSESSMENT

### 2.1 Description of Practical Theological model adopted

The Practical Theological methodological model used to assess the MBTI® is of crucial importance as it will to a large extent determine the interpretation of the results of the assessment and the conclusions. The approach adopted in this study may be called the hermeneutical-critical approach. Practical Theology is regarded as the interaction between theological tradition, a

biblical hermeneutic and the social context in which the church finds itself (Zerfass 1974:168).

The interaction may be envisaged as an interactive spiral which starts from the praxis (the situation). The praxis is reflected upon from a theological perspective (the theory) and the results are used to interrogate the interpretation of theory. The new theory then questions the existing praxis, causing it to be re-examined, and so on. A progressive spiral is initiated, with a time dimension, in which research of the context leads to a new interpretation of the text which, in turn, sheds new light on the actual situation (Heitink 1999:153ff.).

## 2.2 A hermeneutical-critical approach in the context of the Trinity

The most profound way, for a Reformed Theologian, of applying the hermeneutical-critical approach is within the context of the Trinity. This is the framework upon which Calvin based his *Institutes* (Method and Arrangement: I, II, III) and has been re-emphasised by Barth in his *Church Dogmatics* (Vol. 1 1936). It examines what the Bible tells us about God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in relation to the human being since human beings are the result of a Trinitarian intervention in the world. Thus any Practical Theology study must be axiomatically Trinitarian (Purves 1998:224.)

A Trinitarian approach provides the basis and the broadest horizon for Practical Theology. It helps to ensure that it is based on a biblical hermeneutic. It provides the only satisfactory theological hermeneutic whereby the world can be studied both empirically and theologically, allowing God to be perceived as “other” than creation and in relation to it. The distancing of “otherness” provides the freedom necessary for man and society to act and observe as autonomous entities while still being intimate with God (Gunton 1991:132).

## 2.3 The hermeneutical-critical approach in the context of the theology of hope

In addition, a theology of hope (Moltmann 1967) is employed as a means of assessment. This is rooted in the biblical hermeneutic of hope with its basis in the Old Testament (von Rad 1966; Brueggemann 1997:476). It opens up positively oriented hermeneutical structures for relating biblical faith to a modern world in which there has been a disintegration of “the self-hood of modernity” and thus a loss of meaning and purpose (Thiselton 1995:122).

### 3. DESCRIPTION OF THE MEYERS BRIGGS PERSONALITY INDICATOR

The MBTI® was developed by Isabel Meyers and her mother Katherine Briggs for two reasons (Black 1980:ix). The first was out of concern for human reconciliation. The theory was that, if people could better understand themselves and others, destructive human conflict would be avoided or, at least, moderated. Once a person recognised his/her own personality tendencies, and became aware that not everyone possesses those same tendencies, this would result in greater self-awareness and a greater tolerance of the innate differences among people (Black 1980:ix-xii; Long 1992:291). The second was that different vocations favoured different personality types and that Jung's theory, with Briggs's modifications, provided the theoretical structure to link personality to job performance (Briggs & Meyers 1980:157ff.; Pittenger 1993:468).

MBTI® eliminates some of Jung's concepts, modifies others and adds some new theories. Jung (1938:9ff.) suggested that personality could be described by a typology based on the two opposite orientations of the self (extraversion or introversion), the two opposite processes whereby we perceive information (sensing or intuition), and the two opposite processes whereby we make judgements (feeling or thinking). Briggs's theory added the "judgment-perceptive" dichotomy and ignored the concept of the unconscious and its relation to dominant and auxiliary functions and the development of compensatory processes in the subconscious (Pittenger 1993:469).

Thus the MBTI® seeks to disclose a person's preferences among four pairs of personality variables: two basic attitudes (extraversion or introversion), two kinds of perception (sensing or intuiting), two manners of seeking rational order (thinking or feeling), and two varieties of orientation toward the outer world (perceptive or judging). This mathematically produced sixteen possible combinations, or personality "types", each expressed in shorthand by a four-letter code (Briggs & Meyers 1980:1ff.; Keirse & Bates 1984:13ff.; Long 1992:291ff.). The contention is that, while everybody on occasion uses all the eight preference poles listed above, each of us mostly prefers one of each of these opposites of these four pairs and thus each individual can be assigned to one of 16 personality types (Briggs & Meyers 1980:1; Lloyd 2007:120).

