(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I’m Jonathan Rogers, your host.

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

**JR:** Dr. Irwyn Ince is a pastor at Grace DC Presbyterian church and director of the Grace DC Institute for Cross-Cultural Mission.

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** He’s also the author of *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at its Best*. There’s a kind of critique all too rare these days that grows out of hope, out of love, even affection for the people you criticize. Irwyn Ince offers that kind of critique for the American church with regard to race. Tim Keller has said, “I recognize in Irwyn’s voice so much honesty, wisdom, and compassion.” You’re about to hear that honesty, wisdom, and compassion in this lovely conversation I had with Dr. Irwyn Ince.

Irwyn Ince, thank you so much for making time to be on The Habit podcast.

**IRWYN INCE:** Thank you for having me, Jonathan.

**JR:** I just finished reading your new book *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best*, and it did me a lot of good. Thank you for writing that book. It’s a gift to the church and I appreciate it.

**II:** I’m grateful — I really am — for the response it’s been getting. When you write a book, you don’t necessarily know how it’s going to be received, so I’ve been grateful that people have been finding it beneficial as they’ve been trying to think through and engage these issues.

**JR:** Yeah. So much of what you have to say centers around the idea of beauty. Certainly in the first half of the book where you’re laying the foundation fo what you’re up to. I wanna talk about that a little bit. How did you land on beauty as being central to your way of talking about diversity in the church?

**II:** Yeah. Well, I have had a passion for what I would call the ministry of reconciliation in the local church, really from the beginning in my sense of call to the pastoral ministry. But I wasn’t thinking about it in terms of beauty. Five or so years, maybe a little bit less that that, I’ve been captivated by the notion of beauty and the reality that God is beautiful, and I’ve started to look and see, well, how do we see beauty described to us in the Scriptures? What are the parallels here? And then the reality that beauty calls us to embrace mystery. Mystery and transcendence that has its roots in God.

You can’t really quantify beauty. You can describe it, and I try to give in my book some parameters, some facets of beauty, but each of them have a mystery to them which points us to God as the Source of all, and him being beautiful, and beauty being seen, and the fact that he is Beautiful Community.

**JR:** Yeah right. As the Trinity, as the unity and diversity.

**II:** Yes. Exactly.

**JR:** And the other thing I think is important about beauty is it does something to you.

**II:** That’s right.

**JR:** I can’t remember who I’m paraphrasing here, but somebody has talked about the idea that you’ve got that triad of truth, goodness, and beauty. When it comes to truth, I have a sort of accountability to truth, and goodness is something I try to conform myself to. But beauty just happens to you. You know? And it pulls… you say this somewhere in your book, I think. The idea that the pleasure of beauty is to center delight in another. And just the fact that it pulls us out of ourselves is so incredibly important.

I know there are people — and it’s not that uncommon — people see beauty and want to possess it.

**II:** Mmhmm.

**JR:** But ultimately, it’s unpossessable.

**II:** That’s exactly right. There’s a magnetism to beauty. We are drawn to it, we are pulled to it. I think it’s Psalm 27 where David talks about one thing I have desired that I will seek after, that I will dwell in the house of the Lord. To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord all the days of my life and to inquire in his temple. He’s talking about delighting in the Lord… he’s not at the center. To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord all the days of my life! Then I will be satisfied. That drawing us in.

**JR:** Yeah, and you have to be a human being -- or, I guess you have to have a soul to appreciate beauty. A lion can’t say, “that’s a beautiful gazelle!”

**II:** (laughs)

**JR:** He can only say, “That gazelle looks delicious!” You know? (Laughs) And again, a lion’s only relationship to a gazelle is, “I wanna possess that thing and eat it!”

**II:** That’s great. That’s right. Exactly right. You don’t just see the lion pontificating on the beauty of the gazelle’s leap. Right. (laughs)

**JR:** Right. That leap that we think is so beautiful… to the lion, it’s an inconvenience.

**II:** (laughs) Which, to the point — and I make this point in my book — beauty is not about utility. It’s not about what’s just useful. And that’s why you find this reality, the reality of human sin is we want to possess. We wanna center ourselves. And beauty is not something we quote/unquote “can own and possess.”

And this is why, for example, when you look at the Civil Rights movement and post-Civil Rights, you hear African-Americans use this term “Black is Beautiful.” It became part of what African-Americans would say, and I argue that it’s not because that, in the history of America, the primary message had been that Black was ugly, but that Black was useful.

**JR:** Oh man! That’s great, Irwyn.

**II:** It was about enslavement — usefulness — for economic purposes. It was about possession. Beauty is not about possession. So it’s a declaration of liberty to say “Black is Beautiful.”

