

**John Dickson, *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011)**

A few years ago Christian consumers were faced with a difficult choice. Two rival perfumes hit the stores, each aimed at people of faith, and unblushingly playing the virtue card. One fragrance, marketed as [Virtue](#), reputedly included “biblical” ingredients such as frankincense and myrrh, and instructed consumers to “hold it in Sacred regard as a means to train yourself to readily contact your Spiritual Self” in order to “serve both your worldly fragrance needs and provide a means of focusing your Spiritual Intent.” The advertising blurb for the other product, [Virtuous Woman](#), went further, claiming to cater “to the needs of women who are interested in incorporating a passion for sharing their faith with a beauty product that makes them feel and smell really good.” Not to be outdone, in 2007 Virtue perfume began taking applications from religious groups wishing to sell the product as a means of fundraising for mission.

This is, of course, a long way from the teaching of the New Testament on virtue, to say nothing of spiritual formation or philanthropy. Virtue is not something one simply sprays on, and a virtuous person is rarely identifiable from surface indications. Yet virtuous character is a central aspect of Christianity, as it is of all the world religions—although the means of cultivating and maintaining virtues differs from tradition to tradition.

A person becomes virtuous, in the estimation of others, through the practice of certain virtues. Protestants in general, and evangelicals in particular, often feel uncomfortable in speaking of the active cultivation of virtues because of biblically informed convictions about human depravity and a strong aversion to a doctrine of salvation by works. Evangelicals also don’t often know what to do with the rich philosophical tradition of virtue ethics other than contrasting it with ostensibly more palatable deontological or communitarian ethical theories. But talk about Christlike character and they get it.

This is what John Dickson does in *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership* (Zondervan, 2011). Dickson is a Sydney Anglican minister, professional musician and academic historian, and author of some two dozen books, many of them on aspects of evangelism and apologetics. This book takes him in a new direction, albeit with a nod to ancient historical sources, and one or two forays into contemporary apologetic challenges, as he explores the practical implications of the pursuit of the virtue of humility and by implication its antithesis, pride.

Dickson brings a historical and biographical perspective to the discussion of humility, arguing counter-intuitively that “the most influential and inspiring people are often marked by humility.” In chapter 1, he defines humility as “the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself” (p. 19), or, more succinctly, “a willingness to hold power in service of others” (p. 24). He argues that humility does not deliver greatness, nor does greatness demand humility, but “humility enhances the ordinary and makes the great even greater” (p. 29).

Chapters 2-4 discuss the relationship between humility and leadership, the logic of humility (the notion that humility is common sense because it helps keep destructive pride in check), and the aesthetics or aspirational qualities of humility when observed in others. These chapters are of particular relevance to those in public leadership roles, but if leadership is defined (as I think it

should be) as the practice of influencing others, then everyone can learn valuable lessons from reflecting on what Dickson says here.

Chapters 5 and 6 comprise the heart of the book, demonstrating how the ancient world appears to have been profoundly influenced by notions of honour and shame, boasting and self-congratulation, and a parallel rejection of virtues such as humility. Dickson contends that the shift to “modern” values, including a championing of humility by significant leaders, came about “not through a slow evolution of ethical reflection but through a kind of humility revolution” (p. 95), epitomised by Jesus Christ and grounded in the early church’s advocacy of his radical teaching (cf Philippians 2:3-8).

This revolution amounted to a redefinition of honour and a recasting of greatness. It is not that Christianity has a monopoly on the virtue of humility, but Jesus introduced a new emphasis and, for Dickson, “our culture remains cruciform long after it stopped being Christian” (p. 112). This limits the relevance of his argument for non-Western cultures which did not enthusiastically embrace Christian values and therefore retained strong connections to ancient notions of honour and shame, but I would argue that the positive influence of Christianity in numerous host cultures has been both subtle and pervasive.

Another problem is the hoary chestnut of our general reliance on historiography “from above.” It is possible that the strong classical emphasis on honour and courage, and the writing of history and philosophy from the perspective of the winners of wars and debates, had the effect of squeezing out excellent teaching and stories about humility in ancient times. The witness of the New Testament writers shifts the balance in favour of humility, and demonstrates some aspects of historiography “from below,” as it was at the time of writing, but the question remains whether the new emphasis that came with Jesus was entirely new or had simply been forgotten or suppressed by political and historical forces.

Chapters 7-9 outline some practical benefits of humility. For example, it has a generative effect. The literary critic G.K. Chesterton, in his book *Orthodoxy*, argued that pride promoted mediocrity whereas humility fostered greatness:

Even the haughty visions, the tall cities, and the toppling pinnacles are the creations of humility. Giants that tread down forests like grass are the creations of humility. Towers that vanish upwards above the loneliest star are the creations of humility. For towers are not tall unless we look up at them; and giants are not giants unless they are larger than we. All this gigantesque imagination, which is, perhaps, the mightiest of the pleasures of man, is at bottom entirely humble. It is impossible without humility to enjoy anything.

Humility also encourages learning and personal growth, signals and fosters relational security, and enhances the power of persuasion in public communication and the exercise of strategic leadership.

In the final two chapters, Dickson shows why humility is preferable to the virtue (or value) of tolerance, and how to become humble. He explains the importance of “softening convictions” (pp. 163-5), a skill directly relevant in the present heated debate on the merits of same-sex marriage in Australia. Dickson argues that, whatever convictions we hold on the issue, the way forward, modelling the virtue of humility, is to “maintain our convictions but choose never to allow them to become justification for thinking ourselves better than those with contrary convictions” (p. 170). He concludes with a six-step process for cultivating humility—one which I have used in preaching on Romans 12:1-3.

At the start of the book, Dickson acknowledges a conundrum facing both the writer and reader of a book on humility: “Does the author think he has attained this difficult virtue? If so, he almost certainly hasn’t. If not, why is he writing a book on the topic?” Such questions are ultimately

irrelevant and serve merely as a smokescreen for a commitment to ignorance. What is important is that Dickson has examined an important and difficult topic in a fresh way, and offered readers the challenge of embracing the discipline of humility as an essential component to character formation. And it's not just for people of a certain age, religion, personality type or vocation. It's for everyone; and it's a challenge we in the West need in spades. As Ken Blanchard observes in the blurb on the back cover: "people with humility don't think less of themselves; they just think of themselves less." An aphorism evangelical Christians would do well to embrace, not least those tempted to buy spray-on virtues—and their spouses.

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