

BOOK REVIEWS

BIBLE, GENDER, SEXUALITY: REFRAMING THE CHURCH'S DEBATE ON SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS By James V. Brownson, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 300 pp., \$23.00.

James Brownson's illuminating book on same sex relationships offers the hope of "reframing the church's debate." And the current debate does seem at an impasse, with both "sides" determined and resolute. At a basic level *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* stands as a caution against "Biblicist" approaches to Holy Scripture which privilege surface-level readings and out-of-context proof-texting. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson's introduction to the book provides a compelling illustration, noting that the Bible contains at least 326 references to slavery, and that all but two of them either condone it or see it as a normative part of the social structure. Accordingly, if we read scripture simply for what it *says*, we might in good faith conclude that slavery and indentured servanthood are acceptable in God's world and happily continue consuming goods so produced. Brownson explains that the more challenging task is to discern what a text *means*, which can be quite different from what it *says*, and which requires a wider, canonical view of scripture. Clearly, the Bible's message and eschatological trajectory move us away from entrenched and institutionalized social practices like slavery, and toward a new model of God's kingdom where hierarchies of gender, race, and social class no longer carry weight or privilege and are part of an old order which is passing away. The *moral logic* of scripture—a key concept in Brownson's book—sustains the tensions of life in the now-but-not-yet, while offering greater promise than scriptural soundbites for understanding what scripture means in a variety of cross-cultural contexts. Sociologists, with their emphasis on the "sociological imagination" and Max Weber's *verstehen* (interpretive understanding) will appreciate Brownson's call to renewed imagination as an important part of discerning what the Biblical narrative means for us in the world of today.

After preliminaries, Brownson presents successive chapters examining and critiquing traditionalist arguments against same sex intimate relationships, and then examines revisionist readings (and some of their shortcomings too). The main problem he finds with the traditionalist approach is that its case against committed homosexual unions hinges on "divinely intended gender complementarity"—a concept used to emphasize anatomical complementarity of sex organs, and through which the human alone (outside such union) is seen as incomplete. Heterosexual marriage, seen thus, is a way of remedying incompleteness, truncation, separateness—in a *Jerry Maguire* "You complete me" sort of way. Brownson, while acknowledging that problems with the anatomical gender complementarity model do not in themselves legitimate homosexual unions, argues that the focus in Genesis 2 is not on complementarity—the need for someone different, but on similarity—the need of the Adam for someone *like* him. He suggests that the language in Genesis 2 is an expression of kinship, not

sexual compatibility — the animals which are not suitable helpers are different from the man, and he needs someone similar. Brownson writes:

This line of interpretation is confirmed by the response of the man when he meets the woman (2:23): “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” On the surface of it, this appears to be a discovery of sameness, not difference. Furthermore, if one looks elsewhere in Scripture for similar language, one discovers that this language is always used to express kinship (Gen. 29:14; Judg. 9:2; 2 Sam 5:1, 19:12-13; 1 Chron. 11:1). In the other texts where this language occurs, there is not a hint of any notion of complementarity; the entire focus is that those who share flesh and bone share something important in common with each other. In this case, the man discovers a far deeper commonality with the woman than he shares with the animals. That seems to be the meaning that is reflected in the structure of the narrative itself. The focus is not so much on complementarity but on shared identity, nature, and experience between the man and the woman, over against the rest of creation... But the text doesn’t really explore gender differences at all; instead it places the emphasis on the value of shared human experience between the man and the woman. (p. 30-31)

Later in the book Brownson explores the way the concept of complementarity is shortchanged when viewed primarily as a function of fitted sexual organs. Complementarity appears in many forms in various human pairings — she’s analytical, he’s emotionally intelligent; one partner’s hilarious, the other exerts a tempering influence — many of which have no clear or exclusive basis in biology. Accordingly, nesting the harmonious qualities of faithful partnerships in a (presumed) complementary biology is, at best, questionable, and lands us back in essentialist territory where we artificially divide the adjectives of human behavior into the neatly bifurcated and socially constructed categories of male and female.

Brownson never argues that the Bible legitimates any and all intimate homosexual relations. Rather, he draws attention to the *kinds* of relationships Paul and other writers of scripture proclaim to be outside the bounds of God’s good intention. For example, Brownson suggests that the scenario depicted in the well-known Romans 1 “wrath of God” passage (frequently taken as clear evidence of God’s rejection of all homosexual behaviors) appears in the scriptural record as an indictment against excessive, self-serving, out-of-control lust and idolatry. The over-the-top perversion described in the Romans passage stands in stark contrast to the faithful, God honoring, and self-denying love God prescribes and desires for all human relationships. Brownson explains that the debauchery in the passage bears striking historical resemblance to the “... incredible greed, violence, and sexual excesses of Gaius Caligula, an emperor who reigned in a period not too long before Paul wrote Romans” (p. 156). Gaius’ offenses included claiming to be divine, trying to erect a statue of himself in the Temple in Jerusalem, living in perpetual incest with all his sisters, raping the wives of his dinner guests,

engaging in various same-sex sexual encounters, among other acts of “arbitrary violence, vindictiveness, and cruelty” (p. 157). Brownson suggests a link between Romans 1 and the events of Caligula’s life and death:

