



CHRISTOPHER A. HUTCHINSON
FOREWORD BY DAVID WELLS

REDISCOVERING HUMILITY

WHY THE WAY UP IS DOWN

“*Rediscovering Humility* is a mind-enriching and heart-engaging study of a Christian grace that is as important as it is neglected. Pointing us to some of the Christian church’s very best hymnody and devotional writing, Chris Hutchinson reminds us how central humility is to Christian piety. Most importantly, Hutchinson shows us how that piety is rooted in the teaching of Scripture. I warmly recommend this book.”

Guy Prentiss Waters, James M. Baird, Jr. Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, MS

“Humility is a crucial and tricky topic about which to write. An author is expected to be an expert in his field but humility eschews expertise. Only an author who recognizes his deep need for humility is qualified to write on humility. And for that reason I’m grateful for this book by Chris Hutchinson, a desperately needed study written by an eminently humble man.”

Joe Holland, Pastor, Christ Covenant Presbyterian Church, Culpeper, VA; Assistant Editor, *Tabletalk* magazine

“How do you properly recommend a book on humility when blurbs seem consciously designed to hype and pander? How best to commend its author for a job well done? Perhaps with Farmer Hoggett’s words to Babe after the pig carefully and confidently accomplished an equally unlikely feat and made it seem easy: “That’ll do”

Joel White, Lecturer in New Testament, Giessen School of Theology, Germany

“As a woman in a church, I worry sometimes that the voices of the lowly are too often dismissed without a good listen. It takes a robust humility for leaders to not merely tend to the needs, but also attend to the thoughts of those on the margins. Chris Hutchinson’s intelligent, often funny, and truly accessible treatise on the central virtue of humility ought to be required reading for all of us.”

Paige Britton, Curator of the Grass Roots Theological Library

“Humility? We know we should desire this Christian virtue, but it comes at a steep cost—to self-love, self-fulfillment, self-promotion. Informed by much wisdom from the church’s past and fueled by careful interaction with Scripture, in this helpful book Chris Hutchinson reminds us that pride is idolatry. Humility, by contrast, is essential to the gospel, for it accompanies God’s grace shown to us in Christ. If you are Christian, you need this book. Take up and read.”

Shawn D. Wright, Author; Professor of Church History, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Pastor of Leadership Development, Clifton Baptist Church, Louisville, KY

“In his timely new book, Hutchinson not only helps readers understand humility from a biblical perspective, he shows us our urgent need for it. In particular, he demonstrates why, in this culture that so cavalierly rejects truth, we need humility to discover it, embrace it, and then graciously declare it.”

Richard Doster, Author; editor of *byFaith*, the magazine of the Presbyterian Church in America

“My first thought in reading this book is that I haven’t read much like it for a long time. I’ve come to value books on the Christian life based on how much they’re immersed in the Scriptures. As it’s filled with biblical wisdom, this book delivers. It’s also steeped in the practical theology of earlier generations who gave great credence to the value of corporate humility in the life of the church. We would do well to heed the same counsel today, and this book is a good start.”

David V. Silvernail, Jr., Senior Pastor, Potomac Hills Presbyterian Church, Leesburg, VA

“I had the amazing privilege of sitting under Pastor Hutchinson’s faithful and humble preaching in college. *Rediscovering Humility* is a uniquely thorough and challenging appeal on the nature of corporate humility as God’s people. With each page, I found myself saying, ‘we need this.’ In reading *Rediscovering Humility* may we remember that in Christ the way up is down and the beautiful joy that comes with bold self-forgetfulness.”

SharDavia Walker, Author; Regional Women’s Director, Campus Outreach Lynchburg, VA

“Humility is the bedrock of Christian maturity. It is not a spiritual gift, though it is a mark of the presence of the Holy Spirit in life. Instead it is the product of gratitude. Here this truth is both endorsed and explored. With careful exegesis allied to practical understanding our minds are expanded and our hearts challenged. In this slender volume humility is restored to the place reserved for it by Jesus.”

