

Chapter Six

DECORATING WITH GRACE

I OCCASIONALLY WATCH a reality television show called *Property Brothers* about twin brothers, Jonathan and Drew, who help people find, buy, and renovate homes. They specialize in extreme fixer-uppers. As the brothers show the prospective buyers various homes, the people looking to buy almost always have trouble believing that they could ever feel at home in the ugly and damaged house they are seeing.

My favorite part in each episode is when Jonathan uses computer modeling to show them how radically the space could be transformed into a beautiful home they could love. He shows them what they couldn't imagine themselves. There on the computer screen the old room is stripped down to the floorboards and a new room is built layer by layer, even with the accent pieces, right before their eyes. "I can't believe it!" the wife says. "That's amazing!" marvels the husband. "You could really do that? On our budget?"

Grace does that for the church. The people, I mean, not the drywall and joists. Grace is the church's interior decorator, the ultimate renovation expert. "Once you were not a people," Peter recalled, "but now you are the people of God." Paul points to the rubble of old dividing walls and says, "You are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." Deep beneath the church is the foundation stone, Jesus Christ, and tight up against His great cornerstone lay the granite teachings of the apostles and prophets. All of it is a gift to the saints, undeserved and unsought.

Bezalel's Kin

God employs grace-skilled Wordworkers to help build His temple. Pastors use our unique spiritual trade, Word-working, to make sure the people of God whom we serve are built to the specifications of His holiness and mercy in Christ. We are blessed to be part of the answer to Paul's great prayer in Ephesians 3, that the

church, “being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

Architects are sometimes identified by the design approach they follow, like the Prairie School inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright. The spiritual architecture of God’s church gets its inspiration, you might say, from the Tabernacle School. The church is Christ’s Body, God’s temple, and His holy priesthood. So it stands to reason that as a people we would bear the design of the Tabernacle.

Think about the Tabernacle’s courtyard and holy rooms, the precious metals, jewels, fabrics and designs. Think about the furniture, each piece symbolizing an essential aspect of the relationship of God and His people. Think about the priests, their garments and responsibilities, and about the sacrifices and celebrations. Every detail mattered. In both explicit and implicit ways, the Tabernacle declared the holiness and grace of God. It stirred memories of the world God had created, preached God’s remedy for sinful hearts and creation, and promised the hope of glory. It was an architectural prophecy of Christ. Now, God’s people, alive with Christ, display that same detailed interior design.

Remember Bezalel, the craftsman charged with building the Tabernacle? God said in Exodus 31:3-5, “I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship.” Bezalel and his right-hand man, Oholiab, were our pastoral second cousins, a long way removed. We do the kind of work they did, only with the precious people of God. We help craft God’s people into a “dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

Our job is to show believers that while God’s grace starts with the Altar of Sacrifice and ends at the Mercy Seat of the Almighty, there is much more to the holiness and grace of God. We traffic through all of Scripture to show them that Christians are a royal priesthood called to serve God with hands washed clean, in the lamplight of truth, lifting the incense of prayer, and breaking bread with the Lord. We teach them the wonder of coming boldly to God through the curtain Christ tore when He died. We work with the Holy Spirit to build these and other sacred privileges into our fellowship together so that we are a temple befitting the presence of God.

When a church mirrors the heavenly temple of God with the Holy Spirit moving freely among us, our congregation becomes a kind of collective preacher. When outsiders come into a congregation that is inwardly designed and equipped to be God's temple, they know something is different. They sense the Spirit of God among the people of God. Like Paul said of himself in Romans 15:16, the church is called "to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."

GOD IS LIKE THE ART INSTRUCTOR. PASTORS AND
CHURCH LEADERS ARE EACH AT OUR EASELS IN A STUDIO
AROUND JESUS, WHO IS OUR MODEL.

Recently a young man named Alec showed up at church because his Christian friend John invited him. Alec, by his own admission, was somewhere between an agnostic and an atheist. He came that first morning in his black Slayer T-shirt with his guard up. But even before church started, God's people got to know him. Nancy, a grandma, surprised him with a hug. He listened to us sing and pray. He saw how we enjoyed Christ and one another. After church Guy told Alec how he had come to Christ.

When it was time to go, Alec told his Christian friend John, "I thought all Christians were arrogant blankety-blanks, but I've never met people like these before." Then he asked John, "Do you come here every week?" and when John said he did, Alec asked, "Can I come with you again?"

