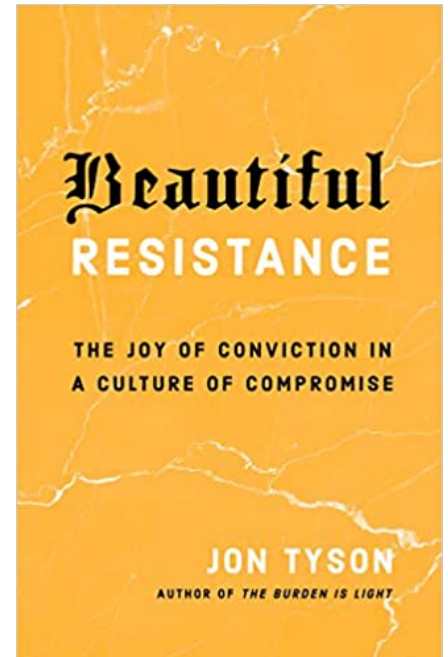


# Review: Beautiful Resistance – The Joy of Conviction in a Culture of Compromise

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 cliché 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 Millennials 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, the marginalized would be empowered, and 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 greatness 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 pseudo-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)*

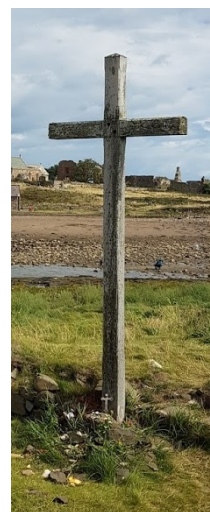
Throughout it all, there is a common thread. This book is a work of *applied ecclesiology*. **This is a book about how to be the church**, without guile.

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.

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## **Q&A: How do we hold both conviction and humility?**

**Sarah**, responding to my previous post, asks:

*Hi Will, could you write another blog post on what conviction and humility look like? Speaking truth to power as you say.*

*Conviction is essential for obedience; it doesn't forsake humility. And if we are saying and doing things that our society agrees with, they will recognise humility. But if we are humbly speaking God's truth that is at odds with the world around us, it won't be liked, it will be hated, and the world won't see any humility at all because we are pointing to an authority higher than all others. We endure, we bless, we answer kindly, we are humble. But we will have to be prepared to not be seen as humble whilst we are bowing the knee to the Lord Jesus?*

***[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]***

Thanks Sarah, and to others who have asked me if I could follow up on my previous post that deals with a perceived incoherence between two aspects of the gospel:



1. The truth-claim that Jesus is Lord. (The *message* of the gospel).
2. The character of humility. (The *mode* of the gospel).

As a wise friend commented, "Great stuff, Will. You outlined the dilemma well. I'd like to hear a fleshing out of the solution a bit more." This is my attempt.

I'm not going to ground this attempt in anything more profound than my own experience and an aspiration towards common sense.

It begins with an agreement with the premise of the question: the Christian call is towards both conviction *and* humility. These two are not at odds. In fact, in the Christian worldview, **conviction and humility cohere**, that is, they go together and can't be separated.

And I also agree with the premise that, in the end, the fact of this can't be determined by other people; it is centred on Jesus. This is point of contention, perhaps. Almost by definition, humility involves an awareness of others, a willingness to listen, to be open to being changed and moved by someone and not hardened towards them. Paul is right: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." (Philippians 2:3,4)

The key to my thoughts is this: our other-awareness derives

from our Jesus-centredness. That is, our humble approach towards others, in the end, relies upon us being found in Jesus, for Jesus, to Jesus. That is, **our conviction about the gospel is the source from which our humility derives**. There are a number of senses to this:

**Firstly**, there is a sense in which **Jesus is the greatest example of humility**. We saw that in the previous post when we looked at Philippians 2:6-8. To be apprentices of Jesus is to have the same “mind of Christ” and approach others in his mode. This is essentially “WWJD”, which isn’t always easy to practice: sometimes being silent, sometimes speaking up, sometimes standing against, sometimes submitting. Whatever the exact behaviour, the heart is humble.