Robert M. Norris, Teaching Pastor 4th Presbyterian Church, Bethesda, MD

“Chris Hutchinson offers a compelling case that humility is the chief of all virtues and at the center of God’s plan of redemption. Basing his expositions on Scripture and guided by some of the great expositors of the past, he provides rewarding practical expositions of what it means to make this often neglected ideal the central paradigm of the Christian life.”

George M. Marsden, Author; Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History Emeritus, University of Notre Dame

“How could someone write a book on humility without becoming puffed up and self-congratulatory? You would write it as Chris Hutchinson has done by not pointing to yourself and your achievements, but by pointing and submitting to the precepts and exhortations in Scripture. We know the drill: If you want to be great in the kingdom of God you must become a servant of all; you must go the end of the line; you must wash the feet of others. The words come easily enough, but in actual practice true humility lags way behind. We readily see the application for others, but we fail to see it for ourselves. So admit the reality of your pride and humbly read *Rediscovering Humility*. You will be challenged to desire what Paul, the once proud Pharisee, deeply desired: ‘God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Galatians 6:14).”

Dominic Aquila, President, New Geneva Theological Seminary, Colorado Springs, CO

“Christopher Hutchinson’s *Rediscovering Humility* fixes our eyes on Christ and the cross, arguing that, as we drink more deeply of Christ and Him alone, humility becomes our defining feature. Like the gospel itself, this seems at first almost too simple and unadorned to be true, but as Hutchinson ponders humility’s beauty and logic, its ethics and witness, our eyes indeed turn from ourselves and toward God’s glory. I pray this would be so, for all who pick up this book and for their churches.”

Thomas Gardner, Author; Alumni Distinguished Professor of English, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA

“In the chest-thumping, opposition-shaming, attention-grabbing ethos of today’s popular culture, poverty of spirit is despised, meekness is confused with weakness, and humility is associated with losers. Chris Hutchinson’s detailed study of humility is just what the church needs if Christians are to avoid ‘losing our virtue,’ borrowing David Wells’ phrase, in the tsunamis of self-promotion that is our contemporary world.”

Terry L. Johnson, Author; Senior Minister, Independent Presbyterian Church, Savannah, GA

“I need all the help I can get in cultivating humility. I am, therefore, glad for this book that helps me better understand it, want it, and apply it. Chris Hutchinson has mined Scripture, church history, and his own soul to find nuggets to share with proud, struggling Christians in the twenty-first century. ‘It takes one to know one,’ and because he knows himself well, he helps us a lot.”

David A. Bowen, Assistant Minister, Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis, TN; founding pastor, The Church of the Good Shepherd, Durham, NC

“Having worked in pastoral ministry with Chris Hutchinson for seven years, I observed in his life much of what he has written in this book. Pride and self-exaltation grow naturally out of man’s fallen condition. Genuine humility is the by-product of grace. Chris has done us a great service by reminding us that God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

Roland S. Barnes, Senior Pastor, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Statesboro, GA

“My brother has been working on this book for close to thirty years, and I have seen the beauty and impact its truths and themes have had on Chris’ family, friends, congregations, and I hope myself, for decades now. This book helps us to see that where there is humility there is kindness, courage, and integrity. And laughter. Lots of joy and laughter, even in suffering.”

Jeffrey D. Hutchinson, Coordinator of Church Planting, Mission Anabaino; Assistant Minister, Christ Presbyterian Church, New Haven, CT

“In *Rediscovering Humility*, Chris Hutchinson serves as a gentle pastor, weaving together biblical truth, personal experience, and insights from poets and philosophers throughout history. This book will bless and challenge your soul. As you read, your love for Christ will grow—your love for his sacrifice to atone for your pride and for his enabling power to display true humility.”

Stephen T. Estock, Coordinator, PCA Discipleship Ministries

“In this engaging book, pastor Chris Hutchinson invites us to a rediscovery of a revolutionary, uniquely Christian virtue—humility. A masterful teacher, Chris shows how humility is at the center of the person and work of Jesus Christ and therefore at the core of the Christian life. Though humility may not come naturally to us (what Christian virtue does?), and though humility may be (in our North American context) radically subversive and countercultural, Chris adeptly shows how humility is evidence of the sanctifying work of Christ in our lives. My humble opinion(!) is that you will be challenged and inspired by Chris Hutchinson’s rediscovery of humility.”

