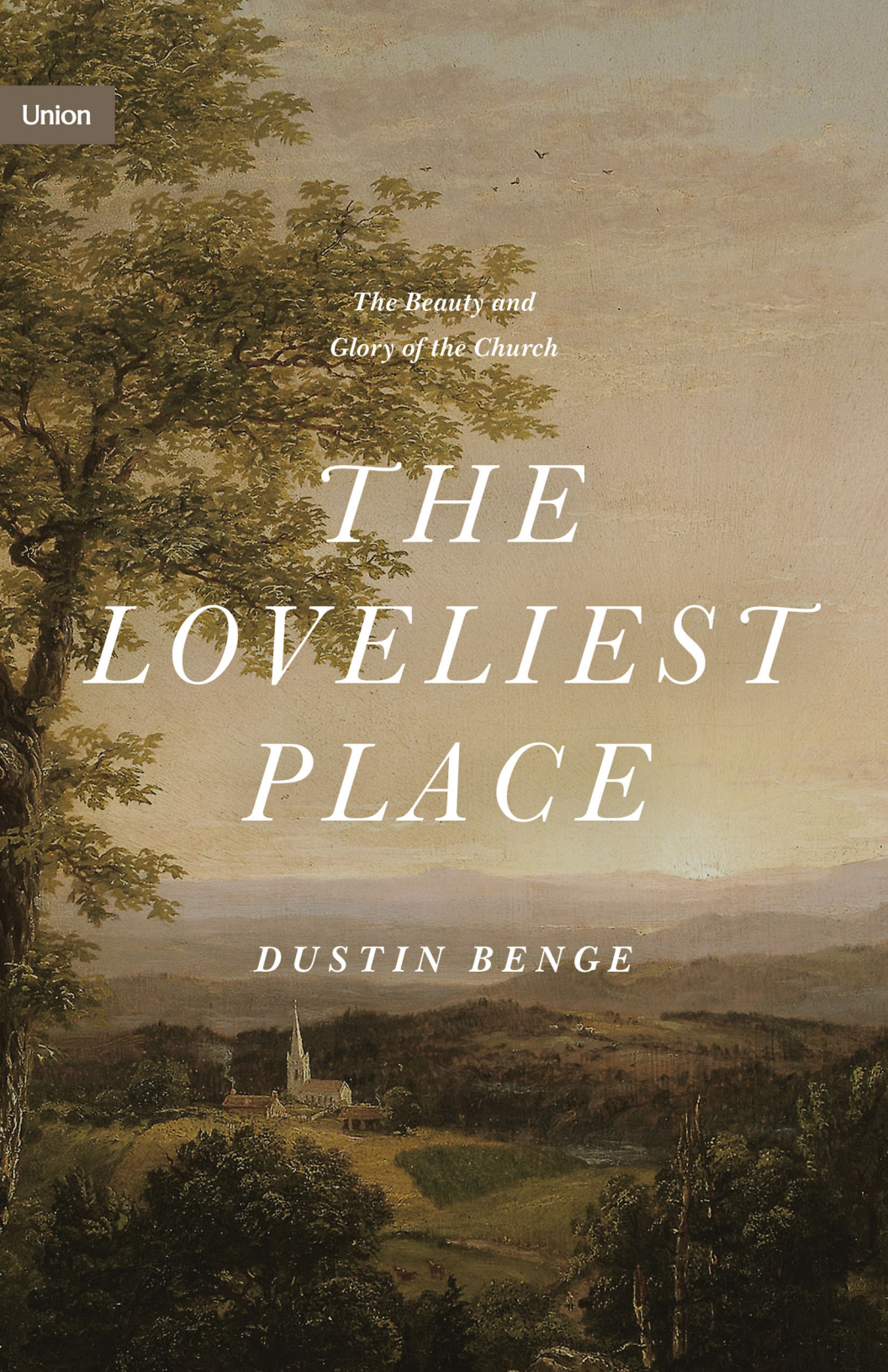


Union

*The Beauty and
Glory of the Church*

*THE
LOVELLIEST
PLACE*

DUSTIN BENGE



“Dustin Bengé provides us with an absolute gem—a beautiful condensation of all that is good about the local church. With ease of prose, Bengé introduces us to the multicolored facets of what the church is and how she functions to grow us into the people of God. A marvelous read.”