We gave him a Bible and God just moved into Alec's life. The Lord convicted him of sin and brought the Scriptures to life for him. Only a couple of weeks later John and Alec waited for me after the service. Alec asked if he could talk to me sometime because he "wanted to convert." Fifteen minutes later the three of us met in my office and went over the gospel carefully. Then Alec prayed and "converted." Jesus saved Alec, of course; but Alec first saw Jesus in his friend John, and then in the whole church. My sermons didn't have much to do with Alec's conversion. But my pastoral work, like Bezalel's, helped build a priestly, preaching church that displays the glorious architecture of grace.

Paint

I came to the church I now serve from a congregation four times bigger. At first I felt the change most sharply in worship. There were just two of us to take turns leading worship, and we had two pianists. No guitar or drums. No choir or organ. No screens or projector. We had a hymnal and a praise chorus book in the pew racks. I know lots of churches do with less, but I had gotten used to the resources of a larger congregation.

I remember saying to the Lord, “How do You expect us to worship when this is all we have?!”

And if I heard Him correctly God said, “*Excuse Me?* Just what is it you *need* to worship Me?”

I think what I actually meant was, “How do You expect us to compete with other churches who ‘do’ worship better than we can?” It sounds terrible put like that, but I think that was it.

Around that time, I was thinking one day of a painter, a palette in one hand and a brush in the other. I imagined planning a worship service—or leading a church, for that matter—like painting a picture. God is like the art instructor. Pastors and church leaders are each at our easels in a studio around Jesus, who is our model. “Paint a church that looks like Jesus,” God says. Then He starts squeezing paint out of tubes onto each of our palettes.

I’m already imagining what my church painting will look like when I see the pigments God gave me. This can’t be right!

“Wait,” I said, “I need more colors than that. There’s no red. I can’t paint a church without red. I’ll have to go borrow red from someone else.” I notice that other pastor-painters are having the same problem. They are also missing colors they figure they will need. Most of us are thinking God has been a little too sparing if He expects masterpieces.

Then God, our art instructor, says, “I’ve given you all you need to portray Christ through your church. Just paint with the colors I gave you.”

That line has become a motto for our church: We will paint with the colors God gives us. It is a way of thinking that pervades our whole church. We think about that when we’re trying to discern new ministry direction or how longtime ministries can be more effective. Generally, our leaders don’t decide what kinds of ministries we should have or what they should look like. We keep looking at the people God gives us, with their backgrounds, passions, and spiritual gifts, and imagine what our church could paint with those colors.

This philosophy of ministry is easiest to see in our worship services. Instead of trying to be contemporary, blended, or traditional

in worship, we try to be *us*, full of grace. Many churches choose their worship style and music in order to appeal to the kinds of people they want to draw. Many use only their best musicians. I get that. But we have decided not to do it that way. We decided that, whenever we can, we will use the people God gives us, as many of them as possible, regardless of whether they play a bass or a bassoon. I know this approach isn't for everyone, but you might be surprised at how wide the appeal is, *especially* to unchurched people who come. Contrary to our assumptions, outsiders don't actually come to church for the music. Whether they know it or not, God brought them to see Jesus.

For example, Nathaniel brings his operatic training to his solos while Daniel sings winsome, sweet songs he has written. John reads Scripture as though he carried a treasure with his voice. Occasionally, a gospel quartet gets us all smiling for the joy of heaven. Kay puts things on our Communion table that make us think. I would guess that forty people or more are involved in our services over the course of a month. Every service isn't a masterpiece, but I think God is pleased with the unique painting we give Him.

One of my favorite parts of being a pastor is painting with people. I don't usually have a strong sense of vision (one of my least favorite words), but I often see the makings of a ministry before others do because I have the best vantage point. Pastors often see the strings God is pulling before others do. We get to make introductions and connections that God has prepared.

One day I was telling a young woman about some of our ministries when somehow it came out that what she really loved was working with senior adults. Only a day or two before someone else had told me the same thing, and a week later I heard it from a third person. I started thinking about how many people in our church have experience working with older people. Plus, we have several who live in a nearby retirement community and care a great deal about their neighbors. I've been preaching there for a couple of years and have made some great friends. My associate pastor, Michael, and I realized we might be on to something.

We called half a dozen nursing and rehab centers right around us, and three of them *begged* us to come and lead services or to just visit with people. An activities director told us, "We have someone who comes and reads from *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, but we need someone to come in here and do a Jesus talk." So that's what we do.

