

Book Review for “Christ, Culture and Conversion”:

The Loyal Opposition
Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality
Edited by Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong

Introduction

The book I chose to read and present is called *The Loyal Opposition*, which is a collection of essays, articles and sermons from various voices within the United Methodist Church, compiled and edited by Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong. The cryptic title, “Loyal Opposition,” at first perplexing to me, references the rhetorical question asked all throughout the book from various perspectives, “*Can we remain loyal to the church we love while opposing its position on homosexuality?*” Or another, even more challenging question might be, “*Is our loyalty to God at odds with our loyalty to the United Methodist Church?*” As Leontine T. C. Kelly states in her forward, “the loyal oppositionist is the proper name for these distinguished persons who will not accept the status quo as norm for the Church when members are suffering and denied the rights of all. Their loyalty to God supersedes their love for the law of the denomination they have so sacrificially served.”¹ The editors, passionately committed to their Methodist community and heritage, introduce their book by stating unwaveringly, “Our love for the church is deeper than our resistance to it.” What follows though, is an often gut-wrenching account of the ever-present tension between their loyalty and opposition.

¹ Amy DeLong and Tex Sample, *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church On Homosexuality / Edited by Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 11.

As an outsider and onlooker to Methodist tradition and especially to Methodist polity, the book was broadly informative as well as inspirational and practically applicable to me personally. Recently, this issue has hit close to home for me, with the “coming out” of several close friends and family members. I’ve also struggled with the waning credibility of Christianity in the eyes of my children, and others of their generation especially, resulting from so-called “Christian” condemnatory attitudes toward gay people they know and love. Having been raised in a fundamentalist environment that was every bit as legalistic and judgmental, if not more so, as the “anti-gay” factions of the UMC, I have been searching for ways to articulate my own evolving convictions, and give a clearer voice to my conscience which can no longer abide what I have come to see as the pharisaical stance toward homosexuals that is still maintained by so many within my own faith community, and which is completely antithetical and even subversive to the Gospel. This stance, which I believe the arguments in *The Loyal Opposition* prove has no scriptural or theological foundation, is harming our witness to the world as the church universal, which is why I think this book was placed on the list of books relevant to “Christ, Culture and Conversion.” And more than that, it is harming our family--the one body of Christ--by dividing it, as we “bite and devour one another.”² While this book was written specifically to United Methodists, intending specific application toward “loyal opposition” in a UMC context, this is a discussion the whole church needs to have, across denominational boundaries, if we are to be relevant and authentic witnesses to our culture to the present reign of Christ in our midst.

² Cf. Galatians 5:15

Book Summary

This compilation is divided into the following seven sections: *Homosexuality, Resistance, and Scripture*; *Homosexuality, Resistance, and the Quadrilateral*; *Homosexuality, Resistance, and the Social Principles*; *Resistance and Human Rights*; *Life in the Church as Resistance*; *Resistance and Ecclesial Disobedience*; and finally, *Resistance: Leaving the Church*. There is some overlap between the contributors across these categories, and some of the points that are repeated are also what stood out to me as the most compelling. And, as one might expect just from a brief perusal of these categories, people of conscience even generally in agreement when it comes to opposing the church's discriminatory policies and rulings are not always in agreement regarding their methods of opposition. However, the one thing these authors all have in common is a love for Christ, and his church, and a particular compassion for those who are currently being oppressed within what should be their safe haven. Their collective charitable spirit, even toward those with whom they were sharply at odds, also impressed me. In this summary I will highlight some things I found particularly significant from a few of the sections listed above.

Homosexuality, Resistance, and Scripture

Victor Paul Furnish, in his essay entitled "The Loyal Opposition and Scripture," dismantles common false presuppositions about what scripture says definitively about homosexuality. Furnish begins his essay by asking rhetorically, "Is it possible to dissent from the statement that 'the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching' and still be faithful to the witness of Scripture?" He answers, "For those who assume that the Bible spells out God's will for all times and that it unambiguously