Will Willimon, Author; United Methodist bishop, retired; Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry, Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC

“In stating his case that humility has become a lost virtue in the Christian life, Chris Hutchinson winsomely restores humility to its proper place as the highest of Christian virtues. If you want a book on humility with ten steps to achieve it, skip *Rediscovering Humility*; however, if you want a book on humility that targets the heart itself, look no further.”

J. R. Foster, Southeast Area Coordinator, Reformed University Fellowship

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CHRISTOPHER A.
HUTCHINSON



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To all the unknown saints

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FOREWORD

The point about Christian faith is that those who are in Christ should actually become godly people. They are the ones who should be God-centered in their minds, God-fearing in their hearts, and God-honoring in all that they do. This God-centeredness should produce a preoccupation with living out the biblical virtues. How could it not? If Christians center their whole being on the triune God, then they are centered on one whose character is pure, joyous, holy love. If this God is in the center of their world, then in all that Christians think and do, they will want to reflect Him.

God's character of holy love, of course, is the fount of all virtue in life and the standard of all that is eternally right; it frames the Christian's whole perspective. The church's great preachers, in fact, were never very far from this thought—preachers like Chrysostom and Augustine, Martin Luther and John Calvin, John Owen and Richard Sibbes, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and John Stott. Why, then, are pointed and penetrating expositions of the Christian virtues so rare today?

I am inclined to think that the answer to this question lies in two main considerations. First, throughout the West today, people have migrated out of the older moral world in their minds and have drifted into a newer psychological world. When people inhabit a moral world, they think of things as being either right or wrong, good or bad. In a psychological world, few ethical judgments are ever made. In an earlier

time a person would have said, “I can’t do that because it is wrong.” Now a person is more likely to say, “I don’t want to do that because I am not comfortable with it.” People like this do not live in a world of ultimates but only one of choices—and those choices are made in the moment. The old moral order that once was fixed and objective has vanished. As the older moral world disappears, the practice of the virtues goes with it. Without a moral world, there is no virtue. Christian faith then becomes only a therapy, a way of helping people to feel better about themselves.

This leads to the second consideration: When Christians become indifferent to those truths that are ultimate, they lose all of their conviction. Believers lose their sense that some things are true, and others are not, that some things are right, and others are wrong. Whatever Christians then see or hear is then framed by nonchalance and indifference. This has passed into language as, “whatever . . .” and is usually accompanied by a shrug. Without conviction about what is ultimately true and right, Christians are simply unable to resist the tides of worldly thinking that roll in over them from television and movies, the workplace and its ethos, the taken-for-granted assumptions about life that meet them in every conversation. As conviction fades, Christian faith is diminished and soon it becomes just a thing that is small and very much of this world.

The reality, though, is quite different. Christian faith does not arise from people’s own nature, experience, or world. It is first and foremost from above because it is first and foremost from the eternal God who is other. It is about Christ whom the Father sent into the world from above. It is about an age that is breaking into today’s world as an antithesis. Today’s age is sinful. The age that Christ ushers is pure. Today’s age is passing. Christ’s is eternal. Christian faith, then, is about being given a spirituality that people do not have and will never have until they are in Christ.

It is in this other age from whence humility arises. In today’s age, pride is the coin of the realm. Today’s age is a world where people

think much about the self and much of the self. In this world, self-promotion, self-absorption, and the pursuit of self-esteem all seem quite natural. They are, in fact, natural but they are natural in the same way that all sin is natural. These preoccupations have no place in the kingdom of God. They are discordant, jarring, and ugly notes. Nothing is more beautiful, by contrast, nothing more enduring, than the alternative. The alternative to pride is humility—forgetfulness about the self. Humility is the least self-aware and least self-conscious of all the virtues. Humility comes from another place. It comes from the place that is always illumined by the grace, goodness, and glory of God. Humility comes from eternity.

Humility is the theme of this book, and I warmly welcome the contribution it makes to the Christian good. The book's descriptions and prescriptions are thoroughly biblical. Were believers to take to heart its plea for humility, the church would be mightily strengthened in both its life and witness. It would, in fact, become more godly.

