

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

Frances Taylor Gench
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Out of her experience with the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and the Purity of the Church of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 2001-2006, Frances Taylor Gench has written a book about listening to conflicts within scripture while attending to various forms of disagreement in modern churches. As both Herbert Worth and Annie H. Jackson Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), she is fully qualified to write such a book. In it her primary goal is to encourage us to read these biblical texts in conversation with others, even with those with whom we disagree. In fact, she is calling us to pay attention to the possibility of multiple interpretations of any given text, not unlike the ways in which Jews might allow for a number of understandings of a text under discussion (10). And although each of us may decide that a "line in the sand" must be drawn somewhere or another, we must also realize that our differing readings of the Bible broaden the scope of our vision and correct personal distortions and idiosyncrasies (11). Only by reading

in conversation with one another can we approach truth about God, Jesus Christ, and the communities in which we live and serve.

With this purpose as a guide, Gench reviews biblical texts pertaining to conflict, including portions of the Johannine epistles, Matthew 14:22-33, Romans 14:1-15:13, Jeremiah 28, 1 Corinthians 12-14, portions of 1 Timothy, and the Farewell Discourse in the Gospel of John. For each of these reviews she posits an appropriate theme that is relevant both to current debates over scripture, discernment of God's will, and church leadership, as well as the ongoing situation of living in and with disagreement among faithful Christians. She draws upon solid biblical scholarship and her own ecclesial experience to uncover salient issues in these texts and then concludes each chapter with questions for group discussion and reflection.

Mercifully, Gench makes no attempt to manufacture some sort of how-to list for navigating modern church conflict based on a presumed claim of what the Bible does or does not univocally present. In fact, one of the great strengths of this book is her ability to discuss the ways in which each of the chosen texts portray communal conflict and offer differing views of how God acts in the faithful community and the world. She is also well aware that there is disagreement among biblical books, especially among those of the Old and New Testaments, in regard to the will of God, ordering communal life, even the nature of Jesus as Messiah. In other words, she allows each author to speak his own truth without explicitly imposing a uniformity upon the biblical voices based on external claims or presuppositions.

Nor does Gench offer solutions to various modern ecclesial disputes based on her own reading of these scriptures. She steers clear of presenting her own views or making pronouncements about the various issues she discussing, particularly the current hot-button questions involving who is qualified to serve in church leadership. Perhaps for this reason, she makes a glaring omission in her discussion of 1 Corinthians 12-14 in which she demonstrates that Paul understands the church as “a community of discourse – of conversation” (76). At the same time, she never mentions that it is in these chapters of the Corinthian correspondence that we encounter some of Paul’s most vociferous remarks against women speaking aloud in worship – surely an important factor in the discussion of qualifications for leadership of churches which she takes up in a subsequent chapter!

Because of these deliberate limitations (and definitely not in spite of them), this book is a very useful tool in our own conversations about “family feuds,” as Gench often calls church conflict. Her strategies for presenting this material are both accessible and invitational to lay and clergy alike. For example, in her chapter on Romans 14:1-15:13, “Living with Disagreements,” she lucidly explores the foundational principles that Paul seems to suggest for Christians who are disputing with another over various issues. Key is his reminder that we “welcome one another” (36), even when we don’t agree with one another. Further, says Gench, in these chapters “one of the most important [perspectives] is the self-reflection to which it calls us with respect to the attitudes we display toward those with whom we disagree” (38). That is to say, it is not necessary to agree with one another on all things, but it is necessary to “honor and

protect the consciences of fellow believers” (41). In this way, we continue to welcome each other as Christ has welcomed us.

In addition, Gench encourages us to heed Paul’s admonition to bear one another’s weaknesses even if it means setting aside our own strengths, at least for a moment. “In short,” she explains, “it would appear that in Paul’s view, ‘rights’ take a backseat to ‘responsibilities.’ Commitment to the well-being of brothers and sisters in Christ (and thus responsibility for them) takes precedence over ‘rights’ one might be tempted to exercise” (42). Yet, even as I quote this very sage advice, I am left wondering about what Paul or other biblical authors might say about when at last Christians must draw that line in the sand (to return to Gench’s earlier metaphor) and insist that the rights of some outside the majority or most-loudly expressed views within a community be honored as well? Even the again very wise advice to reframe the conflict in light of “God’s cosmic project of reconciliation, embodied in the life of the covenant people Israel and realized in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ” does not give enough guidelines to answer my question.

Yet, for Gench, that may be precisely the point of her work. At this stage in the history of the Christian movement, we are wrestling with some difficult questions about who is in and who is out, who can lead and who cannot, who can speak for the purposes of God in the world and who has no clue. Perhaps for now all we can do is read scripture attentively and discuss what we read earnestly and openly in conversation with one another. I would add that we might also include in that conversation voices from outside the community as well.