

Good News *for* Anxious Christians

10 Practical Things
You **Don't** Have to Do

Phillip Cary



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Introduction

Why Trying to Be Christian Makes Us Anxious

Do not be anxious about anything,” says Scripture (Phil. 4:6). The problem is: this makes us anxious! We have enough things to be anxious about already in life, and now we have to worry in addition about how we can manage not to be anxious about any of it. And so the way we respond to this word from God, which is clearly meant to comfort us, actually adds a whole extra dimension to our burdens.

Sometimes the Christian life can get to be like that: trying to live like Christians just seems to add one more layer of anxiety to our lives. We have our work, our families, our friends to worry about, and then on top of that we worry about getting our Christian lives right. And if being a good Christian is at the center of our lives, then this worry can settle into the depths of our hearts and turn everything we do into something to be anxious about.

When that happens, something has clearly gone wrong. The word of God *is* meant to comfort us, to strengthen us by making us cheerful in doing the work God has given us to do. That work has its stresses and strains, which is why we’re invited not to be anxious. Like every commandment of God, this is at bottom a kind of permission: you don’t have to be anxious, and just in case

you think you do, you're commanded not to be. Behind everything God tells us that we *must* do, is really what we *may* do. We may live because God gives us a way of life, and therefore he tells us, "Choose life" (Deut. 30:19). We may live joyfully because his good word frees us from anxiety, and therefore he tells us, "Do not be not anxious." In that way, each of God's commandments is fundamentally an invitation.

But our anxieties turn God's invitation into a burden. That's why we're invited and even commanded to get rid of them! But if this invitation too is not to become a burden—one more cause for anxiety—we need to figure out what we're getting wrong here. How is it that this good word of God becomes a source of anxiety to us? Why is living the Christian life filling us so full of worries?

This book is about what we're getting wrong, why it's worrying us, and why we don't have to think and do what makes us so anxious. It's about seeing the invitations in God's word for what they are, so that our Christian life may be lived in cheerful obedience rather than in anxious efforts to get it right. On the negative side, it's about bad theology, the kind of theology that, when it's preached and taught and made part of our lives, makes us worried and miserable. On the positive side, it's about why the things God has to tell us, even in his commandments, are good for us, how they free us from anxiety and strengthen our hearts to do his work with joy.

The New Evangelical Theology

Every era in the history of Christianity has its own dangers and failures, which include its own particular ways of distorting God's word. This book is about the distortions of our time, as found in a new theology that has more or less taken over American evangelicalism in recent years. I suppose it has spread well beyond America by now, but in this book I'm talking about what I know firsthand—the new evangelical theology that is taught in American churches and that comes into my life through the anxieties of my American students.

It is a theology I don't read about in books, but hear from the lips of young people telling me why they're anxious. The words on their lips are ones you can hear in sermons and Bible studies and in TV and other media, and they make plenty of adults anxious too. They are the words of what you might call a "working theology," which is not an academic theory but a basis for preaching and discipleship, prayer and evangelism and outreach. It's a theology that tells people how to live. It gives people practical ideas and techniques they're supposed to use to be more spiritual.

The techniques are named using familiar phrases that are now clichés in American evangelicalism: *giving God control*, *finding God's will*, *hearing God speak*, *letting God work*, and so on. If you're like my students, you're already anxious about whether you're doing this stuff right. And if that's so, I figure you'll feel even more anxious, not to mention guilty, when you think of not doing this stuff at all. But that's what I'm going to invite you to think about in this book. What I'm telling you is what I tell my students: you don't have to do this stuff. You might think: but wait a minute, isn't this how you have a relationship with God? Don't these phrases tell us something important about how to be Christian? And my answer is: not in the Bible they don't. But it *is* true that in American evangelical churches today, this is what most people mean when they talk about having a relationship with God or being a Spirit-filled Christian.

Good News

The good news is that this is a new theology—it's not in the Bible and you don't have to believe it. It's not God's word and it's not even traditional evangelical theology, which was originally built on faith in God's word. Most of this theology is very new indeed: people my age and older grew up without it. It has taken over American evangelicalism only very recently, from about the time when color TV came on the scene. It's like a big, impressive, fast-growing weed, but it has extremely shallow roots. Its power lies in people taking it for granted that this is what a relationship with God is

supposed to be like. But all you have to do is look at Scripture to see that faith in Christ doesn't have to look like that, because there is nothing like the techniques of "giving God control," "finding God's will," and so on in the Bible.

And once you see that, then it's relatively easy to uproot the weed and get it out of your life. All you have to do is believe God's word instead of this new evangelical theology. You don't have to "give God control"; you're commanded to obey his law, which is different. You don't have to "find God's will"; you have to believe and follow his revealed will, which is found in Scripture. And you don't have to "hear God speak" anywhere but in his word. God's good word, both law and gospel, is your bulwark, your defense against bad theology and techniques of spirituality that make you anxious. For the good news is: you don't have to believe this stuff. You don't have to do it, because it's not in God's word.

