

EXCERPT



The Beautiful Community *Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best*

August 4, 2020 | \$16, 176 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4831-7

The church is at its best when it pursues the biblical value of unity in diversity. Pastor and theologian Irwyn Ince boldly unpacks the reasons for our divisions while gently guiding us toward our true hope for wholeness and reconciliation. To heal our fractured humanity, we must cultivate spiritual practices that help us pursue beautiful community.

Beauty and Simplicity in the Trinity

The Lord is beautiful. The one who dwells in a holy and beautiful habitation wants to be known by us. So he reveals himself to us as the Lord who is one, unity in diversity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The mystery of beauty in perfection, proportion, and pleasure is due to the source of beauty. “The testimony throughout Scripture is that God is one. At the same time, without contradiction, the Scriptures present the mystery of three persons who are God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Fragmentation, division, disharmony, and disunity are our story, but they are not God’s. His is the story of beauty and it is most profoundly seen in his communal life.

That God is Trinity is a mystery so deep it will never cease to inspire awe. How can it be that there is one God who exists in three eternally distinct persons? I don’t know. Such knowledge is too high for me. What I do know is that this is who the Bible declares God to be. Volumes and volumes have been written on the nature of our triune God over the course of Christian history. Here, we’re focused on beauty and the particular beautiful community that is God.

When the Lord Jesus Christ was baptized Scripture tells us, “Immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’” (Matthew 3:16-17). The Father delights in the Son’s obedience. The Spirit anoints him for his messianic ministry. Father, Son, and Spirit affirm one another, declaring by word and action that they are united in plan and purpose. The Father’s affirmation is important because the Son will appear as though he is outside of the Father’s will when he is forsaken by his friends and by his Father (Matthew 26:31; 27:46). The Spirit’s anointing is necessary because the Son needed to faithfully endure temptation to save humanity from its sinful, fragmented life of rebelling against God (Matthew 4:1).

We also find out that, in addition to being united in saving his people, the triune God sustains them through suffering. The apostle Peter puts it this way: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you” (1 Peter 1:1-2). Peter is writing to Christians and he refers to them as “elect exiles.” They live as people who are longing for a true and permanent home as they endure suffering for belonging to Jesus. Peter will tell them that their faith is being tested and that they should not be surprised by the fiery trial that has come upon them (1:7; 4:12). But he begins his letter with the reminder that their triune God is for them. Peter describes them as elect exiles according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, which is a covenantal declaration. Knowing is covenantal. Through his foreknowledge, the Father has bound himself to his people in love. Part of the evidence for this is the sanctification of the Spirit. The Spirit is at work in, among, and through them for a purpose—a life of obedience to Jesus Christ. In other words, they cannot lose because all of God is for them!

Years ago, Rodney King was brutally and tragically beaten by Los Angeles police officers. The city exploded in riots for six days after three of the four police officers, each of whom were white, were acquitted in a jury trial. Famously, King called for

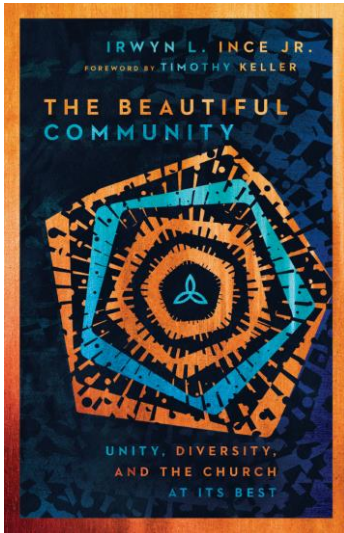


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an end to the violence in a 1992 interview. “Can’t we all just get along?” he asked. These words are inscribed on his tombstone. It is a question that continues to dog humanity as our fragmentation continues to remain on display. But it’s not a question the triune God has ever needed to ask of himself. In our search for peace and unity, what is our example? What is our aim? How will we actually know when peace has been achieved?

John Lennon asked us to imagine a day when all the people would share all the world and the world would live as one. A world without greed, hunger, or murder is also a world without concern for heaven, hell, or religion—without God. We cannot fully imagine what unity among diversity looks like apart from a vision for the beautiful life rooted in God’s essence. Nor can we fully live in the hope that unity is humanity’s destiny. To really imagine such a future, we have to know God as he has revealed himself to be! We have to have been brought into the inner life of God, as those who share in that life through faith in Jesus Christ. “The Trinity belongs to the inner life of God, and can be known only by those who share in that life.” We experience a vision of beautiful community as we experience the inner life of God.

This beautiful inner life of God was described by ancient church fathers with the term *perichoresis*. The term itself takes us beyond utility to beauty because it describes a divine dance. Technically, it is the concept that the three persons indwell and interpenetrate each other. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each fully and mutually fill and are filled by one another as each is an embodiment of the same ineffable substance. In other words, they are joined together in a beautiful, eternal, and inseparable dance. We hear a derivative of the Greek word *perichoresis* in our English word *choreography*.