Derek W. H. Thomas, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries; Chancellor’s Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary

“The true and faithful church is the beautiful bride of Christ. In the experience of reading this refreshing treatment, all who love the church will rejoice in the realization of her beauty. Many people are concerned about how the world views the church. The world will never have the right perspective until the church itself sees her beauty. Surely this is what the apostle Paul meant when he said in 2 Corinthians 11:2 that he desired to present the church as a chaste virgin to Christ. This book is a much-needed gift to the people of God.”

John MacArthur, Pastor, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California; Chancellor, The Master’s University and Seminary

“This is a rich reflection upon the nature of the church. Bengé rightly shows us the way the church is viewed from heaven and from the eschaton. If we could only grasp the glorious beauty of the church in the light of these two perspectives, the negativity that too often crosses our lips and permeates our minds about the triune God’s beloved would be replaced with wonder and awe. Warmly recommended.”

Michael A. G. Haykin, Chair and Professor of Church History, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“A little more than a decade ago I said I’d never seen such a profound unity in the church. What has happened? Leadership failures, unresolved conflicts, high-profile apostasies, political division, social upheaval, a global pandemic, theological controversy, and more. Is greater church unity possible again? Of course it is, but any movement toward unity must be dependent on the Holy Spirit and based on God’s truth. May the Lord use *The Loveliest Place*, in which Dustin Bengé faithfully sets forth the glories of God’s truth about the church, to rebuild our unity.”

Donald S. Whitney, Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Associate Dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Do you consider the church to be lovely? Jesus does. He looks at his blood-bought bride with deep delight and desires that we do the same. In *The Loveliest Place*, Dustin Bengé introduces us afresh to the church in a way that rekindles affection and renews commitment. Many books tell us about the church, but few help us love the church. This important work refreshes the soul and inspires worship.”

Garrett Kell, Lead Pastor, Del Ray Baptist Church, Alexandria,
Virginia

“Beholding the true beauty of the church can often be a challenge because many times she is torn asunder by various scandals and divisions. Dustin Bengé nevertheless calls us to view the church from the divine perspective as the chosen bride of Christ. Only through this corrective lens can we recognize how precious she is in the sight of our triune God. May God give us eyes to see her radiant glory as she is clothed with the glistening garments of Christ.”

Steven J. Lawson, President, OnePassion Ministries; Professor
of Preaching, The Master’s Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier
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THE LOVELIEST PLACE

Union

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*THE
LOVELIEST
PLACE*

The Beauty and Glory of the Church

DUSTIN BERGE

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Loveliest Place: The Beauty and Glory of the Church

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jordan Singer

Cover image: “New England Scenery” (1839) by Thomas Cole (Wikimedia commons)

First printing 2022

Printed in the United States of America

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Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-7494-8

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-7497-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-7495-5

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-7496-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bengé, Dustin W., author.

Title: The loveliest place : the beauty and glory of the church / Dustin Bengé.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, [2022] | Series: Union | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021021539 (print) | LCCN 2021021540 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433574948 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781433574955 (epdf) | ISBN 9781433574962 (mobipocket) | ISBN 9781433574979 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Church.

Classification: LCC BV600.3 .B4625 2022 (print) | LCC BV600.3 (ebook) | DDC 262—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021021539>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021021540>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Nate Pickowicz,
my friend, brother,
and co-laborer in the gospel*

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Series Preface

OUR INNER CONVICTIONS AND VALUES shape our lives and our ministries. And at Union—the cooperative ministries of Union School of Theology, Union Publishing, Union Research, and Union Mission (visit www.theolo.gy)—we long to grow and support men and women who will delight in God, grow in Christ, serve the church, and bless the world. This Union series of books is an attempt to express and share those values.

They are values that flow from the beauty and grace of God. The living God is so glorious and kind, he cannot be known without being adored. Those who truly know him will love him, and without that heartfelt delight in God, we are nothing but hollow hypocrites. That adoration of God necessarily works itself out in a desire to grow in Christlikeness. It also fuels a love for Christ's precious bride, the church, and a desire humbly to serve—rather than use—her. And, lastly, loving God brings us to share his concerns, especially to see his life-giving glory fill the earth.