David F. Wells
Distinguished Research Professor
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank all those who have contributed in various ways to the writing of this book. I want to thank the members of churches where I both taught and was taught humility: the Orthodox Congregational Church of Lanesville, Massachusetts; Grace Church in Roanoke, Virginia; the students of the Reformed University Fellowship chapters in South Carolina; various campus ministries here at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia; Trinity Presbyterian of Statesboro, Georgia, where I served as associate pastor; and finally, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Blacksburg, Virginia, where I currently pastor, and which graciously granted me a sabbatical to finish this book. I believe that theology is always done best when formulated together in the community of friends that make up a church, and so I thank each of my fellow members for their input.

For years, many friends and teachers have taught me humility by precept and example. Some of their stories have found their way into these pages, while others perhaps more worthy have been forgotten or neglected. I want to thank all of the pastors I have had the privilege of sitting under and those who have contributed to this book in unique ways. I would boast of them by name, but they do not need it. They know who they are.

I am blessed to serve in a church with an incredible assembly of godly and humble leaders who set an example for me. The same can

be said of the faithful leaders and friends in our sister churches around town and in our presbytery.

I must not overlook those who have been my adversaries from time to time. The crucibles they provided have forced me to see my own lacks and ever-present need of humility, and so I thank them.

I wish to acknowledge and thank those that read the manuscript and provided valuable corrections and insights. Paige Britton, Thomas Gardner, and Duncan Rankin were selfless in giving their time, energy, and vital encouragement to this project. I heartily thank Mike and Vicki Powell for the use of their beautiful farmhouse, which provided a setting for days of serene writing. I thank the coffee shop baristas who sustained me with their caffeine and cheerful service. In many ways, all of these people embodied this book before reading a page.

I wish to thank all the good folks and editors at New Growth Press for their kindness and hard work and for taking a risk on me. There are too many to mention, but I want to give special thanks to John Walt and to my patient and insightful editors, Beth Hart and Irene Stoops.

My greatest thanks go to my family. My parents, siblings, relatives, wife, and daughters are all precious in my sight, and this book is, among other things, a tribute to them. It was especially my devoted wife, Kirstan, who saw me through this work by her endless encouragement and enthusiasm, carrying me through many long days of writing and editing. She has embodied a life of humble, selfless service that I can only write about at best. She lives it and awaits a heavenly reward for all the ways she has served and loved me, and so many others, through the years.

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PREFACE

Right off, let us get this little bit over with: the following work on humility is one of which I am exceptionally proud. Obviously I jest, but only to illustrate two important truths. First, pride is all-pervasive. It is capable of turning any old thing into a curse, especially those things that are otherwise praiseworthy. Pride so easily masquerades as godliness that even the attempt to quell pride may just as easily feed it. Secondly, people are often reluctant to speak pointedly on the subject of humility because it so often eludes the very ones advocating it. And so a rather proud and otherwise ordinary person has undertaken this task—to write about humility. And yet I write in the confidence that wherever I fail my subject, I am forgiven. For to put confidence in my own humility would undercut the central thrust of the book itself.

Early after my conversion to the Christian faith, I became convinced of humility's centrality to the new life set before me. In addition to personal experiences and the wonders of Scripture, I was immensely impressed with the beauty of humility found in C. S. Lewis's writings. A couple of years later, I discovered the logic of humility in Jonathan Edwards's theology, and things started to fall together.

After that, I found myself suddenly deployed with the U.S. Army to a foreign and distant desert for several months. I had to limit my library to roughly the size of half a rucksack, and no work provided me greater stimulation than Andrew Murray's classic, *Humility*. Many years later I was given Richard Sibbes's *The Bruised Reed*—a work on

Christian sanctification with humility at its heart. In addition to these four authors, I have benefited from many other helpful thinkers from disparate sources, for no one tradition has a corner on humility.

