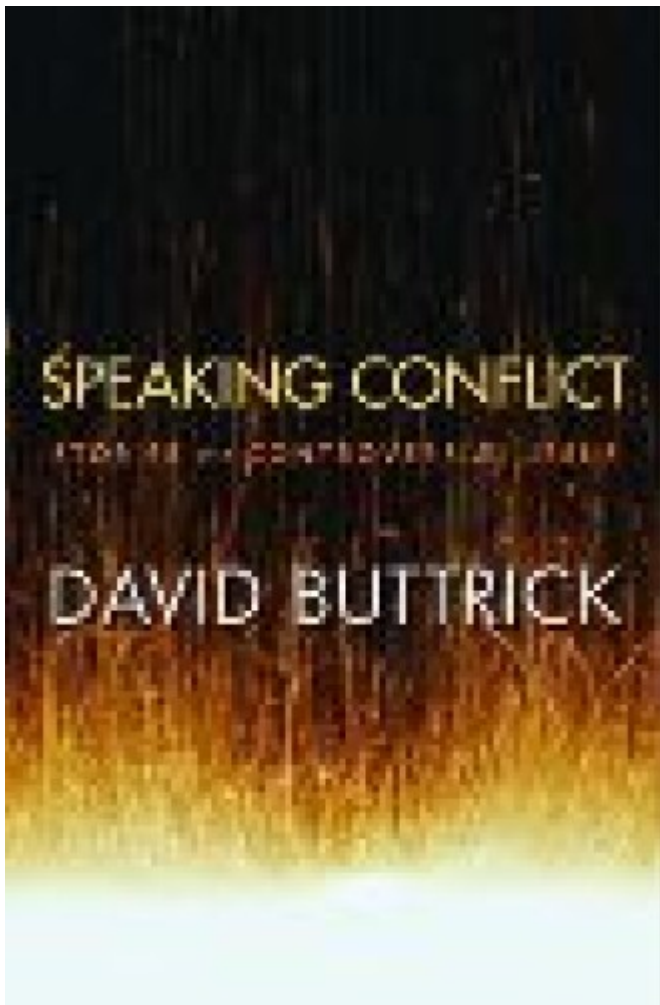


Speaking Conflict: Stories of a Controversial Jesus

reviewed by [Gail R. O'Day](#) in the [August 12, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Speaking Conflict: Stories of a Controversial Jesus

David Buttrick

Westminster John Knox

In 2000 David Buttrick began a project that focused on the language of Jesus and the ways in which attention to Jesus' language can inform and shape preaching. *Speaking Conflict* is the final volume in that project (the first two are *Speaking Parables* and *Speaking Jesus*). In this book, Buttrick takes as his primary material the controversial stories of the synoptic Gospels—stories in which Jesus' contemporaries confront him with questions about controversial religious matters. After attending to introductory questions, Buttrick analyzes the stories in the order of their appearance in Mark. His method is the same with each: he offers a fresh translation of Mark, presents the relevant synoptic parallels, analyzes Mark's story, names the controversy, and concludes with homiletical theology and a homiletical strategy ("speaking the passage"). Buttrick's own sermons provide examples of homiletical strategy.

The controversies that are at the heart of these stories "reflect situational issues that are still with us today": what it means to be religious, the nature of discipleship, the adjudication of conflicting religious claims. This contemporaneity enables Buttrick to urge preachers to pursue his central homiletical strategy of positioning present-day Christians as Jesus' interrogators in these stories. This strategy not only enables the preacher to enter into the language of Jesus and preach the controversy stories for a new day, it also changes the axis of the controversy. In the shift "from the Bible to present-day issues . . . we are able to bypass Mark's depiction of scribes and Pharisees as confrontational enemies. We ourselves become Jesus' questioners so that, when he answers with a counterquestion, he questions us."

At the heart of Buttrick's approach is a strong corrective to the tendency to use controversy stories to pit Jesus against "the Jews," which has fostered anti-Judaism in the church (even if that result was unintended). Buttrick's directness in positioning us, not them, as Jesus' questioners and making now, not then, the locus of the controversies opens up the gospel claims of these stories for the preacher.