Each exploration of a subject in the Union series will appear in two versions: a full volume and a concise one. The idea is that church leaders can read the full treatment, such as this one, and so delve into each topic while making the more accessible concise version widely available to their congregations.

SERIES PREFACE

My hope and prayer is that these books will bless you and your church as you develop a deeper delight in God that overflows in joyful integrity, humility, Christlikeness, love for the church, and a passion to make disciples of all nations.

Michael Reeves

SERIES EDITOR

Introduction

WE ALL HAVE SPECIAL PLACES we visit, either in person or in memory. For me, one of those treasured places is the farm of my grandparents. Running through freshly plowed fields, climbing majestic oaks, and sitting at the table of my grandmother's cooking—there's no place I would rather be. This place evokes a sense of joy, comfort, and home.

When we think of the church, does it arouse similar deep affection? Can we say the church is one of those unique places that conjures a sincere sense of longing, delight, and home?

Nineteenth-century preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon captures the admiration all true believers should have for the church in his depiction of her as “the dearest place on earth.”¹ Chosen by God the Father, purchased by Christ the Son, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, the church should be cherished and recognized as “dear” by all who call her home. *Dear* is not a word we often hear in our modern context, but its definition amply conveys what Spurgeon is communicating to all believers concerning the church. It suggests deep

1 Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Best Donation” (exposition, April 5, 1891), in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Containing Sermons Preached and Revised*, vol. 37 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1975), 633.

affection. You may refer to someone as a “dear friend,” meaning that you warmly esteem that person and consider him or her a particular treasure in your life. By calling Christ’s church “dear,” Spurgeon says there is nothing in this present life that we should find more precious to our hearts, for this is how God himself perceives her. Spurgeon continues, “Nothing in the world is dearer to God’s heart than his church; therefore, being his, let us also belong to it, that by our prayers, our gifts, and our labours, we may support and strengthen it.”²

It’s all too easy to allow our warmth toward the church to slip away, as we grow cold and apathetic. Honestly, the church can often be a difficult place to think of as dear or lovely. However, when we shift our perspective from our puny self-interest, which often fuels our disgruntlement toward the church, she not only becomes precious to us but also becomes a treasure of eternal joy, beauty, and love.

This book is about the beauty and loveliness of the church. It’s for all those who sometimes struggle to see those qualities in her. If you tirelessly serve within her ministries while dismayed by her apparent failures, or have rare, unsustainable glimpses of her beauty, this book is for you. The singular goal is to awaken your affections. Not affections for form, methodology, structure, organization, or programs, but affections for *who* she is and *why* she exists.

You might ask, why is such a book needed?

Every generation faces the seemingly insurmountable challenge of biblically defining the church because our modern definitions never seem to shift from functionality and success to beauty and loveliness.

The church is the assembly of the redeemed. Those who have been called by God the Father to salvation through Christ the Son

2 Spurgeon, “The Best Donation,” 633, 635.

make up her assembly (John 6:37). The apostle Peter describes her as being composed of those called “out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). The church, then, is the corporate gathering of the redeemed citizens of heaven, who have been transmitted from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of Christ through his shed blood, glorious resurrection, exalted ascension, and present intercession (Col. 1:13). This biblical understanding sets the trajectory of every believer’s life, calling, and service in ministry, as well as our relationship with the whole world.

While the church has a clear command, purpose, and mission, those do not define *who* the church is. There’s a deeper and more satisfying well from which to drink that, once realized, fuels such service and mission. Therefore, to capture her beauty and loveliness, the church must be defined not by *what* we do but by *who* we are.

There is no more robust and doxological foundation upon which we can build a definition of the church than the eternal work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the words of eighteenth-century New England pastor-theologian Jonathan Edwards, the whole world was created so that “the eternal Son of God might obtain a spouse.”³ The church is not a Trinitarian afterthought in response to man’s fall in the garden—quite the contrary. The church is the focused domain where all God’s presence, promises, and purposes are unveiled and eternally realized.

