

# **THE CREDIBILITY AND IMPACT OF PERSONALITY TESTS , TESTING, & THE USE OF MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS ON MISSION WORK WORLDWIDE<sup>1</sup>**

Personality Tests, or Personality Inventories are an extremely popular tool used by companies and businesses to assess the mental fitness, interpersonal compatibility, and potential for success of prospective employees. The administration of such tests and “inventories” by the vast majority of evangelical &/or fundamental mission boards to missionary candidates seeking acceptance by such missions has also become a widespread practice over the past few decades as they try to assess the suitability and potential success of such applicants. Some mission boards are also administering or apparently preparing to administer such tests/inventories to existing missionaries, in order to assist in reducing interpersonal problems on the mission field—certainly a worthy goal, considering the very high attrition rate of foreign missionaries worldwide.

However, such mission agencies, including ABWE, would be well advised to reexamine the practice of administering such tests and inventories, employing psychologists to interpret them, &/or teaching key home office and field leadership such things as DISH, DISC, MMPI, TJTA, Myers-Briggs, & other such temperament inventories. Basic questions that should be asked include: a) Do they work i.e. have demonstrated the ability to uncover character problems, b) are they reliable predictors of future success and compatibility, and most importantly, c) are they biblical. It is my contention that such “Personality Tests” & “Personality Inventories” a) do not work, b) are completely unreliable in regard to predictive value, and c) are totally unbiblical. Since I am not an expert in the field of Psychology/Psychiatry/Counseling, the remainder of this paper will consist primarily of quotes from various recognized experts in the field, both Christian and secular, who not only agree with my contention, but give a variety of reasons why that is so. The quotes require little in the way of explanation. They do however explain why I am so apprehensive of our mission board (ABWE) or any other mission requiring such testing and placing any confidence whatsoever in the information that it supposedly yields. Mission Boards would be far better advised to pursue a biblical course of action, such as that delineated below by Dr. Wayne Mack, in attempting to evaluate potential missionaries! To my mind, the use of such tests and inventories demonstrate a lack of trust in biblical methods and standards for judging the suitability of missionary candidates/personnel, and betray a subtle but dangerous shift towards trust in psychology, particularly bankrupt secular psychological theories & systems, as opposed to trust in biblical theology. It is my contention that such a shift has already occurred; has already had an adverse impact on mission agencies, their personnel, and the work of missions worldwide; and if it continues to be practiced and promoted, its deleterious effect will continue to be seen.

## **I. CHRISTIAN OPPOSITION TO PERSONALITY TESTS/INVENTORIES, ETC.**

### **A. STATEMENTS BY SOME CHRISTIAN PSYCHOLOGY/COUNSELING PROFESSORS.**

1. In November, 2002 I wrote to Dr. Greg Mazak<sup>2</sup> requesting his evaluation of the value & validity of personality tests & inventories in general, and in reference to missionaries, etc., in particular. I’d like to quote the relevant part of his response:

“I agree...that if the Bible is sufficient for all areas of godliness (II Pet. 1:3), then we don’t need the input of secular psychology. This includes personality tests. Personality tests are questionable at best, since: (1) they may or may not be accurate, (2) What is accurate in one setting may not apply to others (for example) I am more outgoing when I teach/preach than when I am at home. (It’s) Part of the job!, and (3) They (personality tests/inventories) assume that all people can be divided into four, or whatever, types of people... In a nutshell: I would NOT use them. I think it best not to use them. I’m not sure I’d say they are of the devil (a position Martin & Deidre Bobgan imply in some of their writings), but they are at best unnecessary distractions that point people toward secular psychology, and continue to shift the focus away from Scripture.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes & material contained in this paper were compiled by Rev. Mike Edwards, Baptist Chaplain, Univ. of Goroka, Goroka, Papua New Guinea. Date: 26 January, 2003

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Gregory J. Mazak, Ph.D, Professor of Psychology & Counseling, Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC. Dr. Mazak holds degrees from Ohio State University, Bob Jones University and Clemson University. He is also Assistant Pastor of Trinity Bible Church, Greer, SC.

<sup>3</sup> Letter on file.

