

Good News for Anxious Christians: an interview with Phillip Cary

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I posted a review of *Good News for Anxious Christians* yesterday. I'm pleased that the author, Phillip Cary, was kind enough to answer some questions about the book in this short interview.

I almost didn't read this book, but I'm glad I did. There's some great material in this interview for anyone, but particularly for pastors and church leaders.

Phillip Cary (PhD, Yale University) is professor of philosophy and director of the philosophy program at Eastern University in Pennsylvania as well as scholar-in-residence at the Templeton Honors College. He is the author of *Jonah in the Brazos* Theological Commentary on the Bible and of three critically acclaimed books on the life and thought of Augustine.

You write about "new evangelical theology" - practical ideas about the Christian life that make us anxious and that weaken our faith. How did we get to accept these ideas, especially since they're not biblical?

They work precisely by making us anxious. For instance, if you're in a church where everybody is "listening for God" in their hearts rather than in God's word, you're likely to start wondering what's wrong with you if you're not also hearing from God in this non-Biblical way. And this will be reinforced when nice, well-intentioned people get concerned for you and want to help. If they find out you're not "hearing God's voice," they'll ask you what's wrong and tell you they're praying for you. That's enough to make you feel there's really something wrong with your spiritual life! And of course, this functions as a very powerful form of peer pressure.

So these "practical ideas" are not taught, exactly. Teaching them, as if they were doctrines or something, would allow you to question them--to ask whether they're really based on Biblical teaching. Instead, this is something that it's just assumed you should "apply to your life," the way everybody else does. And there are all kinds of social pressures--many of them, again, quite well-intentioned--to get you doing what everyone else does.

At a sociological level, what this means is that these "practical" ideas proliferate like a virus. They take hold and spread. From a marketing perspective, they're a big success. And that makes them perfect for consumeristic churches, where pastors feel pressured to get good numbers.

Many of these practical ideas are widespread. In challenging these ideas, where have you sensed the most resistance?

Mainly from pastors, who are the most well-intentioned of all, and who feel guilty or inadequate if they aren't helping people "apply" these practical ideas to their lives. Most ordinary Christians I speak to about this really love hearing that they don't have to put these ideas into practice. My students especially tend to feel great relief. They're anxious enough as it is.

Your book keeps calling us to shift our attention away from ourselves and towards Christ and what he's done. Why is this so hard?

That's a really interesting question. It seems you either "get it" or you don't. People I talk to about this either see the point right away (they already "got it" a while ago) or they don't know how to process what I'm saying. I think it requires a kind of intellectual conversion, where suddenly you understand everything differently. You start looking at things in a new way, and you wonder: why didn't I see that before?

But then when you try to explain what you're now seeing, it can come out sounding awfully complicated. At least that's what I've found. And this is pretty frustrating, because the thing you're seeing is really quite simple. You're just looking in a different direction, is all. Instead of looking at your life to find God (asking, for example, "how is God working in my life?") you look away from your life to see what the Gospel is saying about Jesus Christ. You don't find Christ in your life; you find your life in Christ. You belong to his story, because you're one of those for whom Christ came, one of the sinners for whom he offered himself on the cross. And that's such good news that it changes your heart. But it gets into you not when you look at your heart, but when you look at Christ in his Word.

Now here's where it starts to sound really complicated. If you urge people to shift their attention away from their heart to Christ, that doesn't help, because all you've done is give them one more thing they're supposed to do--one more thing to be anxious about. It's just one more way of focusing on dreary old ME and what I'm supposed to

do to get God in my life. (We are so easily fascinated by talk about dear old ME--my heart, my life, etc.) The trick, if I can call it that, is just to talk about Christ, to tell his story, the Gospel--and then to notice that we too are part of his story.

What does that kind of talk sound like? Well, the creed gives us a good example when it says, "For us and our salvation, he came down from heaven..." and "He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate." It locates us in Christ's story, so we can find ourselves in him. It doesn't tell us to turn away from ourselves and look at Christ (which is just one more way of talking about ourselves rather than Christ), but tells us about Christ in a way that turns our attention to him. And that's what gets Christ into our hearts.

It's not just the average Christian who is anxious; pastors and Christian leaders are too. How can they learn to lead in a way that rests in Christ and what he's done?

Pastors and preachers have the wonderful calling of giving people nothing less than God in the flesh. That's what happens when you preach the Gospel and people believe what you say.

The problem, again, is that most pastors feel guilty about not being practical enough. So they literally feel guilty for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is not "practical" at all (I put that word in scare-quotes!) because it gives us nothing to do. It tells us what Christ does instead. It tells us who he is and what he does, and thereby gives us nothing less than Jesus Christ himself. He gets into our hearts simply because we believe what we're told about him in the Gospel--that's what the Reformers meant by talking about "faith alone."

So there's good news for anxious pastors, too. You don't have to be "practical," for the truth is that trying to be "practical" and "relevant" is actually dreadfully boring. So you don't have to do it! You are free instead to do what you are called and ordained to do as ministers of the Word: to give people Christ in your preaching and teaching. You can give them a kind word from God, through which God gives them his own Son.

I would add one more crucial point about preaching. In order to find ourselves in Christ, we have to recognize that we're the sinners in the story. So it's important not to treat Biblical stories as if they were object lessons in how not to be sinners. For example, it does no good to give us advice about how not to deny Christ in our lives the way Peter did--as if it was our job to be better than the chief of apostles! No, the good news is that we are just like him. We are those who deny Christ in our lives. We really have no hope of doing anything good for God unless Jesus Christ can love someone like us. And there we are! The Gospel tells us the good news that our Lord loved someone just like us, and he became the chief of the apostles.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is only for sinners. And in my experience it is incredibly comforting--and terribly rare--when the congregation is addressed as sinners from the pulpit. It's comforting because it's a word that meets me where I really live. It deals with the problem that I really have and feel. And it gives me good news, by identifying me as the kind of person for whom Christ died.

People may struggle at first with preaching that shifts the focus from what we must do to what Christ has done. Do you have any tips on how to make this transition?

To tell people what Christ has done for them is to give them a kind word from God. Start making a habit of this, and before long you'll find you really like it. It's not a way of being "relevant" (more scare quotes!) but of saying something beautiful.

For Christ himself is the most beautiful of all. He is the Bridegroom we're waiting for, and we love hearing about him. We don't come to church to hear about our lives and how to change them, but to hear about our Bridegroom--and this, it turns out, is what really changes our lives. It changes our lives from the inside out, because it's how Christ gets into our hearts by faith.

Imagine you have to give a sermon to a bride, to help prepare her be a better bride. Do you give her advice about how to love her Bridegroom better, or do you tell her how lovely her Bridegroom is? Which kind of sermon really helps her love her Bridegroom better?

And which kind of sermon is more likely to bore her? Most people in the pews, I think, are dreadfully bored (more than they realize) with hearing about themselves all the time--even if they think that's what they want. For they have been trained to believe that a sermon is no good unless it's "practical" and "applicable to my life," and they don't realize that precisely this relentless focus on themselves is what's boring them. So here's some good news for anxious pastors: despite what everybody says, "practical" sermons are boring! So you don't have to bother with them. You get to give people Christ instead.