

Good News for Anxious Christians

an interview with Dr. Phillip Cary

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In a prior blog post I recommended Phillip Cary's book, "Good News for Anxious Christians" where he documents and criticizes what he calls, "the new evangelical theology." Recently I've been in contact with him and he was kind enough to answer a few questions. Enjoy!

Dr. Cary - Thanks for allowing me to ask a few questions! My wife and I are recent refugees of the new evangelicalism that you speak of in your book and I am very much appreciative of the work you've done to document and address it.

1. What is your theological and church background?

I'm a member of an Anglican church. My favorite theologian is Martin Luther, but I'm not exactly a Lutheran. There are a whole lot of assumptions that go with being a Lutheran that I don't share, because I did not grow up Lutheran and have never been a member of a Lutheran church. I've just read a whole lot of Luther and think he's understood something terribly important and beautiful about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What Luther's theology has in common with Anglicanism is a tendency to find God in Word and Sacrament—in the external means of grace by which our Lord Jesus Christ gives himself to us.

2. What is the role of the church in alleviating the anxieties brought on by the new evangelicalism?

If you go to a church that finds Christ in his Word, then you won't have the anxieties I talk about in my book (Good News for Anxious Christians). Everything here depends on the direction in which you turn your attention. A church which really knows the Gospel is constantly turning to find Christ in his Word and Sacrament, in preaching and prayer, in liturgy and hymnody, and in mutual exhortation and encouragement. It is full of "tidings of comfort and joy," as the old Christmas carol puts it, because it is full of the good news about who Jesus Christ is and what he has done and suffered for our sake.

"Remember— Christ our savior was born on Christmas day" as the carol says. And then it proceeds to tell and sing and celebrate the Christmas story. This has the effect of turning our attention away from ourselves and toward Christ, which relieves us of many, many anxieties. The burden of our Christian lives rests on him, because we find our lives in him, and he has done all things well. (Just listen to what the carol says. It's preaching you the Gospel). That doesn't mean the Christian life isn't hard work. It does mean it's work we don't have to be anxious about.

3. How can you convince anxious Christians that the church is a necessity for their growth as Christians?

No doubt the best way is invite them into a vibrant church where the Gospel of Christ is preached and the new evangelical theology is not. That is to say, find a church where your attention is directed to Jesus Christ, instead of a church which is all about your life (or your heart or your experience—all code words for dear old ME, which is the real focus of the new evangelical theology). The churches that try to be "relevant" by talking about ME all the time are in fact deeply boring, because we come to church to hear about Christ, not ourselves. So if all you hear is preachers trying to be "relevant" and "applicable to my life," it will be hard to see the point of going to church at all.

Even how you aim to find Christ is different in a good church. A good church does not get you looking to your life to find Christ but rather shows you how to find your life in Christ, locating yourself within his story, the Gospel. ("Ah! Simon Peter, the chief of the apostles, the one who repeatedly denies Christ! That's me, alright. But look what our Lord Jesus does with him in the end!") The difference is palpable, you can taste it. Instead of defining Christ by your experience (which is enough to make any sensible person anxious) you define your own life by looking at what the Gospel tells you about Christ. And once you've tasted this, you'll know in your bones why you go to church.

4. In your book you offer Christians the gospel in place of the bad ideas that make them anxious. Do you believe that the gospel of the new evangelical theology differs at all from the gospel of historic Christianity? and if so, how?

The new evangelical theology doesn't really have a gospel. It assumes that you've already been saved, so you don't really need the gospel anymore. Therefore, instead of giving you Jesus Christ, it gives you lots of supposedly "practical" advice that makes you anxious, because it's supposed to transform your life and give you a bunch of wonderful new experiences. The result is you feel there must be something wrong with you if you're not having those wonderful, life-changing experiences all the time.

To stave off that anxiety, you're given a lot of "how to"s — how to listen for God in your heart, how to find God's will for your life, how to "let" God work in your life (as if he couldn't do anything unless you allow him, which makes him more helpless than anyone else in the world) etc., etc. So the closest you get to a gospel is the advice that tells you: if you use this "how to" then you won't feel so guilty for being a second-rate Christian. And it turns out these how-to's are not only far from the Gospel, they are far from anything in the Bible, including the Law of God, the ten commandments and all the other good words by which God gives us good work to do.

5. It has been a culture shock to my wife and I as we transitioned out of what you call a "consumerist church" in your book to a church that adheres to the historic faith. What expectations about church would you address to help prepare others making a similar change?

Expect to find Christ outside yourself, the way you find any real person. For you don't encounter real people by looking inside your own heart; you look at them in their own flesh, which is an external thing. That is why Christ came to us in the flesh and gave us his body. Expect to find Christ in bodily ways, including in the sacrament of his body and blood.

Also, expect to come to know Christ the way you know a real person. Real people have their own thoughts, and you can't learn what they are if you don't listen. That means you're hearing a word that comes from outside your own heart. I'm talking about knowing trustworthy people, here, not trying to see through a liar. Good people have a right to a say about themselves, and you have to listen their word if you want to know who they really are.

Expect to hear such a word, over and over again, in the preaching and teaching and singing of the Gospel. It comes with a kind of newness, even when it's familiar. It's welcome, even though it may come as a reminder, even a bit of a shock, like when we begin to sing Christmas carols again every year: "Oh yes, that story again. How could I have forgotten? Time to get ready for the great celebration, the birthday of the King of kings who came for us in the dark and the cold when we were lost, when the angels brought us tidings of comfort and joy..."

For the word comes to us from outside our hearts, but of course it doesn't stay there. Once you've heard what your Beloved has to say for himself, you keep it in your heart — so that it becomes deeply familiar, a part of who you are — and yet you don't get tired of hearing it again and again. So expect to hear the same good news over and over again: celebrating every year the same holiday, hearing the same story, singing the same carols, so that his Word gets deeper and deeper in you, which means he gets deeper and deeper in you.

Expect to hear the word of Christ, not like a theory you have to apply to your life (as if you have to do something to make it "relevant") but rather like a repeated proclamation of good news which simply invites you to believe that this wonderful stuff about Christ is actually true. And bear in mind that ultimately it is Christ who is actually saying this to you, through the mouth of the preacher and the choir and your brothers and sisters in the church. To hear the Gospel is thus like hearing a wedding vow, in which your Bridegroom gives all of himself to you—body, soul, divinity, all that he is. You find him in the promise by which he gives you nothing less than himself, saying things like "This is my body, given for you" and "You will be me people and I will be your God."