The objective of an MBTI® assessment is to identify preferences as accurately as possible by arranging them into the type category to which they are disposed. All the questions are presented in a forced choice format, so that the respondent must choose between two mental functions or attitudes (Quenk 2000:5ff.). The method used to achieve this was to create an easily administered, uncomplicated questionnaire whereby ordinary people could quickly determine their psychological personality type (Black 1980:ix-xii; Long

1992:291). The self-administered questionnaire now has a list of 93 questions that are scored for type (Quenk 2000:5).

#### 4. DISCUSSION OF ASSUMPTIONS UPON WHICH MBTI® IS BASED

Isobel Briggs makes the assumption that MBTI®, and Jung's theory of psychological types upon which it is based, will be very helpful for clergy (Briggs & Meyers 1980:preface). The implication of this, and the citation of Romans 12:4-8 (Briggs & Meyers 1980:211), is that the theory behind MBTI® is compatible with biblical revelation. The evidence whether or not this is so is provided below where each apparent assumption behind the theory is assessed.

##### 4.1 Each individual is unique and different

The first premise of MBTI® is that people are unique and different. From a common sense perspective this seems obvious, although in the light of the postmodern deconstructionist critique, such as Foucault's (1974) "The Order of Things", it must be openly stated as a Christian premise. The premise of uniqueness is fully in accord with a theological anthropology which starts from the presupposition that the selfness of all human beings is determined by the concept of man created in the *imago Dei* (Genesis 1:27), "So God created man in his own image".

In the context of a dialogue with postmodernity this verse may be interpreted as indicating that every human self is genetically determined according to God's purpose to be a structured, distinct, determinate, unique entity with an identity of selfness, influenced as it develops by existing place, culture and gender, continuously contingent upon God and moulded by the God-giveness of life. Perhaps the most convincing argument for the uniqueness of each individual created by God is the teleological doctrine of God's personal judgement of every individual, as clearly enunciated in the New Testament (2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:12-13). If all or even some of us were the same, this would be cruel and/or pointless.

##### 4.2 This uniqueness can be meaningfully measured by personality type

Black (1980:xiff.) claims that MBTI® measures personality. It is worthwhile pointing out that Jung himself did not go so far as to claim that personality

could be measured. Jung defines personality as the fullness of human existence, then concludes his work,

Yet what is called personality is a great and mysterious question. All that can be said about it is curiously unsatisfactory and inadequate ... the very concept of personality is so vague and badly defined in common usage that hardly two minds will take the word in the same sense. I should like to consider everything that I say ... as a mere attempt to approach the problem of personality, without making any claim to solve it (Jung 1940:281ff.).

It is obvious that Jung was not sure what relationship psychological types had with personality in its wholeness or what a “type” precisely represented. This seems to be made explicit when Jung (1940: 287) writes that, “only our actions ... reveal who we are.” With this statement he seems to declare that it cannot be measured using a psychometric test.

Therefore it must be concluded that the relationship between what is being measured by MBTI® and personality is not clear. This is admitted by some MBTI® advocates such as Duncan (1993:84) who writes that there are many other things besides personality type that influence who we are and how we behave. If, as Duncan states, that type classification does not explain the individual psyche, what does it explain or indicate? Lloyd’s (2007:119) answer is that it indicates, “certain facets of human personality, inbuilt preferences for certain ways of interacting with the world. That is all.” The implication is that “type” possibly indicates little more than how individuals are classified by the MBTI® classification, and nothing else. It appears to have very little to do with indicating personality as defined by many psychologists, sociologists, and theologians.

In addition, the self revealed by a biblical anthropology highlights the impossibility of the human self being measured by any test in any meaningful way. This is the result of the immeasurable relational complexity and mystery of human beings as transcendent creatures.

