

**Dr. Brownson**  
**On**  
**Romans 1**  
**“Nature” And Same-Sex Marriages**

**Revision 1**

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# INTRODUCTION

This paper is the result of a more extensive paper which examines the claims presented in Dr. James Brownson's book, Bible Gender Sexuality; Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013). Its purpose is to focus on Dr. Brownson's treatment of Romans 1:26-27, particularly on the word "nature." Many of the responses to Dr. Brownson's position come from the book The Bible and Homosexual Practice; Texts and Hermeneutics by Dr. Robert A.J. Gagnon (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2001). Dr. Brownson's book is considered an authoritative work concerning the acceptance of same-sex marriage, and Dr. Gagnon's book is an authoritative book in defense of the historic understanding of sexual ethics.

Those verses read (ESV):

<sup>26</sup>For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; <sup>27</sup>and 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.

Both of these authors state that the Romans 1 passage is the key passage in the Bible on same-sex relationships. Dr. Brownson states, "Nothing has been more central to the debates over homosexuality in the churches than Paul's language regarding 'nature' in Romans 1." <sup>i</sup> In fact, Dr. Brownson devotes 40% of his book to dealing with Romans 1:24-27. Dr. Gagnon has this to say about the relative importance of this passage:

With good reason, Rom 1:24-27 is commonly seen as the central text for the issue of homosexual conduct on which Christians must base their moral doctrine. This is true for several reasons. It is the most substantial and explicit discussion of the issue in the Bible. It is located in the New Testament. It makes an explicit statement not only about same-sex intercourse among men but also about lesbianism. <sup>ii</sup>

There have been some questions from time to time concerning what my position is. I have considered making a statement to that effect, but at this point have decided to decline. In some ways it is probably clear what my position is. Yet, there are some questions that remain, too. My primary thought is that it does not matter what I believe. The important thing is for the reader to examine the claims made in this paper and hopefully this material will help the reader determine what the Word of God teaches.

If you have questions about my position or other related considerations, feel free to email me. I would be happy to respond to such inquiries.

This paper has been put together first and foremost for the sake of those who deal with same sex attractions. As Christians, every one of us has our areas where we are the weakest. The goal in this paper is to strive to provide good, biblical material that can help people to know what God's will is with respect to same-sex relations.

## DR. BROWNSON'S UNDERSTANDING OF "NATURAL" AND "UNNATURAL"

Until recently the church has basically understood the word "nature" in Romans 1 as a reference to a universal law or guideline. Dr. Brownson disagrees. He goes into an in-depth study of the Greek word translated *nature* in that passage. He points out that the Jewish writers of the Old Testament did not refer to nature in this way, nor did they use that Greek word translated *nature*. (It is important to take these things into consideration, because it is possible we read certain terms with our 21st-century English language understanding rather than the way the biblical writers intended them to be understood.)

Dr. Brownson examines the understanding of nature as individual disposition in the ancient world, nature as communal well-being and nature as biology and anatomy. At the conclusion of his study Dr. Brownson determines that the Apostle Paul was using the word *nature* in all three of these meanings:

Paul envisions the sexual misbehavior he describes in Romans 1:26-27 as [first] a violation of one's individual nature or identity, [second] as a violation of deeply established social norms regarding gender, and [third] as a violation of the "biological imperative" to bear children. All of this is conveyed in his characterization of these behaviors as "unnatural." <sup>iii</sup> (Brackets added to emphasize each of the three.)

It is important to note here that having identified each of the three misbehaviors above Professor Brownson then proceeds to categorize those misbehaviors as "unnatural." Yet, as we will see later in this paper, when Dr. Brownson deals with the term "unnatural" he redefines it as "extreme" and "non-procreative heterosexual" acts. So, not only does he contradict himself in this regard, he also brings considerable complexity to the situation in that he advocates no less than five definitions of the words natural/unnatural. One is not just the opposite of the other, rather, he defines natural and unnatural in such ways that the two cannot possibly come from the same root word. Doesn't this peculiar juxtaposition cause one to seriously question whether his definitions are correct?

The potential definition of *nature* as one's *individual nature* is key in the discussions involving whether or not God approves of any form of same-sex erotic behavior. If that is one of the definitions Paul was using, then when Romans 1 prohibits that which is not natural, it would be prohibiting what is not natural for each *individual*. Therefore a person who has as his *nature* same-sex attractions, what Romans 1 then prohibits is for that individual to be involved in heterosexual activity.

