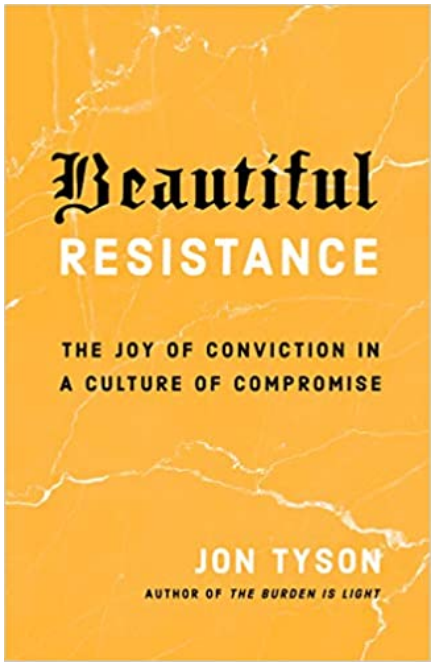
Review: Beautiful Resistance – The Joy of Conviction in a Culture of Compromise

There's a few ways into Jon Tyson's Beautiful Resistance. Here's one way:



We've been encountering, for a while now, the phenomenon of committed Christians who are "done with Church." This isn't the cliche of people backsliding from faith, it's more vocational than that: We were a generation that encountered Jesus and pursued the gospel and his Kingdom. Many of us did this; we gave ourselves to the institutions, submitted, learned, did our bit, and some of us were even "successful." Inevitably, however, comes the time of deconstruction. Church and gospel collide. We have that moment when we look towards Jesus and the path of discipleship and we realise that we are looking *away* from his people, and not towards them. At that point there is a crisis. We weigh up whether to throw in the ecclesial towel or not, *because* of our love and hope, not against it.

This book speaks to our generation.

For the better part of two decades, I have had a complex

> *relationship with the institution called the church. Jesus called her a bride, one of my atheist friends called her a wench, and I have experienced her as both… I am also grieved by my failures and personal contribution to the staining of her reputation. (Pages 9-10)*
>
> *I'm sure that you have felt the same desire to escape the drama of the church in our modern life of faith. At night you probably have deep questions about whether staying involved is worth it. Worth the misunderstanding, worth the heartache, worth the credibility hits, worth the sacrifice. And I am sure that some around you have come to the conclusion that it is not. They have wavered and shrunk back, preferring spirituality over religion, and given up on the institution known as the church. Maybe you are reading this at a time when you are struggling to see the point of the church when she is stained by so much compromise. Maybe you would like to retreat to that easier place of spirituality without religion. But I'm guessing that deep down in your heart you actually long for more. (Page 166)*

Here's another way in:

Our generation has struggled to find its native leaders. We have leaned back into older faces: the likes of Packer, Wright, Stott, Willard, and Chalke (depending on where you see your home). Those are good giants with good shoulders, but the road to our own voice has been complicated.

Our voice fledged twenty years ago or so. Remember the battle of the "Mars Hills"? We had Rob Bell who drew us in with Nooma but sold out and faded out with Oprah and insipid universalism. We had Mark Driscoll who drew us in with keeping it real and relevant and somewhat M-rated, but who badgered us like the bully on the school bus and ran headlong into his own belligerence. The leadership of our generation, sitting at the pivot point between the Boomers and the Millenials and beyond,

needed to grow up.

I think we're beginning to find those maturer voices now. The sort of voices with a couple of more decades in them that have been through some wastelands. I'm thinking of people like John Mark Comer and Pete Greig and others of similar ilk (nominate your own in the comments). These voices speak fluent postmodern – truth is to be *experienced* not just *thought* – but have avoided the naivete of intersectional deconstruction. They speak to formation, and not the reductionism of getting numbers onto pews, or into heaven. They are beginning to hit the balance between winsome relevance and being prophetically distinct. Jon Tyson is one of these voices.

It might be confirmation bias on my part, though! Like me, Tyson is Australian. Like me, he is called as a missionary to the Western world. Like me, he has left his hemisphere and set up camp in a foreign land. He's been a lot more successful than me, but good on him; unlike other ex-pat Aussies, it doesn't seem to have gone to his head.

This book is Tyson's significant contribution to a spirituality of mission that takes the context of the Western church seriously. It hits the sweet spot between pastoral call to individuals, and apostolic call to churches to live out and pursue the truth of the gospel. He makes us ponder if "Christ or culture will have the ascendancy in our generation" (p1).