Human beings are created with a unique capacity to be in relationship with God (Vanhoozer 1997:163). Because of this, the human self must be defined as a mystery, incapable of being understood in its totality and maybe even in part. The *imago Dei* indicates that all human beings were created with this capacity. Genesis 2:7 states, “the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” Human beings are revealed as receiving the breath of God enabling a unique and special relationship with Him as part of their ontology.

As a result they may even be considered as “mediating within creation the immanence of the transcendent Creator” (Grenz 2005:88). Thus human beings are “the creature of the boundary between heaven and earth” (Barth 1966:63). They are incapable of being summarised by any psychometric test because they are transcendent, in relationship with God and thus a mystery.

Furthermore, the *imago Dei* indicates that human beings not only need to relate to God but to each other as an ontological necessity. Moltmann (1981:156ff.) introduced relationality into the being of God and thus places community-ness within the Trinity. Thus the *imago Dei* undergirds mankind’s need for community-ness (McIntyre 1997:27, 208 ff.). This is such an ontological reality that all human beings are deeply influenced and moulded by this community-ness. And as the separate persons of the Trinity cannot be understood fully in and of themselves, human beings made in the *imago Dei* cannot be understood in their complexity without understanding the whole. This means that, taking into account their mystery, even a part of their selfhood cannot be understood since it is only by observing how they relate to everybody that an accurate holistic picture can be determined. And the relational aspect affects every aspect of being! How can any psychometric test measure all this? As Louw (2008:78) comments, “It is nearly impossible to capture the meaning of soul in a theory of personhood or personality type.”

### 4.3 Personality type is innate and unchanging

Another crucial assumption of MBTI® is that personality type is innate and unchanging throughout life (Lloyd 2007:120). Unless this is assumed the indicator loses its rationale, namely to predict career competency, forecast the strengths and weaknesses of marriage interrelationships and the best educational practices for children, and help people understand themselves and others.

What is precisely meant by innate is not clear. Does it mean that personality type exists from conception, birth or later? It appears that Briggs & Meyers (1980:2, 25) believe that personality type is innate in the sense that it begins to develop as soon as children exercise a preference which determines the course of future development. Whether or not this is the case, the meaning must include the idea that something within the genetic template determines the preferred choice of type formed at an early stage of the self’s existence.

There is some theological justification for this position when considering the self in the short term. God is the great “I am” (Exodus 3:14). Yahweh has existed as an identity, structured as a Trinity of persons, from all eternity. Thus the *imago Dei* implies that human beings are beings that exist with structured identities, either potentially or actually, from the moment of their individual

creation. Humankind, like God, has an “enduring identity and thus a specific ontology” (Webster 2003:226). This means that human beings mostly act predictably and consistently. If this were not the case, human relationships would be chaotic and probably unsustainable.

However, there is no long-term theological support for this assumption of the fixity of the human personality. In fact, the biblical witness is that the human self is extremely plastic, in the long term. The factors that contribute to this plasticity are choice, calling, environment (place, culture, experiences, and relationships), faith and becoming a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Despite being born with a genetic template we have the freedom to make a wide range of moral, behavioural, social, volitional, faith-based, spiritual and even, at times, emotional choices. Those created in the image of God have, from the human perspective, the free will to choose or reject God and his ways in all their actions. These choices change us. In Galatians 6:7, 8, the Pauline author makes the point that,

A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

While there are limits to the change the Bible does not delineate what these limits are, except that as long as we say, “No” to God’s call into fellowship with Him, we are unconsciously subject to the power of our sinful natures, causing us to destroy ourselves and harm those with whom we relate.

One choice human beings must make is to accept or reject God’s calling. Calling determines what self becomes (Webster 2003:229). Calling is closely connected with *Imago Dei*. Men and women were called immediately they were created to “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.” Calling is a theme that became prominent among the later prophets and in the New Testament (Isaiah 41:9; 42:6; 48:12; 49:1; Is 52:1; Luke 6:13; Romans 1: 6,7; 8: 28, 30; 9:27; 1 Cor 1:1; 1 Cor 7:17; Galatians 1:15). Calvin (*Institutes* III:X.vi) writes,

... the Lord enjoins every one of us, in all the actions of life to have respect to our own calling ... he has assigned distinct duties to each in the different modes of life by the name of callings.