I used to love watching the show *So You Think You Can Dance*. I would gaze in utter delight at the abilities young women and men to move their bodies with incredible rhythm and grace, even when the music was sharp and dancing to it demanded rough edges. The solo performances were remarkable, but the choreographed partner performances rose to another level. The nearly flawless partner dances sent a chill down my spine. Yet at the end of the performance, when the music stopped and they hit their final pose, the joy on their faces came with heaving chests. In those few moments before the judges, they gave everything they had and were left gasping for breath. They could not continue to dance that way forever. The dance had to end because fatigue and the necessities of life demanded it. But with God, the flawless dance has no beginning and it has no end! John Frame explains it this way:

The concurrence of the three persons of the Trinity in all that they do is a profound indication of their unity. There is no conflict in the Trinity. The three persons are perfectly agreed on what they should do and how their plan should be executed. They support one another, assist one another, and promote one another’s purposes. This intra-Trinitarian “deference,” this “disposability” of each to the others, may be called “mutual glorification.”

To say that the Lord is beautiful is to say that he is beautiful community. His beautiful, simple love is expressed in perfect agreement between Father, Son, and Spirit. It is expressed in the way the Son defers to the Father (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38-39). We see it in the way the Father supports the Son (Matthew 3:17; 17:5). We experience it in the way the Spirit proceeds from the Father and is sent by the Son (John 15:26; 16:7). God is the apex of unchanging beauty as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in eternally existent, mutually glorifying, loving, honoring, and supporting diverse community—a never-ending, beautifully choreographed divine dance.

—Adapted from chapter two, “The Beauty of the Lord: Our God Is Beautiful Community”

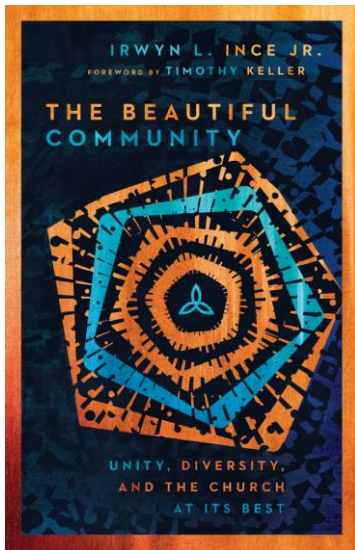


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Q & A



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"Irwyn Ince lays out a blueprint for the church in the twenty-first century. While we are individually made in the image of God, we are also corporately made in God's image as a body. At a time when we are as polarized and divided as ever, when culture is desperately trying to define our identity, there is no greater need than for God's church to model 'beautiful community' and true 'gracism.'"

Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best

Where did you get the idea to write *The Beautiful Community*?

Irwyn L. Ince Jr.: My motivation came from my ministry passion. The ministry of reconciliation in the local church as demonstrated by the gathering of people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities is the natural outworking of our commitment to the gospel. I'm striving to address the need for churches and Christians to reject the notion that reconciliation (on a horizontal level) is a tangent to the gospel.

What message do you hope to convey to readers in this book?

Irwyn: God is beautiful community. His mutually loving, supporting, serving, honoring, and glorifying life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit tells us what it means to be in his image. Beautiful community is humanity's destiny as the image of God. Therefore, as his image bearers, our lives together under the lordship of Jesus are to reflect this beauty. But the church has neglected a crucial aspect of her witness by maintaining ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic divides. It is the Spirit of God who empowers us to pursue and demonstrate God's beauty to the world as a testimony to the power of Christ. And there are practices we must cultivate if we are to commit to this pursuit.

How does your book carry forward the conversation about diversity and reconciliation?

Irwyn: While there are several books that promote unity in diversity and reconciliation as a gospel pursuit for the church, I believe that my book lays a more robust biblical theological foundation and targets more of a popular audience. Additionally, the notion of beautiful community is one that I have not seen explored or expressed in Christian literature on reconciliation. My book takes the concept of beauty, which we all grasp at some level, and helps readers delight in God's plan for his church. It enables readers to see God's original intention to create humanity to reflect his diverse beauty. And it helps Christians understand what beauty can be found in a united church that glorifies God in a diverse world.

What do you hope readers take away from *The Beautiful Community*?

Irwyn:

1. The biblical foundation for beautiful community is the Trinity. Our God is beautiful community.
2. Human destiny is beautiful community. It is the fullest expression of the imago Dei.
3. Pursuing beautiful community (unity in diversity) is, therefore, a gospel imperative.
4. There are practices a church must embrace if they are to persevere in the pursuit of beautiful community (devote to the doctrine, probe the preferences, count the cost, toast to the truth).



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Irwyn L. Ince Jr., *The Beautiful Community*

“Irwyn Ince is not merely a gifted thinker and writer on the subject of loving across the lines of difference. He is also, and has been for the duration of his life and ministry, a compelling practitioner of these important kingdom matters about which he writes. Irwyn is also my good friend. I have learned much from him and have been loved well by him. The same is true of the community that I serve, as we have drawn on Irwyn’s wisdom in our own effort to honor the call of our Lord, who demolishes dividing walls and brings together Jew and Gentile—and every other race that is part of humanity—under Christ. If you are eager to move forward in the triune God’s call to love and build community with those who are not like you, then this is the book for you.”

—Scott Sauls, pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, author of *Jesus Outside the Lines*

Irwyn L. Ince Jr. serves as a pastor at Grace DC Presbyterian Church and director of the Grace DC Institute for Cross-Cultural Mission, a church-based training and research entity dedicated to equipping current and future Christian leaders for cross-cultural ministry. He is a graduate of City College of New York, Reformed Theological Seminary, and holds a DMin from Covenant Theological Seminary.

In 2018, Ince was unanimously elected as the forty-sixth Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) General Assembly moderator—the first African American to hold the position. He is a contributor to the books *Heal Us Immanuel* and *All Are Welcome*. He and his wife, Kim, have been married twenty-eight years and have four children.

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