2. In January, 2003 I also wrote Dr. Wayne Mack<sup>4</sup> soliciting his opinion of personality tests and testing. I wrote to him: "...I would appreciate it if you could briefly give me your thoughts on the validity/usefulness or lack thereof, of 'Personality Tests'...Personally, I am not convinced of the need, validity, or usefulness of such testing... I am quite wary of psychology which is not firmly based on and rooted in Scripture... I would tend to say that such tests (Personality tests) are at least suspect, if not useless. However I do not wish to overreact. Thus I would appreciate it if you would tell me if I'm essentially correct, or all wet? Would you mind briefly giving me your opinion on Personality Tests."<sup>5</sup> Here are excerpts from Dr. Mack's response:

"I certainly agree with your assessment and so does Grace Community Church, the rest of our faculty and NANC. We believe they are unnecessary, useless and can be misleading. Grace Community Church started its own missionary agency, at least in part, because some agencies were requiring these tests of missionary candidates. One missionary agency that used the MMPI was about to reject a particular couple from missionary service or require extensive psychotherapy because of the way a computer scored their test and the way a psychologist interpreted the results. For some reason, I was asked to counsel these missionaries and discovered they were humble and honest rather than reclusive and lacking in self esteem and introverted and hostile. They are now on the field and doing well as they chose to go out through Grace Community Church instead of this evangelical missions society.

"What did Paul and others do in choosing church leaders without these tests? They had their way of evaluating (Acts 16:3; I Timothy 3; II Cor. 3; etc) people for ministry. I'm sure the intent of the people who are pushing these tests is a good one-to make sure people are really fit for ministry. The drop out rate of first term missionaries, the interpersonal problems that missionaries have with other missionaries and even the people they are to minister to and the corresponding waste of money is horrendous. I'm sure they are trying to prevent that. Even so, I don't think this is the best or biblical way to do it. Most of the most popular tests were developed by unbelievers using unbiblical norms and standards. They weren't based on Scripture or likeness to Jesus Christ who is our norm. I have heard of the DISH test and have looked at it, but since I don't see these tests and don't see their value or biblicity, I have not paid much attention to it.

"I think requiring missionary candidates to do internships under biblically wise pastors, being a part of nouthetic churches where their ministry skills, knowledge and ability to work with people is put to the test and evaluated, is the way to go. I also think they should be required to take biblical counseling courses and be involved in counseling as counselees with competent biblical counselors would be a much better way to assess their readiness for the field. In addition to all this, these tests (Personality tests/inventories) are so subjective that the way people answer them one day may be different from the way they answer them at another time and in another situation..."<sup>6</sup>

## **B. SOME GENERAL BIBLICAL PROBLEMS WITH PERSONALITY TESTING:**

1. **UNBIBLICAL PERSONALITY STANDARDS & CHARACTERISTICS**. "...there is some confusion about the so-called personality characteristics because some are value-laden and morally evaluated. With such tests as the TJTA (Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis) there is a so-called 'excellent' range. Thus, a value is placed on 'light-hearted,' for instance, as though lightheartedness is a more acceptable trait

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Mack is adjunct professor of Biblical Counseling at The Master's College & Seminary, Santa Clarita, CA. Dr. Mack has degrees from Wheaton College, Reformed Episcopal Theological Seminary, & Westminster Theological Seminary. He holds "Fellow Status" in the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC). He is also head of "Strengthening Ministries International (SMI) [www.mackministries.org](http://www.mackministries.org)

<sup>5</sup> Letter on file.

<sup>6</sup> Letter on file.

than seriousness, therein identified as ‘depressive.’ Where do the highly acclaimed biblical virtues, such as being sober-minded with a meek and quiet spirit, fit in, and how can they be measured by self-reporting tests?”<sup>7</sup>

2. **UNBIBLICAL &/or NON-CHRISTIAN SOURCES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY.** “Personality tests...work according to the psychological opinions and invalid evaluations of the world. They all emanate from psychological theories of personality that attempt to explain why man is the way he is, what he should be, and how he changes...Psychological interviews, personality tests, and psychological therapy are based on personality theories devised by unbelievers, some of whom were direct enemies of God and some of whom were actively involved in the occult.
3. **MISSIONS IS A SPIRITUAL, NOT PSYCHOLOGICAL ENTERPRISE.** “Missionary work is a spiritual endeavor. Evangelization is a spiritual endeavor. Planting churches is a spiritual endeavor. If it is not the Spirit of Christ in the individual doing the work, whereof will there be fruit? Personality tests may keep from the field the very ones through whom Christ may work and send to the field those with personalities that are so great they could actually hinder the work of the Spirit.”(!)<sup>8</sup>

