Looking for the Truth

In Dr. James Brownson’s

***Bible Gender Sexuality***

Rev. C

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# Reviews

In the Christian community, thoughtful public positions taken on controversial new issues demand responsible public scrutiny and critique. When contributors to both engage each other openly and respectfully and point-for-point one of two things happens. Either the church changes its position based on convincing new biblical argumentation, or the church's historic position is deepened and reinforced by convincing biblical rebuttal. My understanding is that both Herb Kraker and James Brownson have had such interchange until several years ago. I know and have worked with both gentlemen and respect each brother's capabilities as Christian thinkers and leaders. In his latest critique, Kraker raises key points of critique that appear compelling to me. I would benefit from Brownson's serious and thoughtful response. I sincerely hope that they reengage on this vital issue and include the wider Christian public in constructive exchanges. We need more clarity and a strong, Reformed consensus on it.

Dr. James A. De Jong

Former President Calvin Theological Seminary

Herb Kraker has done a great service in bringing meticulous research and scholarship to a critique of James Brownson's treatment of the key passage in Romans 1:26-27 dealing with homosexual practice in his book *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*. As such, he has conclusively shown that the key underpinning of Brownson's entire argument is deeply flawed both historically and exegetically. This, coupled with a fair analysis of the rest of Brownson's book by other scholars, effectively rebuts Brownson's argument that long-term, monogamous same sex relationships are sanctioned by Scripture.

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# About the Author

Herb Kraker approaches the Scriptures with the focus and detail of an engineer. He has the ability to dig down into the Scriptures, utilizing the original languages in which the Bible was written, and a wide variety of resources from, as they say in Washington DC., “both sides of the aisle.” He holds a master of Theological Studies Degree from Calvin Seminary, a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering Degree from the University of Michigan, and a Bachelor of Arts Degree from Hope College.

His passion for the truth resulted in Dialogos Studies, whose stated purpose is as stated below.

*Dialogos Studies seeks to glorify God through contributing to the spiritual growth of Christians by furthering Biblical truths. This is pursued through providing an arena in which the truths of God's Word can be discussed and debated. Dialogos Studies is founded upon the belief that Christians will grow in their knowledge of God and can experience increased unity among themselves, founded upon Biblical truth, when they examine doctrinal issues by looking at them from both sides. Dialogos Studies seeks to provide clear and concise material, gathering and presenting the best insights from both sides of an issue in a written debate format. These written debates help the reader make an informed decision on a given topic. Dialogos Studies also has as its goal that these materials are to be "living" materials, open to additional input from all who study them. By revising in this manner, it is the purpose of Dialogos Studies to constantly work toward producing materials that continually move closer to the eternal truths of God's Word*[*.*](http://www.dialogos-studies.com/picnic2018.html)

*Herb points us to the Bereans in Acts 17:11, “. . . they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” This challenges his readers to consider this paper and his other writings in the same way as they, too, seek the truth.*

# Preface

## Why This Paper And Why Now?

Although there are traces of references to the matter of same-sex relationships through history, it has reached a position in current society that has never been seen before. Misunderstandings and conflicts have caused families and churches many painful problems. Christians may be uncertain of what the Bible teaches, and don’t know where to go to figure it out.

No one book can answer all the questions we have, including what the Bible says and how we are to apply it. The examination of Dr. James Brownson’s book, *Bible Gender Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* is intended to try to answer some of the questions concerning key scriptures that deal with same-sex relationships.

Why his book? Brownson is a professor at Western Theological Seminary (a seminary of the Reformed Church in America) and his book has been read by many pastors throughout the Reformed and Christian Reformed denominations, as well as other groups. He ultimately believes that same-sex relationships are acceptable. Those holding the historic Christian position believe Brownson makes 15 significant errors in his book, leading to a false conclusion. This paper will present his claims and the responses to them.

## How Will We Find the Truth?

The reader can clearly see the claims and responses in each of the 15 sections. By weighing both sides, a decision can be made for each point determining which one seems true. This is not intended to be a fully comprehensive document answering all questions pertaining to same-sex relationships, but will deal mostly with the key passages found in Romans 1. It is believed that the 15 points are essential to J. Brownson’s position and that a correct evaluation of those 15 points will show whether his position is biblical or not. For readers who might have further questions on some of these points, more information is available by visiting the Dialogos website at <http://www.dialogos-studies.com/bible_gender_sexuality.html>.

\* \* \*

# THE FIFTEEN POINTS

In order to determine if Brownson’s position is biblical, we will examine 15 potential errors in his scholarship. Interestingly, each of the 15 potential errors we will address has been sent to over 3,500 pastors and professors, with feedback requested and encouraged. While a fair amount of responses were received, some from pastors advocating same-sex marriage, none of the 15 points were refuted.

A very foundational part of Brownson’s position is that he believes loving or mutual same-sex relationships were not known in Paul’s day, therefore Paul cannot be addressing them. We will consider this in potential error #1.

From the perspective of the historic Christian position on this matter, when the key terms relied upon heavily by Brownson to advocate this are considered, it appears that the words are quite general and vague in nature. We will consider these words in #2-6.

In #7 we will examine how a culture helps shape the attitudes and actions of the people in it, and whether cultural norms supersede scripture.