The church’s beauty and loveliness are most vividly portrayed in the brilliant metaphor of her as the “bride of Christ.” In his instructions to husbands regarding the love they should have for their wives, the

3 Jonathan Edwards, “The Church’s Marriage to Her Sons, and to Her God,” in *Sermons and Discourses, 1743–1758*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach, vol. 25 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 187.

apostle Paul writes, “Love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). This stunning bride is arrayed in snow-white garments washed in the redeeming blood of Christ (Rev. 7:14), and beholding her beauty, a vast multitude cries out,

The marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready. (Rev. 19:7)

God gives the church to Christ as his bride, Edwards says, “so that the mutual joys between this bride and bridegroom are the end of the creation.”⁴

As the creation of God, the church is a means through which the Father delights in Christ as the object of his eternal love and divine happiness. The church’s life is beautifully framed by her position as the reward to Christ for his suffering on the cross, thus making Christ a worthy groom for his bride. This glorious union between Christ and his church will never be severed. The two, joined together by God, are eternally satisfied in one another as they bask in the glory, majesty, and holiness of God.

This book has one aim: to set before you a thoroughly biblical portrait of the church that derives its life from the sweet fellowship of the Father, Son, and Spirit, creating a community of love, worship, fellowship, and mission, all animated by the gospel and empowered by the word of God.

By beholding such radiant beauty and loveliness, may we lift our collective and worshipful cry, “Indeed, the church is the loveliest place on earth.”

4 Jonathan Edwards, *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee, vol. 21 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 142.

You Are Beautiful

*Behold, you are beautiful, my love;
behold, you are beautiful.*

SONG OF SOLOMON 1:15

THE CHURCH IS BEAUTIFUL.

Beautiful is not a phrase we often associate with the church. Words like *organization*, *mission*, *vision*, and even *body* come to mind, but not *beautiful*.

We like helpful organizational charts that describe the purpose and function of the church. We want to place her members in properly assigned roles and duties. We underscore the qualifications and responsibilities of church leaders. We emphasize the church's theology and mission among the nations. We even pinpoint and seem to critique her problems and failures endlessly. While all of these diminutive details may be necessary for fulfilling her divine task on earth, there's a cumulative danger of consigning the church to mere administrative categories that are indistinguishable from our neighborhood civic club.

We consider what the church can give us and do for us, how she can serve us, and even what's in it for us, but rarely do we enjoy the

eye-opening and soul-stirring truth that she is beautiful and lovely in just *being* who she is.

The church has played a central role in many of our lives. She has nurtured in times of grief, shepherded in valleys of despair, and instructed in seasons of growth. We love her people. We love her ministries. We love her worship. We love her teaching. We love her comfort.

Do we love her?

Does your heart swell with deep and abiding affection at the mention of her name and the prospect of dwelling in the company of her people? Can we say of her, as her bridegroom does,

You are beautiful, my love;

behold, you are beautiful (Song 1:15)?

Admired by Christ

Reflecting on Song of Solomon 1:15, John Gill, an eighteenth-century English Baptist pastor, wrote, “These are the words of Christ, commending the beauty of the church, expressing his great affection for her, and his high esteem of her; of her fairness and beauty.”¹ Gill interprets Song of Solomon as an intense allegorical portrayal of the love, union, and communion that exists between Jesus Christ and his bride, the church. In chapter 1, the bridegroom fixes his eternal attention upon the bride and identifies her as “beautiful.”

What must it be like to be admired by the sinless Son of God? Rather than admire her, we imagine he would identify her failures, her shortcomings, and the loathsome sin that so often spoils her gar-

¹ John Gill, *An Exposition of the Book of Solomon's Song* (London: William Hill Collingridge, 1854), 57.

ments. Instead, through the eyes of a bridegroom transfixed upon his bride, Christ invites our gaze with the attention-grabbing, “Behold!” Her beauty commands awe, wonder, and astonishment.

