

Slaying the monsters

Theological issues might be “settled” for us, but there is a big world out there that needs to hear our voices.

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

May 2, 2017



It was several years ago when I grabbed my mug and walked across the coffeehouse to the table where Dr. Frances Taylor Gench sat. I can't remember if I was late for the appointment, but I do recall the frenetic energy I held. My jangling self sat in stark contrast from Frances's calm and soothing manner. As a pastor/mom, I was

always juggling too many things, but I needed this meeting. I had gleaned a great deal from Frances's [work on the gospel of John](#) and hoped that I could talk with her about chapter three, especially Jesus's words that we must be born from above. I wanted to re-claim that feminine imagery from my fundamentalist past. I wanted to be born again again, and I figured Frances would be the perfect guide to help me.

She was. And she did much more than that. After I talked about my book idea, the subject turned to her project. She said that she was working on [something about the household codes](#)—those sentences in the Epistles that stated that wives needed to submit to their husbands and other tyrannical texts.

I winced and asked, “Why?” As a feminist, it seemed to me that those scriptures were part of the Bible we needed to neglect, like the ones on [stoning rebellious children](#). They didn't really need a spotlight shining on them, did they? Our understanding of those verses had been settled long ago.

Frances smiled and explained that she needed to write about them, because these issues might be settled for us, but they are far from settled for most Christians.

So I left our meeting thinking about the notion of “settled” theological issues.

In most of our denominations, we go through a process to distinguish where God is leading us regarding different political, social, and theological debates. Right now, as we look at our landscape, we know that many of our progressive denominations have gone through discernment to celebrate LGBTQ ordinations and marriages. Yet, our largest denomination, the United Methodist Church, is global and therefore bound to different cultural ideas on human sexuality. They're struggling through a particularly painful time.

We have gone through these struggles before—with slavery, suffrage, civil rights, and women's ordination. It's a distressing process that includes a lot of debates, votes, and broken hearts. Often during these times, we have schisms. The group that parts ways declares that they are loyal to the Word of God and the lordship of Jesus Christ. They will stand strong in their convictions, even when the culture does not agree. In too many cases, bigots claim “orthodoxy.”

The conservative group frames the outcome across denominations and non-denominations: The liberals want to throw away the Bible. They don't care what it says. They don't love Jesus. They just want to bow and bend to the winds of culture.

They're not really Christians.

On the progressive side, we lick our wounds, look around at our shattered denominations, pick up the pieces, and try to mend them back together. We watch as people we love walk out the door, and hold our guts as we divide up property. We know that we didn't come to our opinions by ignoring the Bible, Jesus, or our faith. We came to them *because* of the Bible, Jesus, and our faith.

No one likes going through all of this. I've heard things in denominational meeting concerning LGBTQ friends that make me shudder. In the PC(USA), we spent far too long holding on to our phobias. Yet, on the other side, there is a welcome relief. When we have greater liberation, when we uphold the full humanity of all people, no matter what their race, gender, or sexual orientation, we can breathe deeply and believe that an issue is "settled."

Yet, like a bad horror movie, somehow these monsters come back to life. Suddenly, we are dealing with slavery issues, as our President doesn't know [why we fought the Civil War](#). We are wrestling with voting rights issues, as [voter ID laws](#) are enacted. We are concerned with women's rights, as [women's healthcare is threatened](#) and people struggle to identify [sexism in our churches](#).

I finished the book that led me to seek out Frances Taylor Gench, and as a result of its publication, I have spent the last couple of months talking with different news outlets and interviewers about why we don't believe in the household codes. I explained that Timothy and Ephesians were letters written to particular communities, and marriage looked different in Greco-Roman society. I talk about the arranged marriages and property laws, and how this contrasts with our ideals—a marriage of love between two equal partners. I point out Galatians 3:28, and remind people that there is no male of female in Jesus Christ. We are all one.

And as I do, I remember that conversation with Frances. These things might be "settled" for us. It might be painful to relive the theological arguments. But there is a big world out there that needs to hear our voices on these issues. We need to keep slaying those monsters.