

# Resistance to the Church's Stance on GLBT Acceptance\*

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## Introduction

"Main Entry:	Resistance
Part of Speech:	noun
Definition:	fighting, opposition
Synonyms:	battle, blocking, check, combat, contention, counteraction, cover, defiance, detention, fight, friction, halting, hindrance, holding, impedance, impeding, intransigence, obstruction, parrying, protecting, protection, rebuff, refusal, retardation, safeguard, screen, shield, stand, striking back, struggle, support, warding off, watch, withstanding
Antonyms:	compliance, conforming, cooperation, submission"

Roget's 21st Century Thesaurus, Third Edition  
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Resistance can take many forms. My plan is to talk briefly about two familiar forms of resistance – political resistance and occasional or situational resistance. Then I want to focus on two additional forms of resistance that, it seems to me, are equally if not more important for the struggle of GLBTs to gain full acceptance in the church: theological resistance and "world making" resistance.<sup>1</sup>

## Political resistance

- This is the hard work that must be done to get changes in policy.

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<sup>1</sup> I have benefited from Tex Sample's discussion of resistance in Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong (eds), *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000). See especially the "Introduction: The Loyal Opposition" written by Sample (pp. 15-23). Sample refers to two obvious forms of resistance, political and everyday, and then adds a third: world making resistance. The latter he takes from Eugene Genovese's study of slave resistance (see Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1976). I use the terms "occasional" or "situational" instead of Sample's "everyday" for the second type of resistance. To Sample's three forms of resistance, I have added – and concentrate primarily on – a fourth type: theological resistance.

- It requires learning the system, working with allies, gathering support which can be translated into votes when “official” decisions are made.
- Political resistance can take place locally, within a local congregation, but the heavy lifting in political resistance is beyond the local church. It’s in General Assemblies, General Synods, General Conferences and other policy-making bodies, as well as the smaller units – Presbyteries, Annual Conferences, Synods, etc. that may be called upon to approve the decisions of the general body.
- Political resistance, by its very nature, is very public. It requires educating, lobbying, and gathering votes.
- Political resistance is long-term work. It requires patience and determination. It must grow out of deep conviction about the rightness of the cause and willingness to compromise when compromise will move the larger agenda forward.

#### **Occasional or situational resistance**

- I’m calling this kind of resistance “occasional or situational” because it is prompted by occasions or situations that come up from time to time. A few examples of occasional resistance would be:
- Expressing disapproval when someone makes an anti-gay remark or tells an anti-gay joke;
- Speaking positively about GLBT’s in Sunday School classes and other settings;
- Whenever the opportunity presents itself, telling stories that come out of one’s own experience to help create understanding and acceptance of GLBTs;
- Serving as a resource to help individuals and families who deal with this issue.

#### **Theological resistance**

The situation of the church today can be described as follows:

- (a) the church, for the most part, has fallen captive to the culture around it – at least this is the case in the U.S. Without realizing it, the church has adopted the values and attitudes of the larger culture and, in effect, has

developed a very cozy relationship with the culture around it. In other words, the church's values are defined by the larger culture. We call this cultural captivity;

- (b) as a consequence of its cultural captivity, the church has lost its ability to speak with moral authority to the larger culture. Another way of saying this is that the church, for the most part, has lost its prophetic voice.

One of the root causes of 'a' and 'b' is that the church, for the most part, has fallen victim to a fundamentalist, literalist reading of Scripture. The result is that the misuse of the Bible robs the church of its most important source of authority for addressing issues.

- First point: cultural captivity of the church
  - With some exceptions, the church follows a corporate model, rather than a servant model, for organizing itself and doing its work
  - Decisions on hot-button issues are often made by the pastor and governing body by the effect they will have on membership and budget – not whether they advance the church's mission.
  - (These principles of decision-making are usually left unstated, but they are operational nonetheless).
  - Success is measured by budgets, buildings, membership, and level of participation in church activities, not by faithfulness to the Gospel.
  - The views of the church on the issues facing the larger society are virtually indistinguishable from the views of the general populace.
  - The values of church members are defined more by the prevailing views in society than by church tradition or theology.
  - The consequence is that many church members assume a cozy relationship between church and society.
- Second point: the church, for the most part, no longer provides a prophetic witness to the larger society.

- Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other Old Testament prophets issued scathing indictments of ancient Israel and Judah.
- They challenged:
  - Power structures,
  - Social practices,
  - Received tradition,
  - Unexamined assumptions,
  - All of these in any combination conspire together to create injustices.
- On Sunday I was invited to fill the pulpit for a vacationing pastor. I used as my sermon text the Old Testament lectionary reading from the prophet Amos – Amos 8:1-12, which is a judgment oracle against Israel. In this passage, Amos uses a catchy expression when he accuses the sellers of grain – probably the wealthy landowners – of cheating the buyers - probably the peasants who worked the land. Amos says, “they make the ephah small and the shekel great.” In other words, they measure too little grain by using false balances and they over-charge to boot. I called the sermon “Rigged Scales”. I gave several examples of economic injustice in Amos’s day and also in our own time. I used the image of “rigged scales” for each one. Amos’s judgment oracles were scorching responses to every act of injustice, to every situation when rigged scales were used, in ancient Israel. He says that the wealthy “trample upon the heads of the poor” and “sell the needy for a pair of sandals”. The scales of justice were rigged against the poor and needy. God was not pleased! Through the words of Amos, God declared that judgment would come upon Israel. The end of the nation was near; the people would be taken into exile.
- After my sermon, the liturgist added the comment that “We are thankful that God has rigged the scales for our salvation through Jesus Christ.” Isn’t that a telling response! It confirms my point that our churches have lost their

prophetic voice. A sermon focused entirely on social and economic injustice prompted a response about personal salvation!

- Churches today repeatedly overwrite the prophetic witness of the Old Testament prophets and replace it with a message about personal salvation.
  - The goal of prophetic witness is to bring about a more just and peaceful world.
  - With respect to GLBT acceptance (and many other issues), the church must provide an authentic prophetic witness to the larger society.
  - But, first, it must recover its prophetic voice.
- Third point: the church must help its members overcome the “I know what the Bible says” mentality.
    - When the Grace class at Washington Street UMC, after a lengthy period of prayer and discernment, decided to join the Reconciling Ministries Network, members of the class offered to visit other Sunday School classes to explain their decision and answer questions that anyone might have.
    - When the announcement of the visits was made and the reason for the visits was given, two elderly women in the same class made quite different responses: Expressing approval of the Grace class’s actions, one said, “It’s about time!” Another expressed strong disapproval by blurting, “I know what the Bible says.” Incidentally, the oldest member of the class (99 or 100 years old) was the one who exclaimed “It’s about time!” That’s reason for hope.
    - The “I know what the Bible says” attitude assumes that Scripture speaks with a single voice and what it says in one place is perfectly consistent with what it says in every other place. This literalist, fundamentalist view of Scripture “misses the mark.”
    - The Greek word for “missing the mark” is *hamartia* which in simple English means “sin”. Yes, I am saying that a

literalist, fundamentalist reading of scripture is sinful. It misses so much that is in Scripture and distorts its substance and purpose.

- The “I know what the Bible says” mentality amounts to no more than cherry-picking whatever is to the liking of the cherry picker. That’s no more than justifying personal biases with this or that verse of Scripture. That “misses the mark”; it’s downright sinful!
- Instead of this sinful way of looking at Scripture, we should consider the following:
  - There is remarkable diversity within Scripture.
  - The authors of Scripture reformulated the received tradition in astonishingly new ways as they sought to respond faithfully to the living God.
  - For an example of this process of innovative reformulation of Scripture, I want to turn briefly to the so-called Holiness Code in Leviticus 17-26.
    - This section of Leviticus is called the Holiness Code because it repeatedly calls upon the people of Israel to be holy because God is a holy God.
    - I’m using the Holiness Code for my example because within it are two verses that have been repeatedly cited (and misused) by anti-gay forces.
      - “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” (Lev. 18:22)
      - “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.” (Lev. 20:13)
    - The Holiness Code is one of four major law codes in the Bible: the Covenant Code (in

Exodus); the Deuteronomic Code (in Deuteronomy); the Holiness Code (in Leviticus); and the Priestly Code (in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers).