More profound amazement is ours when we consider that the church is composed of sinners. Albeit forgiven, still sinners. In her own eyes, the church is full of spots and blemishes and is, in fact, sometimes disgusting to behold. Paul says that only at the end of the age will the church be presented to Christ “in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Eph. 5:27). Yet Christ draws our attention to his bride here and now, not for veneration, but that we may be astonished and lost in the wonder of his love and sacrifice on her behalf.

The church is beautiful because the lens through which Christ regards her is his cross—the focal point of blood, righteousness, forgiveness, union, justification, regeneration, and grace. His cross makes her beautiful. His perfection makes her beautiful. It is his sacrificial, substitutionary, sinless blood that washes her garments as white as snow. The cross of Christ makes her beautiful not only inwardly by justification but also outwardly through sanctification. From giving second birth to final glory, the righteousness of Christ creates a beautiful church.

His perfect righteousness fashions a loveliness so shocking and captivating that in the same sentence he repeats his admiration twice:

Behold you are beautiful . . . ;

behold, you are beautiful. (Song 1:15)

Then with pictorial detail, the bridegroom begins to characterize the beauty of his bride. Ask any adoring husband to attempt such an explanation of his bride, and he will fail at words. “Your eyes are doves” (Song 1:15). Doves mate for life and are often represented in weddings because they symbolize a lifetime of love. The bond is

so strong that it can extend, for a time, beyond death as they watch over their mates, trying to care for them, and returning again and again to the place of their death. The ever-watchful dove looks only to its mate and has no eyes for another.

Christ has eyes only for his church. Believers, saved by grace through faith, are espoused exclusively to him. His righteousness, pardon, forgiveness, love, care, provision, eternal life—these are only for her. His singular eye is upon her at all times. He exclaims, “You have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes” (Song 4:9). There’s never a time when Christ doesn’t love her. There’s never a time when he doesn’t extend his whole heart to her. There’s never a time his heart isn’t captivated by her.

If, with Gill, we were to interpret Solomon’s words as emblematic of Christ and his church, in that context, listen to what he would be saying to her:

Behold, you are beautiful, my love,
 behold, you are beautiful!
 Your eyes are doves
 behind your veil.
 Your hair is like a flock of goats
 leaping down the slopes of Gilead.
 Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes
 that have come up from the washing,
 all of which bear twins,
 and not one among them has lost its young.
 Your lips are like a scarlet thread,
 and your mouth is lovely.
 Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
 behind your veil.

Your neck is like the tower of David,
 built in rows of stone;
 on it hang a thousand shields,
 all of them shields of warriors.

Your two breasts are like two fawns,
 twins of a gazelle,
 that graze among the lilies.

Until the day breathes
 and the shadows flee,
 I will go away to the mountain of myrrh
 and the hill of frankincense.

You are altogether beautiful, my love;
 there is no flaw in you. (Song 4:1–7)

The bridegroom employs rich creation language here to distinguish the beauty and loveliness of his bride. Though it is not quite how we might describe the attention of our love, the ancient world would immediately recognize wonder in such imaginative beauty. Leaping goats, freshly washed ewes, ruby red pomegranates, shielded stone towers, lilies of the field, leaping gazelles, and rare spices dripping from the mountains—this lovely bride is arrayed in the cloak of God’s creation. She is more beautiful than any composition of man—the *Mona Lisa*, the Riviera at sunset, or the New York skyline glittering at night. She resembles all that God said was good in his perfect creation. She is Christ’s delight, having been redeemed, washed in his blood, and sanctified by his Spirit, and he calls her (us) “my love.”

Reflected Beauty

At this point, it’s necessary to clarify that the beauty of the church is not a type of romantic or inherently attractive beauty that causes

one to blush. The church would never adorn the cover of a magazine because she is beautiful.

The beauty of the church is the reflection of another—God. David says,

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
 that will I seek after:
 that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
 all the days of my life,
 to gaze upon the *beauty* of the LORD
 and to inquire in his temple. (Ps. 27:4)

As if scrutinizing every facet of a brilliantly cut diamond, David confesses that he could spend all the days of his life gazing upon the beauty of the Lord. Asaph joins David in his admiration of God’s perfect beauty:

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
 God shines forth. (Ps. 50:2)

There are no satisfactory words to define or portray the beauty of God. The prophet Isaiah foretells a day when the Lord of hosts “will be a crown of glory” and “a diadem of beauty” to his people (Isa. 28:5). To come face-to-face with God’s transcendent beauty is to ascend to the peak of our deepest longing and the fulfillment of our greatest desires.

