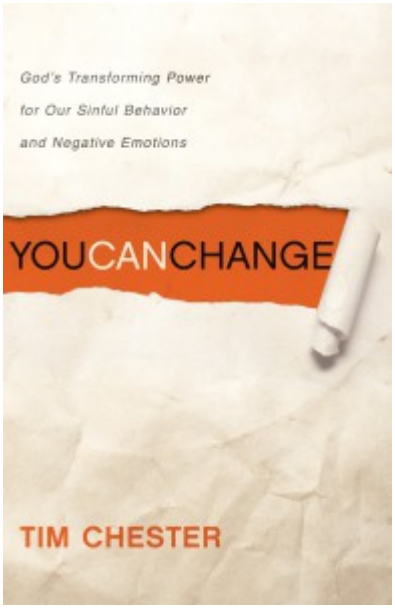
Review: You Can Change

Gill and I have read many books during our life in ministry. Many are helpful, a few are frustrating, and quite a lot are downright disappointing. But some are set apart by being theologically robust and wonderfully relevant and accessible. These are the books that we end up buying multiple copies of and giving away.



It's been a long time since I came across a book that fits into this category. I have found one with Tim Chester's *You Can Change: God's Transforming Power for Our Sinful Behavior and Negative Emotions*. Chester himself describes it as an "anti-self-help book written in the style of a self-help book" which is probably why I like it so much; it subverts all that pop-psych spiritualised self-discovery claptrap that's out there.

The book was referred to me after I spoke at a Men's Weekend Away held by our church. By God's grace among the fruit of that weekend, a number of men are self-motivated to meet together regularly for peer-led discipleship, nurture and accountability. It was they that discovered this book. It is a fantastic resource.

The felt-need addressed by *You Can Change* is, in the broadest view, the perceived irrelevance of typical church life. In that stereotype the things of church – spirituality, theology, community – are valued and appreciated, but with a frustration that they don't seem to *do* anything. The gospel of Jesus can, in some sense, be understood, expressed, and even promoted;

and yet at the same time it can feel like nothing ever changes. The struggles, temptations, failings and flaws of our very person remain unaddressed and sometimes unabashed. The gospel moves around us at arms length and our maturation stalls in an eddy of "sinful behaviour and negative emotions."

The beauty of Chester's book is that he doesn't attempt to meet this felt-need by filling the gap between gospel and personal experience with his own ten-step branded model of success-for-the-motivated-Jesus-man; he simply reflects on how to *close* the gap by applying the gospel as directly as he can to the areas of personal life where change is wanted.

From the "personal experience" side of the gap he encourages his readers to be considering a "change project" as they read; a type of negative behaviour or emotion, or "it might be a Christian virtue, a fruit of the Spirit that you feel is particularly lacking in your life" (p21). Each chapter ends with questions for reflection that allow the specific area of change to be engaged. It's the sort of thing that is perfect to stimulate discussion in a small accountability group. The structure of the book makes this clear; the chapter titles are:

> *What would you like to change?*
> *Why would you like to change?*
> *How are you going to change?*
> *When do you struggle?*
> *What truths do you need to turn to?*
> *What desires do you need to turn from?*
> *What stops you from changing?*
> *What strategies will reinforce your faith and repentance?*
> *How can we support one another in changing?*
> *Are you ready for a lifetime of daily change?*

These questions are answered from the gospel side of Chester's approach. Throughout Chester is Christocentric, cruciform,

and fully appreciative of the providential sovereignty of God. Consider:

> *So whom do you want to be like? What would you like to change? Please don't settle for anything less than being like Jesus and reflecting the glory of God. (p20)*

Of significant value is the way in which Chester constantly takes the focus of ourselves and turns us towards God again and again. This is both in what we might call the *light* sense of re-apprehending the love of God, and it is also in the *heavy* sense of realising that our sin is also God-centred – a rejection of him, a rebellion, a hardening.

Wrestling with sinful behaviours is something we all share, myself included, and this is a useful corrective. It is so easy to almost romanticise destructive habits as a *wrestle*, a *battle,* or a *proving ground*. In this way we reinforce our attachment to those destructive ways as the self-affirming thing that I must overcome, thus eliminating any reliance on God's grace, and so once again pushing the gospel away to arms length.

> *We want to put things right. We want to think of ourselves as a "former user of porn" rather than a "porn addict."… For us, sin has become first and foremost sin against ourselves. If I sin, then I've let myself down. What I feel when I sin is the offense against me and my self-esteem, not the offense against God. (p25)*

In this way Chester has one of the best grasps on a biblical harmatology that I have encountered. As we duck and weave, it simply pokes and prods and reminds us that its not about us. We are not the solution, we must turn to Christ because "external activities can't change us… because sin comes from within, from our hearts" (p42). We need our hearts to be changed, and that has ever been God's work. Indeed, "we

become Christians by faith… we stay Christians by faith… we grow as Christians by faith," (p43) "God wants us to walk in obedience, not [our own] victory" (p118).