I have also observed the church of our day, and have become convinced that the time has come for a fresh application of humility. Modern Christians have not basked deeply in humility's beauty, nor studied much its logic, nor practiced well its ethics. Humility has often been an afterthought, something perhaps to be included if kept in its place. This book is an explicit call to return to the ancient path of humility as the one pilgrimage most necessary for Christian faith. Its path must once again be blazed down the middle of churches, well-marked and well-trodden.

As such, this work focuses on what corporate humility should look like. Meekness should characterize not only individual believers but the whole body of Christ. I propose that a healthy church is first and foremost a humble church. I have not seen this corporate aspect of humility much considered, and I believe this neglect is palpable in the pride that permeates through today's church.

Yet I want to offer far more than a critique of today's Christian culture, for negative critique rarely helps anyone grow in humility. I hope to build a positive case for the centrality of humility to the Christian life and in the church. I want humility to show itself forth in all its truth, beauty, and goodness—something to be pursued even if never fully found before heaven. I have tried to build a positive, scriptural argument in each chapter. Suggestions for Christians today to better practice and promote humility are interspersed. When building a house on rocky ground, some demolition may be needed along the way, but hopefully when all is done, what remains is the house, not the smoke.

This book has come together like a big jigsaw puzzle of jumbled pieces—experiences, church history, and Scripture that have been collecting in my mind for years. As is fitting to the subject, I am far from

confident that I have entirely succeeded; instead it feels like that unsatisfactory puzzle with several missing pieces. Yet, it is the picture God ordained for me to complete, and I pray it is helpful to some as they assemble their own puzzles.

Thoughtful readers will soon discover that I have not said all that I could on the subject. There are doubtless blind spots in my observations, as well as skewed or overstated points. Addition and correction is welcome; that is the point. My main hope is that this little work may jump-start a dialogue on what humility should look like in today's church. This side of the grave Christians will always have room to grow lower. And in heaven itself, I expect that the study of humility will be never ending, always leading us to new places of joy and wonder.

Humility Introduced

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

—JAMES 4:4–10

CHAPTER ONE

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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO HUMILITY?

*Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,
who do his just commands; seek righteousness; seek humility;
perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD.*

—Zephaniah 2:3

*When a certain rhetorician was asked what was the chief rule
in eloquence, he replied, “Delivery;” what was the second rule,
“Delivery;” what was the third rule, “Delivery;” so if you ask me
concerning the precepts of the Christian religion,
first, second, third and always, I would answer, “Humility.”*

—Augustine¹

Most people seem to agree that humility is a helpful quality to throw into their personality mix, at least in theory. After all, humility wins friends and influences people. Humility is an admirable trait, something that polishes all one’s other assets. No one really dislikes humility—especially in someone else.

But that is not what I wish to say about humility. I do not wish to advance it as one more virtue to remember, one more pursuit to add to the calendar app. Humility is not something that can be picked up at the store on the way home and placed neatly in the cupboard, to be brought out when necessary. This book is not another attempt at self-improvement, one more feat to add to the to-do list.

I wish instead to advance humility as the central paradigm of the Christian life. I believe humility to be at the very heart of Christian faith and even to be the best paradigm of all proper thought regarding God, oneself, and others. Humility is the greatest prerequisite to faith in Christ and its most telling result. It is the alpha and omega of the gospel at work in God's people. Humility ought to be the most prominent centerpiece of any Christian worldview.

I believe that the final authority in religious matters is the Bible alone, and certainly, humility toward God, oneself, and others must be considered a religious matter. Therefore, I will not define humility from Merriam-Webster's dictionary, for as fine a definition as it might provide, it would not be authoritative.² Moreover, it is my belief that Scripture is as deep and rich as it is clear. The Bible is a collection of stories, poetry, and letters, and within these inspired collections, a subject like humility is dealt with in manifold ways. Humility's meaning and application is thus rich and complex. Hence, I have avoided a simple definition of humility, opting instead to provide one by the whole of this book. Insofar as it turns out to be biblical, it is a true definition.

Humility always promotes what is good, true, and beautiful, while pride only destroys the same—usually by subtle sabotage. If humility is not the king of all virtues, then at the least it is the ever-present jester, keeping the king in his place.