The first 7 potential errors are covered in Part 1 below. Part 1 is the first half of this paper and it is focused on the question of whether Dr. Brownson’s position is biblical. Potential error #8 through #15 are covered in Part 1 which examines whether the historic position is based on specific, well-defined terms.

# PART 1: IS DR. BROWNSON’S POSITION BIBLICAL?

For James Brownson, as for many theologians, Romans 1:26-27 is a critical passage for the matter of same-sex relationships.

26For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 27and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

To understand many of the following points, it is important to know what Brownson considers the primary focus of Romans 1. He believes that the Apostle Paul was only prohibiting excessive (over the top, non-consensual, essentially non-loving, and abusive) actions and relationships.

“The flow of the rhetoric makes it clear that the whole range of behaviors Paul describes in Romans 1, including same-sex eroticism, is for him an extraordinarily powerful and excessive manifestation of lust.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

In fact, words like “excessive” and “lust” are found at least 298 times in his 300 page book. This is evidence he considers it the main theme of his book, the backbone of his position. Brownson spends nearly 40% of his book on the Romans 1 passage, clearly recognizing that particular passage as the most critical one as far as same-sex marriage is concerned.

Therefore, if an examination of the evidence shows that Romans 1 is *not* limited to excessive, non-consensual acts, then it will be established that Brownson’s position is unbiblical. The very core of Brownson’s position is that Romans 1 prohibits only excessive acts. All of the other material he presents in his book is of secondary importance, and all the other arguments become disconnected from each other without this central hub. If this central hub argument fails, then all the other arguments, like spokes radiating outward, fade into insignificance, leaving nothing of sufficient magnitude to make his case for same-sex marriage.

### #1 Were Loving Same-Sex Relationships Known in Paul’s Day?

The first aspect of James Brownson’s position that will be considered is his claim that there were no accounts of loving same-sex relationships in Paul’s day. Brownson states that Paul only prohibited excessive acts, since he could not prohibit what he did not know. If the only same-sex acts Paul knew of were all excessive acts, so Brownson reasons, only those were being prohibited in passages like Romans 1. However, if it can be shown there were loving or mutual same-sex relationships during Paul’s day, then it is possible Paul was prohibiting all same-sex acts including consensual same-sex relationships.

We must also remember that, independent of what the Apostle Paul personally observed, the Spirit certainly could have inspired Paul to write something that would have been relevant in the future, even if he didn’t experience it.

Brownson states, “What Paul has in mind here is not the modern concept of homosexual orientation, that is, the notion that some people are not sexually attracted to those of the opposite sex at all, but instead are inclined to love those of the same sex. Such a perspective is found nowhere in the literature of Paul’s day.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Ironically, the evidence against this statement is found right in his own bibliography! He lists an article written by Dr. Mark Smith that is only 33 pages long. Brownson must be acquainted with all of the contents of such a relatively short work since he references it. Yet, in that article Smith lists six accounts of loving same-sex relationships from Paul’s time period. No less than Brownson’s ultimate example of excess, Emperor Caligula, is one of those listed. Caligula is supposedly the type of abusive person whom Brownson claims Paul was referencing in Romans 1. Caligula was very promiscuous. He had a reputation for raping the wives of guests he invited to dinners. It is also believed he slept with his sisters. Yet, in spite of his excesses, Caligula was evidently also involved in a loving relationship with a man named Lepidus. Can Brownson say there were no known instances of loving same sex relationships when one of his own sources documents six examples?

Not only does he ignore the evidence in one of his own sources, he also specifically says that asking if Paul knew about these relationships is “entirely speculative” . . . when the facts are clearly cited and contradict that.[[3]](#endnote-3)

In his critique of Brownson’s book, Dr. Preston Sprinkle also addresses the question of whether or not Paul could have known about loving same-sex relationships.[[4]](#endnote-4) Sprinkle identifies ten people who were either in a loving same-sex relationship or historically recorded the existence of such relationships. These ten instances were all from before or during Paul’s time. Perhaps the most notable of these was the Roman Emperor, Julius Caesar. The historian Suetonius wrote that Julius Caesar was “every woman’s man and every man’s woman.” Caesar lived from 100 BC to 44 BC. Julius Caesar is known by many people the world over today, more than 2000 years after he lived. Isn’t it likely, perhaps guaranteed, that Paul would have been familiar with the reputation of a Roman Emperor as famous as Julius Caesar?

### #2 The Vague Language Vs. Specific Language of Romans 1

The second serious concern is Brownson’s reliance upon vague terms in contrast to more specific terms in the first chapter of Romans. His primary objection to the historic interpretation of Romans 1 (that all same-sex erotic acts are prohibited) is his position that only excessive acts are prohibited in Romans 1. He refers to four terms to justify this.

These four terms are:

\*lust or desire (*epithymíais* verse 24, see section #3 below)

\*passion (*pathē* verse 26, section #4 below)

\*consumed (*exekauthēsan* verse 27, section #6 below)

\*passion (*orexei* verse 27, also covered in section #6 below)

These terms of lust, desire, passion, consumed, as well as words like impurity and dishonor (terms he also deals with at length) are all general in nature. Impurity was caused in the Old Testament and in the New Testament by a wide variety of things. Dishonor, too, can be the result of many things. The same is true of someone who is, or something that is, shameless. Nowhere prior to verses 26 and 27 does Paul specifically say they did “\_\_\_\_\_\_\_” (fill in the blank) which made them impure, or dishonorable. So, prior to verse 26 this is all very vague and general.

