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Restoring Our Welcome

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First Episcopal District Bible Study

The Year of *RESTORATION*

Key Verse:

“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.”

Luke 14:13-14a

Study Passage:

Luke 5:29-39

THE RECKONING

UNWELCOME: a tragedy, in two parts

Act I

It was youth Sunday! Mother Brown was frowning because only five youth showed up to participate. She heard the Sunday school teacher going over their lines for the program that would start in five minutes. Mother Brown stopped Sister Carmen and asked, “Where is your daughter’s family?” Sister Carmen replied, “She did not want to come. Talking nonsense that our youth program has not changed since she was a child.” Sister Carmen walked away shaking her head.

Mother Brown watched her go toward the kitchen, but the words stuck in her head, “the youth program has not changed!” Mother Brown had been at the church forty years and the truth was the youth program had not changed. She didn’t see why it needed to change. Mother Brown shook her head and said softly, “I just don’t get this new generation!” ^(a)

Act II

A pastor [told] this story about a Bible study aimed at the hip-hop generation [those born between 1981-2000]. The pastor talked about successfully starting a Bible study that engaged younger individuals. Those responsible for starting the Bible study were even successful in getting these young adults to come to the church. Sadly, when the hip-hop generation started showing up, the drama started. Some of the more seasoned members started complaining about those kind of folk coming into the church. They “strongly encouraged” the pastor to stop



THE RECKONING *(continued)*

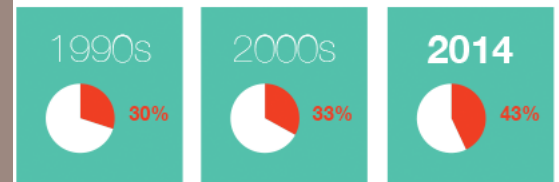
the study. The pastor tried to reason with the seasoned members but finally gave in and stopped the study. This is not where the story ends.

The pastor happened to walk by the sanctuary one evening and saw one of the young men in the back watching choir practice. The pastor greeted the young man and asked how things were going. The young man asked the pastor, “Why don’t we have Bible study anymore?” The young man talked about how he looked forward to it. The pastor struggled to find words that would be honest and not hurtful. Finally ended up saying something like not everyone was committed to the success of the study. It was the last time the young man ever came to church! ^(b)

(a) From *New Wine New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations* by F. Douglas Powe, Jr. (Abingdon Press, 2012)

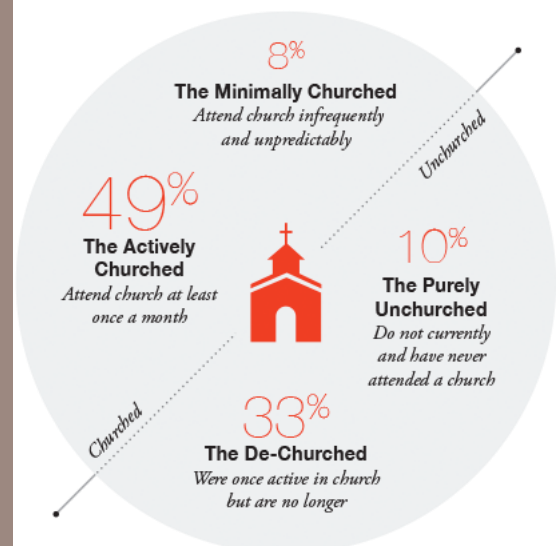
(b) From *Not Safe for Church: Ten Commandments for Reaching New Generations* by F. Douglas Powe, Jr. and Jasmine Rose Smothers (Abingdon Press, 2015)

The rise of churchlessness in America



Barna Group (Churchless, 2014)

% of U.S. Population



RECLAMATION

God promises to bless those who welcome all whom the world deems worthless. The church experiences restoration when we follow Jesus in placing the needs of the marginalized at the center of our concern.



RECOVERY

The book of Luke is the first half of the two-part story that is completed in the book of Acts. Luke is also one of the three synoptic gospels. The term “synoptic” means “seeing together,” and it refers to the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke because those three gospels share so much material in common. Yet, careful study reveals that the three gospels actually present different perspectives reflecting the authors’ sensitivity to the needs of the audience to whom they wrote.

These differences are most evident in Matthew and Luke, both of which were written decades after Mark and likely used that earlier gospel as a common template. While Matthew was tailored to the Jewish Christians who dominated the early church, Luke addresses Gentile Christians who were a minority within the church and were often viewed and treated as second-class Christians who were not fully welcome in the church (see Acts 11 and 15). Luke’s gospel aims to assure these Christians that this treatment was not reflective of Jesus, whose radical welcome is on full display in our study passage.