The Dethroning of Humility

*That religion I got in them way-back days is still with me.
And it ain't this pie-crust religion,
such as the folks are getting these days.
The old-time religion has some filling between the crusts.*

—Prince Bee³

Humility is not, in my experience, a subject much emphasized, discussed, or displayed within mainstream or evangelical Christianity.

When it is, humility is often only a tertiary or peripheral subject, something not to forget rather than something emphasized. Christians have instead more often clothed themselves with pride, though they may dress it up differently in various Christian traditions, sometimes even disguising it as humility itself. On the theological left, pride has frequently displaced humility in the name of progress, tolerance, and self-esteem. Those on the right, meanwhile, glory in their numbers or, eluding that, in their ability to remain pure while they watch others succeed. High churches tend to pride themselves in the wealth of their architecture and liturgy, while low churches exult precisely in their eschewal of the same. Humility has lost a central place in today's church and, therefore, in the average Christian's life. The general Christian culture, the public images of individual churches, and the realm of personal piety are all plagued with pride.

Christian Culture

Few evangelicals have grappled with the toll that this cultural accommodation takes on the message of the gospel. They have all but jettisoned such key themes as suffering, humility, meekness, courage, and truth from their thought.

—Rick Lints⁴

What topics circulate most around the general Christian culture? What subjects generate conferences and book publications? I have seen hundreds of conferences advertised and have attended a few, but I cannot recall a single major conference where Christian humility was a main topic. Christian conferences abound on all sorts of other good things: evangelistic methods, world missions, biblical financial principles, healthy marriages, and more. Rarely, in my observation, has a conference been centered on Christian humility. If humility is central to the Christian faith and if Christian conferences address topics important to the Christian faith, then why is humility rarely, if ever, explicitly addressed?

The exact same question can be asked of Christian publishing. One only need to visit the local bookstore or do a Google search to see that few works on the topic are available or well known other than Andrew Murray's little book, written a century ago.⁵ Humility may still have a prominent place in other popular Christian books, but this does not appear to be the case according to a simple review of chapter titles and indexes.⁶ For instance, in an appendix to *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Mark Dever lists twenty books written in the 1990s that either set forth various trends in contemporary church life or offer their own list of the values possessed by growing and/or healthy churches. Not once is humility explicitly mentioned as a goal or value to be sought by today's Christian churches.⁷ I doubt that things have improved much in the past fifteen years.⁸

I realize that this may sound like anyone harping on their pet subject, some singular detail of the Christian faith. I have heard similar complaints about the lack of books on a Christian view of recycling or a biblical perspective on spanking. But if my thesis is correct—that humility is not just a mere detail but is at the very heart of Christian faith—then this neglect is baneful.

There is a general absence of meekness as any sort of guiding principle at all. Conferences and books are almost always promoted in ways that conflict with scriptural injunctions against self-glorifying and self-heralding. Large, glossy pictures, boasts about numbers, incredible claims and promises, and key endorsements from celebrity theologians are the prevailing method of advancing an event or movement in today's Christian culture. In both the ends and the means of Christian publishing and conferences, humility is frequently sidelined.

The problem is not just that Christians do not talk about humility, but it rarely crosses the Christian mind that believers should be meek at all. In short, the humble mind-set no longer exists in Christian culture. While individuals in the limelight may themselves be humble, they have usually been unsuccessful in transferring that meekness to

the way their causes are advanced. The marketing machine has silenced humility, rather than itself being muzzled by Christian meekness. Yet, people are not helpless conformists to any cultural machine; they conform by choice. Christian conformity to vainglorious marketing methods demonstrates that the humble mind-set no longer exists in the general Christian culture—or at least that part which advertises itself.

Church Public Images

These hands have greeted over 600,000 converts.

—Caption under a picture of an evangelist's hands⁹

Another way to test the assertion that humility has lost its rightful place is to look at the public images of individual churches, that is, the things churches typically address, the way they advertise, and their stated goals and mottos. Is humility ever mentioned? Perhaps so, but I have yet to run across it.¹⁰ Most church advertisements tend to focus on their perceived strengths or uniqueness—why they ought to be considered over other churches. Pictures, interesting claims, and ministry lists abound. Often, the bigger the church, the bigger the advertisement, though they would seem to need it least. As in the world of business, success breeds success. The resulting portrait is of a crowded hodgepodge of competing churches where, in the interests of effective marketing, humility finds itself treated like the short, homely cousin left in back, perhaps blocked out of the family photo altogether.