At the center of God's word is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, which is to make us glad. God gives us that good word not just to convert us and make us Christians to start with, but to strengthen us all along the way to eternal life, giving us what we need for the whole journey. The gospel is meant to make us cheerful, because the Christian life is a life of love, which gets us involved in a great deal of hard work and heartache, as we share the sufferings and sorrows of our neighbors and even our enemies. So our obedience to God's commandments would be a crushing burden if it were not supported by the love of Christ—by which I mean our Lord Jesus's love for us, including all that he has done for us and for our salvation, as announced and revealed in the gospel. When we believe *that* good news, we have strength for the journey. And that strength has an emotional side to it, which is not anxiety but cheerfulness.

Consumerist Theology

But I expect that initially, at least, this book will make you anxious. For I'm trying to convince you that what's making you anxious are some of the most prominent techniques for living the Christian

life found in the evangelical churches of our day. I do not believe these are techniques to make you spiritual or holy or happy, though that is what they pretend to be. They're really a set of techniques Christian organizations use to hang on to their share of the religious market in a consumerist society.

Pastors and other Christian leaders have been taught to use these techniques and get you to use them too. They do this with good intentions, thinking that this kind of “practical” and “relevant” teaching will transform you and change your life—precisely the kind of thing that consumerist religion always promises to do. Just look at the books on the self-help shelf in any bookstore: they all say they'll change your life! And the same thing with the New Age spirituality shelf, and the Christian spirituality shelf too. They're all competing in the same market.

Well, it's hard for pastors these days. They're anxious too. They want their ministries to be a success, they want to change people's lives, and having techniques to make themselves relevant or make their ministries grow looks like a great help. But the real function of these techniques is precisely to make you feel anxious or guilty for not using them. That's what keeps you participating in the programs of the churches and organizations that teach the techniques. And that's what maintains “brand loyalty,” as the marketing specialists call it. In this case it means you stay in church, and maybe even in the same church—which really makes your church look good, if what you're looking at is the numbers. I'm not saying this is what pastors mean to be doing; I am saying this is why the techniques are effective, why they spread and take hold. Quite simply, they work. That doesn't mean they make you holy or good Christians, but that when leaders use them and get others to use them, churches grow in numbers and retain their membership.

Thinking Critically

The new evangelical theology is essentially a set of practical ideas or techniques for living the Christian life. They “work,” but in a peculiar and not very Christian way. They make you anxious when

you don't use them, which makes you use them. That's their real success: they reproduce themselves like a virus, until everybody has the virus—until everybody is using the techniques, saying the same things, participating in the same programs. So one of the things I expect will happen, as you read this book, is that you'll feel guilty about the very thought of not doing the things I'm saying you don't have to do.

I figure there are two ways you might respond to this feeling. For some readers, what I'm talking about in this book will seem too good to be true. To those readers, I say: the gospel of Christ is often like that—hard to believe because it is *such* good news. But go ahead and believe it! On the other hand, some readers will resist what I'm saying because it seems so outrageous, so contrary to what they've heard about God and tried to apply to their lives. They will feel like I'm trying to take something away from them, a part of their lives they want to keep. To those readers, I say: go ahead and resist! And what I mean by that is: go ahead and think critically.

And to everyone who reads this book, I say: don't believe any of this just because I'm saying it. Please do think critically—and that includes thinking critically about what I say in this book. Above all, search the Scriptures to see if these things are so, like the Jews and Gentiles who first heard the gospel in Berea (Acts 17:11). Bad theology cannot stand up against the Scriptures, and does not fare well under the gaze of critical thinking either. But truth is different: if what you believe is true, it can stand up to critical thinking and Scripture will confirm it. So if you seriously believe your faith is true, you don't need to be afraid to think critically.

Since bad theology can't really defend itself against critical thinking, it has to try to get you not to think. So if you feel guilty for even thinking about the things in this book, that's not an accident. That's consumerist religion trying to keep its hold on you. You have been trained to feel guilty for thinking, as well as for other activities that are part of a responsible Christian life. So if it helps you, go ahead and start practicing the art of critical thinking by using it on this book. Think critically about what I say—take seriously the task of discerning what is true from what is false

here. Having done that, you're one step closer to discerning what is true from what is false in the theology you've been taught. And that will do you a lot of good.

Good News and Hard Work

The gospel of Christ is good news because it does us a lot of good. It frees us from anxiety, makes us cheerful and glad. And that is something we need, because life is hard and the Christian life is harder. It is a life of love, and real love is very hard work. Above all, it is full of heartache, because you love people who hurt and you share their hurt. And you have your own hurts too. You can't be feeling good all the time. (When I say the gospel makes us glad, that doesn't mean we have an obligation to feel glad every moment of our lives. More on that in chapter 8.)

What the gospel of Christ does is give us Christ, and that is enough. We can let everything else be what it is—hard work, worthwhile work, works of love, and the heartaches that come with all of that. And we can let our feelings be what they are, whatever that may be. What matters is Jesus Christ, and the gospel tells us that all is well on that score: that we are our Beloved's and he is ours. (Yes, that's in the Song of Songs in the Old Testament, not in one of the four New Testament Gospels. But the one gospel, the good news of who Christ is and how our lives belong in him, is found throughout the Bible.) The gospel gives us Christ the way a wedding vow gives you a bridegroom. From now on you know who he is, that he is yours, that he has promised to love you, and because he keeps his promise, everything else will be alright.

