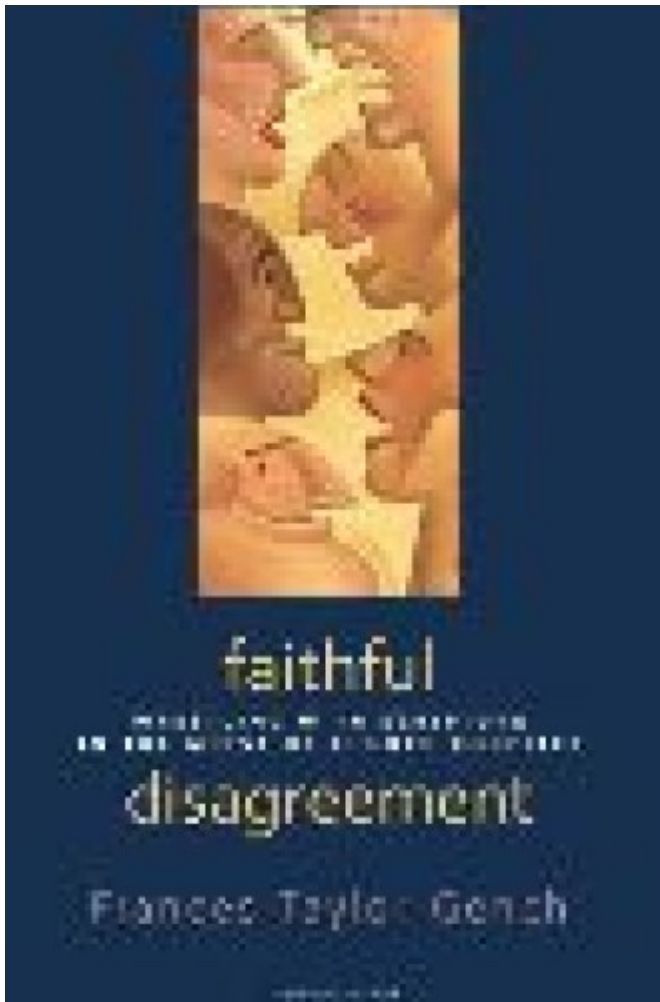


Lowering the volume

By [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [March 23, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Faithful Disagreement: Wrestling with Scripture in the Midst of Church Conflict

Frances Taylor Gench
Westminster John Knox

Here's a reality show I would like to see. Take 20 Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Methodists and leave them on a tropical island with these three: the recently resigned governor of Illinois, a United Church of Christ parliamentarian and David Letterman. The contest would be to see if they could (a) become excellent ballroom dancers and (b) resolve the issue of human sexuality before getting thrown off the island by a jury of former child stars judging the show from rehab.

If the contestants were successful, each denomination would receive a visit from Donald Trump to advise them on best practices from the business world that can be applied to the church. And if they were unsuccessful, they would be forced to attend all of one another's national gatherings in perpetuity.

Now that's raising the stakes.

After much argument over issues of sexuality and biblical interpretation, in 2001 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) established a Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and the Purity of the Church. (Perhaps the Presbyterians were hoping that in the time it would take to say the whole name, the sexuality issue would have been resolved somewhere else.) For the next five years, 20 people with diverse opinions—the three moderators had appointed people “who would never have dreamed of hanging out together”—met to wrestle with the issues uniting and dividing them as Presbyterians. The group represented so many points of view that there were no complaints whatsoever about the makeup of the task force, but many wondered how on earth they would ever get along.

Frances Taylor Gench, a professor of biblical interpretation at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia, was one of the 20. Her book *Faithful Disagreement* is a scholarly love letter to the members of the task force, who, it turns out, did much more than just get along.

In the introduction, the most interesting and provocative section, Gench describes how they decided to engage with scripture together and how hearts and minds were opened as they moved past the culture wars to Christian community. Her thesis, that Presbyterians are better at claiming the authority of scripture than they are at actually opening the Bible, could hold true for many denominations. In most mainline national gatherings, we tend to use scripture like a condiment, something added to our intellectual and political positions after they have been cooking for a while. Gench's testimony is that God has more to work with when we are willing to

work a little harder with God's holy word.

And these Presbyterians did work and study hard. The book is a collection of seven dense Bible studies, with a heavy focus on the epistles, meant to remind us that there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to church conflict. By wrestling with the same questions our spiritual ancestors did, yet placing them in their cultural context, as well as praying individually and collectively, members of the task force learned to lower their decibel level and really listen to one another. Gench was initially nervous about participating, but now she gushes: "It turned out to be the most powerful experience of the Holy Spirit I had ever had."

After that enthusiastic buildup, the seven Bible studies themselves seem awfully dry and heady. I felt a bit like I was viewing someone else's vacation pictures. I was confident that the task force participants all had a good time, but I just wasn't feeling the same excitement looking at it from the outside. This may be a case in which you really had to be there.

On the other hand, the book is meant to be shared in groups—to be read collectively and then discussed in community—and I imagine that it is in those discussions that the excitement of the Holy Spirit would come through, the same Spirit who is so evident in Gench's introduction, where she tells her story and testifies.

We learn tantalizingly little about what happened in that group of 20. Gench has not written a tell-all memoir, and she is deeply respectful of her conversation partners and the integrity of their process—so much so that I was left longing for at least a little dirt. There must have been some mudslinging that was part of getting to the love story. Surely it wasn't all wine and roses.

But Gench has written a serious book that has a different purpose. She has constructed a practical tool to help others get closer to the peak experience she had. Even if the vacation pictures aren't as much fun as the trip itself, everybody could use a good tour book for the journey ahead.