As called individuals all human beings are in “a perpetual movement of receiving and responding to a gift” (Webster 2003:228). Calling shapes and moulds the individual. In addition, a human being can achieve anything that is within the limits of the God-given calling.

The Bible witnesses in general that faith, culture, norms, morals, experiences, relationships, and purpose all influence selfhood for all human beings. These are all teleological in their consequences. A human person is a being propelled forward by an imponderable complex of ultimate norms, values, and a quest for significance and meaning. People live in place and space and are therefore extremely sensitive to reactions, responses and attitudes within that space and place (Louw 2008:26ff.). While we strive to categorise in order to predict responses all the time, these are sometimes unpredictably surprising. This is due to the fact that how we relate to others is capable of changing in ways that cannot be predicted by any scientific theory or intuitive understanding.

Many of the influences mentioned above are not benign. The “sin complex” within us adversely moulds the development of self.

God’s creatures repudiate their absolute derivation ... seeking by a perverse and counter-act of self-creation to be human in a way other than that purposed by the creator (Webster 2003:225).

The consequences of this are self-unmaking and a self-destruction that destroys intimate communion between human beings and God (Rom 6:23: For the wages of sin is death). We are flawed creatures who do not understand our own actions (Romans 7:15). There is a deep-seated sin complex within us which either unconsciously influences our actions or to which we consciously choose to surrender (Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 7:18-23).

If life is not received or experienced as a gift from God, contact with reality is ultimately severed and futility is the result. The individual’s ability to respond effectively to the call of God or fulfil God-given potential is damaged. Unhelpful choices are made in reaction to relational, environmental and cultural influences and there is powerlessness to live according to moral values. Character does not mature. Predicted achievement is often not fulfilled.

It is only the living hope of the new birth, as 1 Peter 1:3 makes clear, arising from the work of the triune God in restoring this fellowship that releases unimaginable transformative possibilities in every individual who says, “Yes” to God. No psychological assessment with its predictive claims has the right to limit in any way any Christian’s calling because s/he reflects the image of Christ. “The Christian faith works from the presupposition that people can indeed be changed” (Heitink 1999:202).

Those who accept God’s “Yes” are recreated into the image of Christ. The incomplete relationship with God, due to the sin problem, is now restored through justification. As Barth (1966:16) comments, “I believe ... is a human form of existence” and “I believe is consummated in a meeting with ... the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. This is not just a forensic, superficial newness.

Christians have a “religio-ontic” status (Heyns 1980:57). This enables new possibilities for relationships with others.

... as the love of God through Christ’s vicarious action restores community between God and man, so the human community too once again becomes the living reality (Bonhoeffer 1963:114).

A new complex, dynamic connectedness is established that moulds personhood more than ever before, making it even more surprising and difficult to assess.

Transformation of the self becomes an ontological reality. The Holy Spirit transforms the character, behaviour, and even the nature of those in whom he lives to become images of the character, behaviour and nature of Christ (2 Corinthians 3) (Clowney 1987:67, 70). Individual human beings can and do change beyond expectations. God’s work cannot be limited, “it is absolutely new to us men, inaccessible and inconceivable” (Barth 1966:17).

Through the power of the Holy Spirit we are freed to obey God’s directions for life (Barth 1956:101ff.). He empowers people to become what they truly are in Christ which they cannot do themselves (Bonhoeffer 1959:269ff.). The Holy Spirit is able to enact a,

... multitude of experiences of help in concrete powerlessness, experiences of deliverance from entrapment with no escape point ... so that lives are changed in an unimaginable way ... [involving] ... unpredictable, unforeseeable, emergent processes, breaks in life processes and in routines (Welker 1994:215, 217, 248).

The Spirit breaks in and forces people to reconsider and redirect along new and innovative paths (Van der Ven 1996:436-439). Predictions are nullified and the new creatures can become and do far more than all they ask or think.