And then you begin your married life, and it's a lot of hard work. And it's all good, because it's life with your Beloved. There are lots of books about the romance before this spiritual marriage—about how people are converted and come to faith in Christ for the first time. But this is a book about the married life—about what it is like to have such a Bridegroom, which means what it is like to be a member of the church, his Bride, which in Scripture is also called his Body.

We're all in this together, which means part of our job is to keep reminding each other about the Beloved, the Bridegroom who is ours, who is also the glorious one whose coming we await. Which is another way of saying: it's our job to keep preaching the gospel of Christ to one another. We don't stop needing to hear this good news just because we've become Christians. This good word, the gospel of Christ, is the bread of life that feeds our souls, because it is the way we keep receiving Jesus Christ every day. It is our daily bread, so we need to keep hearing it and feeding on it in our hearts by faith.

In short, the good news for anxious Christians is the same as it has always been. Scripture tells us the truth: "I am my beloved's and he is mine" (Song 6:3). We sing this together, we teach our children to sing it, and that's how we keep giving Christ to one another—and that's how Christ gives himself to us. And that in turn is how something as difficult as the Christian life is possible.

To obey Christ is to live a life of love, and that means giving ourselves to others, which is hard—hard enough to kill us sometimes, which is why our Lord Jesus speaks of taking up a cross when we follow him. You wouldn't normally say a cross is good for you. Indeed all it can do is kill you if Jesus is not with you—walking with you in the valley of the shadow of death, so that even there you need fear no evil (Ps. 23:4).

That is why we keep needing to hear the gospel—we Christians. It is our job to give our lives for others, and that is nothing but death unless Christ has given his life to us first. We need this good news, this daily bread, this cheerful word about our Beloved who is ours. God means it for our good, for he means us to have Christ, his own beloved Son. And that is enough to live on for eternity.

1

Why You Don't Have to Hear God's Voice in Your Heart

Or, How God Really Speaks Today

The first time I realized how seriously anxious the new evangelical theology can make people, I was reading a student's paper and trying to figure out just what she was talking about. It was the first course I was teaching at an evangelical Christian college where I had recently been hired as a philosophy professor. We were studying the concept of revelation in a class on the philosophy of religion, and I assumed that when we used the word "revelation" in a Christian context, we all knew that meant the Bible. But I was wrong.

The paper I was reading criticized the concept of revelation, and behind the criticism was anguish. The problem with revelation, my student wrote, was that you can never really tell if it's the voice of God. For how do you know which voice you're hearing is really *God's* voice? And if you can't tell it's God's voice, then how can God reveal anything? I realized pretty soon that she wasn't talking about the word of God in holy Scripture. That's just not what the

term “revelation” meant for her. It meant a voice she was supposed to listen for in her own heart. And her anguish was: how can you tell whether you’re listening to the right voice? How can you be sure you’re not mistaking your own voice for God’s voice? *How do you know?*

You have to admire this student’s honesty, not to mention the courage it took to write such a paper for her Christian philosophy professor. The sad thing was that her honesty was the source of her anguish. She was too honest to succeed in persuading herself that she really knew which of the voices in her heart was God. It’s as if there were a kind of psychological trick she was supposed to pull on herself, and she was too self-aware to believe the trick as she was doing it. And since for her, hearing God in her heart was what it meant for God to reveal himself, she was left without any concept of revelation or how to know God.

The comments I wrote at the end of this courageous student’s paper were the first step I took toward writing this book. What I wrote went something like this: “I have good news for you: the voices in your heart are all your own. So you don’t have to get all anxious about figuring out which one of your voices is God. None of them is. The revelation of God comes in another way, through the word of God in the Bible, and this is something you can find outside your heart.”

What I discovered as I continued to teach evangelical students is that most of them have the same deeply unevangelical view of revelation as this anguished student, and that they learned it from their evangelical churches and youth groups and other Christian ministries. It’s the standard teaching in American evangelical circles today—the new evangelical theology.

From “Guidance” to Hearing God

And this is a very new development. The practice of listening for God’s voice in your heart has only recently displaced Scripture as the most important way, in the view of most evangelicals, that God reveals himself to us. When I was a kid this practice was

called “guidance,” and it was not nearly so central to the life and piety of evangelical Christians as it is today—though it was already prevalent enough to cause many young people a great deal of anxiety. The idea, as it was taught to me back in my college days, was that when you have a big decision to make—say, about marriage or your career—then you are supposed to seek guidance from God (good idea!) and the key way to do that is by listening to how he’s speaking in your heart (bad idea!).

The bad idea, let me hasten to say, was not that you should listen to your heart. That’s something you have to do if you want to know your own thoughts and feelings, which you need to know if you want to make good decisions—not to mention if you want to have self-knowledge. But listening to your heart contributes to *self*-knowledge, not knowledge of God. The bad idea was that listening to a voice in your own heart was how you could hear *God*. For to know God you have to listen to God, not to yourself, and that means listening to a word which comes from outside yourself—the external word of Scripture.