It is readily apparent that it is very important for the discussion at hand that this definition be proven to be correct or disproven. We will examine the three points from the quote above in detail, from both Dr. Brownson's and Dr. Gagnon's position.

## FIRST: NATURE AS ONE'S INDIVIDUAL NATURE

Dr. Brownson refers to Romans 2:14, Galatians 4:8 and Ephesians 2:3 and from them concludes that the word nature/natural in Paul refers to what comes natural for a given individual.<sup>iv</sup> The word nature in those passages modifies **people** (Rom. 2:14 and Eph. 2:3) or **beings** (Gal. 4:8 – who were not God).

On the other hand, historically Romans 1:26-27 shows that the word nature/natural modifies **relations**, not people. Therefore, since Romans 1 says there are natural and unnatural *relations* would it be more straightforward to read those relations as being universal, the same for all men and all women, rather than natural relations being somehow dependent on the desire of an individual? \*

Romans 1:26b reads, “For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature . . .” not *their* natural relations. If the verse was worded that way, it would more clearly agree with Dr. Brownson understanding of nature. Instead, in this verse, the use of the term *natural* is not used to modify the women being spoken of, but their *relations*. Paul is writing about “natural relations” and “unnatural relations.” “Natural relations” is referring to relations that are expected to be a universal norm in the natural order. Natural relations for women would be the same for all women everywhere. If that is in fact true, Brownson’s conclusion that Romans 2:14, Galatians 4:8 and Ephesians 2:3 prove Paul uses nature to refer to an individualistic trait in Romans 1 is an incorrect conclusion. One of the most widely accepted lexicons of New Testament Greek (by Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker) confirms the view that “nature” is used differently in Romans 1 than in Galatians or Ephesians.<sup>v</sup> That lexicon also says that in Romans 2:14 nature might refer either to a natural order or to a personal trait.<sup>vi</sup> Therefore, these passages do prove that the word nature/natural *can* be used in that way, but they do not prove that the word can *only* be used in that way, which is what Dr. Brownson states.

We can further test his interpretation by inserting synonyms for his proposed individual natures of heterosexuality and homosexuality in the verses of Romans 1. The insertions will show explicitly whether a person of same-sex orientation is being considered in the verse, or a heterosexual person. Professor Brownson maintains that what is prohibited in Romans 1:26-27 depends on whether a person is heterosexual or homosexual. According to his interpretation heterosexual people are prohibited from going contrary to *their* nature and homosexual people are prohibited in that passage from going against *their* nature. The added words are in italics and the replaced words are in parenthesis and struck through. First the verses will be given as found in the ESV. Next they will be given with the audits.

“For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature . . .” (verse 26b ESV)

In this first instance, let’s replace “women” and “natural relations” with “heterosexual women” and “heterosexual relations.” This is done because Dr. Brownson believes Romans 1:26-27 does not contain a universal principle that is the same for all women, but a principle that applies one way for heterosexual women and a different way for homosexual women.

“For their *heterosexual* women exchanged *heterosexual* (~~natural~~) relations for *homosexual* (~~those that are contrary to nature~~) . . .”

With this wording, which expresses Dr. Brownson's interpretation of nature/natural, the verse makes sense, both in the original and the edited verse. In either version the heterosexual women could be said to be going against their individual nature.

This also could work when we insert words for women with homosexual orientation, and look at it through Dr. Brownson's “individual nature” filter.

“For their *homosexual* women exchanged *homosexual* (~~natural~~) relations for *heterosexual* (~~those that are contrary to nature~~) relations . . .”

We have been dealing with verse 26 which deals with women. Verse 27 deals specifically with men.

“. . .<sup>27</sup> and 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.” (verse 27 ESV)

In this first instance, let's replace “men” with “heterosexual men” and “natural relations” with “heterosexual relations.” Remember, Dr. Brownson believes these verses contain a principle that applies one way for heterosexual men and a different way for homosexual men.

“. . .<sup>27</sup> and the *heterosexual* men likewise gave up *heterosexual* (~~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.”

If one assumes Dr. Brownson's interpretation, this could be said to make logical sense.

Now let's insert the words specifying men of homosexual orientation. To do this we'll replace the general “men” with “homosexual men” and the general words “natural relations” with “homosexual relations.” Once again, keeping the individualistic viewpoint in mind, we have:

“. . .<sup>27</sup> and the *homosexual* men likewise gave up *homosexual* (~~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.”