> *We're changed when we look at Jesus, delight in Jesus, commune with Jesus. But no one can embrace Jesus if still guilty of sin. And no one will embrace Jesus if still feeling the guilt of sin. So change begins only when we come under grace with its message of divine pardon and welcome. (p50)*

We are changed by God's grace, we are saved and sanctified by God's grace. By God's sovereign grace the Holy Spirit simply *is* at work in us, to change us. Our sin as Christians is not therefore a failure to turn to Christ, its a choice to **pull away from him**. This is Chester's **central comfort** and his **main provocation:**

> ***I used to think sanctification was a bit like pushing a boulder up a hill. It was hard, slow work, and if you lost concentration you might find yourself back at the bottom. But it's more like a boulder rolling down a hill. There's something inevitable about it, because it's God's work, and God always succeeds. The sad thing is that often I try to push the boulder back up the hill. I say in effect, "Don't change me yet, I like doing that sin." (p55)***

> *If we truly want the grace of holiness, we must get lower, humbling ourselves and leaving the lifting up to God. (p118)*

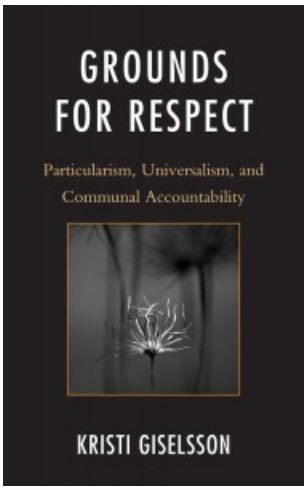
Around this central focus Chester addresses the felt-need questions. There is very little that is novel in his approach. Occasionally he seems to be close to some of the twelve steps. At other times what he proposes is basically a form of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. But it is all useful, and, above all, applicable.

There are two dangers that Chester avoids really well. The first is the risk of wrong ***passivity*** – 'if God has done it and is doing it then I don't have to do anything at all.' The second is the risk of wrong ***activity*** – 'if I can only fulfil this or achieve that then I will be OK.' He doesn't avoid this by silence. There *are* practical suggestions, and proposed exercises, elements of choice that engage with the nominated *change project*. In summary they are:

> *1. Keep returning to the cross to see your sin canceled and to draw near to God in full assurance of welcome.*
> *2. Keep looking to God instead of to sin for satisfaction, focusing on the four liberating truths of God's greatness, glory, goodness and grace.*
> *3. Cut off, throw off, put off, kill off everything that might strengthen or provoke sinful desires.*
> *4. Bring sin into the light through regular accountability to another Christian*
> *(p173)*

It's the fourth point that has been the context in which I have read this book: the community of a men's weekend and the groups that are subsequently developing. My hope and prayer is that for the men who read this book, myself included, that grace-filled community, which is so utterly absent in our pious illiberal secularist world, will be the place where Christ is met anew, and reflected in our individual and communal life.

Review: Grounds for Respect



It's taken me a while to digest this book by local academic and author, Kristi Giselsson. Kristi is a compassionate and articulate philosopher who has made balanced and thoughtful contributions to the public debate on a number of social issues recently.

This book *Grounds for Respect: Particularism, Universalism, and Communal Accountability* is a published version of her doctoral thesis in philosophy at the University of Tasmania. It is an exploration of "the question of what grounds are needed in order to justify respect for others." (Page 1). This is a fundamental question, the diverse answers to which contribute a great deal to the unspoken (and often unknown) assumptions that shape and guide the cross-purposed conversations that epitomise public dialogue.

Giselsson's contribution is to explore this using philosophical analysis and critique. This necessarily involves a philosopher talking about philosophers, because that is how such an analysis works: positions are described, clarified, analysed for their differences; their implications are drawn, their internal and external logic put under test; and finally a path of good thought and good conscience is found through the heady tangle of these broad-shouldered giants.

For myself, this was my first introduction to this level of philosophical treatise. I came to the book motivated by the

practical and socio-political applications: when you're talking about personhood issues such as abortion, euthanasia, marriage, freedom of speech and so on, then the nature and basis of *respect* is of significant relevance. I was struck, however, by the philosophical exploration itself.

I have only had one experience like it, when I first studied church history in my BMin studies, suddenly I had insight into where people where coming from, what motivated them, and why. Similarly, Giselsson's exploration of the pedigree of philosophical thought, the sort of thought that is currently and actively applied in our Western World, gave me new insights. It also made me thirsty to learn more, hence my current little project.