**Secondly**, there is a deeper sense in which **Jesus enables us to be humble**. Humility is aware of others, but there can be a flip-side to that. I am also other-focused when I am driven by fear, pride, panic, hate, lust, and so on. If my sense of identity and worth is bound up in others, then it is impossible to be truly humble. If my identity is other-centred then any actions I do, even if they are nice and acquiescent will be at least tinged by self-preservation or self-fulfillment. Rather, if Jesus has captured my life (Galatians 2:20) then I am his and his alone; therefore I am free of obligation towards anyone else. I owe my eternal life to no-one else. Therefore *I am free to be humble*. John 2:24 describes this of Jesus, who in his humility, “would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people.” He was free of them, he was free to love them.

**Thirdly**, there is a similar sense in which the **Spirit of Jesus compels us to be humble**. There is a conceptual and practical aspect to this. Conceptually, the gospel is a great leveller: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast”

(Ephesians 2:8-9). Practically, we trust that the Spirit of Jesus is at work in us. "Christ love compels us" (2 Corinthians 5:14a), says Paul, and he is right. However that compulsion is manifest – speaking, listening, acting, resisting, or simply solidly *being* – Jesus doesn't just show us the way and give us the freedom to walk it, he leads, guides, propels us forward. The more we look to him, the more we are moved by his humble, life-giving Spirit.

I think the the premise of Sarah's question is right. Our humility towards others rests upon our dependence on Jesus. Because of this, we cannot, in the end, measure the "success" of our humility by whether it is recognised or not. It doesn't mean we ignore others, or dismiss other's opinions and beliefs – after all, Jesus, didn't do that. It *does* mean we don't fear others, slip into their traps, or concur with their brokenness; we are embraced by Jesus first, and we love others out of freedom.

And it won't always "work." It didn't work for Jesus. "If the world hates you," Jesus said (John 15:18), "keep in mind that it hated me first."

Gill and I have certainly known what means to be rejected. It does lead to some soul-searching. Many times, we have fallen short of the humility of the gospel, and have not been careful enough in manner or mode. Sometimes, we have compromised on the truth. At other times, I have had to conclude that I could do no more: My physical size has had me perceived as overbearing, and I can do little about that. I inhabit the role of vicar, and sometimes people respond to previous negative experiences of other vicars, and I can do little about that. All I can do is focus on Jesus and seek to be more like him.

But when it works, it works! I received a voice message today from a friend of mine. Here is someone who is fully committed to the gospel, and feels very free to share it. But there is

no sense (beyond ordinary human brokenness) that that conviction is not manifest in a Jesus-centred humility. Take a listen to Uncle Nige:

<http://briggs.id.au/jour/files/2020/02/Nige20200222.mp3>

And finally, I was struck today by an article that summed it up really well, from the point of view of Adam Neder, a Christian teacher. He conceives of humility as an *awareness of our weakness*, and therefore a dependence on the Spirit.

*Many of us who teach Christian theology are keenly aware of the poverty of our language in comparison to the reality of God. We try our best to speak truthfully and faithfully, but our words often seem thin and unreal, they taste like ashes on our tongues, and we wonder if our teaching will add up to anything more than wasted time. In extreme cases, this trajectory of thought and feeling can lead to a deadening acedia that takes root within us and leaves us hopeless or in despair.*

*But an awareness of our dependence on the Spirit moves us in the opposite direction. It eases the pressure by displacing the teacher from the center of the educational process. It relativizes our weaknesses. It does not eliminate them, and it certainly does not excuse them, but it assures us that God rises above them. And this awareness becomes an essential source of freedom and joy for those who believe and depend on it, whereas for those who do not, teaching can become a burden too heavy to bear—at least for teachers who want their students to know God personally.*

Humility is an awareness of the “poverty of our language” and a “displacing the teacher from the center.” When we come full of ourselves, with controlling systems, asserted techniques, and market-proven strategies, we are missing the mode of the

gospel. When we come dependent on the Spirit, that is the power and freedom to humbly gift ourselves to the world. Whether the world receives us or not is not for us to know or control.

That then is the only “solution” I can offer: Jesus first, the rest of it will follow.

Image credit: Pjposullivan