**JR:** Oh, that’s so good. Cause I guess you know, I have… I had thought of that slogan “Black is Beautiful,” kind of as a slogan. Like, “Hey everybody, you know…” I hadn’t taken it as seriously as I should have taken it.

**II:** Well, I have to say my point is where does that heart cry come from? It’s related to the reality fo the image of God, but I posit that it’s rooted in this pushing back against a message not of aesthetic displeasing, pleasure in looking black people, but out of a message that says blackness in America has only been about utility, use for goals.

**JR:** Wow. That’s great. And the inutility of beauty is a clue to how important it is. Right? You know, if everything is a means to an end, obviously the end is more important than the means. And by saying beauty isn’t a means to anything, we’re saying it must be important.

**II:** It must be maybe of primary importance, you might even say. We exist, in many respects, we talk — the words that Scripture uses, not just beauty, but things like glory, majesty, awe, wonder — those words get us into a mind that says well, is my… what is the end? Well, glory now. Yes, glory’s coming, but we seek to honor and glorify God now. We acknowledge and recognize his majesty now. He dwells in his radiance, he dwells in his unapproachable light. All of these realities that are not just about — these are things that are true.

**JR:** Yeah. This is a podcast about writing, right? So I’m gonna try to direct these big ideas, these big theological ideas — I don’t wanna reduce them down to “these are writing tips.” But I do wanna sort of direct toward what do these big ideas… how can they shape how you think about writing? And so… except, I still have to… one thing I wanna say is I love what you’re doing, talking about the beautiful community.

As I said a minute ago, goodness and truth are… [pause] You remind us that there’s pleasure in diversity. That it’s not just hey everybody, the right thing to do here is to embrace diversity, which of course it is. That and equality. But there’s a joy here, and a pleasure.

**II:** That’s right.

**JR:** And I think that delight that you talk about is such an important motivator for the work we do, whether that’s creative work or other kinds, ministry work or plumbing.

**II:** Yes it is. That sense of delight… I mean, it’s really interesting, right? The Scriptures, particularly Ecclesiastes — I’m going to paraphrase here — it talks about finding joy or contentment or delight in our toil under the sun. The preacher says that there should be a sense of delight in what we do, but finding a sense of contentment and pleasure in our work. And it’s interesting, he calls it in contrast “our toil under the sun.” It doesn’t give you that sense of delight. It gives you that sense of this being hard. It’s hot! Your’e under the sun. But a pleasure there in the work that we do… the Lord is pleased for us to be pleased.

**JR:** Yeah.

**II:** Or he calls us to do, I might say.

**JR:** But now having said that, you also acknowledge that it is — and you’re borrowing this term from MLK, if I’m not mistaken — it’s “divine dissatisfaction” that moves you to do a lot of what you do, both in your ministry work and writing this book. So… that feels like a contradiction.

**II:** (laughs) Yes…

**JR:** Delight and divine dissatisfaction. Which is it?

**II:** (laughs) Um, it’s yes. (Laughs)

**JR:** (laughs)

**II:** So, the divine dissatisfaction, that phrase I borrow from Dr. King when he encourages in a 1965 speech at Ebenezer Baptist Church, he encourages hearers to go out with a divine dissatisfaction. That is, what do you see in the world, in the church that is out of accord with God’s standard and his word. God himself gives you a divine dissatisfaction to engage these issues.

So you might be motivated to say, you know, I see this issue and problem, and I see what God’s heart is, so I want to press into how things ought to be as God declares it to us. But there’s also a delight in that pursuit! There’s a sense of joy in God’s calling. In responding to God’s calling, in being engaged to God’s calling… it doesn’t mean that it’s easy. It doesn’t mean there’s no discouragement. It doesn’t mean there’s no difficulty or hardship. But those things are not necessarily antithetical to joy and delight. So it really is a both/and.

Yes, there’s a day coming where there will be no more divine dissatisfaction, where all will be delight and everything will be as it ought to be. When there will be shalom permeating the cosmos. But right now we live in this tension of the reality of the things that move us to a divine dissatisfaction, but also a sense of contentment and delight and peace in engaging it because God has called us to.

**JR:** Yeah. I love it. I talk to writers a lot about the idea of telling a truer story than the story the world is telling.

**II:** Mmmm. Yes.

**JR:** About itself and about us. A related idea that I think is really relevant to he way you’re talking about your work as a minister and a writer is there’s true things and truer things and truest things. The brokenness in the world around us, whether that’s racial brokenness or all the other kinds of brokenness… that’s all true. There’s no reason to pretend it’s not true. But there’s something truer.

