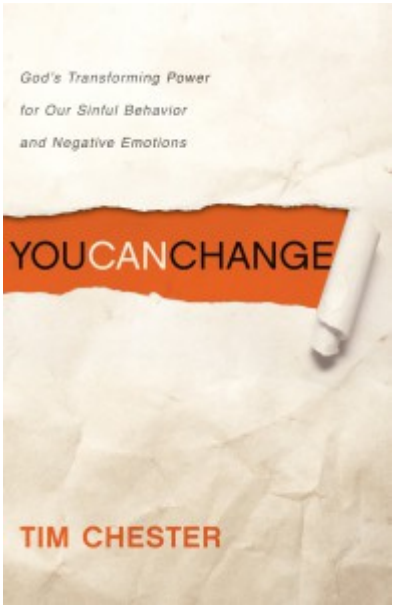
Review: You Can Change

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.

Sin

Two conversations have had me thinking about sin. Or to be more specific, what happens when we use the word "sin." What

actually gets communicated?

The first conversation was a wonderfully deep intelligent conversation in which I and my interlocutor were seeking mutual understanding on a whole swathe of issues. The relevant part involved a hypothetical where I was asked, "How would I speak to someone in situation X?" My response was, "I suppose I'd probably begin by saying 'Well, we are all sinners.'" The response to this was some genuine, well-hearted, dismay… "Oh yes, that's where you lot start from…"

What I intended in my response to the hypothetical was an attitude that eschewed holier-than-thou-ness or condemnation. For my part, "We are all sinners" is the great leveller. It says "I am not better than you" and "I cannot condemn you, for if I did I would also condemn myself."

It's not like this was beyond the capacity of my conversationalist to understand. The conversation delved into areas of a relevant common human experience: how we all wrestle with both the broken parts and healthy parts of our lives; how even the most well-intentioned relationships cannot hold selfishness at bay 100% of the time; how in our finitude (if nothing else) we each end up committing and suffering harm. This is simple reality that we both recognised.

But somehow the word "sin" or "sinner" didn't connote any of that…

The second conversation was with someone who has a Christian faith but lives in a non-Christian context. She shared the evisceral reaction to the word, because that reaction has been part of her world: "'Sin' doesn't work, it get's turned off and tuned out."

But, it was noted, there are words that do work. "Brokenness" is one of them. Everyone of us can acknowledge that we are broken. "Darkness" is another, recognising the fact that sometimes we just want what we want, we do what we know is

harmful and wrong. Even the phrase “rebellion against the things of life” gets more traction.

The conclusion of course, is not a new thought: The word “sin” doesn’t work as a word anymore. It doesn’t do what words should do – encapsulate and communicate meaning. It’s Christian jargon. But it’s worse than that, from this perspective **it signifies our self-justifying delusion, “sin” is our construct to justify our own existence and exercise power over others.**

This is not hard to understand, but it something we need to emotionally appropriate. An exercise for (the much caricatured) Christian conservatives might be something like this: You know how we feel when we get called bigots and hatemongers? We not only find it derogatory and disconnected from the reality of who we are, and hypocritically hateful, we also consider it as polemical self-justification: if they can maintain the rage against the bigoted Christians, they can get more votes. You know how that makes us feel? On the flip-side, for them, that’s what happens when we use the word “sin.”

So what do we do about it? Do we stop using the word? Perhaps. After all, our job is to communicate, and it’s not like the word is sacrosanct. Are we not preachers, homileticians? Our job is to connect the worlds and get the meaning across. Just as I don’t quickly use jargon words like “eschatology” or “propitiation” (although I do try to communicate the substance of them) perhaps we should also be careful in how we describe our harmatology.

It’s not like there isn’t precedent. In New Testament Greek “sin” is ἁμαρτία (harmatia) which connotes “missing the mark” or “wandering from the path” of God’s good ways; it speaks to a more fundamental wrongward inclination. It is also παράπτωμα (paraptoma) which has more of the connotation of

“trespass”, “wrongdoing” or “lapse”; it speaks more to specific actions that are wrong or done wrongly.

I think we are being lazy. Rather than communicating our intent, we use an ineffective jargon word, in which we expect even our interested listeners to do some semantical gymnastics in order to keep up with us. But even more worryingly, we end up lazy with our own thoughts, using a catch-all word where precision is necessary not only for mutual understanding, but for genuine expression that is also loving and caring.

Therefore, and to conclude, let us take a look at the pallid rainbow of the darkside of human existence. To be honest, even in my current use I wouldn’t apply the word “sin” in all these instances. But it seems, that when we use the word it may be taken that way. It’s worth a consideration; after all, if we use “sin” intending to communicate something akin to “wrongdoing” or “mistake” and it is heard as “evil”, we can do immeasurable harm.