We didn't dream up this ministry. We had no particular vision for it at first. In fact, it really wasn't on our radar. But we do what so

many pastors do: We looked at the colors God gave us and helped our church paint.

Saying Yes

What pastor hasn't had someone come up and say, "I have this great idea for a new ministry"? I admit I cringe a little when I hear things like that. It isn't because I'm averse to new ideas. It's because I'm averse to more work!

There are a variety of good reasons why we don't give equal weight to every idea. But sometimes God is behind one of those crazy ideas. I've watched the property brothers on TV plead with prospective home buyers to see past the mess in a room to imagine how warm and inviting it could be with some work. Some just don't buy it. Pastors can be like that. God brings someone along with a great opportunity, solution, or vision; but sometimes we shut them down because we just can't see it.

"LET'S BE A CHURCH THAT SAYS YES."

About a month before we moved from our church in western Pennsylvania, Bobby talked to me about an idea he had for an outreach event. Bobby loved sharing Christ and he was into cars big time. In fact, he was a professional drag racer. He wanted the church to host a car cruise where enthusiasts show off their customized cars. (I was yawning already.) He thought he could get a big name Christian driver to share the gospel. He said he could bring his funny car and do a burn-out down the road that ran by the church. The church people could serve beverages and hot dogs. He thought he could pull something together by summer. Then he asked what I thought.

Well, I thought it was a crazy idea. But I was moving soon, and this fell into the "what could it hurt to try?" category, so I just said, "Sounds interesting. Go for it." I didn't realize God in His grace had whispered the idea to Bobby. A few months later, I heard that more than a thousand people showed up to look at cars, watch a burn-out, and eat hot dogs on a summer afternoon. A well-known Christian driver shared Christ and people believed the good news. The publisher of *Christian Motorsports Illustrated* showed up and wrote a cover article on the event so other churches could model it. That crazy cruise idea became a significant annual outreach. It wasn't just that people came. People came to Christ.

Once years ago, when our staff was puzzling over some new idea, my associate pastor at the time, Paul, said simply, “Let’s be a church that says yes.” That was grace talking! And that has become another of our core values.

A couple of years after that, I called an OTSP (on the same page) meeting to help all our various leaders work through our philosophy of ministry. One of the things we went over was being a church that says yes. They had all heard it before, and they all nodded agreeably.

GOOD QUESTIONS PUMP LIFE INTO GOOD IDEAS AND LET FLIMSY IDEAS QUIETLY DRIFT AWAY

We covered a number of other core values in the course of the evening. About an hour later I said, “Get in groups and let’s do a case study.” When everyone was clustered I gave them a hypothetical situation that I had dreamed up just to test them. “Let’s say that last Sunday someone in the church came up to you with an idea. She said, ‘I was thinking that we should offer a vacation Bible school the week between Christmas and New Year’s when the kids are off school. Kids have time on their hands and some parents have to work. We might reach a lot of kids.’” I asked my leaders, “What will you tell her?”

They talked a while and then I polled them. Without exception, each group proceeded to tell our hypothetical idea person all the reasons her idea would not work at our church. Some of the reasons were solid, but still I challenged them, “What happened to trying to say yes?”

I am not really suggesting that we agree to every idea. I mean that we lean toward a yes rather than a no. We explore and consider. A culture of grace recognizes that God has surprises up His sleeve. More than anyone else in the congregation, the pastor is situated to green-light God’s surprises.

One way to distinguish off-the-cuff brainstorming from God-given burdens is to ask questions: *What made you think of that? Have you thought through some of the challenges? Have you talked about this idea with others? Is there some reason you think this would be especially effective at our church now? Are you invested in this idea enough to write up a short proposal I could show to others? Would you pray about this for a couple of weeks and see if God brings other people forward?* Good questions pump life into good ideas and let flimsy ideas quietly drift away.

After our meeting that night one fellow came up to me. “I heard about a church that did that very thing—that Christmas vacation Bible school idea,” he said.

“You did? Somebody actually did that?” I replied in surprise.

“Yes,” he said. “I heard that in about three years they had more kids coming that week than they got for their summer program.” Why he didn’t tell the whole group I’ll never know.

Property Brothers

Pastors are sort of like property brothers with Jesus. We are on the lookout for congregational fixer-uppers. Once God points us to one of His local temples, we go to work with grace, the church’s interior decorator, the ultimate renovation expert. When Wordworkers build into a church all the details and dimensions of God’s grace in Christ, we build with gold, silver, and jewels that will only shine the brighter when the Day of Jesus dawns.