**II:** yes. Yes. Absolutely. And we… this is the blessing, you know? I don’t wanna start preaching here, but here’s what I… one of the things we see is in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, “there’s true things and truer things” is what you might say that book is about. It’s a revelation. It’s John — the curtains are pulled back for John while he’s on the Isle of Patmos to see the truest things.

**JR:** Yeah.

**II:** To see that as the churches are suffering, dealing with persecution… as it seems that evil is winning the day, the Lord says let me show you the Bride. Let me show you the wife of the Lamb. See her glory and her radiance and her beauty as she reflects the glory and the beauty of her Lord. This is what the Lord looks like. This is what God’s people look like. You need to see it.

We have that same kind of calling. One of the things the Spirit of God does is he gives us the eyes to see things our senses can’t perceive. Yeah. (laughs) End of sermon. I’ll stop.

**JR:** Well, I appreciate… you’re telling a truer story. That’s what’s going on in this book. So… yeah. Thanks. (laughs)

**II:** (laughs)

**JR:** Okay, I don’t have statistics. I don’t know for sure, but I’m pretty sure my listenership of The Habit podcast is overwhelmingly white people, and I hope a lot of them are interested in telling a truer story about matters of race and justice. But can you sort of talk a little bit about ways that white folks who are writers or — and I don’t know, I’m afraid I’m using language that’s somehow outdated — but can be allies or can be brothers and sisters to people of color? Can we talk about that a little bit?

**II:** Sure, sure. Let’s talk about that. Um, particularly in this day and age, in this time, when the conversation around race and justice, reconciliation, is just… it’s in bold relief before us, in the church and in the culture. And so to my white brothers and sisters, I think one of the realities, at least among those who I think have done the better job of engaging this, is going on a learning journey yourselves.

So, recognizing that as you enter into this conversation, it’s not that you have nothing to offer, but before offering something, there needs to be a willingness to hear, to listen, to be slow to speak and quick to listen to the voices of African-Americans, other people of color, their lived experiences, how they think through these issues.

So if you’ve never read African-Americans who have written on this subject, you know particularly from a Christian perspective, brothers and sisters in Christ — I’m not saying limited to that, but brothers and sisters in Christ who engage these issues, who speak on these issues, who preach about these issues, then there’ll be a deficit in your perspective when you speak into these issues, because you will not have been able to give serious consideration to the lived and expressed experiences of African-Americans.

Because here’s the thing, right? This is not new for the majority of the African-American church. Let’s just talk about the church. This is not a new conversation. It’s not a new engagement. It is one that has been there from the beginning of the Black church in America. Press into these issues. And there have always been, what you might, say, call white allies in these — along the way. But that has very regularly taken the shape of something that’s more patronizing.

**JR:** Yeah, let me lend my authority and my influence to your project or whatever.

**II:** Yes, exactly. For example, read a wonderful new biography on Frederick Douglass by David Blight, Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom, talking about Douglass’ escape from slavery and how he was a spokesman for, you know, the abolitionist/anti-slavery moment, but he was also used by that movement. And he expresses his own frustrations about being kind of managed by his white managers in his messaging and the like. So that… coming under the listening influence of people of color before you begin engaging in and pontificating on these issues.

I have a very good friend who’s the pastor of a historically African-American church here in D.C., and we have these conversations. Their church has added — his church is almost 120 years old, so it’s a fixture here in D.C. And they have included intentional reconciliation in their core values. But when we talk, he’ll share with me expectations that yes, it takes me a while before I trust that my white brothers and sisters are genuine, that they come to the table with a listening posture and not one that is initially suspect of my theology, suspect of my ability or our ability to take the lead in these kind of engagements. So that’s a necessary part of this, and the wonderful thing is that there are ample resources. (chuckles) There’s no lack of ways to engage.

**JR:** Yeah. But I think there is a lack of white folks’ willingness to… to, well, to be under the authority, if that’s the right word? I mean, that’s definitely a right word. I think you touch on this in your book, that even in multi-racial churches, if white folks don’t… white folks don’t do too well without feeling like they’re in charge sometimes.

**II:** That’s right. So the research bears out that even in multi-racial churches, um, white cultural normatively remains the dominant quote/unquote “cultural ethos” of the church. And that’s based on historical realities. (laughs) Of where we are. If you were in a different country, um, there are different problems, right? But if the majority of people are not European, there’s a different dynamic in the church context. So cultural normativity is a really thing wherever you are. It’s just that here, as we pursue diversity, white cultural norms become the most dominant ethos. So taking that position of a learner who wants to listen well before speaking.