The *resistance* Tyson speaks of, is therefore *responsive* to *who* we are as God's people and *where* we are in this broken world. He frames the whole book with an anecdote from Bonhoeffer countering the power of Nazi Germany with the "beautiful resistance" of humble discipleship. In the same light Tyson ponders about "*our* cultural moment and the compromise rampant in our day" (p4). The chapters he leads us into summarises what follows:

> *Worship Must Resist Idolatry*

Rest Must Resist Exhaustion
Hunger Must Resist Apathy
Hospitality Must Resist Fear
Honor Must Resist Contempt
Love Must Resist Hate
Sacrifice Must Resist Privilege
Celebration Must Resist Cynicism

The chapter on **worship** recognises that our Western world has no "reference point for idolatry" (p24) and therefore offers no guidance for our desires and passions. The unresistant church adopts the same passions as the world, and we end up with a "church more informed by… cultural preferences than [God's] Word" (p33). Tyson's exploration of this issues touches my centrist heart; his ability to identify and counter the idolatry of both left and right extremes is admirable. He has the cultural insight of a missionary; he has had to come to grips with the "ecosystem of power and approval" in his context of New York similarly to how I've has to wrestle with a sense of the English middle class. Tyson envisages the beautiful resistance:

> *The church exists as a counterformative community to confront our idolatry. So we don't go to church for entertainment. No, what we're really working for here is transformation into the image of Jesus. (Page 38)*

The chapter on **rest** speaks to how we "ache for peace in the world, but many of our lifestyles are a form of violence to ourselves and those we love" (p46). There are many people speaking right now about the weariness and pressure and distraction of contemporary life. Tyson takes us to the difference between mere "relaxing" and true "rest" which comes with a movement "from fear to trust… from anxiety to peace.. from control to surrender" (p54).

> *We need a framework of Sabbath that makes Jesus's invitation*

> *to rest a reality in our lives. (Page 51)*

The chapter on **hunger** is about "confronting our spiritual numbness" (p64). This is a topic that should be talked about more in church circles! The age-old conundrum for anyone pursuing mission is this: How can we get people to simply *care* more? We pursue techniques and programs, and we have forgotten that it is, in the end, a *spiritual* task. Tyson's advice is to "begin again with fasting" – literal, physical fasting – as a resistance to the stultifying culture that wraps everything around what we feel, and what we want (p71). It's a worthy thought; "we have tried every other type of solution… "this kind" will come out only through prayer and fasting" (p75).

> *I urge you – let your hunger resist your apathy. (Page 77)*

The chapter on **hospitality** addresses a culture of *fear*. This book, although dated as 2020, was written pre-pandemic and before the death of George Floyd; the relevance of it has only increased. Tyson explores the process of exclusion (p82), again with admirable centrism that sees the fear-centre of both the progressives and the conservatives. He allows the scandal of an inclusion, exclusively centred on Jesus: "…hospitality wasn't one of Jesus's strategies; it was *the* strategy… Jesus was able to model what our culture is craving – spaces of welcome where strangers, enemies, outsiders, and others can become our friends (pp86-87).

> *Jesus created pockets of love in a culture of fear that formed a new kind of community in the world, something he called "the church." The church was to exist not as a haven from the world but as a place of hope for the world. (Page 87)*

The chapter on **honour** is in the same vein. It recognises the complexity of shame and dysfunction within Western cultural

contexts: “the elderly are dismissed, traditions are mocked, the past is erased, hopelessness settles in, prejudice is assumed, and conflict is inevitable” (p110). This is the cultural minefield set before anyone who seeks to engage in community life. In answer, Tyson takes us to Jesus’ “filter of honor for all he encountered… regardless of the contempt their culture showed them, he saw differently” (p105).

> *I can’t help but imagine the power and beauty of a community that saw everyone through an honor filter. What would happen if every person’s story, calling, sacrifice, gifts, and future were held in view? If people were seen as crowned with glory and coheirs with Christ? I believe conflict would be transformed, young people would be filled with vision, the elderly would be respected, teh marginalized would be empowered, adn the invisible would be seen… This community would be unlike any other – this community would be like the kingdom of heaven on earth. (Page 109)*

The chapter on **love** takes us to the countercultural sense of *agapé*, or “enemy love.” It resists hate, but not in the sense of current rhetoric where “hate” and “love” are weaponised in the culture wars. Rather, Tyson would have us follow Jesus into these societal battlegrounds, with surrendering love: “The arena can be transformed again. But only if we’re ready to act on our faith” (p122). There is suffering in this type of beautiful resistance.