The question at this point is inevitable, “Does that interpretation make sense?” Ultimately the reader must decide for himself or herself concerning Dr. Brownson's interpretation. Most people would agree that this wording is illogical. First, there is no such thing as “homosexual relations with women...” Second, “. . .<sup>27</sup> and the *homosexual* men likewise gave up . . . *homosexual* relations . . . and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men . . .” Again, this is logically self-contradicting. If the men gave up homosexual relations they *couldn't* be committing acts with men.

The inclusion of the word “women” in verse 27, "and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women," is enough to rule out Dr. Brownson's interpretation of "natural." The position that what is “natural” can be different from one individual to another, rather than being a universal principle, relevant in the same way for all men and all women, does not fit Romans 1:26 and 27.

Dr. Brownson claims the church should accept monogamous marriages between members of the same sex. He bases this on the definition of “nature” as being individualistic, and, using that definition, claims that Romans 1 does not prohibit it. By testing the definition as we have done above, his interpretation is called into question. When the valid meaning of the word “nature” is examined, does Romans 1 prohibit same sex marriages or allow them?

## **SECOND: NATURE AS COMMON KNOWLEDGE, CULTURAL NORMS**

The second definition of nature as common knowledge or cultural norms is treated extensively in Professor Brownson’s book. It is a key premise of Christianity that it, i.e. Christ and the Scriptures frequently go counter-culture. This can be seen here, too, in that the Ancient Near Eastern cultures accepted male-male sex with such stipulations as the passive partner had to be of a lower class. The Scriptures do not make any reference to accepting that arrangement.<sup>vii</sup>

## **THIRD: AS IT RELATES TO PROCREATION**

The third definition of procreation or biological complementarity is an interesting definition from Brownson’s perspective in that he states that this definition is relevant in these verses<sup>viii</sup> *and* he holds that same-sex marriage is acceptable under certain conditions. In order to do that he puts himself in a strange position. He is saying when applying Romans 1:26-27 to life, in some circumstances one must take one definition of “nature” and in other life situations one cannot take that definition, one has to use a different one. Since procreation and biological complementarity cannot be pertinent when two members of the same sex are being considered, according to Brownson the third definition cannot be relevant then, but he holds that sometimes that definition of procreation *is* relevant in this passage. Now, it is commonplace to understand a given word in different ways depending on the context it is used in. However, is it ever the case anywhere else in the Bible that one has to take a particular word in a given context and define it one way in one case and then define that same word in the same context in quite a different manner in another situation?



## FOURTH: UNNATURAL AS EXTREME

Dr. Brownson also claims in his book that the word “unnatural” in Romans 1 refers to what is done to the extreme<sup>x</sup>. In this regard Professor Brownson gives a table in which he states the connection between the word “unnatural” in verse 26 and “were consumed” of verse 27 is demonstrated.

1:23 They <i>exchanged</i>	the glory of the immortal God	for images resembling a mortal human being or animals.
1:25 They <i>exchanged</i>	the truth of God	for a lie.
1:26 Their women <i>exchanged</i>	natural intercourse	for unnatural.
1:27 In the same way also the men, giving up	natural intercourse with women,	were consumed with passion for one another.

With this understanding of unnatural Dr. Brownson proposes that Romans 1:26 does not prohibit some activity that goes contrary to a universal standard, rather, it prohibits activities that are done to the extreme (violent etc. etc.). Consistent with this, he then advocates that two people of the same sex who love each other and want to build each other up etc. should be allowed to get married.

It is true in the above table that the word “exchanged” is common to the first three rows. However, there are also some imbalances to the table. For example, the “giving up” in the first column and the last row does have a similar meaning to the word “exchanged,” however, it is a different Greek word. Secondly, you will notice that verse 24 is not included. Third, in the first three rows the primary verb (*shaded*) is in the first column. In the fourth row, however, the primary verb “were consumed” is in the third column. Primary verbs are very important when it comes to understanding the real import of the various words in sentences. This is a significant imbalance. Fourth, with the omission of vs 24 the statements about God giving them up are not included. This pertains to vs. 26 as well as vs. 24. The matter of God giving up on them is an important aspect of this passage, on a par with them exchanging one practice for another. The two are directly connected and inter-twined. Attempting to analyze the meaning of the verb “were consumed” without including one of the two primary concepts in the passage appears to be a very risky approach.