- C. **SOME MISSION AGENCIES THAT DON’T USE PERSONALITY TESTS...& WHY.** In light of Dr. Mack’s advice (above) it is interesting to note that in a survey of the 35 largest evangelical mission agencies<sup>9</sup> only three do not use “mental health professionals to screen or evaluate candidates, as well as do not use psychological tests. Those three agencies are: New Tribes Mission (NTM), Youth With a Mission (YWAM), & the United Pentecostal Church International. Bobgan & Bobgan observe: “Both New Tribes Mission and YWAM have long training programs where they can closely observe those individuals who desire to be career missionaries. The United Pentecostal Church International sends out associate or short-term missionaries for one to two years prior to accepting them as career missionaries. Thus, these three mission agencies appear not to need external screening from mental health professionals...or psychological tests.”<sup>10</sup>
- D. **THE MYTH OF MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS’ EXPERTISE.** Regarding the alleged expertise of mental health professionals, Bobgan & Bobgan write: “The first myth has to do with mental health professionals’ expertise in personnel selection. The psychological grid through which a mental health professional will view a missionary candidate will be either one or a combination of two or more of the 450 psychological systems of personality theory and counseling methodology in existence today. They are all pseudoscientific opinions and guesses about man from the very ‘wisdom of men’ that God has warned His followers about. If one truly wants to know about the depths of a missionary candidate, one needs only the doctrines of Scripture applied to life. The pseudoscientific psychological nonsense available will not and cannot improve upon that. The second myth has to do with the usefulness of psychological testing to screen missionary candidates. At their best, about all the personality tests can do is to present the most superficial aspects of a missionary candidate that one could better discover through a short-term acquaintance with the individual and by asking his pastor, church leaders, and friends. At their worst, personality tests will be used to predict success or failure of a missionary candidate, with no scientific support for doing so.”<sup>11</sup>

Bobgan and Bobgan observe: “Mental health professionals have demonstrated scant validity in analyzing past behavior or in being able to make predictions concerning their clients’ future

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 142.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> Survey conducted by Dr. Martin & Deidre Bobgan. See “*Missions & Psychoheresy*,” Eastgate Publishers, n.d. (2000 c.)

<sup>10</sup> *Missions and Psychoheresy*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 21-22.

behavior. It is paradoxical that, in spite of the great fallibility in professional judgment, people seem to have unshakable confidence in it.”<sup>12</sup>

E. **A BETTER STANDARD OF CRITERIA FOR MISSIONARIES.** “What qualities are needed on the mission field? Would they not be Christian virtues rather than personality traits and temperaments? Such virtues as humility, honesty, integrity, faithfulness, diligence, compassion, commitment, obedience, trustworthiness, and merciful concern for others would certainly be foremost along with the fruit of the Spirit, ‘love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance’ (Gal. 5:22-23). Would not a primary requirement be some evidence of sanctification unto good works?... (Eph. 2:10). Learning about how the candidate has shown faithfulness to the Lord and a willingness to follow Christ prior to candidacy will reveal more important information than psychological interviews and tests. Personality tests are not sufficiently valid. Moreover, they are merely man-made measures of people, ‘measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves,’ which according to God’s Word, ‘are not wise’ (II Cor. 10:12). Personality tests are measures judging a person according to personality traits and types. There is no such measure given for believers in Scripture. Works and fruit are to be judged, doctrine is to be judged, but there is no place where personality traits are to be judged.”<sup>13</sup>

F. **PERSONALITY THEORIES, TESTING AND INVENTORIES AS A POSSIBLE METHOD OF MANIPULATING OTHERS?** I do not wish to overstate the negative aspects of personality inventories and categorization or imply some sinister motives on the part of anyone. However, having established the fact that the validity, predictive value & credibility of Personality Tests & Personality Inventories is virtually non-existent (above & below), a question naturally follows. If such testing, and the theories they are based on are incapable of accurately predicting an individual’s reactions, behavior or future conduct, why would any organization, especially mission agencies, use them and promote an expansion of their use?

I asked an individual I know who was trained in and has administered the TJTA (Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis), and who also happens to be a foreign missionary. His response was: “You learn it, so that you will know how different people react, so that you can anticipate their reactions and manipulate them to accomplish what you want (your agenda)... We learned it so we’d know how to manipulate people. And you know what? It works!” Now I’m sure most of us would consider that a cynical overstatement. But the fact remains, if personality tests, inventories and theories have no scientific validity and zero predictive, or even post-dictive credibility, then why else would you use them? And why would you teach veteran missionaries and their field leaders those theories, philosophies and methodologies if they do not accomplish what they are supposed to? Perhaps the off the cuff comment made by an ABWE home office administrator when asked why a particular personality profile system was going to be taught to all of the regional mission coordinators may give some insight: “The DISH personality profile material is similar to Lahaye’s 4 temperaments, **and especially, how to relate to others in a proactive way.**” I do not wish to read too much into a random statement in response to a spontaneous question, but “learning to relate to others in a proactive way” can be mean a number of different things, depending on who you talk to. In light of the earlier statement above about personality testing enabling the testers or leaders to control/manipulate a group of employees in order to accomplish the leader’s goals, and the present, highly centralized leadership philosophy of our mission board, that possibility cannot be dismissed, out of hand.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp. 141-142.