> *Our enemies hurt us. Our enemies abuse us. Our enemies do violence to us. This can cause horrific trauma and require deep healing, boundaries, and grief. Jesus, however, experienced all this suffering and still insisted on love. (Page 126)*

The chapter on **sacrifice** counters the prevalence of unseen privilege. His exploration is both *honest* and *gracious;* he recognises the reality of privilege, but avoids language which

shames in response. Toxic privilege is rooted in fear, the answer is humility and grace. “We can serve without fear because the kingdom is a gift, not something we earn. From that position of security, we can humble ourselves without any anxiety” (p137). We are shaped by the mind of Christ in Philippians 2; where we have privilege, we give it away. “Servanthood resists privilege, and the kingdom takes root” (p141).

> *Jesus redefined greateness as the distribution of our unearned cultural advantage on behalf of others. Rather than fighting over rights and responsibilities, Jesus calls us to redirect our privilege for others. (Page 139)*

And finally, the chapter on **celebration** is a resistance to *cynicism*. The sentiment of pointlessness is pervasive in our community, and our churches. I certainly encounter it, not just in myself, but in a younger generation; what have we bequeathed? They are launching from the nest into a cloud streaked with GFC, climate crisis, and pandemic. The answer is not pesudo-idealism, the “telling of positive anecdotes that will makes us feel better” (p144). The answer is hope, in the service of a “joyful God” in which we put our confidence, including confidence in his truth (p150).

> *Jesus insisted that the work of God demands celebration. He is in the world, bringing good news, welcoming the outsider, restoring the lost, binding up the broken. The question is, Will we join the feast or issue excuses? (Page 155)*

Throughout it all, there is a common thread. This book is a work of *applied ecclesiology*. **This is a book about how to be the church,** without guile.

I found it fanning some lingering embers back into flame. The Church *is still* the temple of God, a place for his presence (p13). The Church *is still* the body of Christ, existing to

express God on earth (p18). Indeed, “there is a rumour going around the West that, in spit of the avalanche of change and often-repeated accusation of irrelevance, a church has actually survived. Yes she is stained; yes, she is broken; but she is here. Her Lord is working within her. The bride is becoming beautiful; his presence is becoming tangible; the body is becoming functional. Beauty is rising and resisting the brokenness” (p20).

Tyson prays “Lord, bring your body to life” (p20), and I remember praying the same thing years ago, in the sweet land of immature zeal. Now, in the present, wedged between ecclesiastical nihilism on one side and triumphalism on the other, I, for one, need to re-voice those old and true prayers, from lips now tempered with struggle and salted with sweat and tears. Tyson is a brother to me at this point, giving me some words to use, and thoughts to think.

I read this book while on a recent holiday. During this we visited the Holy Island in Northumberland and chanced upon Cuthbert’s island, just off-shore, accessible only at low-tide. In its day, it was a place of solitude, a place of prayer, a place of spiritual travail. You could feel it in the rocks.

I don’t know much about Cuthbert. But I know he prayed there, at and soon after a time of collision in the British church between the Roman body and the Celtic spirit. Cuthbert invested himself at the Lindisfarne Priory as the Irish monks retreated, and answered the call to a spiritual travail for the soul of nation and church.

We found ourselves praying there, reflecting on the collisions we see in church, world, and between the two. It was something