#### 4.4 Personality type predicts future performance in certain areas

The MBTI® literature claims that knowledge of personality type affects “career, marriage and the meaning of life itself” (Black 1980:ix). The claim that it sheds light on the meaning of life itself is certainly exaggerated and must be rejected out of hand. However, it is claimed that it sheds light on how families and marriage partners relate, the performance of learners, and provides insight for counsellors and clinicians.

This claim relies upon the basic assumptions that personality type relates meaningfully to personality, can be measured, and is innate and unchanging. If the above arguments are accepted, these assumptions must be rejected despite the statistics to the contrary (Briggs & Meyers 1980:27ff.). Statistics are notoriously difficult to interpret and so often the results depend on the questions asked in order to formulate their tabulation (Roberts n.d.).

#### 4.5 People can be categorised within a framework of 16 personality types

A psychologically qualified assessment of the categorisation of human beings into sixteen personality types is beyond the scope of this article. However, some pertinent comments may be made from a theological perspective.

Although Brigg's (1980) observations of how human beings act are very perceptive, this does not necessarily validate the sixteen categories into which they have been placed, ENTJ, and so on. Moreover, while there is a well-thought out theoretical basis for these categories, the foundation on which the theory is based is not and can never be proven within the foreseeable future. The method of construction of the theory is inductive and not scientifically verifiable. The only way to affirm an inductive hypothesis is to gather sufficient circumstantial evidence to establish a weight of proof behind it. This is perfectly justifiable but in the case of MBTI® the evidence is ambiguous and disputed. It appears that there are considerable differences of opinion among qualified psychologists about whether there is sufficient evidence of the right quality to lend credence to the theory even as a hypothesis.

Moreover, the theory rests upon such foundational statements as that human behaviour is "the logical result of a few basic observable differences in mental functioning" (Briggs & Meyers 1980:1). The sheer mystery and complexity of the human self should surely cast doubt upon any theory based on this premise. Human beings are made of the dust of the earth and therefore their relationship with the material world is a theologically acceptable topic of study. However, the MBTI® claims far exceed what is acceptable.

It must also be borne in mind that MBTI® is a product of modernity. Jung (1938:18) admits that what we understand by the concept of the individual is a relatively recent acquisition in the history of the human mind and culture. Modernity arose in the seventeenth century and emphasises philosophy, science and reason, and that "all processes can be fully comprehended and controlled" (Bosch 1991:265). Modernity likes to explain and categorise everything scientifically and rationally. Thus MBTI® neatly categorises the difference between persons through the lens of Jung's psychological types. (The fact that MBTI® resulted from a paradigm of western modernity suggests

that it would be interesting to discover how those in other cultures view it and respond to it.)

The problem from a theological perspective is that psychological types are not a category for judging human beings in the Bible. There is no such concept, implied or otherwise, in biblical anthropology. The terms “extrovert” and “introvert”, for instance, are an invention of modernity and are foreign to a biblical worldview. Human beings are perceived and judged rather from the perspective of moral categories and their relationship to God, with the resulting emphasis on the “wicked” and the “righteous”.

The MBTI® categorisation might be innocuous if it did not open the possibility of limiting people’s expectations and confining them so that they do not fulfil Gods’ call upon them. Human nature alone can achieve surprisingly unpredictable things. How much more can those achieve who have within the indwelling miraculous transforming power that comes from being a new creation? Another valid question is, might not an undue focus upon category of personality type cause Christians to focus insufficiently upon biblical categories for decision-making, achievement and success? For instance, might not undue focus be produced by Brigg’s (1980:12) comment that if one perceptive process is to reach a higher degree of development it needs undivided attention and that, if this does not happen, a primitive mentality is produced? Biblical categories are based upon revelation whereas psychological types are an inductive theory of modernism based simply on an interpretation of historical persons, literature and observation, without proof, despite any claims to the contrary.