The bottom line here is that God speaks to us as a person. And you can’t listen to another person just by hearing what’s in your heart. Other persons live *outside* your heart, and that’s where you have to listen for them. That’s even how they get into your heart. So Scripture says Christ dwells in our hearts by faith (Eph. 3:17) but directs our attention outside our hearts to find what we should put our faith in: “Faith comes by hearing,” says Paul, “and hearing comes by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). The word of Christ that he’s talking about is not a voice in our hearts but the preaching of the gospel in external words that we can hear with our ears, announcing the good news of Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:15). So Christ gets into our hearts precisely as we put our faith in the word of Christ that we hear preached to us. He is a person who is inside us because we find him outside us. That’s how it always goes with persons.

This way of finding Christ through the word of God used to be obvious to all evangelical Christians, but not anymore. The practice of seeking “guidance,” which they tried to foist on me when I was a college student, is now the reigning view among

today's evangelical college students about how God speaks. It's very revealing that one of the best and most important books advocating this practice, written by Dallas Willard, was originally titled *In Search of Guidance*, but in a more recent edition has been re-titled *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*.

It's one of the best books on the subject because it includes so many warnings and safeguards about how this practice of "hearing God" can go wrong. But even with the safeguards, I still think the practice is inherently bad for your faith. You can begin to see why just by noticing the title change, which reflects the way this practice has spread and taken over evangelical piety. What used to be described as "guidance" is now described as having a relationship with God. In fact, for many evangelicals nowadays "having a personal relationship with God" *means* hearing God speak in your heart. This would have astonished most evangelicals a couple of generations ago, who thought of a personal relationship with God as based on God's word, which they found in Scripture alone.

And yet this way of "hearing God speak" has become so dominant in American evangelical circles today that my students are not aware that it was ever any different. Even evangelicals writers who criticize it will often label it the "traditional" view. But it's not traditional at all. It's a novelty only a few generations old. Some elements of it do go back to older branches of the evangelical tradition, especially the Holiness and Keswick traditions. But those traditions themselves only arose in the second half of the nineteenth century, so they are not exactly what you could call deeply traditional—compared to the whole sweep of the Christian tradition going back for the past two thousand years. (What's deeply traditional, in that sense, includes things like the doctrine of the Trinity and the practice of the Eucharist, things that go back to the New Testament church and ultimately to Jesus himself.) And in any case, the Holiness and Keswick traditions made a point of insisting that the ultimate basis of our knowledge of God and relationship with him is the revelation of God's word in the Bible.

Listening to Our Own Feelings

Having been immersed during graduate school in the older parts of the Christian tradition, especially the theology of the church fathers and the Protestant Reformation, it took me a while to recognize how many of my students were trying to hear God in this newfangled way. At my evangelical college, there are guys who tell girls, "I think God is telling us he wants us to get together." And there are girls who are convinced that God has told them to break up with their boyfriend. Now a guy saying that kind of thing is pretty comical (unless he gets away with it, and then it's too destructive to be funny anymore). But a girl who has to say that kind of thing is just in sad shape.

I think I can imagine how it goes. See if this sounds right to you. Imagine a young woman getting back to her dorm room after a long night, and she's saying to herself, in a loud, excited voice, "Oh, I *love* my boyfriend so much! He's so great! He takes care of me, he watches out for me, he protects me, he never lets me go . . . he never wants to leave me alone, he won't ever let me out of his sight, I can't ever get away from him, he's always in control, he controls me so much, sometimes I feel like I can never escape . . ." And then, as her enthusiastic monologue begins to trail off, a very different-sounding voice comes out of her mouth, a quiet little voice that says, "I don't feel right about this. . . ." No doubt that's the voice of wisdom, unlike the loud, excited voice that came before. The loud, excited voice is trying to convince her that she's got a great thing going, but the quiet little voice comes from deeper in her heart, where she feels there's something wrong before she knows what it is.

The sad thing is not that she listens to this quiet little voice, but that she can't admit it's her own. She has to label it God's voice in order to take it seriously. Apparently she's never thought of her own voice as something worth listening to. Maybe she's gotten used to nobody listening very seriously to what she says. In any case, it seems that in order for her to listen to herself, to pay heed to the wisest and most perceptive voice in her own heart, she has to say it comes from God. She can't admit it's her own voice because that would make it unimportant. Who's *she* to say her boyfriend's not good for her?

I think there are a lot of young people like this—and more young women than young men—who do not have what psychologists call the “ego strength” to believe that their own feelings matter, that their own thoughts are worth paying attention to. As they grow up, they need to learn that it’s okay to have thoughts of their own, even though they’re not perfect. They need to be taught that it’s their responsibility to learn to think well—to think self-critically (because of course their thoughts aren’t always right), but also courageously (because a person is nonetheless responsible to act on the basis of what she thinks is true).