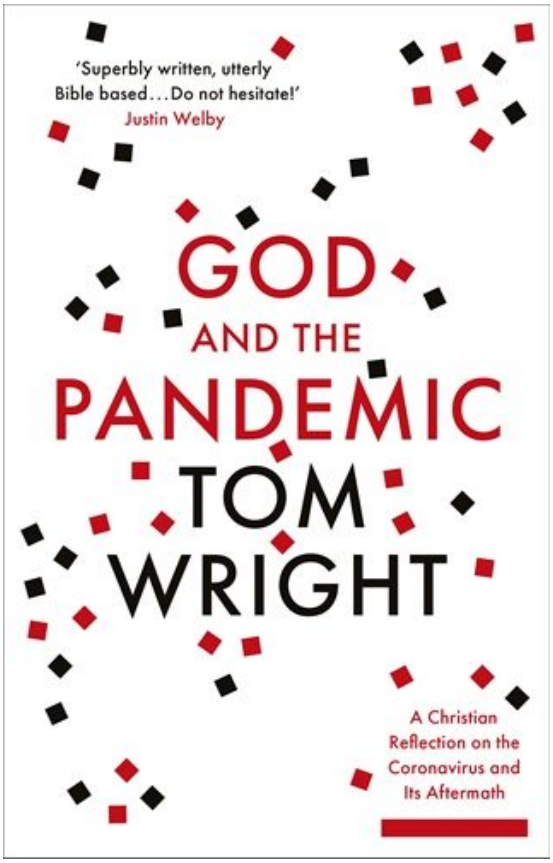
of a vocational recommitment for me. Tyson's words were in my reflections and I realised I had found something anthemic in them. It isn't complicated. It's just that we need to be God's people.

It is time.

We are God's people, we are disciples of Jesus. Within this broken, loved world, it is our time for beautiful resistance.

Review: God And The Pandemic

The Christian faith is *relevant.* At least, it's meant to be.



We have, of course, skewed our definition of "relevant" to mean something like "trendy, hip, and attractive to young people." Relevance is actually deeper than that. It is about being connected, responsive, and impactful with respect to the

real moment. 2020 is a very real moment.

In the midst of the pandemic the relevance of following Jesus has been (understandably) questioned. The doors of Christian churches have been shut, our liturgical and summer festivals halted. The rites and rituals for births, marriages, and deaths, have been cancelled, postponed, or severely curtailed. What are we left with?

Some have given a utilitarian defense: We have kept foodbanks open. We have provided meals, and pastoral care networks. We have coordinated volunteers, and generally been facilitators of decent folk. It's true. But others have done that too.

Some have slipped into seize-the-moment optimism: We have expanded our horizons. We've gone online. We're more accessible then ever before. Our viewer numbers are bigger than our former congregations. This is great. We have responded well. But so have others. What makes this distinctively *Christian*?

Real relevance happens at the level of our core message and way of life. For us, it is all about Jesus. If Jesus is relevant, then Jesus makes *sense*, and Jesus makes *sense of life*. This is the essense of the Scriptures; the Bible is not some abstract articulation of doctrine, it is *applied* belief which grows from the intervention of God in real times and places. As people devoted to Jesus, our words and actions are meant to be similarly connected, responsive, and impactful. Frankly, we should have something to *say*.

Many have said things poorly. Leaving aside the ridiculousness of prosperity preachers naming and claiming immunity and right-wing political conservatives anathematising face-masks, even the estimable John Lennox has asked *Where is God in a coronavirus world?* but doesn't do much more than reiterate his defense against New Atheism. Relevance isn't just about seizing a new opportunity to say the same things in the same

ways, it's about showing how the same truths are alive enough to connect with, respond to, and impact a new set of circumstances; the gospel is not defeated by shifts in context.

Tom Wright's *God and the Pandemic*, is relevant, properly relevant.

It's short, it's easy to read, and it's substantial. It is simple. Five chapters: Introduction to the context, followed by relevant expositions of the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament, and a conclusion asking "where do we go from here?"

And it is not trite. In fact, the essence of Wright's message is to push back at our propensity for platitudes. To read the signs of the times isn't about digging in to the moment to find some hidden "inner cosmic moral mechanism" (p17), as if 2020 locates us on the end-times roadmap for those who are privy to a plan. It's about locating *ourselves* within the revealed heart of God and the divine narrative of his history.

Necessarily, that centres us on Jesus. "The minute we find ourselves looking at the world around us and jumping to conclusions about God and what he might be doing, *but without looking carefully at Jesus*, we are in serious danger of forcing through an 'interpretation' which might look attractive… but which actually screens Jesus out of the picture." (pp19-20). "If there is one God, and if he has come in the person of his own son to unveil his rescuing purposes for the world, then there can be no other signs, no other warning events, to compare with this one" (p22). "Jesus is already reigning", he assures us, his "rule over this world" is a *present* one, "starting with his resurrection and ending when he has finished the work of subduing all 'enemies' – the last of which is death itself, a very relevant consideration at this time (1 Corin. 15.25-26)" (p24).