And recognizing this — here’s the other thing. The other thing is that there has to be a willingness to be roundly criticized by some segments of white evangelicalism. No white Christian who engages these issues forthrightly, who takes these kind of listening postures, and can kind of express the experiences, and can offer ways of moving into this that include kind of dying to self, will be free of critique. Free from the accusation that you’re beginning to abandon the gospel for a socialist agenda.

**JR:** Uh huh.

**II:** I mean that’s just… especially in today’s Twitterverse. It will happen.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah. Um… this… what’s the term you use? Cultural normativity?

**II:** Yes, white cultural normativity.

**JR:** That’s such a helpful thing to bear in mind. The ability — now I’m again narrowing this down to writerliness — but the ability to step outside yourself and see where you’re coming from is so important for any of us, but especially for people who write. To be able to examine, to have some sort of self-awareness that what I’m calling normal isn’t universal, right? (laughs)

**II:** Yes, that’s exactly right.

**JR:** You talk about “ghettoization.” You use it in a way that people don’t usually use it. Actually, can you tell us — tell me what you mean about ghettoization. You say it started at the Tower of Babel, right?

**II:** Right. That’s right. I don’t mean “a densely populated urban context characterized by blight and poverty.” I mean the groups to which we belong that are divided, are segmented, separated, that start, Biblically speaking, at the Tower of Babel, when — I say that’s the last time humanity was one big happy family.

**JR:** (laughs)

**II:** That’s how it’s described in verse 1 of Genesis chapter 11. But our unity was a unity of absolute, abject rebellion against God. God said, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” and humanity said no thank you, we’ll find ourselves a plain and build ourselves a city and a tower and make a great name for ourselves. God comes down and confuses our language, which, right? They leave the building project undone, and they can no longer understand each other. So I find the roots of our discontent, so to speak, there. I get my sense of humanity and what it means to be a person and what it means to be people from my group, my tribe, my ghetto. And therefore I am naturally hostile — we are, at the very least, suspicious of people from a different ghetto.

We don’t naturally say you know, let’s appreciate the beauty, God’s creative genius, in our fellow image bearers who come from this cultural context, and what beauty they bring to the table, and how that enhances our understanding of what it means to be human. We say oh nonononono, if you really wanna be human, you should become like us. Do things our way, because we know the right way.

**JR:** Right. And so, as you say, “We have no idea the depths to which our expectations, desires, preferences, and predilections are informed by our ghetto. When your ghetto is the norm, your default position is to expect others to conform to your way of being.”

**II:** Yes.

**JR:** And so to return to my previous question… I think people of color are maybe a little more aware of this truth than white pole like me who think my ghetto is the norm, or my ghetto is the world.

**II:** You know, there’s truth there. I wanna nuance it a bit.

**JR:** Okay. Great. That’s what I’ve got you here!

**II:** (laughs)

**JR:** You provide the nuance!

**II:** This reality of our cultural norms, as the water that we swim in and as unexamined rules and ways of being and understanding life is true of everybody.

**JR:** Mmhm. Okay.

**II:** It’s not something that, you know, African-Americans say, oh, well I understand cultural norms and why they happen! A lot of times they’re unexamined. Now what happens is when the dominant culture, the majority culture…t hose norms are not examined as much because there’s no need to navigate in non-majority culture context. So…

**JR:** I’m not code switching as much as you are to get through my day.

**II:** Right. I, as an African-American… you’ve gotta navigate in majority white cultural contexts. So you can see those differences and distinctions. There’s things you can appreciate and value in your own culture, and then you say, okay, here’s what I have to know and do in this context if I’m going to thrive.

If I’m a part of white majority culture, I don’t have to do that. I don’t have to do that to thrive in the United States of America. I don’t. Um, and so…

**JR:** When you say “I,” you mean if you were a white person?

**II:** If I’m a white… yes, right. (laughs) Yes! Thank you for that clarification. (laughs) But my white brothers and sisters do not have to engage in different cultural contexts, different cultural norms if they’re going to thrive and flourish.

So it’s more of a… this gets to the notion of the term “privileged.” It’s an aspect of privilege. It doesn’t mean, oh, I’m going to, as a white person, I’m always gonna be rich and successful and have no struggle. It relates to, I have the privilege of not having to engage a different cultural context with different norms and rules that I have to understand if I’m going to thrive. I don’t have to do that.

**JR:** If I don’t thrive, it has nothing to do with that.

**II:** It has nothing to do with that. There might be other reasons I don’t thrive, but it has nothing to do with that. Absolutely.