- These codes arose out of different historical and social contexts. At least 250 years, and perhaps as many as 500, separate the earliest from the latest.
  - The framers of the codes come from a variety of social contexts: village elders, scribes in the service of the state, and various priestly groups.
  - The law codes are visions that each social group has for ancient Israel - or at least for their group within ancient Israel.
  - We do not know whether the law codes were enforced; in fact, some of the laws seem highly unenforceable.
  - If we don't know to what extent the laws were enforced, or meant to be enforced, we do know that the law codes are based on *visions* that each group that produced them had for ancient Israel.
  - There is some similarity between these four law codes, but what is most significant is that they differ a great deal from each other. In other words, over the centuries different groups, depending on the historical circumstances, dominated the scene.
  - As each group came to power, it examined the legal traditions that had guided someone's vision of Israel in the past and decided what to accept, what to revise, and what to create new. In other words, they figured out how to invent God's law for their time and place.
  - When I use the expression "invent God's law", I am not suggesting the law codes and the laws within them *are nothing but* human creations. Rather, the

point is that humans were involved in the process as they responded to God's revelation as received by the group in question. Both God and humans had input in the formulation of laws.

- The two verses in Leviticus that concern us (18:22 and 20:13), as I have pointed out, are both found in the Holiness Code (HC). The HC is the only law code that addresses same-sex relationships. In other words, three of the four law codes are silent on the matter.
- This issue does not enter the legal tradition for approximately 600 years after the time of Moses. What might have prompted the framers of the HC to include it in their law code? What situation might have led them to innovate on the received legal tradition and create something they believed God wanted for their time and place?
- They were formulating laws in Babylonia, in exile, as they looked forward to the time when they might return to their homeland.
- After they were taken from their homeland by their Babylonian captors, the farms, vineyards, pastures, and homes that they had owned were taken over by opportunists who rushed in and laid claim to the land. These were not Israelite folks; they were people of other ethnicities and religions who came from other parts of the region.
- The framers of the HC likened them to the indigenous nations that had lived in the land before it became Israel. (This association is accomplished by setting the HC in the time



of Moses before the land was originally entered by the Israelites.)

- In an attempt to differentiate the Israelites' way of life from the way of the people who now live in the land, all kinds of allegations are brought against the newcomers. Among the allegations is a long list of sexual relationships that are prohibited. This is what *they* do, not what *we* do.
- Many of the prohibited sexual relationships are framed as "You shall not uncover the nakedness of ..." (that is, you shall not have sex with...) and the list includes: your mother, your father's wife, your sister, your sister-in-law, your daughter, your daughter-in-law, your paternal aunt, your maternal aunt, your granddaughter, and on and on.
- Related to this list are other prohibited relationships, such this one: "You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion." (Lev. 18:23)
- The HC prohibits all of these relationships and practices because, allegedly, the "nations" do these things. And whatever the "nations" do is bad.
- The concern, then, is not morality. It is *construction of identity and boundary maintenance* between Israelites and the "others".
- In the context of the HC, the concern for maintaining a clear sense of identity in distinction from the others, the "nations"

who now live in the land, drives the formation of laws – or, in other words, this context inspires the vision of the framers of the HC. If we do not maintain a distinct identity from the other peoples in the land, the framers say, then the land will become defiled and it will vomit us out.

- Doing what the “nations” do defiles the land, the land that is to be kept holy because God is holy and God’s people are supposed to be holy to keep the land holy.
- Besides prohibited sexual relationships other prohibited practices that allegedly imitate what the “nations” do are included in the HC. For example: “you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.” (Lev. 19:19)
- Why is it wrong to grow wheat and corn in the same field, or to wear a garment made out of cotton and denim? These practices are deemed wrong, in this situation, because they blur distinctions. For the same reason, the framers of the HC want to prohibit same-sex relationships. They blur distinctions.
- These practices are not wrong in a moral sense, but to the framers of the HC they are unacceptable because they blur distinctions – and keeping things distinct, separate, or holy, is of utmost importance. The “nations” in the land do not maintain these distinctions, but the Israelites should.
- Neither of the earlier law codes shares this view. That’s why laws about same-sex relationships are not found in the Covenant Code or the Deuteronomic Code. The concern about maintaining distinctions is an innovation in the HC.