Brownson’s argument of excess is based primarily on these four terms and the fact that Paul does not specify a *certain* act, one which is self-destructive or over-the-top, therefore it can be concluded that the people of Rome were guilty of excessive acts. Brownson suggests that Paul is referring to sins such as Caligula committed. However, aside from same-sex acts, Romans 1 does not spell out any of the particular atrocities Caligula committed. Does this leave Brownson’s reference to Caligula as conjecture? Is there anything specific in Romans 1 to base it on, anything beyond vague terms? Scripture is generally interpreted by what is there, not what isn’t.

Verses 26 and 27, on the other hand, are very specific, “26For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 27and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.”

When these verses spell out that men are shameless when they give up women and turn to men sexually, the historic understanding is that what is impure, dishonorable and shameless has been clearly defined.

Let’s look at these four specific statements:

• ... their women exchanged the natural sexual use (implying the use of males) for those that are contrary to nature . . .

• . . . and the men likewise gave up the natural sexual use of women . . .

• . . . and were consumed with passion for one another . . .

• . . . men committing shameless acts with men . . .

There are two questions to be decided here, and, if both are answered yes, then the historic position is affirmed:

1) Are the four terms Brownson relies on vague, general terms, needing additional explanation to make sense?

2) Do the four specific statements clearly define what the issue is?

### A Closer Look At These Four Important Words

By taking a closer look at these 4 key words that can make such a difference, we will be able to better decide what they mean. The primary objective here is to see if these terms do in fact support Brownson’s interpretation that they refer to excessive acts only. They are examined below in sections 3-6.

#### #3 Did “Desire” (Epithymíais) Mean "Excessive Desire"?

Brownson’s interpretation of Romans 1, which leads to his entire position on same-sex marriage, rests to a large extent on four Greek words. *Epithymíais* in verse 24 is the first of these four.

*Epithymíais* has *never before* been defined as excessive or self-destructive desire.

Neither of two widely accepted authorities on the Greek language, Kittel’s “Theological Dictionary of the New Testament” and Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker’s “A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature” define it that way. There is a significant difference between an intense desire and an excessive (negative) desire.

For instance, when Paul had an intense desire to be with believers in Thessalonica, he did not have an excessive desire, or a negative desire to be with them.

But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face . . . I Thessalonians 2:17

The same Greek word, *epithymíais* is used for Paul’s desire to be with those believers. If Brownson does, in fact, have a new insight into the meaning of this word, one that differs from the accepted authorities, then he needs to make a good case for that position. He does not do that.

Dr. Jeffrey Weima has the following to say concerning this:

But if the problem that Paul is addressing were, in fact, excessive sexual desire or out-of-control lust in 1:24, Paul could have made this clear by adding the adjective “much” before the word “desire” (*epithumia*)as he did in 1 Thess. 2:17 (“in much desire,” *en pollê epithumia*). Furthermore, the problem that the apostle identifies involves not one of wrong *degree* (excessive behavior) but of wrong *object*. The preceding verses of 1:19-23 deal with the sin of idolatry and Paul’s argument here does not involve degree (as if normal idolatry is acceptable but excessive idolatry is wrong) but object: people worship created things rather than the Creator. Similarly, the sin of same-sex activity discussed in 1:24-27 does not involve degree (normal desire for same-sex activity is acceptable but excessive desire or lust is wrong) but object: women are having sex not with men but with women and conversely men are having sex not with women but with men.[[5]](#endnote-5)

It is a serious matter to take a word which has long been understood to mean intense desire and claim it means excessive desire without proving it. Yet Brownson uses this new definition as “evidence” to support the position that same-sex marriage is acceptable to God, when such marriages or relationships have been understood for centuries to be an abomination before God.

I have personally received responses to this material from a good number of Brownson’s own students from over the years. They have been consistent in stating that Brownson always required the highest of scholarly standards in research and writing. Unfortunately, they do not see his scholarship on this topic as an example of high scholarly standards.

#### #4 Did “Passions” (Pathē) Mean "Excessive Passions"?

The second of the four key Greek terms is *pathē*, which is found in Romans 1:26 and is often translated “passion.” As with the term *epithymíais*, Brownson states multiple times that it means excessive desire, but at no point in his book does he successfully show that definition to be the case. He does provide some reasoning for his conclusion, but it is not very convincing. The standard Greek dictionaries do not give excessive desire as a definition of *pathē*. As in all languages, through usage over time, words can acquire multiple meanings. However, to change the definition from “passion” to “excessive desire” is unacceptable. Passion is an emotion while excess is a measure of quantity. The two are very different in nature.

As with the preceding section, when a modern scholar gives an ancient Greek word a different biblical definition than it has had in 2000 years and does not make a solid case for that new definition, does the reader have any choice but to conclude this new definition falls short and cannot be accepted?

#### #5 Biblical Use of a Term Vs. Sources Outside the Bible

There is a serious separate but related concern in Brownson’s treatment of the Greek word *pathē*. Brownson turns primarily to sources outside the Bible when he arrives at the definition of *pathē* as excessive passion.