And as part of this responsible thinking, it’s also important for people to listen to their own feelings. Like thoughts, feelings are not always right, but still they often tell us something we need to hear. Labeling some of their feelings “God” or the voice of the Spirit gives young people an excuse to listen to them, which is something they really need sometimes. Unfortunately it also short-circuits the process of growing up. It reinforces their sense that their feelings are not really worth listening to—as if they don’t really have a right to pay attention to their feelings unless their feelings come directly from God. And this in turn makes it hard for a young woman to learn, for instance, that she has a right to stand up to her boyfriend when he’s doing things that make her feel wrong, unsafe or boxed in. And that’s the sad thing. She doesn’t believe that it’s okay for her to be perceptive about her situation, that it’s okay to realize that her boyfriend is bad for her and to do something about it—for instance, to defend her integrity and well-being (and maybe her chastity) by telling him “No.”

In short, she doesn’t realize that she has a right to be a morally responsible adult. And it’s her theology that keeps her from realizing this. The new evangelical theology that she’s immersed in undermines her sense of morality, her responsibility, and her adulthood, not to mention her self-knowledge. That’s a sad thing, and it’s bad for her.

The Many Voices in Our Hearts

“Hearing God speak in our hearts” is not only a bad way to learn who God is, it’s also bad for our hearts. It prevents us from rec-

ognizing the thoughts of our own hearts and dealing responsibly with them. The good news here—the news that I especially want young women in evangelical colleges to hear—is that it's okay that the thoughts of your heart are your own. They don't have to be God's voice to be something worth listening to.

But we do have to listen carefully, even critically, because we have many different voices in our hearts and some are better than others. Some in fact are pretty dumb—thoughtless and conventional, easily manipulated and willing to join whatever party is going on. Those are usually the loudest voices, trying to drown out the others, like the voice of the young woman trying to tell herself how much she loves her controlling boyfriend. It's usually the quiet voices that are the most perceptive, because they come from a part of ourselves that's afraid to speak up at the party, but that knows what we really have to live with inside—knows how we really feel and how it hurts. This is where we often find the voice of our own integrity—a voice that's unsure of itself because it tells us about feelings we're not quite ready to admit we have, or thoughts that on some level we don't want to think about even though we need to. But the voice is there because it comes from the part of ourselves that the party can't drown out—the part that notices how our heart isn't quite in it.

Self-knowledge means knowing the voices in your own heart, both thoughts and feelings. They're not always right, but they're yours and if you don't know them, you don't know yourself. The good news here is that it's okay to know yourself. The voices in your heart don't have to be God's voice to be worth listening to. They're not infallible, but they are often perceptive, telling you a lot of things you need to know.

And as our moral character develops and the Spirit works within us, the voices of our own heart can even grow into voices of wisdom. This is not a wisdom we should trust as if it were the word of God (for there is nothing more foolish than people who are wise in their own eyes), but it is a wisdom God commands us to seek: the wisdom to discern good from bad, to make responsible adult choices, to live with moral integrity.

Attaining self-knowledge is part of the process of growing up. In commanding us to seek wisdom (Prov. 4:7), God is command-

ing us to seek knowledge of ourselves, as well as knowledge of him—and an awareness of the difference. That’s why the new evangelical practice of “hearing God speak” is doubly bad for us. By trying to identify which voice in our hearts is God’s, we not only misidentify God, we fail to know ourselves for who we really are.

Doubly Good News

It is good news that God does not speak in our hearts. It’s doubly good news, having to do with both God and ourselves. On the one hand, this means it’s okay that the voices of our hearts are our own. And on the other hand, it means that when God does speak, we can hear him the way we hear people we love, who are real and therefore exist outside our own hearts. We hear them speak by turning our attention away from our own hearts and listening to voices that come from outside us. To turn our feelings away from ourselves in this way is not to deny our feelings, but to let them go where feelings of love always long to go—toward the beloved, the other person who is outside us.

Some people who like the newfangled way of “hearing God” say it’s more personal. But that’s not how we get to know and love other persons! On the other hand, I don’t agree with the critics who say “hearing God in your heart” is self-centered. When I look at my students, what I see instead is that it prevents self-awareness and self-knowledge. It reinforces the sense so many of them have that their own feelings don’t really matter and aren’t worth listening to. It also undermines the genuine kind of self-assurance that goes along with real moral responsibility, where you know what you believe and why you think it’s true, and you live by the truth you believe, even when others try to manipulate and control you. Trying to hear God within yourself does not strengthen the self but undermines it. It makes you easier to manipulate, like a girl who doesn’t know what to say when a guy tells her, “I think God’s telling us we should get together. Don’t you feel him saying that too?”

External Things That Shape Our Hearts

One of the most important things to know about the voices of our hearts is that, like our hearts themselves, they are formed to a large degree by what comes from outside them. This is why it's so important to hear the word of God properly preached and to take it into our hearts, so that faith, hope, and love may take shape there. For our culture contains all sorts of voices that want to shape the voices in our hearts. That's what mass media and consumerism are all about.

And in the more consumerist side of American evangelicalism, there are all sorts of voices that also aim to manipulate you and tell you what God is saying in your heart. It's not all that different from the manipulative boyfriend. You may have heard more than one fundraising speech or stewardship sermon in which the speaker says something like this: "Just close your eyes and hear what God is saying in your heart, and listen to what he's telling you to give. Maybe it's a little. But maybe it's a lot more than you thought. I'm not telling you how much to give. I'm just saying, listen to what God tells you. What is his Spirit saying in your heart today? What does *he* want you to give?"