God’s beauty and loveliness shine forth most radiantly through the biblical concept of glory. Moses experienced this glory when God passed by him, revealing only the afterglow of his grandeur (Ex. 33:12–23). When God’s glory engulfed the temple, the priests were unable to perform their service of worship (2 Chron. 5:14). Isaiah found himself facedown in the dirt when he witnessed God’s

glory emanating from his eternal throne (Isa. 6:1–5). Peter, James, and John became like dead men as God’s glory sparkled in their eyes when Christ transfigured before them (Matt. 17:1–8). In our fallen state, to behold God’s refulgent glory would cause us to fall dead in wonder, love, and praise.

Jonathan Edwards, reflecting on God’s glory and beauty, wrote,

For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory; God . . . is the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty.²

Like a prism that splits light into a myriad of colors, everything in God’s creation is a mere reflection of the one radiant beam of glory emanating from God’s inherent perfection and holiness. God’s beauty isn’t exhibited in his flawless skin tone, waving hair, perfectly set eyes, or impeccably symmetrical nose, for he has none of the physical attributes that we often classify as beautiful. Edwards regards the beauty of God as the differentiating feature of God himself: “God is God, and is distinguished from all other beings, and exalted above ’em, chiefly by his divine beauty, which is infinitely diverse from all other beauty.”³ God’s beauty emanates directly from his being. All other creatures receive their beauty from outside sources. God is not dependent upon other things or persons to make him beautiful, for he is “beauty

2 Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue: A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 252–53.

3 Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 298.

within himself.”⁴ Beauty is one of the defining characteristics of God’s uniqueness and transcendence, for he is its foundation and fountain.

The supreme expression of God’s beauty is his Son, Jesus Christ, who himself is the image and radiance of his Father. Paul affirms Jesus as “the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). That is, to see Jesus is to see God, to hear Jesus is to hear God, to know Jesus is to know God. Again, in Colossians 1:15, Paul classifies Jesus as “the image of the invisible God.” The writer of Hebrews echoes the same language: “He [Jesus] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3). As glory is a defining characteristic of God’s nature, the beauty that shines forth from God also shines forth from Jesus, for Jesus is the visible incarnation of God’s radiant glory.

Edwards identifies Christ as the end for which God created the world and how God most vividly expresses his beautiful love to sinful creatures. The expression of that love is selecting a bride for Christ that she too might beam with the same beauty as her bridegroom. Edwards reflects, “Christ is divine wisdom, so that the world is made to gratify divine love as exercised by Christ, or to gratify the love that is in Christ’s heart, or to provide a spouse for Christ—those creatures which wisdom chooses for the object of divine love as Christ’s elect spouse.”⁵ To express his infinite love for Christ, God gives him a spouse, the church. In a sermon on Revelation 22 preached in May 1741, Edwards continues this meditation:

Christ obtaining this spouse is the great end of all the great things that have been done from the beginning of the world; it was that

4 Roland André Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 152.

5 Jonathan Edwards, *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee, vol. 21 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 142.

the son of God might obtain his chosen spouse that the world was created . . . and that he came into the world . . . and when this end shall be fully obtained, the world will come to an end.⁶

The church is a gift from God to his Son “so that the mutual joys between this bride and bridegroom are the end of creation.”⁷ Therefore, as the Son is a reflection of his Father, the church, as his eternal bride, is a reflection of the Son.

When Christ lovingly looks upon his bride and exclaims that she is “beautiful,” he beholds the reflection of the everlasting glory and infinite love of his Father, who is the primary fountain from which all true beauty flows. Since Christ’s ascension to the right hand of the majesty on high, there is now no more brilliant exemplification of God’s perfect beauty in this world than his church.

God could have chosen to make his beauty known exclusively through breathtaking landscapes, undulating oceans, and sublime sunsets. Instead, he has decided to display his radiance within the hearts of the crown of his creation, humanity. As a result, he has chosen a people, his church, to reflect his glory to the world.