Lastly, when one takes a quantitative look at Dr. Brownson’s table an interesting fact comes to light.<sup>x</sup> When one checks the words in verses 23-27 one will find that there are 130 words total. The number of words not included in the table is 80. Therefore, 61% of these verses are not listed in the table. Why were those sections omitted?

Let’s take a look at both concepts of humans exchanging and God giving people up. In Greek a certain balanced progression was quite often used in writing. By “balanced” is meant that there would be “x” number of statements made (ref. *a-e* below), then the main thought would be given (ref. *f*), then there would be the same quantity of “x” statements given after the central thought (ref. *e'-a'* below). The first statement made would have a certain correspondence to the last (i.e. *a-a'* below), the second would to the second to the last (*b-b'* below) etc. until finally the statement immediately preceding the central statement would correspond to the one

immediately after it (*e-e'*).<sup>xi</sup> Reference Romans 1:18-32 below as laid out according to this literary device.

*a* <sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

*b* <sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, **they did not honor him** as God or **give thanks to him**, but **they became futile** in their thinking, and their foolish **hearts were darkened**.

*c* <sup>22</sup> Claiming **to be wise**, **they became** fools,

*d* <sup>23</sup> and **exchanged** the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

*e* <sup>24</sup> Therefore **God gave them up** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the **dishonoring** of their bodies among themselves,

*f* <sup>25</sup> because **they exchanged** the truth about God for a lie and **worshiped** and **served** the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! **Amen**.

*e'* <sup>26</sup> For this reason **God gave them up to dishonorable passions**.

*d'* For their **women exchanged** natural **relations** for **those** that are contrary to nature;

*c'* <sup>27</sup> and 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.

*b'* <sup>28</sup> 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.

*a'* <sup>29</sup> They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup> foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup> Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

There is a fair amount of evidence supporting this particular analysis of the passage.<sup>xii</sup> Three of the five pairs of lines (such as *a* and *a'*) contain the same or closely related words or phrases. The center of the literary device (*f*) summarizes both halves of the passage.

From this literary structure one can see that the words in verse 27 (*c'*) referring to the men being consumed correspond in a significant way to verse 22 (*c*) "Claiming to be wise, they became fools . . ." This is a stronger connection than the "were consumed" and "unnatural" as given initially in the table above by Dr. Brownson. This shows that in Paul's mind there was not necessarily a correspondence between "being consumed" and "unnatural" but that there was a relationship between the two phrases in verse 27 "being consumed" and "receiving . . . the due penalty" and verse 22, "Claiming to be wise, they became fools."

Dr. Brownson, as noted in the table at the beginning of this section, focusses on the word translated "*exchanged*." In the structure proposed immediately above, it will be noted that those words are located in *d*, *d'* and *f*. These three sections are perfectly symmetrical. Verse 23 references all men/people (*anthropon*) to whom God has revealed Himself, as is verse 23's *allaxan* and verse 25's *metallaxan*. Verse 26 then references women in particular, perhaps to show that they are indeed included in the original *anthropon* of verse 18. Could it be, then, that when Paul finally gives the summary of all of it in verse 27 by saying that in this choosing of the unnatural over the natural, and the ways of men over the ways of God, it is an abandonment of God's blessed intentions for us and a choosing of our own damnation (and its inherent results)?<sup>xiii</sup>

Therefore, from this we can see that the proposal Dr. Brownson makes, namely that "unnatural" in this passage carries the meaning of "extreme" does not necessarily have a basis in this passage. Dr. Brownson does not offer any other Scriptural evidence for that proposal either. As a result, the position that unnatural meaning extreme limits the prohibition of Romans 1 to only acts that are extreme, can that position be maintained?

## **FIFTH: "UNNATURAL" AS HETEROSEXUAL NON-PROCREATIVE ACTS**

Dr. Brownson includes in his book two sources stating that their understanding of "contrary to nature" for women in verse 26 was non-procreative heterosexual activity (heterosexual activity not intended to result in conception).<sup>xiv</sup> The two sources he quotes to back this up are Clement of Alexandria and Augustine, two prominent leaders in the early centuries of the church. If this is the only definition of unnatural in verse 26, then it removes that verse from consideration as far as homosexual activities are concerned.

Traditionalists do not believe the above definition of "contrary to nature" is correct. There are at least five reasons for this.