A very important rule for understanding the Bible is to determine how words are used. Frequently the Bible did not use certain words the same way the Greek culture did at that time. We have noted four separate phrases in Romans 1 which very clearly point to prohibiting erotic same-sex acts. Those phrases are within the context of the term *pathē* and therefore have a bearing on the meaning of that word. While the term *pathē* (passion) is very general in nature, those four phrases are very specific.

Those four phrases are:

* For their women exchanged the natural sexual use (implied of males) for those that are contrary to nature . . .
* . . . and the men likewise gave up the natural sexual use of women . . .
* . . . and were consumed with passion for one another . . .
* . . . men committing shameless acts with men . . .

Is the primary meaning of the passage more likely to be defined by four specific phrases in the immediate context that Paul uses to describe particular passions as in the four bullets above, or is it more likely to be defined by a general term, *pathē*, the meaning of which is being taken as Brownson does, from extra-Biblical sources? Standard Greek dictionaries go according to accepted prioritization of deriving a word’s meaning first from the immediate biblical context, then how the given author uses the word in other places and with lesser influence they take the usage of the word in ancient times. Brownson leans heavily on the latter and doesn’t rely so much on the context of Romans 1.

#### #6 Is “Consumed with Passion” A Vague Phrase?

The third and fourth of the four terms Brownson relies on are found in verse 27. They are the words “consumed” (*exekauthēsan*) and “passion” (*orexei*) and together they form the sixth (#6) significant item under consideration. The following is probably Brownson’s main statement on these terms.

In verse 27, Paul speaks of men engaged in same-sex eroticism as “consumed with passion for one another.” This is not merely the portrayal of an “objective” problem; this is a portrayal of out-of-control desire, the same kind of desire recounted in the parallel texts we have observed. The word translated as “consumed” in Romans 1:27 (*exekauthēsan*) literally means “to kindle or burn.” The focus is not on objective behavior but on passions that are running out of control and threaten to “consume” one’s better judgment.[[6]](#endnote-6)

As with the first two terms, this statement is very general in nature. How does Brownson know so clearly that this is not an “objective” problem, in other words the problem does not consist of same-sex erotic acts? How does he know so clearly that the problem is “out-of-control desire” and not specific physical acts that were committed? When it comes to sexuality, being consumed with passion and strong desires is frequently part of the picture. One sees this recorded all throughout human history including such writings as The Song of Solomon. The list is very long. Many times those passions are powerful but they are not necessarily out-of-control. American soldiers returning from World War II are one example. They were exhilarated to have survived the war. One can easily imagine that many of them found themselves constantly thinking of wives and girlfriends on the ships as they sailed back to the States. But these longings, these desires were not necessarily “out-of-control.”

As Brownson quotes it, verse 27 speaks of men being “consumed with passion *for one another*” (italics added). The language of “for one another” is reflexive in nature. It is the picture of two men where each man is mutually involved with the other man. This is not a picture of one man forcing himself upon another man, being excessive, where the other man does not want to have anything to do with it. This is a picture of both men desiring the sexual activity with the other man.

Is there any evidence that the passion spoken of here is beyond the passion that normally accompanies sex or that the real problem is passion that is out of control? Brownson says that is the case, but is that true? The words in the Bible that he builds his case on are very vague and general. The specific words used by Paul, however, are quite clear in stating that men were sexually involved with other men. For thousands of years that has been understood to be the problem the Apostle Paul is referring to here.

When the matter of whether terms are specific or vague is considered, it is interesting to note another Greek word that appears in the New Testament. That is the word *perissoteros*. In the ESV it is translated with the words zealously, abundantly, supremely, excessive, superfluous, far greater, extremely, and more earnestly. When Brownson claims Romans 1 has to do only with “out-of-control desire,”[[7]](#endnote-7) “over the top lust”[[8]](#endnote-8) and “self-destructive excess,”[[9]](#endnote-9) it seems like those concepts would fit very well with the word *perissoteros*. Yet, Paul didn’t use that word to describe things in Romans 1. In II Corinthians 2:7 we read, “. . . or he may be overwhelmed by **excessive** sorrow . . .” The word “excessive” there is the translation of *perissoteros*. The wording of II Corinthians 2:7 is the kind of message that Brownson claims is contained in Romans 1. Per the question in the preceding paragraph concerning whether the real problem here is that the passions spoken of are out of control, the Spirit could easily have indicated that by using a word like “excessive” (*perissoteros*). The words of passion, desire, consumed are used, words of strong emotion, but no specific word is there which indicates things were out-of-control. So the reader needs to ask, from the context of Romans 1 is there reason to believe that the real problem here is that passions were out-of-control? Is the real problem that passions were out-of-control, or is the problem that the passions were misplaced, that is men were sexually involved with men and women with women?

### #7 Is the Passive or the Active Person Dishonored?

We canoften understand the text of the Bible better when we understand the culture in which the biblical writers lived. Brownson states that, according to ancient culture, a man dishonored the other man when he required the other man to play the role of a female in a same-sex situation. Why is this important? Because Brownson concludes that, when Paul writes about dishonor, he is only prohibiting excessive acts where one dominant man forces himself upon another passive man and makes him play the role of a woman. This is central in Brownson’s ultimate conclusions that mutual same-sex relationships are acceptable according to scripture.

Let’s look at the specific words in Verse 26a: “For this reason God gave them up to **dishonorable passions**.” (Bold added.) The **passions** were dishonorable.