#### 4.6 An overly optimistic assessment of human nature

In the light of the biblical concept of the sin complex that influences human behaviour it seems that MBTI® has an overly optimistic assessment of human nature. Black (1980:xii) comments about its “refreshing optimism”. Innocuous enough, perhaps, but in the light of the comment that many problems might be successfully dealt with in the light of Jung’s theory of psychological types (Briggs & Meyers 1980:Preface) it becomes symbolic. The descriptions of the sixteen types focus on strengths and tend to dismiss negative aspects as mere weaknesses.

Admittedly Briggs (1980:84ff.) describes a shadow side that “uses relatively childish and primitive kinds of judgment and perception, unconsciously to escape from the conscious personality”. The results of this behaviour are classed as usually regrettable and said to occur when a person is not looking. This, however, is a far cry from the Apostle Paul’s cry in Romans 7:24 “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

## 5. SUGGESTED REASONS FOR ACCEPTANCE IN CHRISTIAN CIRCLES

Why then has it been so well accepted in non-professional counselling circles in the church? The answer to this question is complex but appears to be that various factors in today's modern and postmodern world, the motivations of those who embrace the Christian experience and the nature of Brigg's work have all contributed to this acceptance.

Christians are a part of a world society subjected to loss of community and increasing individualism (Küng 1996:763). It is surprising to note that this has led to an undermining of confidence in personal identity (Kirkpatrick 1995:10, 11). Discovery of a personal identity has thus become crucial in American society and therefore, probably, in the Anglo-Saxon-influenced world as a whole (Wuthnow 1994:184ff.). As a result, many jump at the opportunity to discover their identity, using a tool such as MBTI®. Its status and prestige aid the process of acceptance since it is supported by authoritative experts (although the qualifications of some practitioners seem questionable) involved in what is probably a billion dollar industry. Over 11,000 entries are listed in an ongoing bibliography (in the Centre for Applications of Psychological Type, 2008), including over 1,780 dissertations. The *Journal of Psychological Type* has published 69 volumes mainly devoted to typological research efforts (Quenk 2008:4).

It is suggested that resistance to new ideas may have decreased due to the loss of doctrinal certainty and the rise of pragmatism in Christian circles which has tended to lead to an uncritical acceptance of psychological models and ideas without questioning the theories behind them. Results become more important than whether something is right or wrong (Cox 1965:60). This means that the MBTI® descriptions of types, which are optimistically orientated, are culturally acceptable in today's world (Long 1992:294). The types seem to be sensible and understandable to those living in the modern paradigm, and the descriptions use language that moderns have been taught to use and understand over the past two hundred years.

How is it, however, that many people also seem to be able to easily identify themselves with some parts of the type description when they receive the results of their MBTI® test? At an informal level Brigg's observations and descriptions of human behaviour and thought patterns are very realistic and have been experienced by many. But this does not account for how many people can so often perceive themselves in one of the 16 types.

It is tentatively suggested that one explanation for this could possibly be found in the theory of knowledge and more particularly in that branch dealing with perception theories. Perception theories have entered theological

discourse through the application of Kuhn's (1970) "paradigm theory" found in his "Structure of Scientific Revolutions". Theologians such as Küng (1988, 1989), Tracey (1989) and Moltmann (1989, 2010) have applied this theory to theological discourse. As Küng (1989: 5) comments,

What at first seems an unusual comparison particularly with the natural sciences... can help us ... even in regards to what is new in theology.

One of the ideas of perception theory is that errors often occur between what we actually see and what we think we see. These errors are usually produced by "misplaced assumptions or knowledge" (Gregory 1981:395). This category of error occurs because our normal perceptions are always structured. We read patterns and meaning into the text depending on what we want to see or have been taught to see so that we can easily assimilate knowledge (Searle 1992:133ff.). (This may also explain a common thread which runs through the Bible where human beings have consistently interpreted Gods' revelation in terms of traditional patterns and thus missed seeing the truth.) It is therefore suggested that MBTI® test respondents fit themselves into a category on the basis of a few clues that resonate with them and seem valid from Brigg's description of that category.