Giselsson's thesis is that "some form of *universalism* is needed to ground respect for the particular; in order to justify why we should respect others" (Page 2). Universalism is the sense of *moral universalism* which asserts that there is a particular system of standard, morality or ethic that can be applied universally and which is not contingent on the particulars of a person (e.g. their rationality or autonomy). Giselsson also emphasises a foundational *humanism* as a necessary aspect of our notions of respect. This is "humanism" as an affirmation of an innate, non-contingent, ontological, and unique reality (and value) of the human person.

The form of Giselsson's argument therefore includes an exploration and ultimate rebuttal of posthumanist philosophers such as Derrida, Foucalt and Lyotard (all of whom I now want to read for myself).

> *…posthumanist critiques of universalist assumptions within humanism are themselves based on unacknowledged ethical assumptions of universal value and respect for others… (Page 2)*

> *…at the very heart of Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard's critique of humanism lay a moral judgment; that universalism is inherently unjust in its apparent exclusion of particular others… this ethical judgment is made without recourse to any justificatory philosophical grounds, but rather relies on the force of its rhetorical – and ultimately humanist – appeal alone. This ethical rejection of universal humanism has in turn had an enormous impact over a wide range of disciplines, but specifically in those areas of scholarship that deal with those traditionally marginalized within Western philosophy…" (Page 117)*

The broad brush strokes of the argument might be characterised by breadth and depth. This first part of the book is a consideration of depth – is anything less than universalism enough to provide a coherent basis for respect? Giselsson shows that posthumanism either fails to provide for respect, or where it asserts its claim that it can, it has actually slipped into the universalism (albeit usually of a less caricatured sort) that is trying to be avoided.

The second part of the book looks at the breadth question and therefore tests the bounds of humanism. In particular, could animals be included as "human" to the extent that respect can be both encapsulated and applied? This second consideration tests utilitarian approaches such as that of Singer. Giselsson shows that while a utilitarian approach looks to assess a person's particular characteristics or functions to justify respect, a humanist approach asserts common ontological or innate grounds that are more robust.

By way of example:

> *Dismissive views of the elderly and those suffering from dementia are only affirmed by utilitarian principles that emphasize the greater good of society and the comparative worthlessness of a cognitively impaired life.*

(Page 175)

Having drawn the broad boundaries. Giselsson turns to those who thinking is within the bounds of universalist humanism and examines their formulation for grounds for respect. The thread being followed here is not the extent of human being but the characteristics – self-determination, self-creativity, accountability, subjecthood and the like are all explored. She finds them wanting for her purposes:

> *I have also argued that current Western liberal and humanist theories that attempt to readdress the foundations needed for universal respect still conceptualize these grounds in terms of what characteristics an individual must possess in order to qualify for equal moral consideration. These grounds still revolve around traditional notions of moral personhood, these being selfdetermination, rationality and autonomy; and they inevitably exclude all humans not possessing such qualities. (Page 259)*

Giselsson therefore posits her own formulation of human being, which has to do not with biology or economic characteristics but with our "*way* of being" (Page 260). She therefore emphasises *community* as a necessary and innate part of human personhood and demonstrates that a concept for respect can rest upon the operation of accountability within and from the human community. She explores this conception for inconsistencies and negative implications and concludes:

> *The ontological foundation I have offered, while partial rather than complete in its conception, seeks to balance the tension between particularism and universalism by showing a structure of human morality that is irreducibly communal in its practice. Moreover, while arguing that the inter-dependent practices of social standards of value and reciprocal accountability are thoroughly communal in nature, the universal standard of value implied by the assumption of*

> *reciprocal accountability – that each human is an end in themselves – ensures that justice is not reduced to communal consensus alone, as this standard provides for the possibility of respect for particular individuals beyond the relative nature of localized and particular norms (Page 296)*

The foundation that Giselsson offers is indeed "partial rather than complete" because while she circumscribes respect with the well-argued conception of communal accountability she stops short, understandably, before filling that notion with articulations of what particular behaviours or attitudes or beliefs might be worthy of being held to account. Therefore, while she has demonstrated grounds for respect without recourse to divine revelation, I question whether she could build upon those grounds without doing so.

This book took some time to digest. It made me realise how little I know and how much I need to know about the philosophical tendrils that generate and move the values and people of our society. There is so much lack of respect, belligerence and assertions and misuse of one another in Western Society. Much of it comes from those sections of society who espouse care and tolerance and love yet find it so hard to articulate respect and understanding and community outside of their own narrow bands.

This book has made me thirsty to know more, to explore in particular some of the 20th Century philosophers who influenced the current generation of culture-shapers. To that end this book has whet my appetite. And that makes it a good book!