The verse contains no mention at all of a dominant or a passive person. The passage only mentions people who were sexually involved with others who were of the same sex. In order for Brownson’s interpretation to be correct, rather than the passage stating, “God gave them up to dishonorable passions” it would have to read something like, “God gave up dominant individuals to dishonoring others around them”.

This is a very important distinction. As in the previous section, the choice before the reader is whether the message of Paul’s words is to be determined from the passage itself, or by beliefs imported from other cultures?

Sprinkle acknowledges that the view that men who were penetrated were dishonored was prevalent in the ancient world. However, he also points out that we know that because some ancient authors stated it explicitly. But Paul does not give that as his reason. On the contrary, Paul, unlike the ancient world, held a high view of women. He believed women are equal to men. Sprinkle concludes it is incorrect to conclude, as Brownson does, that this is evidence Paul was only prohibiting excessive same-sex acts.[[10]](#endnote-10)

# PART 2: IS THE HISTORIC POSITION, BASED ON SPECIFIC TERMS, BIBLICAL?

We have already seen the importance of paying close attention to key words used by the Bible writers. In Part 1, which includes potential errors #1-#7, we looked at terms that Brownson focuses on heavily to justify his claim that Paul is arguing against a specific form of same-sex activity, namely, excessive passion or lust.We considered whether these terms were too vague to conclude that only same sex acts characterized by excessive desires were prohibited. He especially leans on the word *pathē,* passions, and claims it always has the connotation of excessive or out-of-control desire.

Now, in Part 2, we will look at 5 words and phrases upon which the historic position bases its conclusions that all same sex acts or relationships are prohibited. The first of these is the word “for”.

### #8 "For" And the Concept of Excessive Desires

“. . . God gave them up to dishonorable passions. ***For*** their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature . . .” Romans 1:26 ESV (Bold and italics added.)

The word “for”, which starts the second half of verse 26 (which we will call 26b), can be considered in two ways: causal, meaning it is showing cause and effect in the verse, or explanatory, meaning it will explain other words or phrases in the verse.

If the “for” starting 26b is causal, or “because”, then the verse could be read, “God gave them up to dishonorable passions *because* their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature.” This then shows cause (26b) and effect (26a).

If the “for” starting 26b is explanatory, as some theologians believe,[[11]](#endnote-11) then the word “exchanged” explains or defines the “dishonorable passions” in the first half of the verse (26a). So the verse could be read, “For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. The dishonorable passions are that their women exchanged natural relations . . .” The dishonorable passions are clearly that the women traded sex with men for sex with women.

In both cases it is important to note that the second half of verse 26 (26b) describes the first half of the verse (26a). These are the only two options acknowledged by commentators. In contrast, Brownson holds verse 26a describes verse 26b, and more of the passage.

Brownson completely ignores the word “for”. He says that the “dishonorable passions”, which to him mean *excessive* passions, show that the exchanging of natural relations is only wrong when done in an excessive, or abusive, manner. He believes that a mutually agreed on relationship would not be excessive, therefore it would be acceptable. So, according to this stance, the verse could read, “God gave them up to passions that were excessive, which made them dishonorable, when women exchanged natural mutual relations for those that are forced, thus contrary to nature.”

Brownson uses the word “excess” 75 times in his book, and related words like “abuse” and “lust” another 223 times. The Greek word that can be defined as “excess” is *perissoteros*, as we saw under #6. Paul’s use of it in other verses (I Cor. 12:23, II Cor. 2:7, Gal. 1:14 etc.) illustrates that he could have easily used *perissoteros* if that’s what he wanted to say.To decide that a word means something that no one else has ever defined it as, ignoring other uses of it, does not seem like a good position to take.

James Brownson also claims that for the first 300 years of church history the acts that were “contrary to nature” by women were *non-procreative heterosexual acts*.[[12]](#endnote-12) Not only does Brownson’s interpretation seem very out of context for Romans 1, but he could only cite two authors who are in support of this through 2,000 years of church history. Preston Sprinkle lists two Church Fathers who held other than a non-procreative view, namely Chrysostom and Clement of Alexandria.[[13]](#endnote-13) Brownson seems to mention this as an aside, not linking it to any of the other explanations of this section, as though trying to shore up his position from another angle. This mention of non-procreative heterosexual acts seems like nothing more than a distraction.

Once again, it is very important to listen carefully to what the text is telling us.

This is the eighth (#8) key item.

### #9 The Words Females and Males

Contrary to what most English translations have, Paul did not use the words “women” and “men” in verses 26 and 27. Rather, a better translation would be “For their *females* exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the *males* likewise gave up natural relations with *females* . . .” (italics added). When it comes to properly understanding the Word of God, one of the most important lessons taught in seminary is to pay close attention to the words used in the original languages. The 9th serious concern has to do with the significance of these words.

In order to correctly comprehend Romans 1 we need to come to grips with these two words. Consider the following:

* The Greek word translated “woman” (also translated “wife” and “widow”) appears about 190 times in the New Testament. The Greek word for “female” appears only about 9 times.
* The Greek word for “man” appears 49 times in the New Testament, the word “male” only 9 times. (When one includes an analysis of Greek verbs, a case worth considering can be made that “man” appears in the New Testament not 49 times but over 500 times.[[14]](#endnote-14))

Therefore, it is correct to conclude that the use of either “female” or “male” is very rare in the New Testament. In everyday English the words “male” and “man” may be largely interchangeable. But that was not the case at all in New Testament Greek. A New Testament author would have to have a particular reason for using the words “male” and “female.”