The **first** reason has to do with a key term at the beginning of verse 27 which is translated "likewise." That word links the content of verse 26 to that of verse 27. Dr. Brownson states that Paul "probably uses" this word (also translated "in the same way") to make it clear that the be-

havior of these males is another "exchange," like the three already quoted earlier in that passage.<sup>xv</sup> In this connection reference Dr. Brownson's table quoted earlier.

Specifically with respect to the word "likewise," Dr. Gagnon has this to say:

For the "likewise" of 1:27 to be appropriate, both the thing exchanged and the thing exchanged *for* must be comparable. Hence, sex with members of the same sex, not non-coital sex, is the point of comparison between 1:26 and 1:27.<sup>xvi</sup>

The **second** reason involves going into further detail on these two verses where Dr. Gagnon makes the following statement:

The expression "natural use of the female (as a sexual partner)" in 1:27 suggests that the implied objective genitive for "natural use" in 1:26 is "natural use (of the male as a sexual partner)," which in turn implies that the converse "that which is contrary to nature" refers to the unnatural use of females as sexual partners. The continuation of 1:27 makes clear that the exchange for a man is not that of coital intercourse for non-coital intercourse but rather an exchange of sexual relations with women for sexual relations with men.<sup>xvii</sup>

The **third** reason has to do with multiple uses of a single word. Louis Berkhof made a statement relative to the multiple uses of words in a single context. For anyone not familiar with Berkhof, theologian Wayne Grudem has called Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* "a great treasure-house of information and analysis [...] probably the most useful one-volume systematic theology available from any theological perspective."<sup>xviii</sup> This is quite a compliment coming from a theologian who himself has written a systematic theology. This is also a testament to the continuing value of Berkhof's writings.

Berkhof states, "If a word is used in the same connection more than once, the natural assumption is that it has the same meaning throughout."<sup>xix</sup> Therefore, when verse 27 very specifically identifies "natural" as being heterosexual in nature, the evidence weighs heavily in favor of "natural" in verse 26 also referring to heterosexuality as opposed to the more specific coital heterosexuality. In order for anyone to hold to the definition of unnatural as referring to non-coital heterosexual intercourse they are then obliged to produce a reason why that word is used with two so very different meanings in these two verses.

The **fourth** reason involves another Greek word which is used here. Very closely connected to the English word "likewise" is the use of the Greek word *te*. Dr. Brownson has this to say:

At the same time, there is a more qualified parallel between Rom. 1:26 and 27 in that both deal with sexual issues that are "natural" or "unnatural," and the two verses deal in contrasting ways with males and females. This lesser parallelism/contrast is evident in the repeated use of the Greek particle *te* in these two verses, a common device in Greek for making comparisons or contrasts.<sup>xx</sup>

Professor Brownson says "the two verses deal in contrasting ways with males and females." Three authoritative lexicons state that *te* indicates close unity, inner bond, close connec-

tion etc.<sup>xxi</sup> As far as contrasts are concerned, it is true that one key lexicon states, “3. a. usually of the same kind or corresponding as opposites.”<sup>xxii</sup> Now it must be noted that this lexicon refers to “opposites” not contrasts. There is a difference between those two. Professor Brownson does not give a source for the definition of contrasts. Where does that meaning come from? If the two verses refer to *opposites*, and verse 26 speaks of non-coital heterosexual intercourse, what would the opposite of that be? It couldn’t be coital homosexual intercourse. It would appear to be the case that the two are connected by a close unity, an inner bond etc. based on the usage of the Greek *te . . . te kai*.

The Blass, Debrunner and Funk lexicon states that the words *te kai* connect words, not whole clauses.<sup>xxiii</sup> This being the case, the words *te . . . te kai* would connect the words females and males given the immediate positioning of those words after the *te* and *te kai*.

So on what basis does Dr. Brownson say that Romans 1 contrasts males and females? And how does he refer to that relationship as a lesser parallelism/contrast? With the definitions given in the lexicons for the words *te . . . te kai* there is not a lesser contrast, but rather a rather clear unity there. Therefore, as was the case with the word translated “likewise,” these Greek words also indicate that there is a close unity between what was natural and unnatural for both women and men. Since verse 27 makes it clear that what was unnatural for men was same-sex erotic activity, then what is unnatural for women is also same-sex erotic activity; it is not non-coital heterosexual activity.