Suetonius records that Gaius was stabbed through the genitals when he was murdered. One wonders whether we can hear an echo of this gruesome story in Paul’s comments in Romans 1:27: “Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own person the due penalty for their error.” Gaius Caligula graphically illustrates the reality of which Paul speaks in Romans 1: the movement from idolatry to insatiable lust to every form of depravity, and the violent murderous reprisal that such behavior engenders. (p. 157)

While the reader could certainly interpret Romans 1 as evidence of God’s rejection of all homoerotic behaviors, Brownson draws attention to the emphasis this and similar passages place on excessive self-serving lust and idolatry. Such practices displease God and undermine the shalom and one-flesh bonding he intends for his people. The graphic debauchery of Romans 1, is, Brownson argues, fundamentally different from the monogamous, loving, kinship bonds which characterize some same-sex unions today. He points out that Romans does not specifically and categorically condemn faithful same-sex unions that evidence the loving kinship bonds God intends for those who bear his image. Consequently, it is problematic to place *all* homosexual activity (violent, coercive, pederasty, and committed monogamous) in the same category, as though the sexuality of a committed, monogamous, loving, gay couple is simply a subtype of Caligula’s behavior.

Drawing on both biblical and extrabiblical ancient texts, Brownson explains that homosexual behavior in the ancient world generally had a coercive dominant/submissive character where one partner was forced into submissive posture (such as is certainly true in some of the pederasty practices of the Greeks, or where high class males forced slaves to submit to sexual acts). The Pauline tradition clearly condemns this sort of behavior, steeped as it is in violence and disregard for the other. We see nothing in ancient literature, Brownson maintains, of the sort of committed same-sex unions we find in contemporary society. They simply weren’t recognized.

Brownson also explains that some of the disgust and disdain for homosexual behavior in the cultures the Bible originally addressed derived from deeply entrenched and widely held patriarchal attitudes. The act of a man “lowering” himself to behaviors associated with women (passive, submissive, prone, etc.) was thus despised. From this perspective, the supposed immorality of a sexual act was less an issue than the adoption of an inferior (female) identity and subordinated posture by a man. Disdain issued from a sense that something fundamental in the social order was eroding—a man acting like a woman? Man up! “Receiving” any such act as normative posed significant threat to the underlying organizational fabric of society—an organization that rested on patriarchy, and on some of the hierarchies that the moral logic of scripture calls us to reexamine. In concert with this view, some in the ancient world might more

thoroughly despise a person victimized by an act of homosexual aggression, than they would the act's perpetrator.

Critics of Brownson's thesis will point out that the Bible simply contains no examples of homosexuality as normative—it prescribes no rules for such relationships and offers no examples of same-sex partnerships integrated into the family of God. Accordingly, it is wrong to try and catch the Bible up to contemporary ideas about marriage and sexuality—bending the text to suit our modern tastes. Brownson's explanation for the absence of Biblical commentary on loving homosexual relationships is that the ancient world simply had no concept of sexual orientation as we understand it today. But, of course, the world is full of new social forms that the writers of scripture didn't anticipate—many of which we readily accept as complying with the moral logic of scripture. He writes:

It is clear that Scripture assumes that this one-flesh bond only takes place between a man and a woman. Yet there is nothing inherent in the biblical usage that would necessarily exclude committed gay or lesbian unions from consideration as one-flesh unions, when the essential characteristics of one-flesh unions as kinship bonds are held clearly in view (p. 109).

Accordingly, Brownson asks whether gay and lesbian couples whose orientation is not subject to change—something statistics on those who have tried seem to uphold—and who do not feel called to singleness (which Paul and Jesus see as a gift given to some, but not all) might find a place among the people of God in the now-but-not-yet kingdom of God. Might the moral logic of scripture point us to at least consider this direction? Might "their" faithfulness find a place alongside "our" faithfulness?

