



ALL THINGS NEW

FIRST EPISCOPAL DISTRICT BIBLE STUDY

JUNE 2018

June Theme: A New Church

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A New Word

The Church of Jesus Christ has always been one body, made up of people of different ages, races, genders, sexualities, nationalities, theological perspectives, political affiliations, and traditions. God is calling us to find new ways to build unity in the midst of our diversities and act as one loving body of Christ in the world.

A New Understanding

The book of Acts is the second of two volumes written by a Gentile Christian named Luke toward the end of the first century of the common era. The first volume, the Gospel of Luke, focuses on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ., while the second volume, the Book of Acts tells the story of the birth and expansion of the Church. Luke begins the Church's story with the ascension of Jesus, and recounts the birth of the Church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), when the Holy Spirit comes to a group of Galilean Jewish disciples in Jerusalem and empowers them to preach so that Jews from all nations are able to hear them in their own distinct languages. Luke further narrates the struggles and challenges the Church faces as it grows and expands to include non-Jewish Gentiles from areas throughout the Roman Empire including parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa.

KEY VERSE

*"So in Christ we,
though many, form
one body, and each
member belongs to
all the others."*

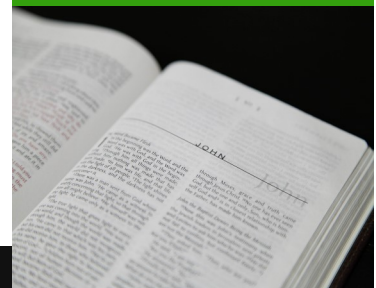
— Romans 12:5

STUDY

PASSAGE

Acts

15:1-11



Acts 15:1-11

1 Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. 3 The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were

"I never understood how people could refuse to go to church and still believe that they were fully functioning in their Christianity... until I became that person."

- D. Danyelle Thomas

welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. 5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses." 6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

The Old in the Text

1. What did those operating under the old mindset require of people who wanted salvation and to be part of the Church?
2. How were the Judean Christians thinking about and responding to the increasing diversity of the Church?
3. Why might the Judean Christians have insisted on their way of understanding salvation and practicing the faith?



The New in the Text

1. What new things was God doing among the Gentiles in our text?
2. How were Paul, Barnabas, and Peter thinking about and responding to the increasing diversity of the Church?
3. What did Paul, Barnabas, and Peter believe was required of people who wanted salvation and to be part of the Church?
4. In Acts 15:23-29, church elders send a letter to the new Gentile believers requiring only that they refrain from eating certain foods and sexual immorality. What do you think about this decision and the process by which the leaders in the church settled their disagreements?

A New Look

Excerpt From “Exodus: Why Black Millennials Are Leaving the Church ”

By: D. Danyelle Thomas

Overwhelmingly, many Black Millennials simply don't feel a connection to the church. They often don't feel fulfilled by worship services, auxiliary ministries, and sermons that do not resonate with their spiritual needs.

Black Millennials need human leadership. One person said, “My pastor never talked about his life or his dreams, he criticized women, gays, young people, and the community.” For Millennials, there is a non-negotiable need to be deeply rooted and connected by shared experience. We desire leaders whose humanity authentically reflects our own. We can accept that you are flawed, we just can't deal with fraud.

Black Millennials would rather leave church than do its respectability politics. Respectable Christianity Politics (RCP) is a set of requirements where sin must fall within respectable limits in order to be eligible for salvation and the right hand of fellowship within our churches. RCP has defined our acceptable dress code, style of worship, and even which sins we confess and address.

Black Millennials are in a period of awakening that cannot be dimmed with religiosity or with clichés like “that's the Word!” We are far too educated (both by way of collegiate matriculation and informal learning) to overlook the glaring injustice of the world and reinforced oppressions in the church. We're cringing at the shouts and praises gained at the expense of our LGBTQIA comrades. We wince at the outdated sexist remarks across the pulpit. Little by little, we've been shown that we must adopt an anti-them mentality to fit in with fellow parishioners. And we're refusing to play that ball.

Black Millennial Women are tired of being responsible for men's lack of self-discipline. It feels that there is no missed opportunity to remind women of their role of subservience to men within our hallowed halls. Black Millennial Women live and participate in a social media culture where if she breathes she's called a hoe. We are saddled with the responsibility of not only our sexuality but that of our Christian brothers. Our dresses can't be too short, too tight, or reveal too much shoulder lest we cause a “good man” to fall. Despite being dressed up in scripture, we find no refuge in our churches from the ongoing shaming of our sexualities. The conversations around sex in our churches are almost always one sided and revolve around instructing women to “not do it” and “save themselves for marriage.”

Black Millennials are more politically aware than ever. Even if we haven't sided with a political movement, we are painfully aware of the world around us. We are seeking refuge in our churches and are only met with antics that tickle the emotions. We desire to be equipped with how to take on a society that hates us – and we need to be told more than “just pray about it.”

One respondent said, “I stopped attending church because there was a disconnect between what I was hearing/seeing practiced in church and what I'm living. I need a word for right now that addresses the craziness I feel praying to a God who has not always kept me safe—about keeping my young Black son safe. It is challenging to wrap my mind around the fact that suffering for indigenous people, women, and people of color is God's will. As hard as it was for me to accept that I should have stayed in a dysfunctional marriage because that would bring me closer to God. At what cost?”

Black Millennials want to get the hell out. The political and social climate for Black life in the U.S. is why many Black Millennials are rejecting the theology of hell. State-sanctioned murders at the hands of law enforcement coupled with a political regime that deepens institutionalized marginalization daily is enough hell in itself. Hellfire and Brimstone sermons aren't moving us to join the ranks of your membership rosters – nor convincing us of room for us at the cross.

In short, Millennials are not a generation lost, churches have not made themselves a home to be found.

The full article can be found at: <https://www.unfitchristian.com/black-millennials-church/>

A New Conversation

1. D. Danyelle Thomas offers one perspective on why Black Millennial Christians, those roughly between the ages of 18 and 35, are not in church. What do you think of her critiques and how do you think the church should respond?
2. Resolving disagreements and uniting a group of diverse people and perspectives is difficult. Does the way the early Church addressed the issue of building unity through diversity give us direction for how we might build unity in light of the diverse perspectives highlighted in Thomas' article?
3. For you, what is essential to being a Christian, to being AME? What matters most? Are there shared values and commitments across diverse perspectives in your group? Can you identify shared values and commitments that could unite Millennials and Baby Boomers; rich people, middle class people and poor people, and other demographic groups in the church?
4. Can you imagine a church where people with the perspectives shared by those in Thomas' article and those of more traditional perspectives dwell together in unity and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to act in the world as one Body of Christ, loving and serving the world? If not, why not? If so, what would have to happen for that to be a reality?

Editors' Note:

Given the complex nature of the issues addressed in this study, our Episcopal Leadership recommends that the study be taught by a pastor or other person with experience teaching the Bible. Instructors should familiarize themselves with the issues in the study passage, as well as the values and concerns of Millennials and Baby Boomers, beyond what is presented here, to ensure a balanced discussion. Finally, to give ample time for reflection and conversation, it is recommended that this study be taught over at least two sessions.

A New Walk

1. Imagine your local church and the AME Church in 25 years? Who is there? What are the ministries? Does it look different than it does today?
2. What emotions do you experience when you imagine what the church will look like? (Fear, grief, sadness, anger, anticipation, excitement)? How do those emotions cause you to engage in conversations and actions intended to shape what the new AME church will look like?
3. What is God calling you to do to build unity among diversity in your family, church, community?