declares homosexuality to be a sin, the answer is clearly No. They will conclude that in this particular matter a ‘loyal opposition’ is out of the question, because an absolute biblical truth is at stake.”³ However, when we faithfully and carefully examine the scripture we find that it says nothing at all about homosexuality, but only homosexual *acts*. Now, it is important to state emphatically here that the authors are not advocating separating *behavior* from *being*. Nor are they suggesting, as sometimes we hear suggested in Christian circles, that it’s ok to *be* gay, as long as you don’t *act* gay. In fact, none of the authors contributing to *The Loyal Opposition*, with whom I agree on this matter of supposed scriptural condemnation of homosexuality, are suggesting that statements in the bible clearly condemning homosexual acts are even applicable in our context today. I was formerly of the opinion however, that homosexual acts were “sinful.” It says so right in the Bible doesn’t it? But even then, I would strongly oppose those who called out that one particular “sin” as though it were somehow more grievous than their own sin. However, I still viewed homosexual behavior as “wrong” or “unnatural”—and “unnatural” is also something condemned by the bible, correct?⁴ But in recent years, through my own studies, leading me to conclusions further confirmed by the authors of *The Loyal Opposition*, I’ve come to see how hermeneutically untenable such a position is. For one thing, and there is much more to be said regarding the passages that are used to declare homosexuality “incompatible with Christian teaching,” as Furnish summarizes,

To search the scripture for judgments about homosexuality is to look for biblical answers to questions that were not and could not have been raised

³ Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 33.

⁴ Romans 1:18-32 is a common passage used to label homosexuality as “unnatural,” or “against nature” and condemn it as such. However, a closer examination of that passage in its context, which the book does engage in briefly, arguably renders that position baseless.

by the biblical writers themselves. Homosexuality, as we have come to understand it and use the word, is not a biblical topic.⁵

Again, there is a full and detailed case to be made for resistance, and a “loyal opposition,” which deals faithfully with scripture with an appropriate appreciation for both its cultural and theological contexts. While this book does not make that case comprehensively, it does make it compellingly, and as someone who is deeply concerned about a faithful and reverent response to the text of scripture, I would recommend this book as a starting point to someone wanting to dig into this study, with an openness toward reexamining some of their presuppositions—and if we are honest, we can all agree that for the most part those presuppositions have been dictated to us by a tradition that we have since discovered to be flawed in other areas.

Homosexuality, Resistance, and the Quadrilateral

On a personal note, the “Quadrilateral” per se was something brand new to me a couple of years ago when I started seminary. Although somewhat familiar with it conceptually, I was not familiar with this terminology or its Wesleyan context. Furthermore, I have struggled, and continued to struggle with an emphasis on reason and experience, especially when they are viewed as “on par” with Scripture. And tending heavily toward reformed theology, it goes without saying I have strong cautions toward tradition, especially when it is spelled with a capital “T.” So I have been typically resistant right off the bat to arguments that tend to elevate tradition, reason or experience to the level of Scripture, or even that would try to place these things in tension with

⁵ Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 34.

Scripture, thus diluting what I considered the “authority” of Scripture. But since beginning seminary, and participating in a much more diverse context of theological study and discussion, I have come to increasingly welcome and embrace this tension.

Dwight W. Vogel contributes the essay to this section entitled, “Homosexuality and the Church: Evangelical Commitment and Prophetic Responsibility.” Regarding the stand-alone witness⁶ of Scripture itself, he makes this critical statement regarding our interpretation of this witness:

The New Testament writers themselves are involved in the interpretive process. Questions concerning circumcision and dietary laws are raised, and the decisions made are articulated within what later becomes the canon. Their writings were not within the canon when first written, however. They point to the struggle of what the Christian community is to do with what was once accepted, but no longer fits the emerging life of faith.⁷

He then gives examples from the New Testament, clear statements regarding the role of women in the church, rules we now reject as irrelevant in our context, and states, “Such passages reflect the cultural conditioning of the age in which they were written.”⁸

Regarding Tradition (even with a capital T!), Vogel writes:

⁶ One of the most significant paradigm shifts I have had during the course of my seminary studies has been regarding the nature of Scripture. Whereas I formerly equated Scripture with divine revelation, I have now come to understand the written “word of God” not as revelation itself, but rather a *witness* to revelation. Specifically, a witness to the self-revelation of God in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ, for the purpose of our redemption. This indeed has impacted the way I read the Scripture, first taking into account its cultural, historical and theological contexts, and only then discerning its primary meaning to us today with the unfolding of redemptive history in our hindsight. This is indeed pertinent toward the topic of homosexuality and the church, as select passages that Tradition has maintained dictate us to establish prohibitive laws against homosexual relationships do not lead to these traditional conclusions when read within a *Gospel* context.