I'll be saying a lot more about biblical stewardship in chapters 3 and 4, but let me say here that I'm convinced what being a good steward means when you're stuck in a situation like this is to open your eyes, look at your wallet or your checkbook, think about your budget, maybe take out a pen and do a little arithmetic. And then do some critical thinking: do you really want to give so much to a ministry that tries to manipulate people like this? A good steward is wise in the use of money and is not so easy to manipulate.

But if you've ever been in a room where everybody is closing their eyes and listening reverently to a speech like that, you know how hard it is to fight back against the manipulation. It's not easy to think for yourself when the voice of the speaker is doing its best to call up all the guilty voices in your heart and convince you it would be dishonest not to recognize that this is the Holy Spirit speaking to you. (Every manipulative speaker knows this trick of saying: "Let's be honest. You know that deep inside what you really

feel is _____,” and then you’re supposed to fill in the blank with what he wants you to feel.) But one of the things about responsible stewards is that they don’t decide how to use their money based on guilt and manipulation. That means they must resist a speaker’s efforts to make them feel guilty for thinking critically.

“What’s Wrong with Me?”

Listening to God in our hearts is a way to avoid thinking critically; it prevents us from thinking for ourselves like a good steward or a responsible adult. That’s why I don’t think it arises from individual selfishness. It’s not something that any of us came up with on our own; it’s something we were taught. I’m calling it a *practice*, because it’s not something that just happens to us—like one day God suddenly starts talking to us. It’s something we’re taught to do on a regular basis, in church or youth group or on weekend retreats. We are *told* how to listen to God in our hearts and make it an ongoing part of our lives. And we are made to feel guilty if we don’t put it into practice.

In a sense, however, you can’t really say we’re *taught* to do this, because if there were any real *teaching* going on, it would be easier to think critically about it. It’s more accurate to say that what we’re dealing with here is the power of group dynamics. Have you ever been in a room full of people doing something together that doesn’t feel quite right to you? Despite your discomfort, you’re likely to feel all sorts of pressure to give in and join the group. And the pressure is not just external. Because everyone else in the room seems to be on the same page, you end up listening in your heart to a persistent, worried voice asking why you’re the only one who’s not getting it. It all seems so right, so obvious, to everybody else. Why can’t *you* see it? *What’s wrong with you?*

I think this is one of those loud voices trying to drown out the quieter, more perceptive voices in your heart. It’s a kind of socially induced guilt that takes the form of that voice in your heart eating away at you, nagging at you, saying: “What’s wrong with you?” It’s reinforced when people smile at you really nicely and say, “We can

see you're struggling with this. We'll pray for you." When people treat you like that, then you *really* know there must be something wrong with you—at least *they* think so. This is the way many groups make it hard for people to be very thoughtful or critical, or to say things that disturb the consensus of the group. It's really the group maintaining its own comfort zone—by making you feel uncomfortable that you're not in it.

And it all happens with the best of intentions. Nobody's being mean or judgmental; they're all just trying to help. They're perfectly sincere about that. But the assumption is that you *need* help because there's something wrong with you—you don't really fit in, you aren't experiencing what everyone else is experiencing or you aren't thinking the same way they are. This is one of the most powerful secrets of manipulation: people do it without even meaning to—and with the best of intentions, because all they want to do is help. And it has a potent effect on you, making you wonder what's wrong with you if you're not on board with everyone else. If it didn't work like this, then groups wouldn't wield such enormous social power. Group dynamics *is* powerful—powerful enough to give social cohesion to a crowd by getting everybody in it to suppress their own criticisms, doubts, and hesitations. People keep their anxieties to themselves, and nobody speaks up to raise any concerns about where it's all going.

This situation is very different from sound Christian teaching. It's not really teaching or preaching at all, but more like a kind of peer pressure. The technology of manipulation in our society harnesses peer pressure all the time, as you can see by watching how advertising works to recruit our youngsters for consumerism. And yes, adults are subject to peer pressure too. I'm convinced this pressure is how most people have learned to listen for God in their hearts. They do it because it makes them feel anxious if they don't. They wonder what's wrong with them if they can't hear God's voice. "Am I not really a Christian," they ask, or "Have I somehow missed out on a real relationship with God?" So instead of being taught the word of God in holy Scripture (which does not require them to do any such thing) they are left anxiously trying

to figure out which of the voices in their hearts is God—because that’s what everyone else is doing.

Consumerist Spirituality

So the practice spreads, making most people secretly anxious. But it also makes people easier to manipulate, which is why it has really taken hold in the consumerist culture of our churches. Consumerism, unfortunately, is not something you find only in the secular world. We live in a time when churches are competitors in the marketplace of spirituality, selling themselves, trying to improve their numbers, and trying to hang on to market share—which means hanging on to *you*. And that means anything that makes you easier to manipulate counts as an advantage.