When the New Testament specifically uses the more precise and rarely used word for “female,” it is zeroing in on the sexual side of the people involved. Doing something in an excessive manner, as J. Brownson holds, could refer to any number of actions, but does not necessarily have anything to do with sexuality. *However, dealing with exchanging heterosexuality for homosexuality does require dealing with people’s sexuality.*

What is Paul saying when he uses the words “males” and “females”? Pardon my bluntness on this, but to be a male in this case is to be a human being with a penis. And to be a female is to be a person with a vagina. By using the words males and females, Paul is indicating in very clear language that “humans with penises, having left behind the natural sexual use of humans with vaginas . . .” This makes it very clear what Paul considers the sin here to be. Paul emphasizes in two ways that the sin is sexual in nature: first, the use of “males” and “females” has to do with the sexual nature of people, and, second, the wording indicating “the natural sexual use” is also an explicit reference to the sexual nature of the problem. Brownson’s proposal that the problem here is that people were excessive (or abusive) gets away from the clear sexual nature of Paul’s statement.

If excess was Paul’s sole concern, he could have used more general terms like “women” and “men” or maybe even “people.” Also, if Paul’s concern here was the matter of excessive (or self-seeking) behavior, it would not require consideration of humans as females and males.

J. Brownson doesn’t deal with the fact that the terms “females” and “males” are used in these verses. These are key terms in the passage, and anyone striving to understand what Romans 1:26-27 teaches us must cover this. The reader needs to ask if it is possible for an author advocating same-sex marriage to do a good job on this passage while working with the words “women” and “men” when the Greek words really mean “females” and “males.” To be thorough, wouldn’t that author have to cover the fact that the Greek words point to their gender?

### #10 Three Phrases: Mutual Love or Excessive Acts?

The purpose of section 10 is to deal with the phrases “for one another,” “among themselves” and “in themselves.” These phrases teach very explicitly that the people under consideration mutually desired the acts, as opposed to the acts being excessive or abusive.

As we saw in #6, the word  “consumed” (*orexei*) in verse 27 is one of the four key words James Brownson points to in his claim that Romans 1 only prohibits excessive acts.  Since love and sexual appetites often are accompanied by passion, it is very difficult to see how these terms indicate that the main emphasis, in fact the only emphasis of these verses, is on excessive self-destructive acts.

The text does say they were “consumed,” that they burned with their yearning (*orexei*) for one another (reference verse 27c). However, the passage does *not* say that they burned with their desires for even greater pleasure, which is what Brownson says it means. This passage is objecting to the fact that they were passionate about each other at all. They were passionate “for one another.” These words very specifically identify the fact that it was a mutual relationship. They are not the words of one person abusing another, rather they were passionate for one another.  These are the words of two men who are each passionate for the other.

Yet, J. Brownson says it was not mutual. When Brownson advocates the church accept same-sex relationships, is he advocating explicitly what this passage prohibits? His terms “self-destructive excess” and “out-of-control desire” fall into an area that is difficult to specifically define. However this passage does clearly teach that the men were mutually involved with one another, and it says that the relationship was wrong. Brownson ignores the phrase “for one another” which is more specific and clearer than his interpretation that “consumed” means excessive.

Just as “consumed” in verse 27 in grammatical terms is reflexive, which means they mutually enjoyed it, there are two other such phrases in this passage. The message of a mutual relationship (not excessive) is also contained in verse 24 where it says that they dishonored their bodies “among themselves,” (i.e. “among themselves” illustrates they mutually enjoyed it; ref. Gagnon, page 234). Another example Gagnon points to is the “in themselves” (*en heautois*) in verse 27, and he states that this could very well be intended in the same reflexive sense.

So it seems that in three places in this passage there are references to the men mutually enjoying the acts. Therefore, this is not the picture of men committing acts that are selfish and abusive or men forcing themselves on another without their consent. It is a picture of men (and women) engaged in acts where both participants want to be engaged in the act. If a specific message is stated three separate times in the immediate context, one can be sure this is an important fact. It is not to be missed. This is the 10th serious concern.

### #11 Shameless Acts, Not "Acts Committed Shamelessly"

In a quick review of English grammar, an adjective describes a thing, a noun: the table was round. An adverb tells us how an act, a verb, is carried out: how did we sit at the table? We sat around the table. Romans 1:27 states in clear terms that when men were involved sexually with other men the acts were “shameless acts” (*aschēmosynēn*). The word “shameless” is an adjective describing the noun “acts.” (Interestingly, in the English language, which we know is notorious for confusing words, shameless and shameful mean the same thing. Some versions translate the Greek word as “shameful.”) It does not say they “committed acts in a shameless, or excessive manner,” where the word shameless is an adverb describing the way the acts were committed.

In order to arrive at Brownson’s interpretation that Paul is only prohibiting excessive relationships rather than all same-sex relationships, we would need to consider shameless, or shameful, as an adverb (describing how the acts were committed), which it is not. We see by the use of specific words that the acts themselves are shameless. This is a serious error (#11) because Brownson is interpreting a word meant to describe an act to mean how the act is carried out. The true meaning of these verses can only be determined by a proper understanding of the specific words that Paul used. It is important in interpreting Scripture to pay close attention to the grammatical differences between adverbs (“committing acts shamelessly”) and nouns (“committing shameless acts”). The true meaning of the Bible can only by determined by listening carefully to such distinctly different words.