⁷ Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 60.

⁸ Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 60.

There have been periods when the church has thought that the view that the earth revolved around the sun was heresy, or that there was an implicit approval of slavery within the Tradition. We have no qualms about saying the church was wrong in these regards, that it misunderstood the nature of its own Tradition. We are called upon to discern (with the help of the Holy Spirit), what is central to the Tradition of the church and what is culturally conditioned baggage, which we have confused with that Tradition.⁹

Homosexuality, Resistance, and the Social Principles

Again on a personal note, this section was a difficult read for me—probably the most difficult portion of the book for me to digest—simply because the political language of the UMC is so foreign to me. This section includes thoughtful responses to the precise wording of the Book of Discipline, specifically the sections within the Social Principles that deal with the church’s prohibition of same sex unions. This section contains two essays. The first, by E. Dale Dunlap, is entitled “Homosexuality and the Social Principles,” and basically exegetes and critiques the section in the Social Disciplines which deal with sexuality in general, and homosexuality specifically, thus revealing some blatant contradictions in the church’s stated positions. The second, by L. Edward Phillips, is entitled “Homosexual Unions and the Social Principles” and exposes the inconsistency between the way the church responds to diverse opinions about war, and the way it responds to diverse opinions about same sex unions. To put it mildly, the UMC has a major disconnect going on here.

There is so much here of the Dunlap’s and Phillips’ arguments worth mentioning but first, the critical foundation upon which our analysis of UMC polity rests is this statement from paragraph 65G of the Book of Discipline—a statement which should be startling to

⁹ Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 61.

anyone reading it, considering the subsequent statements in the same document that have brazenly contradicted it:

We recognize that sexuality is God’s gift to all persons. We believe persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, others and society in the stewardship of this gift. We also recognize our limited understanding of this complex gift and encourage the medical, theological and social science disciplines to combine in a determined effort to understand human sexuality more completely. We call the church to take the leadership role in bringing together these disciplines to address this most complex issue. Further, within the context of our understanding of this gift of God, we recognize that God challenges us to find responsible, committed and loving forms of expression.... [And in conclusion]...Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.¹⁰

It is a reasonable proposition that anyone reading through that statement, including the middle section I omitted in the interest of space, would have no choice but to agree that with one statement: “*We do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching,*” the authors of this document have completely contradicted everything else they have said. To that point, this statement from Dunlap’s essay was especially compelling to me:

If one recognizes and affirms the reality of same-gender orientation as ‘natural’ to that person’s being--as I think we have no other option if we follow our theological guidelines faithfully--then to reject a ‘natural’ expression of that orientation in a covenantal, responsible, faithful and

¹⁰ Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 195.

loving relationship is fundamentally immoral. It is tantamount to denying that person's right and responsibility to be his or her true self.¹¹

Furthermore, exposing what can only be called the hypocrisy inherent in the church's statement that "*the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,*" and in its time and time again honored prohibition against the performance of same-sex unions by its clergy or within its churches, Dunlap writes,

Further along [in paragraph 65G of the Book of Discipline] it is stated that 'we insist that all persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured.' ...But we are unwilling to accord the full religious rights to members of the United Methodist Church who happen to be of same gender orientation as we accord to other members. It is apparent that we expect higher standards of society than we are willing to accept for ourselves.¹²

A Few More Highlights

As mentioned above, there are themes repeated throughout the book, by several different authors. One of those is the relationship between *being* and *behavior*, and the fact that those two things cannot be separated without seriously assaulting one's very personhood. This is an especially pertinent point toward discussions I often find myself having within my own faith community. It really drives home for me the absurdity of the idea that one can *be* homosexual and not be sinning, as long as they don't *practice* their homosexuality, the practice of which *is* sin. Certainly the parallel between the Pharisees of old and the legalists of today is a recurrent and relevant theme throughout the book, and particularly sobering, as the church's treatment of homosexual people today is a stain

¹¹ Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 81-82.