It doesn’t count as an advantage, of course, to a church that knows what Christian discipleship really means. But if your church is going by the numbers (and lots of church leaders are pressured to do that), then what it needs is for you to keep trying to hear God in your heart. That way, you’ll keep hearing what they want you to hear. For what people hear in their hearts is actually pretty predictable. You don’t need to look inside their hearts; just look at the social environment that surrounds them and the peer pressure it generates.

People’s hearts show where they live. If your spiritual life is situated in a consumerist world dominated by technologies of manipulation and social engineering (so that you’re constantly hooked up to screens and church-as-entertainment, for instance) then more often than not, your heart will reflect that. After all, the entertainment on our screens these days is carefully designed—and often extensively tested—to shape our feelings and opinions, the voices of our hearts. There’s a whole technology for this, techniques you can learn in a marketing class or a church growth seminar. That’s why professional church growth consultants can work successfully with the numbers. Your heart is part of their statistics.

This leads to the great irony of consumerist spirituality. The practice of inward listening is not an escape from external forces

like mass media, social engineering, electronic technology, and statistics. On the contrary, it's promoted and supported by the marketing techniques of consumerist churches. There's an important lesson here. For good or ill, the heart is always shaped by outside forces—by the gospel of Christ, by the influence of good friends, by bad company that corrupts good morals (1 Cor. 15:33), or by the forces of consumerism that train us to desire what others want us to desire. What really matters, of course, is which of the voices outside us we're listening to. And the problem is that listening to inner voices, without noticing how forces outside us are acting on us, means being subject to manipulation by those outside forces without knowing what's happening to us.

Listening for God's voice in your heart is precisely what a consumerist church needs you to do in order to keep its hold on you, because it makes you so much easier to manipulate, so much more amenable to all the programs that church leaders anxiously put in place to try to keep their numbers up. The trick is to figure out what they need you to feel and experience, and then get you to believe that God is telling you that's what you're supposed to feel and experience. And it's not really such a difficult trick: most fundraisers learned it long ago, and the manipulative boyfriend is already well on his way to mastering the technique. But again, most people employ this kind of manipulation in groups, with the best of intentions, not even realizing that's what they're doing.

Where the Spirit Really Speaks

Because our hearts are always shaped by what they hear and love and learn, it's not really surprising that our inward listening reflects the outward manipulation of consumerism. But it *is* ironic. The practice of hearing God in our hearts is supposed to be spiritual, but its real source is technological. It ultimately originates not from deep inner experiences but from marketing techniques driven by the numbers. In a consumer culture, a whole lot of spirituality is like that. Today's pagan and New Age spiritualities, like consumerist Christianity, are market-driven phenomena. They're designed to

be attractive to people who want to feel they're escaping from the technological world—the world of market-testing and statistics and mass entertainment. But that's the world that gave birth to these spiritualities in the first place.

A very different kind of spirituality comes to us from the revelation of God in holy Scripture. It frees us to develop our own thoughts and feelings, since we don't have to look for God within our hearts—which is where we are most vulnerable to self-deception and technologies of manipulation. Instead, we can find him in his faithful word. So once again we have doubly good news, about both self-knowledge and the knowledge of God. The good news about self-knowledge is that it's okay for your feelings and thoughts to be your own, not the voice of God. For the good news about God is that he makes himself known the way a real person does, by speaking to us from outside our hearts. And precisely that external speaking, when we take it in by faith, gives a new shape to our hearts, conforming us to the image of his Son. That's how our thoughts and feelings and inner voices become a new thing, not merely a product of consumer culture.

The Bible instructs us that this external speaking of God's word is the work of his Spirit. Just imagine what it was like hearing God's word in Old Testament times. You didn't go listening to your own heart; you listened to the words of the prophets. For the Spirit of the Lord is the Spirit who speaks through the prophets. "Thus says the Lord!" the prophet would cry aloud, and what you heard next was God's word given to his people Israel. Things have not changed that much since then. The word of God still comes out of human mouths and resounds in the ears and hearts of his people. That's where you go to hear God—you dwell in the community of his people, because that is where his word is.

And because his word is spoken among his people, it gets into their hearts. They learn it by heart, and thus it dwells within them and changes their lives. Think how this works, inwardly and outwardly: the word of the Lord comes to people in the human voices of the prophets, then is repeated by the voices of those who hear and believe, and in the end is repeated even in the voice of their own hearts.

It is just like today, when we pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” The words are God’s, coming from our Lord Jesus himself, but the voices are our own. So also when we learn these words by heart and repeat them silently: it is the voice of our own hearts (we don’t have to pretend it’s God’s voice) but the words are God’s, right there in our hearts. And this word in our hearts shapes us, like a favorite piece of music that you sing to yourself to give you hope when you are tired, discouraged, or needy.

It’s God’s word, but your own voice. That’s how it is even in your heart: with your own voice, the voice of your heart, you can remember, repeat, even sing the word of God. (Think of how many good hymns and spiritual songs are really just ways of singing words taken from the Bible.) That’s how it works, because the place to look for God’s word is not in your heart but in the gathering of God’s people for worship, prayer, preaching, and teaching.

