

Percy, Martyn. 2021.

*The Humble Church: Renewing the Body of Christ*

Norwich: Canterbury Press.

ISBN: 978-0-19-067364-2

REVIEWED BY KRISTINE STACHE

Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, IA  
kstache@wartburgseminary.edu

Martyn Percy, a former Dean of Christ's Church who spent years teaching at Oxford University, provides for readers in this, his most recent book, an alternative way of thinking about ecclesiology in response to the current state of the Church and the world. The Church, he states, "often lacks strategic patience, and is too keen to react rather than reflect" (xv). Percy utilizes a missiological lens to shape his ministerial and academic work and centers his ecclesiology on who God is and what God has and continues to do in Christ. Jesus is "the actual expression of God-in word, deeds, actions, silences, walking being-of what God is doing" (2). This starting point of who God is provides for Percy a way for the church to "see the world differently, and therefore ourselves and our neighbours in a fresh light" (xxviii).

*The Humble Church: Renewing the Body of Christ* is an interesting blend of a wide variety of ingredients. Percy uses grammar to make a Christological case for a missional ecclesiology (“Jesus is the verb of God” (2)), and throws poetry and a bit of math in for good measure (“to be a church of multiplication, not division” (4)). From the beginning, Percy invites the reader to “allow God to resume God’s place in our life, faith, and world” (xviii), which ultimately leads to the renewal of the body of Christ.

Percy covers a lot of territory in less than 200 pages (almost too much). After an introductory chapter that sets the stage for using humble as a preferred word to describe the church, Percy organizes his argument into three sections, each with three chapters, and ends the book with a bonus study guide for groups or individuals. He then closes it with additional resources and further reading.

In the first part of the book, titled *Culture and Change*, Percy provides a critique of the church growth movement, making a case that the church must move from a focus on increasing numbers to becoming counterculture. Growth and mission (and thus the renewal of the body of Christ) for Percy are more akin to farming, and the flourishing of the seeds (26). “The church does not exist to grow. It exists to glorify God and follow Jesus Christ” (26). Counting and numerical growth are not the way to measure the church. Instead Percy asks us “to see as God sees, count as God would count . . . all matter” (45). It is in this flourishing of mutual relationships that we create a co-dependency on one another. “We are invited to humble ourselves and recognize our mutual dependencies” (56). In this process all are included and we continue to be shaped and formed into the body of Christ.

The second part of his book, *Challenge and Church*, Percy sketches the ever-changing landscape that continues to shape Christian beliefs and practices (63). The first chapter of this section focuses on generational differences, the second proposes appropriate responses to abuse by clergy and those in authority, and the third chapter identifies discrimination practices based on race, gender and disability and how they continue to prevent the church from flourishing. The challenge I found with his addressing so many huge, yet important, topics is they get lost (almost trivialized) with such a cursory introduction and left this reader craving more explicit connections to his proposal for the Church to be humble Church.

*Christ and Christianity*, the third section of the book, lays out a theological argument for the church as an inclusive body for all. “Jesus is an expression of God’s heart for humanity. He is the body language of God. The Kingdom for all” (113). This then shapes mission and evangelism in a humble church as one that has historically “listened deeply and lived its faith, faithful and unassumingly,

rather than brashly promoting its brand” (121). The church’s response as a listener then leads to kenosis, to be come a “self-emptying church” (140). In order to do this we all must take on “the vocation of humility” (143) argues Percy.

Percy’s critique of the Church and Church structures is neither surprising nor new. While his argument for a humble Church has potential, his chapters are a bit too disconnected to make a case for the Church to be more than just a listening community. Percy’s work on the *missio Dei* is spot on, recognizing God’s activity in and through the world to and through the church, however its connection back to the role of the humble church remains a bit fuzzy. If one agrees that we are called to be the “Verb of God”, then listening is merely the starting point. Humbleness and humility are not merely postures but actual lenses to interpret the listening and action.

This book, I believe, could be a good conversation starter for groups that care deeply about the relationship the church has with the world. Such conversations could take Percy’s insights and ideas to push, pull and interpret further. Listening and reflecting is ultimately about learning. I think Percy himself would agree. “We cannot know everything, and nor should we assume we can. Which is why a humble, grounded church that listens, and is receptive and adaptive, is the key to the church recovering its vocation, and revitalizing its mission” (10).