- What a law code sets forth, the topics it covers, what the code prohibits and what it commands, indeed everything about the code is rooted in the vision that the framers of the law code have for their society. They invented God's law which they thought God wanted for their time and place.
- Therefore, we today, as we make use of Scripture, should not *uncritically* make absolutes – valid for all times and places -- of laws that were intended for a particular group and a particular time and place. That includes prohibitions of same-sex relationships.
- The law codes, as I've tried to demonstrate with but a single example, are evidence of diversity within Scripture and they point to internal religious pluralism within ancient Israel.
- Thus the "I know what the Bible says" mentality is very naïve and uninformed. This mentality gets only part of the picture and since it attempts to absolutize that part it badly distorts what Scripture is all about.
- No wonder the church languishes in cultural captivity; no wonder its prophetic voice has fallen silent. No wonder it wiggles and squirms when its claim to inclusiveness is challenged because it does not yet give full acceptance to GLBTs.
- Theological resistance requires some heavy lifting on the part of those who would change the way things are. What I have sketched out here is only one example of what can and must be done.

### **World Making resistance**

- Eugene Genovese uses this term in his study of how African American slaves were able to build an alternate world even in the midst of slavery.
- The alternate world the slaves created was, in many ways, a spiritual world. It gave them the capacity to affirm themselves as people of dignity and worth even as slave owners demeaned them,

treated them brutally, and denied their value as anything more than chattel.

- They created a world within a world. They developed
  - slave songs
  - slave religion
  - prays (praise) houses
  - black preaching
  - the black church
  - all of which affirmed their humanity and dignity and counteracted the oppressiveness of the slave owners' view of them
- GLBTs are in a similar position vis-à-vis the church: discriminated against, oppressed, demeaned, rejected, and denied full participation in the life of the church – to say nothing about the denial of their full humanity.
  - Like the slaves, you know that you do not have to accept the church's (or society's) view of you, a view that so often pushes you to the margins.
  - You, too, can create an alternate world, a form of spirituality that says 'no' to the way your detractors would treat you and 'yes' to your awareness that you are men and women of God who want nothing more than to be free to claim the identity that God has given you and to live out that identity openly and with full acceptance from church and society.
  - Openings, and other groups and meetings like this, are vehicles for alternate world making. They are vehicles that nurture spiritual resistance. Like the slaves, you have developed many other ways to keep yourselves spiritually alive while you wait for the day when you experience full acceptance by church and society.

## **Conclusion**

- Resisting the church on GLBT acceptance has two primary goals:  
(1) to liberate the church from everything that holds it in cultural

captivity so that it can recover its prophetic voice; and (2) to enable you (and me) to survive with dignity and purpose as we wait for the church to live out its calling to be the community of faith for all people.

- People like you are exceptionally qualified to lead the way.
  - You are already keenly aware that the church is not living up to its claim of inclusiveness.
  - You are already aware that Scripture, in the half dozen places where it addresses same-sex practices, knows nothing about the loving relationships that come so naturally to you as gay or lesbian or bi-sexual or transgendered persons.
  - You are already aware that the church's attitudes toward GLBTs merely reflects the general culture and doesn't begin to measure up to the breadth, the height, or the depth of the grace of God which accepts all.
  - You are already aware of the church's cultural captivity.
  - You are already aware of the Mystery that prevails over creation, making each of us different and a unique child of God.
  - You are already aware of the dignity of difference.
  - You are already aware that with few exceptions the church's prophetic voice has fallen silent.
  - You have already demonstrated what it means to be church, and your resistance to the way things are is nudging the church to greater inclusiveness and, eventually (we hope and pray), to full inclusiveness.
- I close by referring to an ancient rabbi's observation. He said, "There are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who don't."
- I've been talking about being people, church members especially, who do not divide the world into two kinds of people – some acceptable and some not; some saved, some damned. We are all one at the most basic level of what it means to be human. Whether we're gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered or heterosexual, sexual

orientation is important but it is not what defines us at the deepest level. We are all one in the most important ways that define us as humans, but that doesn't mean that we are all the same. We are different, we are different, we are different.

- I yearn for the day when the church will proudly add another verse to the children's song "Jesus loves the little children."
- The children now sing, "Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight."
- With the added verse, they will sing, "Gay and lesbian, bi and trans, they are precious in His sight."