### #12 Further Clarification of “Shameless”

Even though we have just been dealing with the word shameless, there is additional clarification available. Shameless acts cannot be understood as excessive acts because the Greek term *aschēmosynēn*, often translated “shameless” in verse 27, points to the genital area of the body. This is simply a reference to nakedness[[15]](#endnote-15) or nakedness and genitalia[[16]](#endnote-16) without any reference to excesses.

The word used here is only found one other time in the New Testament (in that same form) and that is in Revelation 16:15, “Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!” The word translated “exposed” in English is the word in question. This word carries no aspect of excess here, it is a simple reference to the shame of being naked in that situation.

By using a term for shame that contains a reference to the genitals, the Apostle Paul penned Romans 1 in a way that it conveys the message that there is sin (shame) involved and it has to do with men, their genitals, and inappropriate relations. Brownson makes a serious error (#12) because Paul is using a rare term, and rare terms carry connotations that must be noted. There is a reason Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit chose that term.

### #13 “Shameless” Links Romans 1 to A Universal Biblical Prohibition of Same-Sex Erotica

In Romans 1:27 Paul uses the Greek word, *aschēmosynēn*, translated “shameless” as a reference to simple acts of same-sex erotica. The word in its various grammatical forms appears only four other times in the New Testament (Revelation 16:15, “Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen **exposed**!” I Corinthians 12:23, “. . . and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our **unpresentable** parts are treated with greater modesty . . .” I Corinthians 13:4-5, “4Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5or **rude**.” and I Corinthians 7:36, “If anyone thinks that he is **not behaving properly** toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong . . .”) Therefore it is a rather unusual term that Paul chose to use. In the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), the word *aschēmosynēn* is used 51 times, with 30 of them appearing in Leviticus 18 and 20.

With Paul using this relatively unusual term in Romans 1, a word that is used seven times more frequently in just the two chapters of Leviticus than in the entire New Testament, it is obvious he is hearkening back to Levitical law in Romans 1.[[17]](#endnote-17) Leviticus 18 is very direct and clear; one male is not to lie with another male. Once again, in order to correctly understand the Word of God, it is essential to listen very carefully to the exact words in the original language. This is the 13th potential serious error.

### #14 Is the Phrase “What Ought Not To Be Done" Incomplete?

Verse 28: “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.”

Verse 28 explicitly carries the same message as verse 27, that the shameless actions “ought not to be done.” It is not incomplete, needing to say that the shameless actions “ought not to be done in an excessive way.” It is prohibiting the acts completely. God could very easily have indicated doing something in a certain manner if that is what He meant, rather than clearly saying, “. . . doing what ought not to be done.”

The historic interpretation of Romans 1 has held that the wording “. . . to do what ought not to be done . . .” is language that, plainly and simply, clearly prohibits all same-sex erotic acts. Yet, James Brownson never once deals with those words from verse 28 in his entire book. If a theologian is going to advocate an understanding that is different from the historic interpretation, doesn’t that person then owe it to their readers to show how the historic interpretation is not correct? You can’t do that if you never deal with the evidence in the biblical passage.

### #15 – Verse 27 Individual Nature or Natural Use?

Romans 1:27 says ". . . and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women." (From the English Standard Version.) A more precise translation of the particular Greek words Paul used in the verse is: “. . . and likewise also the males having left behind the natural use of the female (as regards sexual intercourse) . . .”[[18]](#endnote-18)

The church has historically understood “natural relations” or “the natural use” to be heterosexual acts. In contrast, a critical part of J. Brownson’s position is that what is natural is what is natural for each individual. Rather than a universal biblical principle for everyone everywhere, J. Brownson has come to believe that there is an individualistic principle, i.e. for a person attracted to members of the same sex, homosexuality is natural.

Brownson quotes another contemporary commentator by the name of John Boswell. “ . . . Boswell claims that, when Paul describes men as acting ‘against nature’ by engaging in sex with other men, he is envisioning heterosexual men who act against their own nature and disposition. Boswell thus concludes that this passage says nothing about homosexual men, because their same-sex behavior is in accordance with – and does not violate – their own nature or inclination.”[[19]](#endnote-19)

However, it must be noted that verse 27 does not read, “. . . and the men likewise gave up *their* natural relations with women . . .” (Italicized word added.). Romans 1 does not speak of the noun (nature) but rather the adjective (natural). In the phrase “the natural use” (*tēn physikēn chrēsin)* the word “natural” (*physikēn*) is an adjective describing “use,” therefore there is nothing grammatical indicating it is the nature of the particular individual.

In the above quote Brownson says, “. . . the passage strongly implies that he was not discussing persons who were by inclination gay . . .” How does the passage strongly imply that? To begin with, how often is sound theology based on “that which is implied”? It is far better to base our theology on what is explicitly stated.  Brownson states that the passage strongly implies it, but he does not present proof of that statement.