Church vision statements are typically catchy, alliterated three-point cadence calls (e.g., exalt, equip, evangelize) meant to focus the congregation and staff on the same goal. If church leaders listen to the consultants, these slogans are most effective when they are hailed often and plastered everywhere. There are even churches where the unique church logo—not the cross—is found on the pulpit and in every corner. All is done in the name of marketing their particular brand in order to build their own congregation and reputation.

This type of overt, self-referential reductionism is quite new in the church, and it seems to have been borrowed more from modern industrial culture than from the depths of Scripture. If folks such as Neil Postman are right, that the forms of communication effect content itself, is it even possible to convey Christian humility through the use of boardrooms, branding, PowerPoint, and Twitter?¹¹ Is it possible to adapt the corporate methods of successful worldly ventures without also imitating their worldly pride? If the question is not asked in the first place, then the subject of Christian humility has once again been left out of the church's public image. Christians may not have distinctly disowned humility, but they have forgotten somehow to call it up from the basement when company arrives.

Humility is not much dwelt upon in today's church culture, if the various venues of public display are any indicator. For instance, when Christians need to find a new church, how do they evaluate different places of worship? How do these churches want to be evaluated? Do Christians even look for humility or think it worth finding in a church? More often than not, Christians choose instead to go where the excitement is—the place with the most specialized ministries; the place with the upbeat, professional worship; and especially the place that is already growing (with the right kinds of people).

Success breeds success; humility breeds humility. Now certainly, success and humility are not mutually exclusive in a church, but of the two, which do Christians look for first? And which do they most desire? Believers can learn something about themselves by their answer. Christians can also learn something about their churches. It is time for believers to turn from the industrial model so many churches have embraced and return to a simpler, humbler approach.

Personal Piety

Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God.

—Popular Christian slogan, attributed to William Carey¹²

What three or four main gauges have you as a Christ follower been taught to use for diagnosing your own spiritual health? All Christians have some set of standards or norms by which they measure their success in life. Some of these standards are chosen deliberately, while others are adopted almost unconsciously, often swallowed whole from the culture. Hopefully, a Christian's diagnostics are biblically informed, focused on the spiritual and the eternal rather than the worldly and the ephemeral. Where does humility make the cut? Is it chosen right away without hesitation, or is it selected only at the end, reluctantly, like that scrawny kid at kickball? (Full disclosure: I was often that kid.)

I would venture that in one's personal assessments of spiritual health, humility often finds itself displaced by other gauges, such as the frequency of some pious activity like prayer, Bible reading, evangelism, or church attendance. Of course, in themselves, these are all very good things and highly commended by Scripture. One might even safely say that if these disciplines are not there in some regular measure, then one's spiritual health is poor indeed. But are they, of themselves, the best and surest measurement of spiritual success? I have heard them advanced that way countless times, but given Jesus's encounters with the Pharisees, who were more pious in these activities than anyone, I have my doubts.

Even simplistic and pietistic slogans should be considered with caution. For example, the quote that opened this section, "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God," is taken from a famous sermon preached by the English Baptist pastor, William Carey, in 1792. In context, Carey gave a stirring call for his fellow Baptists to straighten their theology and do their part in spreading the gospel to foreign lands. However, a problem arises when Christians take such slogans and turn them into a test of piety or a test of God's sanctifying work. In such cases, Christians often become self-focused, wondering whether they are doing enough for God.

In this case, one of two things may happen: Christians either become despondent at their lack of accomplishment, or worse, they

become prideful about what they think they have achieved for God. The slogan is not false, but what if Christians redefined “great things for God” not only as mission work, or successful careers, or raising godly children, but also as growing in humility? What if pursuing a greater meekness is in fact attempting a great thing for God? What would that meekness look like? That question drives the rest of this book.

PRAYER

Teach us to care and not to care

Teach us to sit still

Even among these rocks

—T. S. Eliot¹³