

“Extreme Home Makeover”
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I have a confession to make. I have a thing for home makeover TV shows. I really do. To each, their own, right? I don't watch all the home makeover shows, mind you. Let's be honest, there are way too many of them. But I have my favorites. I remember when ABC first premiered Extreme Home Makeover, with host Ty Pennington. I was fresh out of a college and living in a run-down little old house with a group of housemates. We were all a part of the Young Adult Volunteer program (YAVs), which was a ministry of the PC(USA). In addition to the fun of watching an old home be completely renovated and transformed (and secretly wishing they would come makeover the house I was living in), I was touched by the way the show was focused on bringing intentionality to home design to help a family who was struggling in one way or another. More recently, I've enjoyed Fixer Upper, Home Town, and Fixer to Fabulous. Especially during the pandemic, these kinds of shows gave us a family-friendly way that we could pass an hour of TV time together on winter days when there wasn't much else to do. We would marvel at the way that some reclaimed wood, special family heirlooms, and choice color palettes could all be integrated into outdated, shabby, or just plain boring homes to bring new life, character, warmth and joy.

Last week, we were plunged into the flowing stream of poetry used by the writer of Ephesians to proclaim to the churchgoers in Ephesus the overwhelming grace and ever abundant love of God for us. We found some stepping stones that helped us make our way in the swiftly flowing stream. We discovered not only that it is God's deep pleasure to have us in God's long-range plans but also that, in Jesus, we now have redemption and forgiveness of sins.

This week, an architectural metaphor is employed to help us find our way through the many differences and divisions between us that keep us apart and at odds with one another so that we can once again rest in the long-range plans of God for the church in the world. Here's a hint about God's long-range plans for the church: God's working on an extreme home makeover with all of us.

I once heard told a story about the Vietnam War. The story goes that there was some significant lag time between the official proclamation announcing the cease fire and end to the war and how long it took many still fighting deep in the jungles of Vietnam to actually stop their guerilla warfare and fighting and hear the good news that the war had ended.

This story illustrates a dynamic going on in the church in Ephesus. The writer reminds the Christians that there was once a time when they were without Christ. They were strangers and aliens. They were without Christ, and hence without peace. There was a time when they were lost—without hope and without God. I don't know how those words strike you. Can you identify a time in your life without Christ, without hope, without God? Many of us might have been born and raised in the church and so that might not feel applicable. But here's the thing: none of us

were born a Christian. All of us are made Christians—not by our own efforts but by the long-range plans of God enacted for us in Christ.

Oftentimes the language used in churches is this: I joined the church. Maybe we even talk about accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We think in terms of our choice and our membership: like when we join the local country club, yacht club, the book group at the library, the local service organization, etc. Many of us have thought about being a Christian as something that comes naturally—or we think of it as the good and upright thing that we do as “moral, normal Americans.” We may talk about being raised in a Christian household. We may lament what we see as the loss of status of Christianity in America.

If that is how you think about yourself as a Christian, as a member of the church of Jesus Christ, I’ve got news for you. That is not the gospel. And that, I think, is what makes this text in Ephesians challenging and strange to our ears.

Nobody comes into the church by birth, by choice, by their own selected membership. All of us, every last one of us, have been adopted, transferred into, built into this household. That means all of it is grace. None of it has been earned, chosen, or decided on by us. In Christ, we have received grace upon grace and true belonging as God’s adopted children, God’s intentionally chosen building pieces.

Think of it this way: in a newly renovated home, we would never think of the lovely, reclaimed wood beams or the cool antique farmhouse sink or even the funky tile in the bathroom to be there of their own accord. Obviously, we know these things were placed there with intentionality and by design of the builder, whether Chip and Joanna Gaines, Ben and Erin Napier, or Dave and Jenny Marris.

But there is another reason why seeing God’s definitive action as the builder and our passivity in the process is so very critical. Consider this, in our everyday lives, when we join an organization, when we move into a planned community or neighborhood, all of those choices we make in our lives are chances for divisions, separation, and differences to keep us apart from one another. These are ways we gather with other like-minded folks or others in the same situation or stage of life. That means these choices we make are also ways that we live deeply segregated lives from those who are different from us, who have different life experiences or who are at a different stage of life. As but one example: the neighbors at Burton Village probably do not significantly cross paths with those who live in Rehoboth Beach Country Club.

The original audience to this letter in Ephesians consisted of a conflicted, divided, segregated group. There were those who were circumcised and those who were not. In other words, there were Jews and Gentiles. And everything in the society around them was designed to keep them apart. And they were all okay with that. But then along comes God the builder and all the sudden country farmhouse style is being blended with modern industrial in the house of God.

Like those extraordinarily different, hostile, and divided groups of Jesus followers in Ephesus, we also are often only too comfortable with worldly divisions ruling the day in our church and our approach to ministry. We are often only too glad to make church a place that best suits one

generation but not a mix of generations. We are often willing to design our worship and our ministries so that those who are in a dominant group: like white Europeans, middle class homeowners, or straight, and cisgender folks, just for example, are most comfortable and ministered to and others are left ignored, neglected or expected to conform.

The challenge we face is that God's plan is for something different—God's after an extreme home makeover. God's trying to build something that breaks all the design rules we put in place to keep things comfortable, predictable, and safe for ourselves. God, who created us all in God's image, who in Christ has adopted us all, and whose spirit-breath is the life-force in every person—this God wants to build a totally new, totally extreme, totally made-over home.

Why? Because God wants to reside there. The home is built by God. The home is also for God. Unlike the homemaker shows I watch on TV, God is both the designer and the homeowner. Each of us has a place in God's construction and design plans. But so do all the other folks who we often exclude in our design of church and ministries. And so, when we continue with our own building plans, which don't match God's, what we risk running into is the absence of God in this place.

The good news is that God has already, in Christ, destroyed all the hostile walls and divisions we've created to keep us from one another. May we, the reclaimed wood, the antique farmhouse sink, the family heirlooms, give ourselves over to God the designer and builder. And may God build us up together in God's home—where rustic farmhouse meets industrial modern and everything in between. Amen.