> *If you want to know what it means to talk about God being 'in charge of' the world, or being 'in control', or being 'sovereign', then Jesus himself instructs you to rethink the notion of 'kingdom', 'control' and 'sovereignty' themselves, around his death on the cross. (Page 25)*

Wright reaches into the Scriptures and shows how Jesus is *presently present.* That is relevance. He is neither located in the past with dusty words of lore, or waiting in the future with fantastical notions of shallow victory. Jesus is present, ruling, reigning, working, within the broken plagued world.

The demonstration and inauguration of that ruling, reigning work is the cross. And therefore the victory, the hope, the renewal, and all the other things we're looking for in this present moment, is also found there. Pointing to the episode of Lazarus' death, Wright reminds us how the King brings the Kingdom of God: "He just weeps. And then – *with the authority born of that mixture of tears and trust* – he commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb" (p28, emphasis mine). How much more the authority revealed in the pain of Gethsemane? How much more the authority revealed at Calvary? Christ's power is the form of authority that is made strongest in weakness, and which we discover by *sharing* in the suffering of Christ as we (relevantly!) engage with this world.

The clearest call from Wright, then, in this season, is to *lament*. We weep, we mourn, and we respond as the Holy Spirit empowers us within that helplessness. Isn't that the sort of kingdom that Jesus envisages, inherited by the meek and those who mourn and those who are poor in spirit (crf. the beatitudes)? Isn't that a conceivable *embrace* of the current moment?

> *…God does send thunderbolts – human ones. He sends in the poor in Spirit, the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers, the hunger-for-justice people. They are the way God wants to act*

> *in his world…. They will use their initiative; they will see where the real needs are and go to o meet them. They will weep at the tombs of their friends. At the tombs of their enemies. Soem of them will get hurt. Some may be killed. That is the story of Acts, all through. There will be problems, punishments, setbacks, shipwrecks, but God's purposes will come through. These people, prayerful, humble, faithful, will be the answer, not to the question Why? But to the question What? What needs to be done here? Who is most at risk? How can we help? Who shall we send? God works in all things with and through those who love him. (Pages 34-35)*

Wright's book, therefore, has a prophetic edge. A lot of our church energy has gone into shoring ourselves up, battening down the hatches. We are either fearful or comfortable with respect to how disturbed our church meetings and finances are. But those things are irrelevant. We are not about re-spinning our strength for the "new normal", we are to be moved by lament in the gift of the present time.

We *groan* with all creation, Paul tells us in Romans, as we long for the completion of it all. This is a revelation in *our* Scriptures, the word of the Lord to *us.* Can we not proclaim to this world, by giving voice to this groan? Do we not know the deep joy of meeting the Spirit of adoption, the Spirit of the Father, the Spirit of Jesus, who also groans within us? A happy dapper brave face will just reveal ourselves. But if we groan with his Spirit, we don't just have some sort of chance of experiencing an awareness of Jesus, we find ourselves being sent in the same way he was sent, sharing in his authority, following his commission. "We hold the vision and the reality side by side as we groan wih the groaning of all creation, as as the Spirit gorans within us so that the new creation may come to birth" (p74).

This, then, is also a *vocational* book. If there is any utilitarian potential in this pandemic it is this: that it may

catalyse the church to remember itself, by remembering Jesus and the raw, almost primal nature of his kingdom. The tears of the King are the pathway to a new creation and Wright calls us to it.

> ***The followers of Jesus are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain.*** *(Page 42)*

Wright does unpack some of the outworking of it all. He dips into how Christians have turned their groans into actions in the past, willing to care where the state has not, and so showing how God's kingdom is different to the world. He cautions against the privatising of worship through the prolonged pivot to online services. He warns of following the "secularising lead" – "The sign of the new creation, from the ministry of Jesus forward, has been the healing presence of Jesus himself, and his death and resurrection above all" (p69). There is a necessary place for public worship, public help, public speech as a way to express God's Kingdom. The world is destabilised, and the "pagan subtexts" (p 72) of our secularised situation will play out in a fight between the gods of money, health, and deadening pleasure.

These are not unprecedented times. But this is a season that is forcing us to be honest. This is the case for the Western world particularly, and the Western church as well. Wright's book helps express that honesty, and perhaps some repentance. If nothing else, it helps us groan well.