The church is beautiful because God is beautiful.

The Bride’s Affection

Not only does Christ lavish his affection upon the church as the object of his joyful love, but the church also reveres her bridegroom with

6 Jonathan Edwards, unpublished sermon on Revelation 22:16–17 (May 1741), accessed from the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2011, L. 3v. See also Rhys S. Bezzant, *Jonathan Edwards and the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 59.

7 Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies,” 271, in *The Miscellanies, Entry Nos. a–z, aa–zz, 1–500*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer, vol. 13 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 374.

the same unshakable devotion. She describes him as “distinguished among ten thousand” (Song 5:10), having “lips . . . dripping liquid myrrh” (v. 13), “arms . . . set with jewels” (v. 14), “legs . . . set on bases of gold” (v. 15), and “altogether desirable” (v. 16).

Of all who might arrest her attention, Jesus Christ is better than all the rest because he has purchased the church with his blood (Acts 20:28). Christ is beautiful to the church because he rescued her from her enemies and set her in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). Christ is beautiful to the church because he freely offered his life as payment for a debt she owed (John 10:11). Christ is beautiful to the church because he satisfied God’s wrath against her sin and victoriously conquered death (Rom. 3:24–25). Christ is her Savior. Christ is her Redeemer. Christ is her beauty.

Wilhelmus à Brakel, a seventeenth-century Dutch theologian, defines the affection the church has for Christ as one of familiar discourse:

The soul who thus beholds Jesus, the heart going out in love towards Him, will share with her beloved the frame of her heart, her love, and her grief for not loving him more. She will bring all her needs to him, reveal her desires to him, make supplication to him, plead affectionately with him, and beg of him sweetly for the fulfillment of her desire.⁸

The deep mutual affection shared between two people creates a personal vocabulary that no one else quite understands. Standing across a crowded room from your spouse, for instance, doesn’t break the cord of love reciprocally shared. When your eyes meet, the unspoken

⁸ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2015), 95.

language of love bridges all chasms, and you immediately understand one another. Through God's revealed word to us in Scripture, there exists between Christ and his church a sweet familiar interchange.

She listens to what Jesus has to say to her, turns herself to his Word, deeming it to be the voice of her beloved. This is particularly true when with clarity, power, and sweetness he impresses a text of Scripture upon her heart, causing her to speak to him in return, giving expression to all the questions generated by her love, which in turn causes Jesus to reply to her. In doing so the soul will lose and forget herself, and it will grieve her if this dialogue is broken off, or if her body is too weak to endure the intensity of her desires as well as the kisses and influences of his love.⁹

Reserved only for the bridegroom and his beloved bride, this intimate dialogue is foreign to the rest of the world as it reveals a complete dependence upon him for all things. "In love she leans upon him, entrusting to him her soul, her body, and whatever she may encounter," à Brakel writes.¹⁰

Paul describes this dependence as characteristic of the church in Ephesians 4:15–16: "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." God's great desire for his church is that every believer, without exception, will "grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ." As we learn to become increasingly dependent upon Christ for all things, God is continually fashioning

⁹ À Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 95.

¹⁰ À Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 95.

the church to mirror the image of Christ. In essence, the church in the world is the beauty of Christ in the world.

We began with the phrase “the church is beautiful.” Not that she is beautiful of her own accord or even increasingly beautiful because of her good works, but that she has been made beautiful by the redeeming and propitiatory blood of Christ. Both inwardly and outwardly, the beauty of the church is derived from God through Christ. God has chosen to display his perfect beauty in his beloved bride by giving her to Christ as a majestic reward for his suffering. As a result, the church is the brilliant reflection of God’s beauty and loveliness through Christ to the world.

If we accurately grasped the church’s beauty and loveliness in all its glorious richness, how dramatically our lives would more appropriately reflect God’s plan and purpose. How quickly we would reject petty squabbles that mar our snow-white garments. How lovingly we would serve one another by following the self-denying footsteps of our bridegroom.

“Behold, you are beautiful!” Beholding the church’s beauty changes everything.