Kuhn (1970: 113ff.) clarifies how this may happen,

Surveying the rich experimental literature ... makes one suspect that ... what a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see.

He adds that members of a group or specialist sub-community can be influenced to see what authoritative figures in their group have already learned to see. Such learned recognition may be the result of neural processing which makes recognition of similar patterns involuntary, unconscious and intuitive. As a result of the influential reputation of MBTI®, its authoritative community of practitioners, the manner in which it is administered, the familiar learned psychological terms developed in the modern paradigm, and its apparently simple ordered structure would all allow many to identify with the results of the testing and "feel" it was right.

In addition to all the above reasons, Christians may well be motivated by a greater desire than non-Christians to complete something of the nature of an MBTI® test. The Bible encourages self-understanding as an aid to growing spiritually, relating well to others, and fulfilling God-given purpose. MBTI® has been perceived as a tool whereby this may be achieved. The very fact of thinking about oneself, how one reacts, motivations and actions is always beneficial. Thus Christians have gained insights into their own uniqueness and that of others, leading to greater people skills and those practices of prayer

and living that will be most suited to them. It challenges the one-size-fits-all approach to Christian spirituality and discipleship often found in traditional approaches (Lloyd 2007:111).

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1 For practitioners

It is recommended that those Christian MBTI® practitioners who make the decision to continue using the psychometric questionnaire accompany the administration of the test with a detailed explanation of what it does and does not indicate about people and its limitations when it comes to assessing selfhood and predictions about job suitability, marriage relationships, spiritual developmental preferences, and above all education. In addition, it is recommended that the word “personality” be removed from all vocabulary associated with administering the test.

This also raises serious doubts about the value of the test being self-administered. The literature appears to be vague and ambiguous or else difficult for the layman to understand. It is therefore recommended that the results always be discussed with a trained psychologist and that all self-administered or quiz-type tests be withdrawn or unlicensed by the body that grants recognition to practitioners.

### 6.2 For the church

The questions raised by the widespread acceptance of the MBTI® about the shortcomings of current church praxis are disturbing. Why is it found more useful than biblically based teaching about human behaviour and attitudes and the profound insights of the Scriptures? Is this due to inadequate emphasis in this area in the church’s didactic ministry? Does it reflect the shallowness of the understanding and importance of Christian doctrine among the majority of Christians? Surely the widespread acceptance of MBTI® indicates that something is lacking in present praxis. Is the church perhaps not meeting the legitimate needs and aspirations of Christians who are serious about growing in discipleship?

It is therefore recommended that there be greater personal “mentoring” of individual Christians to help them, as unique persons in Christ, identify their God-given callings and gifts; that this mentoring involve Christian nurture using the biblical categories of character, hope and purpose, and take account of each person’s sin complex.

This needs to be underpinned by teaching about the uniqueness of all men in relation to God and its priority in mental, emotional, social, and spiritual development. Much greater emphasis needs to be placed upon the transformatory possibilities resulting from the Christian's identity as a new creation in Christ.

Finally, it seems vital for the future health of the church that the concept of and necessity for the practice of discernment, based upon a biblical hermeneutic, by all Christians of secular ideas be preached and taught from the church's pulpits. Is there not a need for far more Christians "whose minds are trained by practice to know the difference between good and evil", according to Hebrews 5:14 (God's word version)?

## 7. CONCLUSION

While MBTI® seems to have gained wide acceptance in the Christian world and may have been helpful in perception, or actuality, its use and long-term helpfulness are questionable. There is no doubt that assessing MBTI® from the perspective of a trinitarian biblical hermeneutic of hope raises serious doubts concerning most of the assumptions on which it is based. These doubts ought to cause Christians to think very seriously about using it because of the dubious validity of its prediction, especially for a Christian respondent.

Such doubt may further indicate that Practical Theological research on similar psychometric tests such as the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (see Keirsey & Bates 1984) and the DISC psychological inventories (Marston 1928), also based upon Jüing's work, would be profitable.

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(All biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version of the bible.)

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Bybelse hermeneutiek

Persoonlikheidstipe

Self

Aannames van MBTI®