Let’s consider the grammar that affects this situation. Brownson also says that Paul’s use of nature is always possessive. This is simply not a valid argument. (See Romans 11:21 and 24, and I Cor. 11:14). Also, the three Greek words, *tēn physikēn chrēsin* (the natural use) are accusative (the direct object of the sentence) and singular, showing that “natural” modifies “use,” not “males.” As the direct object, it is what the men gave up. This very much fits the historic understanding of the passage that the natural sexual use of the female is heterosexuality. The historic understanding has claimed that this passage is not dealing with what is natural for each individual man. Rather, when it uses the language of “the natural use of a female” it is very explicitly speaking of a universal entity or a universal principle.

As it stands, the statement by Boswell above is a statement of opinion, without anything to verify it. It goes contrary to accepted Greek dictionaries such as Kittle, and Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich (BDAG). The particular words the Apostle Paul chose to use in verse 27 are quite specific in indicating what Paul was saying is prohibited, although English versions vary in how they translate this phrase. For example, the wording of the ESV is rather general in nature. It reads, ". . . and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women." The words *physikēn* (natural) and *chrēsin* (relations in this quote) in the passage communicate a more precise meaning in Greek. It can be translated as: “. . . and likewise also the males having left behind the natural use of the female (as regards sexual intercourse) . . .” The noun *chrēsin* carries the meaning “use, usage; usefulness.” The verb form of that word, *chraomai* is translated, “to use, make use of; desire, yearn after, enjoy.” The noun is also sometimes applied to sexual intercourse (cf. BDAG, *chrēsis*, 3.) The context causes both verses to be understood as “as regards (or: in) sexual intercourse.”[[20]](#endnote-20) This understanding was acknowledged at least as far back as John Calvin in his commentary on Romans over 400 years ago.

So the reader needs to decide: is Brownson correct that Romans 1 refers to each individual’s nature, or do the considerations from the perspective of the historic understanding indicate the nature, or natural use spoken of is universal, not individualistic?

# CONCLUSION

Let’s review the main facts concerning James Brownson’s primary position that the Bible only prohibits excessive same-sex erotic acts:

* 40% of his book focusses on Romans 1, therefore he acknowledges this is the key biblical passage to determine whether same sex relationships are permissible, and represents the Bible’s primary teaching on this issue.
* 298 times in his 300 page book one finds words like excessive, abusive, lust, etc., therefore it is his interpretation of the key passage, Romans 1, that it only prohibits excessive acts.

With those thoughts stated, let’s review the critique of his position.

* Of the 75 times various forms of the word “excessive” appear in his book, only nine of those contain substance. The rest are mere statements of his opinion. Among these nine substantive statements, the strongest evidence Brownson cites is the translation of words like passion, desire and consumed. These words are all found in Romans 1. He claims these terms indicate Paul is referring to excessive acts. However, these terms are vague; i.e. Paul also uses the word translated “desire” when he says he desires to be with the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 2:17. Is that use of desire excessive? Although we know that Paul dearly loved the people in these churches, he was not indicating that his desire to be with them was over the top. The desire mentioned in Romans 1 has historically been understood as a negative desire, but not because it is excessive. Desire does not carry an innate connotation of being excessive.
* In contrast to the above claims by Brownson, the Romans 1 passage contains four specific statements such as “. . . and the men [males] likewise gave up the natural sexual use of women [females]. . .” and the statement “. . . men [males] committing shameless acts with men [males] . . .” These specific statements have historically been understood by the church to be references to same-sex erotic acts.
* The four vague phrases/terms Brownson cites are contrasted to the four specific statements understood to prohibit same-sex acts. Additionally, the above lists 15 serious errors those holding to the historic understanding believe Brownson makes in advocating his position.
* When one considers the vague terms in contrast to the specific terms, one thing appears to be reasonable to conclude. The interpretation that Romans 1 only prohibits excess acts does not encompass such wording as “the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another . . .”

These points have been presented to thousands of pastors. Certainly some of those pastors agree with Dr. Brownson’s conclusions, but no one has put forth further arguments supporting his position as a result of that dialogue.

***So, the bottom line here is that 1) the very core of Dr. Brownson’s position is based on only a few statements of substance, 2) those statements rely primarily if not entirely on four vague terms and 3) the historic Christian understanding of Romans 1 holds that Brownson’s position contains 15 serious errors.***

Anyone disagreeing with this assessment is welcomed to submit their insights into this situation. The reader is encouraged to consider this paper as he or she strives to determine if God accepts loving same-sex relationships.

1. J. Brownson, page 154 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brownson, pages 155-56 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Brownson, page 156 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dr. Preston Sprinkle, *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2014), pages 515-528. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Notes received from Dr. Jeffrey Weima, December 27, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Brownson, page 169 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Brownson page 169 etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Brownson page 160 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Brownson page 169 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Dr. Preston Sprinkle, *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2014), pages 515-528. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For example, Gagnon page 235 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Brownson, page 225 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Dr. Preston Sprinkle, *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2015), page 507. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. It is helpful to point out the fact that in Greek whether the subject is a man or a woman is often indicated by the form of the verb. As a result, the actual word “man” will not be found in the Greek text in those cases. This phenomenon can be measured to a certain extent by looking at what translators have done in English versions. In the ESV the word “man” is found no less than 538 times. Since “male” is used only 9 times, the concept of man according to this tabulation is found **60** times more frequently than male. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Gagnon, page 68 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Gagnon, page 239 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Gagnon, pages 238-39 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Gagnon, page 231 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. J. Brownson, page 228 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Gagnon, pages 236-37 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)