The **fifth** reason involves looking at this from another perspective, shown in I Corinthians 7:9.

But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

The reason marriage resolves the burning with passion is because of the fact that they will be engaged in intercourse. That is then not necessarily, or not only, intercourse for the sake of procreation. What is referenced here is intercourse specifically for the purpose of relieving the burning with passion. If a couple marries because they cannot exercise self-control, that difficulty with this self-control is quite likely to be there after the children are born as well as before the marriage. Therefore, the Bible itself is advocating non-procreative heterosexual intercourse. How can that then be considered unnatural, or somehow bad? Prof. Brownson deals with this passage in I Corinthians in five places in his book. However, he does not address the matter of whether or not this passage teaches that non-procreative heterosexual intercourse between spouses is being advocated by the Scriptures here.

Therefore, even if two theologians from the first 300 years of church history held to that definition, Scripture itself rules it out as a possibility.

For the above five reasons, is the position right or wrong that the *unnatural*, the undesirable, intercourse referenced in Romans 1:26 is bad because it is not for the purpose of procreation?

## THE TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF “NATURAL” AND “UNNATURAL”

It is interesting to note Professor Brownson advocates in his book to one extent or another, multiple definitions of the words, *natural* and *unnatural* (the same root word). For the Greek word that appears three times in Romans 1:26-27, Professor Brownson has no less than *five* definitions that he claims are all relevant to the passage.<sup>xxiv</sup> In fact, the three instances of the word are even found in the same sentence (as in the ESV, KJV, NASB and RSV). Brownson’s definitions of natural/unnatural are:

1. natural - what is true of a given individual
2. natural - common knowledge, cultural norms
3. natural – procreation, biological complementarity
4. unnatural – extreme/excessive
5. unnatural for females – non-procreative heterosexual acts

The first definition has been dealt with in the section FIRST: NATURE AS ONE’S INDIVIDUAL NATURE. That section takes the position that when the synonyms for that definition are inserted in place of the terms “nature” and “contrary to nature” one runs into an irreconcilable conflict in the wording of verse 27.

The second and third definitions have been dealt with above as well and do not necessarily pose complications as far as the aspects of the tension between being natural and contrary to nature are concerned.

The fourth definition, excessive, is also a difficult definition to fit into Romans 1 as far as “nature” and “contrary to nature” is concerned. The sections above have presented five reasons “extreme” cannot be taken as the definition of “contrary to nature.” In addition, in specifying nature and what is contrary to it the passage is dealing with two concepts that are opposites of each other. What is the opposite of excessive? It is not something that is “normal.” According to Thesaurus.com the antonyms of excess are insufficiency, lack, need, want, scarcity, deficiency, deprivation etc. Substituting then excessive and its opposite in Romans 1:26 we have, “For their women exchanged *deficient* relations for those that are *excessive* . . .” Does this make any sense? The word excessive expresses more quantity rather than type. What is natural and what is unnatural are concepts that differ in type, not quantity. Natural as heterosexual and unnatural as same-sex are two concepts that differ in type. In the above section, FOURTH: UNNATURAL AS EXTREME, the case was made that Dr. Brownson’s table containing the words “exchange” and “were consumed” etc. does not present a full, balanced assessment of Romans 1. If this is correct, it also removes key evidence which would support Dr. Brownson’s definition of unnatural as excessive.

The fifth definition of unnatural as heterosexual non-procreative acts has had five reasons given in the section by that same name which, if correct, would show that definition to not be correct. Once again, if we consider what the opposite of heterosexual non-procreative acts would

be we run into difficulties with this definition. The only opposite of that would be *procreative same-sex acts*. Does that make any sense?

With respect to the use of the term nature in Romans 1:26, Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker provides the definition of “the regular natural order.”<sup>xxv</sup> As Dr. Gagnon has pointed out, the Greek word *chresin* in those verses carries with it sexual overtones.<sup>xxvi</sup> Therefore, a very reasonable meaning of “the regular natural order,” which has sexual overtones is “heterosexual.” And the opposite of that, a reasonable definition of that which is “contrary to nature” would be “same-sex erotic activity.” Substituting those meanings for the relevant words we have:

<sup>26</sup>For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged *heterosexual* relations for those that are *same-sex erotic activity*; <sup>27</sup>and the men likewise gave up *heterosexual* 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.