EVIL: “Sin” pertains to those things that are utterly antithetical to the things of life. “Sin” reigned through the workings of Pol Pot and Hitler. “Sin” is manifest at it’s highest in serial killers and torturers. “Sin” is diabolical, demonic, irredeemably hell-bound.

CRUEL INTENTIONS: “Sin” pertains to those who delight in pain. “Sin” pertains to sadistic abusers who are fully aware of what they are doing. This “sin” is not so much a desire to win but a desire to defeat others, no matter the cost. If it is not quite an evil lust for power, it is certainly a lust for control.

DELIBERATE REBELLION/HARD HEARTEDNESS: “Sin” pertains to those who manifest selfishness at its utmost. “Sin” will cast others aside in order to get what is wanted. This “sin” is machiavellian in the extreme. Others are means to an end. Responsibilities cast aside, abandonment, and rejection. All

this is “sin.”

SENSUAL PASSIONS: “Sin” pertains to the idolatry of human passion. This is the domain of the “seven deadlies” – from raging anger, to rampant lustfulness, the flesh is king. Persons are reduced to animals, fresh meat, gold mines, for the satiation of appetite.

BONDAGE: “Sin” pertains to addictive behaviours. False comforts that are destructive, but provide temporary physical or emotional relief. Often in response to harms of the past, a destructive cycle becomes our own, and without consideration we ourselves become harmful.

NEGLIGENCE: “Sin” pertains to carelessness and neglect. Sins of omission which overlook or diminish others. Sins that refuse to see the image of God in the face of others. Racism and xenophobia, at the very least, are “sin” at this level.

MISTAKES: We stuff up. We hurt people. We harm them. And whether it is intended or not, such mistakes are our responsibility. We have done the wrong thing, and that is “sin.”

BROKENNESS: We are wounded, we are hurting. And often this means we believe wrongly about ourselves. We think we are evil, when evil has been done to us. We root our very person into shames that have been wrought upon us. At a very gentle level, this thinking about ourselves is wrong – and like all “sin” we must turn away from it.

As a final thought: In writing the above, the usefulness of the word “sin” in covering them all is that there is one answer to all these dark things: Jesus. From the defeat of evil at the top, to the gentle healing of brokenness at the bottom, he is the answer.

Review: Stendahl's The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West

I have embarked on a self-imposed project to explore the links between the New Perspective and a new apologia.

It seemed good to begin with Krister Stendahl's 1963 classic article, The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West. It's a short piece that is a good insight into the beginnings of the New Pespectives movement. It raises the basic questions pertaining to the disparities between the Pauline, Reformation and modern milieux and chases these down some hermeneutical rabbit holes.

Not that Stendahl goes too deep. It's a pleasant read which gives the broad brushstrokes and only glimpses of the obvious academic rigour that lies underneath.

It suits my purposes to summarise and condense his argument,

codifying and storing away the framework as I continue my wider exploration.

<u>Point #1</u> – The modern world wrestles with matters of introspection and individual conscience. This is not what Paul-the-fomer-Pharisee wrestles with.

Stendahl uses the psycho-social term "introspection" and "introspective conscience." It is crucial but short-hand language and he never unpacks exactly what he means by it. Here is a connection point between Pauline hermeneutic and the modern world which is at the heart of my project. The hermeneutical end of this connection is Stendahl's phrase "Pauline awareness of sin" for which, Stendahl suggests, we have a primarily Lutheran and Augustinian lens that is not entirely aligned with Paul's concerns.

Stendahl's insistence is that Paul has had no real problem with law keeping; after all, the Law includes elements of grace despite the Lutheran law-grace dichotomy. Paul's concern is with the Law itself, not with the keeping of it.

> *It was not to him a restoration of a plagued conscience; when he says that he now forgets what is behind him (Phil 3:13), he does not think about the shortcoming of his obedience to the Law, but about his glorious achievements as a righteous Jew, achievements which he nevertheless has now learned to consider as "refuse" in the light of his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. (200-201)*

Yes, there is an impossibility about keeping the law. But the real issue is that even when Paul is righteous 'according to the Law' it is nothing to the grace now revealed in Jesus.

The communal & convenantal emphases of the New Perspective is apparent here. For Stendahl, Paul's concern is not to assuage individual conscience but to demonstrate that the two communities – those who have lived under the old covenant of

Law, and those who have been a Law unto themselves – now must approach God in the same way, through Christ.

<u>Point #2</u> – Paul-the-Christian's introspection is not shaped around a personal wrestle with sin.

A comparison is made here between the Pauline world and the world of the Reformation in which Luther stood firmly on the legacy of Augustine, who was the "first modern man" (205) who "may well have been one of the first to express the dilemma of the introspective conscience" (203).

