

The background is a classic landscape painting. In the foreground, there are lush green trees on the left. The middle ground shows a valley with a church featuring a tall, pointed steeple, surrounded by smaller buildings and fields. The background consists of rolling hills and mountains under a soft, hazy sky with a few birds flying. The overall color palette is muted and naturalistic, typical of 19th-century landscape art.

Union

*WHY SHOULD
WE LOVE
THE LOCAL
CHURCH?*

*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 this book, 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 *Why Should We Love the Local Church?* 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
Ministries

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A book series edited by Michael Reeves

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*WHY SHOULD
WE LOVE
THE LOCAL
CHURCH?*

DUSTIN BENGE

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*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

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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 concise treatments, such as this one, are like shorter guided tours: they stick to the main streets and move on fast. You may find, at the end of this little book, that you have questions or want to explore some more: in that case, the fuller volume will take you further up and further in.

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?

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 *lovely*. However, when we shift our perspective from our puny self-interest, which often fuels our disgruntlement toward the church, she not only

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becomes precious to us but also becomes a treasure of eternal joy, beauty, and glory.

This book is about the loveliness, beauty, and glory 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.

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.”¹ 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 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

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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.”²

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.”

You Are Beautiful

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

SONG OF SOLOMON 1:15

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?

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. 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 garments.

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. Ultimately, the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ 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 bride.

Reflected Beauty

The supreme expression of God’s beauty is his Son, Jesus Christ, who himself is the image and radiance of his Father. Paul af-

firms 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. In Colossians 1:15, Paul classifies Jesus as “the image of the invisible God.” 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.

To express God’s infinite love for Christ, God gives him a spouse, the church. The church is a gift from God to his Son “so that,” according to Jonathan Edwards, “the mutual joys between this bride and bridegroom are the end of creation.”²² 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.

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 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.