Other features of this book include an explication of the concept of "nature" which factors prominently in same-sex debates, an exploration of celibacy as it applies to gays and lesbians today, a discussion of how honor/shame cultures operated, and an examination of the "seven passages" that reference homosexuality with a view to how we might apply them to committed gay and lesbian relationships today. The treatment of "nature" is, itself, worth the price of the book. We learn that Paul, for example, writes about "nature" in ways that are akin to our understanding of "social convention." "Nature" for Paul is, in some uses, a synonym for "conventional." 1 Corinthians 11:14-15 asks, "Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?" Here, the word "nature" is used as we might use "social convention." Likewise, and in reference to the Romans 1 passage, Brownson writes:

... when Romans 1 speaks of acts that are "unnatural," it is speaking not only of individual natures; it is also speaking of what we would call "social" realities, including widely held social understandings of the meaning of gender, with fairly clear assumptions about the nature of men and women and their respective roles in society. To put it simply, men having sex with other men was considered unnatural, at least in part, because it violated

established gender roles, forcing men to play the role of women, upsetting the normal hierarchy of the genders that went unquestioned in the ancient world. (p. 237)

Bible, Gender, Sexuality, is a helpful resource for deepening one's understanding of what biblical passages addressing same sex relationships meant in the cultures in which they were written, and for contemplating how they might apply to the different social worlds in which we live today. The depth and length of the book may be a deterrent to some, but working through it is worth the effort. Each chapter concludes with a list of bullet points which provide helpful summaries of its main points and arguments. Furthermore, the complexity of the book stands as a reminder that although we prefer simple explanations (it's part of human nature!) working from the ancient biblical record to the society in which we live, is no simple task. Our tendency is to assume close correspondence between that world and our world. But meanings change and contexts are lost. As missiologist David Bosch writes, "To do this would be to succumb to the 'temptation of concordism, which equates the social groups and forces within first-century Palestine with those of our own time'" (Bosch, 2011, p. 23).

If nothing else, some of the ideas in Brownson's book may help us all temper our speech toward the other. Much of the polarized religious rhetoric surrounding same-sex relationships is riddled with ad hominem attacks, soundbite theology, and ominous words like abomination, unnatural, and impure (on the one side), and intolerant, narrow-minded, and out-of-touch (on the other). Despite biblical instruction to the contrary, on the issue of same-sex relationships many of us seem quick to talk and slow to listen. And some of our speech is far from edifying. Google "church signs on gay marriage" and you'll find such plucky "seeker-friendly" phrases as "turn or burn," "God is good; gays are bad; read your Bible," and other witty aphorisms that enliven the "love the sinner; hate the sin" mantra recited by those who seem to loathe contact with the very "sinners" for whom they profess agape love. In the present climate, thoughtful Christians on both sides of the gay marriage divide may feel nervous even questioning their own beliefs about same-sex relationships, fearing that any capitulation to the "other" side might reveal a perilous softening toward the enemy—an enemy that is frequently another Christian. In this book—even more relevant since the June 2015 SCOTUS ruling on *Obergefell et al. v. Hodges*—Brownson challenges the church to struggle a bit more with what the scriptures say, rather than defaulting to what they've long been assumed to say. His is a call for a more coherent hermeneutic coupled with a willingness to relinquish a few a priori assumptions in new and imaginative openness to the scriptures and the God to which they testify. And, unlike many entries in the same-sex culture wars, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* has a charitable tone and a respect for allies and adversaries alike. Brownson's book brings a scholarly word of shalom in a vast minefield of anger, anxiety, and Christian ill-will.

I have one small criticism of this book that is, perhaps, beyond the scope Brownson intends. The book makes no explicit reference to how intersex people (individuals who for biological or other reasons fall outside the bifurcated categories of male or female) might locate themselves in the Biblical narrative, or where they might fit in the world imagined in Galatians

3:28. Even more than gays and lesbians, these people are the invisible ones in society, the ones most affected by the sexual dimorphism assumed and defended in many church communities. The word “eunuch” for example, sometimes seen as a type of intersex condition, which is addressed in scripture, is not found in the book’s index. I also think that the reader would benefit from a more protracted discussion of some of the ways that Christian assumptions of sexual dimorphism affect who “we” consider full and acceptable members of the body of Christ.

The above small criticism aside, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* considerably enriched my understanding of same-sex relationships in Biblical perspective. Don’t read it with an eye on whether Brownson’s on “our” side or “their” side—that’s not the primary point. Read it to learn. Read it to de-reify your understanding of some parts of the Bible—parts about which you may have indulged particular assumptions without really examining familiar passages in scripture. And no matter your conclusions about the merits of Brownson’s arguments, come away with a sense of how Jesus might view the marginal ones in our church communities. Remember that how a community talks about its most vulnerable members is the strongest indicator of its deepest anxieties. For while we debate whether “those people” should be sold wedding cakes, the Jesus of the scriptures invites us all to a wedding feast. Jesus calls those of us in positions of strength to the weak, the vulnerable, and the marginal. He calls us to make neighbors of strangers. And, perhaps, this book will help the loudest among us to temper our brashness a bit, enabling us to identify more with the broad, inclusive, now-but-not-yet church of Galatians 3. For in bearing with the weak, perhaps we just may encounter the Jesus who bears with us all, in a deeper, more intimate, less status-conscious way. If Brownson’s goal was to reframe a debate, he offers much to think about.

Works Cited

Bosch, D. (2011) (20th anniversary edition). *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (American Society of Missiology), New York: Orbis Books.

Matthew S. Vos
Covenant College