Luke 5:29-39 (NIV)

²⁹ Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

³¹ Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ³² I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

³³ They said to him, “John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.”

³⁴ Jesus answered, “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? ³⁵ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.”

³⁶ He told them this parable: “No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. ³⁷ And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. ³⁸ No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. ³⁹ And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better.’”



RECONSTRUCTION

1. In Matthew’s gospel, the narrator identifies Jesus’ dinner mates as “tax collectors and sinners” [Mt. 9:10]. How are these guests described by the narrator in Luke’s telling? According to Luke, who introduces the label of “sinners”? What do you think accounts for the difference in the two gospels?
2. Jesus justifies the invitation of these so-called “sinners” by arguing that he has come to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Based on the response of the teachers of the law in v. 33, into which category do you think they would place Jesus’ followers - righteous or sinners?
3. When you compare the behavior of the disciples of John and the Pharisees (“fasting and praying often”) to that of Jesus’ disciples (“eating and drinking...with sinners!”), which group of people would be more welcome in our churches? Which group would make ‘good members’?
4. In our key verse from Luke 14, Jesus uses the occasion of another banquet to compare the benefit of welcoming ‘good’ guests (those who are like us or who can benefit us) from ‘bad’ guests (those who are not like us, cannot benefit us, undesirable), and teaches that God is looking for hosts who will welcome the latter. In our study passage, Jesus appears to be putting his own teaching into practice. His famous parable about the new vs. old garment and the new vs. old wine/wineskins is a part of his justification for his behavior at the party. How does the lesson from the key verse help us interpret this parable? Who do the new cloth and new wine represent? And what actions do the new garment and new wineskins represent? Given this context, what is the implication of Jesus’ final word in v. 39? Is Jesus praising this attitude or is he offering a lament?

RENEWAL

In their book, *Not Safe for Church: Ten Commandments for Reaching New Generations*, F. Douglas Powe, Jr. and Jasmine Rose Smothers argue that black churches still operate mostly out of theologies and practices rooted in the experiences and culture of the Civil-Rights Generation. In order for black churches to extend the true welcome of Jesus to post-Civil Rights generations (those born after 1961), Powe and Smothers posit that we need not only innovative strategies (new wine), but a transformation in our orientation from an us-centered church to an other-centered church (new wineskins). They suggest the following ten “commandments” as points of conversation:

1. **Thou Shall Chill:** Assess What is At Stake — take a break from frantic “action” and discover what really matters to those whom you seek to welcome (hint: it’s not the preservation of your church!)
2. **Thou Shall Not Front:** Be Authentic — do not try to be all things; walk in your unique call with integrity
3. **Thou Shall Not Trip:** Discuss Taboo Subjects — we must address important issues of sexism, classism, and heterosexism in our own community and boldly wrestle with the diversity of opinions that emerge and the hypocrisy in our witness that may surface
4. **Thou Shall Check Yourself before You Wreck Yourself:** Provide Inclusive Worship & Bible Study — it’s not enough to talk about “others”; get to know them so that you can truly welcome them when they come
5. **Thou Shall Learn How We Roll:** Create New Entry Points — worship will not be the first point of contact for most “dechurched”; use other ministries to engage
6. **Thou Shall Watch the Throne:** Rethink Leadership — “Moses,” create opportunities for “Joshua and Caleb”
7. **Thou Shall Get Game:** Engage Mission and Activism in Meaningful Ways — update your knowledge about where and in what ways activism is effective; this may be your most salient “entry point” to un/dechurched
8. **Thou Shall Not Deny My Swag:** Hear New Insights — don’t be afraid if/when God leads the new people to take church in directions you are not comfortable with
9. **Thou Shall Sample:** Bring Together Old and New — create meaningful intergenerational exchange
10. **Thou Shall Represent:** The Future is Now! — don’t wait to restore the welcome of Jesus; find some way to start representing Jesus to new generations now



REVIVAL

1. Do any of Powe and Smothers’ “Ten Commandments” of reaching new generations seem particularly important for your church to wrestle with right now? If so, can you name specific experiences or conversations that led you to identify those “commandments”?
2. The restoration of the church’s welcome does not only apply to younger generations. Jesus identified economic injustice as the major issue of his day, since the poor and those whose different physical abilities prevented them from making a living were viewed as worthless. What group of people do you think would feel especially unwelcome in your congregation? A homeless person? Members of the LGBTQ community? Different races/ethnicities? An atheist or agnostic person? What would it look like to welcome them to your banquet? Do any of the “commandments” help?
3. What new wine is God ready to pour in your personal life? Is there an opportunity to minister welcome outside of church?