**JR:** Well, we’re about to run out of time. I just wanted to highlight something I appreciate you saying, which is your advice to — I started to say to white folks, but I guess it’s to everybody — embrace being more curious than confident in matters of diversity and difference. And I think that’s… thats what we need bumper stickers of.

**II:** Yes. More curious than confident in matters of diversity. Just think about this, not even from a human perspective. Think about it from the vantage point of seeing the diversity in creation. When I look at different flowers and plants, or when I listen to, look and see different birds, I don’t have a sense of confidence. Oh, I get why this flower is this color and why these birds sing this song this way. There’s curiosity there.

Particularly in the same way when it comes to humanity. We all have — to go back to what you pointed out earlier from what I wrote — we very rarely probe the depths of the ways in which our outlook on life, the way we think about what is good and true and beautiful, is shaped and formed by our ghetto, our cultural realities and contexts. If that’s true, that means I have to have a curiosity about those values, those unspoken values that exist below the surface of the water, below the things that I see, with fellow image-bearers who are different than I am. Because we are all image-bearers, and we are made to reflect the beauty of the Lord in our diverse, beautiful community. So that should engender in me a curiosity of discovering the beauty there.

**JR:** Yeah. That’s great. And so where… where confidence displaces curiosity, there’s a kind of blindness.

**II:** I should say there are some things I can be confident in. That’s not to say I don’t have any confidence. At a basic level, I certainly have confidence that I’m engaging with a fellow image-bearer who has immeasurable comparable dignity and value because of that truth. I can have confidence in what God says in his Word, right? About my salvation in Jesus Christ, about what God intends to do with humanity and his world. But in terms of our engagement with one another in our pursuit of loving our neighbors… I can be confident we’re to love God with everything and our neighbors as ourselves, but in the how do we love our neighbors well? That’s where the curiosity comes in.

**JR:** None of those kinds of confidence you named would displace curiosity. They would engender curiosity about your fellow image-bearers.

**II:** That’s right.

**JR:** So I gotta ask you my last question I always ask: Who are the writers who make you want to write?

**II:** Yes! There are… let’s think about various categories. (laughs)

**JR:** Okay.

**II:** Theologically, I am informed by people like Herman Bavinck. I don’t aspire to write tomes and volumes, but his ability to grasp and to tease out the implications of Scripture -- even when we have places of disagreement, right? They inspire me to be thoughtful and creative in my own writing.

As I think about particular writers and journalists, I think of Isabel Wilkerson, an African-American journalist and author. The storytelling, her book *The Warmth of Other Suns*, her new book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*… I’m inspired by the way she writes.

**JR:** She’s amazing, isn’t she?

**II:** Amazing. A novelist, Colson Whitehead. His novel *The Nickel Boys* last year, his other story “The Underground Railroad.” These are fictional stories, but they inspire me creatively.

I’ll mention two more. Um, Esther Meek, who I think is a professor at Grove City College in Pennsylvania. Just her depth of thought in a book like *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology*. She’s a professor of philosophy. She influenced me, even reading how she writes about beauty.

And then last one, who hasn’t really written a book. Her name is Elissa Yukiko Weichbrodt, she’s a teacher, professor at Covenant College out in Georgia. More about hearing her speak as she brings the reality of art history to bear on all kinds of subjects. Whenever she writes something, I read it. I’m inspired by it.

And lastly, I’ll say, my son Nabil who is an artist. A musician, but the lyrics he writes… I’ve learned from him. My second boy. So there you go.

**JR:** Yeah. And his hip-hop name is…?

**II:** Ah, Seaux Chill. S-E-A-U-X Chill.

**JR:** I remember I saw that in your book, and I loved what you had put in there from him. Alright, Irwyn Ince. This has been such a delight.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** I’ve been so happy to get to know you a little bit, and I hope we can talk again soon.

**II:** Yeah, likewise Jonathan. Thank you so much for the time and the invitation.

**DREW MILLER:** The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We’re so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.

Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song “Too Good” as part of this podcast. Visit [jessraymusic.com](http://jessraymusic.com) to hear more of her beautiful songs.

**JR:** The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other a little more courage. Find out more at [TheHabit.co](http://TheHabit.co).

**DM:** This podcast was produced by The Rabbit Room, where art nourishes community and community nourishes art. All our podcasts are made possible by the generous support of our members. To learn more about us, visit [rabbitroom.com](http://rabbitroom.com), and to become a member, [rabbitroom.com/donate](http://rabbitroom.com/donate).

(THEME MUSIC OUT)