> *"It is in response to their [the Augustine/Lutheran milieu] question, "How can I find a gracious God?" that Paul's words about a justification in Christ by faith, and without the works of the Law, appears as the liberating and saving answer… (203)*

> *Augustine and the Church was by and large under the impression that Paul dealt with those issues with which he actually deals: 1) What happens to the Law (the Torah, the actual Law of Moses, not the principle of legalism) when the Messiah has come? – 2) What are the ramifications of the Messiah's arrival for the relation between Jews and Gentiles? For Paul had not arrived at his view of the Law by testing and pondering its effect upon his conscience; it was his grappling with the question about the place of the Gentiles in the Church and in the plan of God… (204)*

Paul's chief concern was about the inclusion of the Gentiles into Christ-centred grace, not the exclusion of sin-wracked Jews from grace because of their Law. Paul's own "conversion" is not so much an individual relief of conscience, but a prophetic (and very Jewish) call to be the Apostle to the Gentiles to gather those who are now included.

To break into commentary for a second – this is a useful consideration. I recognised many years ago that the great

evangelistic sermons of Acts do not accord with the evangelistic shape of the modern age. Here I see in Stendahl an exploration of why this is so.

<u>Point #3</u> – The Introspective Conscience framework gives rise to hermeneutical difficulties.

This section is the most valuable part of the article. Stendahl unpacks some considerable implications. The launching point is this:

> *Where Paul was concerned about the possibility for Gentiles to be included in the messianic community, his statements are now read as answers to the quest for assurance about man's salvation out of a common human predicament. (206)*

Paul's concern is to demonstrate that

> *Once the Messiah had come, and once the faith in Him – not "faith" as a general religious attitude – was available as the decisive ground for salvation, the Law had done its duty as a custodian for the Jews. (206)*

But

> *In the common interpretation of Western Christianity, the matter looks very different. Once could even say that Paul's argument has been reversed into saying the opposite to his original intention. (206)*

The Law, which was for Paul an obsoleted custodian *for the Jews* until the coming of Christ (in which Christ himself is prefigured in the gracious aspects of the Law), has become the tool of introspection – a custodian that takes *each of us individually* to Christ by crushing us with its righteousness.

There is a true disparity here and Stendahl helps us know what is at stake. It is the shape of the gospel of itself, and

certainly the defining points of an effective kerygma.

> *Paul's argument that the Gentiles must not, and should not come to Christ via the Law, i.e., via circumcision etc., has turned into a statement according to which all men must come to Christ with consciences properly convicted by the Law and its insatiable requirements for righteousness. (207)*

<u>Point #4</u> – Modern introspective exegesis can be rebutted.

Stendahl finally gets to his positive consideration of the matter and gives a quick rendition of the New Perspective lens (and, yes, he does use the term "new perspective" in passing (214)). My summation is this:

1) Sin is real. "Rom 1-3 sets out to show that all – both Jews and Gentiles – have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God." This is properly conceived as covenantal sin of peoples, not the travailing conscience of individuals. (208)

2) Paul's personal awareness of sin is not a present wrestle of conscience, but a past fact of his persecuting actions against the people of God. Paul uses this to speak of the covenantal inclusion of the godless – as a rhetorical device, not a conclusion. If "Paul's enmity to Jesus Christ and the church" can be "gloriously and gracefully blotted out", how much more can God justify the "weak and sinful and rebellious" (209)

3) Paul's consideration of present troubles is one of "weakness" and attack from the enemy. When it comes to matters of conscience he more readily speaks of victory in Christ and "his good conscience before men and God." (210)

4) Romans 7, which is meant to be the epitome of introspection is actually an "acquittal" of the Christ-focussed ego, "not one of utter contrition." This is because Romans 7 is an argument in which good (but ineffective and obsoleted) Law can

be made distinct from “bad Sin.”

> *“If I do what I do not want, then it is not I who do it, but the sin which dwells in me.”… This distinction makes it possible for Paul to blame Sin and Flesh, and to rescue the Law as a good gift of God.” (212)*

> *We should not read a trembling and introspective conscience into a text which is so anxious to put the blame on Sin, and that in such a way that not only the Law but the will and mind of man are declared good and are found to be on the side of God. (214)*

Stendahl’s considerations are not without difficulty, both exegetically and practically. I am driven to read Romans in particular and to weigh Stendahl up against Scripture. I am concerned practically in the downplaying of present sin in terms of weakness and enemy attack; it seems but a variation on “the devil made me do it.”

Nevertheless, this has been an intriguing and enjoyable beginning to my little project. I will move from here either backwards to Augustine, or forwards to Dunn and Wright and others who have progressed the New Perspective. I’ll probably do both.