¹² Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 84.

on our reputation and destroying our witness to the culture at large. The choice to be made between obeying God and obeying man is also a recurring theme of the book, and again, how sobering to consider that one's *church* could be standing in the place the authority of man in opposition to the authority of God, as exemplified clearly by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

In Phillips' essay a peculiar distinction is noted, between the wording in the Social Principles regarding war—"war is incompatible with the *teachings and example of Christ*"—and the wording in the same document regarding the practice of homosexuality—"the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with *Christian teaching*."¹³ This distinction begs the question, "Which carries more weight, the teachings and example of *Christ* or *Christian teaching*?" The UMC has apparently decided in favor of the latter to the disparagement of the former, as it prohibits same sex unions, and does not allow clergy to bless them, citing the authority of Christian teaching; yet the Book of Worship contains a special blessing for those whose conscience compels them to temporarily set aside the teachings and example of Christ and go to war.¹⁴

The chapter entitled "The Last Prejudice" in the section on *Resistance and Human Rights* parallels the issue of inequality for homosexuals in the church with past issues of racial inequality in the same church, which should indeed make us recall times when we as a church have been sincerely wrong! Gilbert Haven Caldwell writes in that essay, with a statement that I find profoundly relevant to "Christ, Culture and Conversion":

¹³ Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 90-91.

¹⁴ Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 88.

Resolution and reconciliation within the church on homosexuality offer us the opportunity to ‘become honest’ before the world, acknowledging that our response to living Scriptures and to a God who is involved and engaged in continuing and unfolding revelatory activity, has made the church and will make the church, a dynamic and changing community.¹⁵

Application and Conclusion

Through the example of the UMC’s response to homosexuality, and its stance against same sex unions, the essays in this book contribute to a unified call to action against the pharisaism in the church that is manifested by the way it demands conformance to a moral code with no basis in the teachings of Christ or even in the Scripture when it is responsibly examined, but rather in “Christian teaching” which ironically, violates the UMC’s own stated exegetical principles.¹⁶ This pharisaism in the church today is blatantly reminiscent of the Judaizing that Paul condemned so harshly in the first century. Contrary to its stated mission, the UMC is not a “hate free zone” as it has advertised via bumper sticker. As Amy DeLong states,

The bumper sticker is a lie—too many of our churches are dangerous places for gay people...We have become like the Pharisees of old—judging, condemning, limiting, silencing those who believe that our position on homosexuality is damaging and life-destroying, and ultimately does not reflect the “kin-dom” of God.¹⁷

Regarding the interplay and overlap between the church and American culture we examined in class this semester in “Christ, Culture and Conversion,”

¹⁵ Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 103.

¹⁶ In light of the fact that according to the UMC’s guidelines for interpreting Scripture, as Dunlap states, “none of the scriptural texts offered as proof that scripture condemns homosexuality are relevant to the issue...the United Methodist Church has consistently ignored and violated its own exegetical principles when it comes to the issue of homosexuality or same-gender orientation.” Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 72.

¹⁷ Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 27.

ironically, the UMC advocates and celebrates the type of relationship with the wider culture with this statement in paragraph 65G of the Book of Discipline, which it later in the same document denies and refuses:

We also recognize our limited understanding of this complex gift [of human sexuality] and encourage the medical, theological and social science disciplines to combine in a determined effort to understand human sexuality more completely. We call the church to take the leadership role in bringing together these disciplines to address this most complex issue.¹⁸

In conclusion, as stated in my introduction, I read this book hoping to find help articulating my own convictions and give a clearer voice to my conscience as I interact with those in my faith community who are yet maintaining a condemnatory stance toward homosexual relationships—even loving, committed, grace-filled relationships that model the character of Christ’s kingdom and model and minister reconciliation to those around them. This book has both equipped and inspired me to continue to engage in a deliberate, and ever gentler and kinder persuasion within my own Christian community, that honors the teachings and example of Christ, in defiance of so-called “Christian teaching” when necessary, and celebrates the triumph of mercy over judgment. The integrity of the Gospel is at stake.

¹⁸ Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*. 195.