One will note that there is no logical contradiction, no incompatibility in these verses once that has been done. There is no problem as was the case with the five reasons against “heterosexual non-procreative acts.” With respect to Professor Berkhof’s statement, with these two meanings the words natural and contrary to nature are consistent in meaning throughout these two verses. And these two meanings are in fact opposites of each other. These two meanings do not conflict with other Scripture passages such as I Corinthians 7:9.

## CONCLUSION

It is ultimately up to each reader to decide what interpretation of Romans 1:26-27 is correct. In addition to this paper there is a more extensive paper which lies behind this one and of which this one contains the highlights. This paper should provide a fairly important perspective on the subject at hand as Romans 1:26-27 is considered by a number of key authors to be the most important passage on this topic.

The author hopes that this paper is a benefit to understanding this topic and Dr. Brownson’s book in particular. Input, clarification, and criticism are welcome and will be added to the materials as is appropriate.

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<sup>i</sup> Brownson, page 223.

<sup>ii</sup> Gagnon, page 229.

<sup>iii</sup> Brownson, page 246.

<sup>iv</sup> Brownson, page 226-27.

<sup>v</sup> Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, The University of Chicago Press, page 869.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Gagnon, pages 303-332 especially page 330.

<sup>viii</sup> Brownson, page 255.

<sup>ix</sup> Brownson, page 224.

<sup>x</sup> The highlighted words in the quotation of the passage below are the words Dr. Brownson includes in his table. The words that are not highlighted are the words his table omits.

<sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools; <sup>23</sup> and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

<sup>26</sup> For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, <sup>27</sup> and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

<sup>xi</sup> Those who study Greek refer to this as a *chiasm*. That word comes from the Greek *chi* which is the Greek equivalent of the letter X. The example given shows how chiasms are typically laid out in print. You can see where the letter X is used to refer to this literary device as it models at least the left half of X.

<sup>xii</sup> **Evidence in support of the chiastic reading:**

- Vs. 21 (*b*): “**they did not honor him** as God or **give thanks to him**” parallels the wording in vs. 28 (*b'*): “**they did not see fit to acknowledge God**”
- Vss. 23, 25 and 26b all contain the primary verb **exchanged**; vss. 23 (*d*) and 26b (*d'*) are symmetrical about verse 25, the center of the chiasm
- Verse 25, as the center of the chiasm is concluded with the word, “Amen!” which helps in giving emphasis
- The theme of exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images of creatures is the primary focus of the first half of the chiasm. The second half of the chiasm describes what happens to humans when they don’t acknowledge the glory of God; they end up doing unnatural things and ultimately are caught up in all kinds of sin (vss. 29-32). Verse 25 (*f*) gives a summary of this section; 25a, “. . . because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie . . .” is a restatement of the first half of the chiasm. Verse 25b, “. . . and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator . . .” summarizes what people did as spelled out in further detail in the second half of the chiasm
- The first part of the chiasm (*a*) initially introduces this theme of not honoring God. That is the theme of the first half of the chiasm. The last part of the chiasm (*a'*) gives the result of not honoring God, which is the theme of the second half of the chiasm.



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- Vss. 24 (*e*) starts with the word “Therefore” and 26a (*e*) starts with a phrase of similar meaning, “For this reason”
  - Both vss. 24 and 26a have the same subject and the primary verbs “**God gave them up**”
  - Vs. 24 contains the word **dishonoring** and 26a has the word **dishonorable** which comes from the same root word

<sup>xiii</sup> Email from Pastor Stan Drenth dated 10/4/15.

<sup>xiv</sup> Brownson, pages 207-208.

<sup>xv</sup> Brownson, page 224.

<sup>xvi</sup> Gagnon, pages 298-99.

<sup>xvii</sup> Gagnon, page 298. Dr. Gagnon also goes into further detail concerning the Greek words used which justifies his translation of "natural use of the female (as a sexual partner)".

<sup>xviii</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994, pg. 1225

<sup>xix</sup> L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, Baker Book House, page 77.

<sup>xx</sup> Brownson, page 224.

<sup>xxi</sup> Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker, page 807; A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, Broadman Press, page 1178-79; Blass, Debrunner and Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament And Other Early Christian Literature*, The University of Chicago Press, page 203.

<sup>xxii</sup> Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker, page 807.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Blass, Debrunner and Funk, page 230.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Brownson, page 245.

<sup>xxv</sup> Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker, page 869.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Gagnon, page 236.