That is why the apostle says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Col. 3:16). And in a parallel passage, he says, “be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:18). From the parallel between these two passages we can see what being filled with the Spirit means: it means for the word of Christ to dwell richly among us. This happens when the people of God gather together as a congregation in the name of Christ, teaching and admonishing and singing God’s word to one another.

In both passages, the verbs and pronouns are plural. To translate the Greek literally, you’d have to say something like “Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you guys,” and “Be filled with the Spirit, you guys!” In both cases, you find what you’re looking for—the word and Spirit of Christ—in his church, the Body of Christ. And because it’s there in the church, the gathered Body, it’s in our hearts as well—as the apostle proceeds to say: “singing . . . with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16) and “singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart” (Eph. 5:19). (Again, the “your” in both passages is plural.) The alternative to the consumerist church is thus the truly Spirit-filled church, which means

the church gathered to hear the word of Christ spoken and sung externally by human voices, so that hearts may be formed inwardly in joy and thanksgiving and the knowledge of God.

So nothing has changed in this regard since biblical times. The Spirit has always spoken through external words. Biblical prophets, for instance, never talk about hearing God in their own hearts. That's just not what they say about their own experience. They often tell us about their dreams and visions, but they know nothing of the practice we have been taught today where you try to quiet yourself and hear God's voice in your heart.

That's not how the Spirit speaks, because that's not *why* the Spirit speaks. He does not come to give people private instructions—that's not what prophecy was ever for—but to join them to the community of God's people. So the best place to hear him now is in a gathered congregation of the Body of Christ, where he is present to teach, comfort, warn, and guide all who believe. His speaking is not an inner experience but a shared event, just like the teaching and admonishing that happened when the New Testament church was filled with the Spirit.

Most striking of all, of course, is what happened on the day of Pentecost. Notice that the Bible tells us nothing about the experience of the people who spoke in tongues on that day, but instead dwells at length on the experience of those who heard them speaking in their own language—languages from all over the world (Acts 2:6–13). That's the Pentecostal experience: the experience of hearing the word of Christ taught and sung and preached and prayed, hearing it in human voices speaking words you can understand, so you can put your faith in it and take it to heart.

Two Questions

When I talk about this biblical view of the Spirit with my students, they often ask, “But are you saying God doesn't speak today?” Now you know my answer. Of course God speaks today! His speaking today in the word of Christ is what saves us and makes us Christians, and that is what the Holy Spirit is all about. He speaks

when the words of the prophets and apostles found in Scripture are preached and taught and sung and prayed, especially in the gathering of his people for worship. He speaks whenever the gospel of Jesus Christ dwells in us richly.

What my students' question shows is that they have never thought of this as God speaking. For them, the only way God can speak *today* is in the privacy of their own hearts. That's the only way they have ever heard of God speaking—the only way they have ever heard it talked about, even in church. They have literally not been taught to hear the gospel as God's word. Presumably they've been taught that they have to believe it to be saved, but evidently after they get their "fire insurance," their free ticket out of hell, they think the gospel of Christ has nothing more to say to them about their Christian lives. I figure this cannot be their fault—it must be how they're taught in church. This is going to have dire consequences for the future of the evangelical churches in America, I think. But I'll get back to that in chapter 10.

Another question my students ask is: "Are you saying God *can't* speak in our hearts?" It's like they want to make sure a door is left open for this other way for God to speak, even after they've been persuaded that the Bible doesn't impose on them the practice of listening for God in their hearts. Maybe it's not how they're supposed to hear God all the time, they're thinking, but perhaps it's something God does now and then, on special occasions. And of course, you can't deny that God can do whatever he wants.

But the real question is about what God in fact does want to do—how he has actually chosen, in his wisdom, to speak—and to answer that question we have to look at what we know about how and why God actually *does* do things. We have to ask: why in the Bible and the history of his people does he keep speaking to us in external words, in the voices of prophets and apostles, preachers and teachers, and even in our own songs and the prayers he gives us to pray? God *could* speak in some other way, we may suppose. But whenever we hear of him speaking in Scripture he seems quite intent on speaking *this* way, giving his own word to us in external human voices. Why?

As I put it earlier, God speaks to us like any real person, as someone outside our own hearts whom we love. There are deep and wonderful mysteries here, all of which center on Jesus Christ. The place to find real people is not in our hearts but in their own flesh: surely that is why God came to us in the flesh, in his own Son, Jesus our Lord, who is God from God, the eternally begotten of the Father. The great mystery—which means the wonder and the glory—is that this flesh in which he comes to us is our own. It is human flesh, so that he can meet us and speak to us like any other person we know. It is a human face that we long to see as we await the coming of our Beloved, the Bridegroom—and the Spirit and the Bride say, “Amen. Come Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:17, 20).

Our Lord’s face is a human face, and his voice is a human voice. That’s why it’s okay that our voices, too, are human voices. For he speaks to us in human voices, the voices of prophets and apostles, preachers and teachers, in song and prayer—and in his own voice, which is a human voice, the voice of his human flesh, born of a woman. So it’s okay that our voices, too, are our own human voices—even the voices of our heart. They don’t have to be God’s voice to be worth listening to, or even to speak the word of God.