**Moral Logic: How to Get the Bible to Say What It Doesn't Mean**

Professor James Brownson's latest book, *Bible Gender Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships,* Eerdmans, 2013, is perplexing in a number of ways.

**First**, it is, by his own admission, a book written out of personal struggle. One admires him for baring his soul in revealing that his motivation for the book grew out of his discovery that his son is gay. This led to five years of struggle to come to terms with this fact and with what he had previously believed the Bible taught about homosexual practice. The result, despite his meticulous scholarship and comprehensive research, is a book whose conclusion can already be deduced in its introduction. The considerable content that lies between the two reveals a bias in his interpretation that relentlessly drives towards a single-minded outcome - that the Bible blesses, rather than prohibits, committed long-term same-sex relationships or, in his words, "marriages or something like marriages."

**Second**, from the tone set in the introduction, one expects to encounter an even-handed treatment of what the author refers to as the "traditionalist" and the "revisionist" positions that will lead to some kind of middle ground breakthrough. Instead, innumerable pages are devoted to the dismemberment of the "traditionalist" position while a mere nine pages are devoted to a critique of the "revisionist" position. (pp. 40-49) Ironically, four of those pages (pp. 40-44) contain an exposition of "revisionist" positions that the author eventually goes on to adopt as his own, so even those pages are not really a critique.

Hope for some new middle ground breakthrough is extended in the introduction when Brownson writes, "…the temptation is either to revert to simple answers from the past or to avoid the particularity of the biblical texts and simply focus on broad principles such as justice and love. Neither approach will help us move beyond the current impasse in the church." (p. 15) However, that hope is dashed when, in chapter after chapter, it becomes obvious that this book is not a well-balanced approach to the Biblical teaching on this subject, but a distorted exegetical defense of, and relentless polemic for, the blessing of long-term same-sex relationships.

**Third**, this book reminds the reader of the author of Ecclesiastes' remark, "There is no end to the writing of books, and too much study will wear you out." (Ec. 12:12) The arguments put forth are tortuous and repetitive. One appreciates the scholarly care with which Dr. Brownson treats his subject matter, but the steady repetition of the arguments that relentlessly push the reader towards what appears to be an inevitable conclusion reminds one of the Chinese concept that water will eventually wear down rock, and the German concept that if you posit something outrageous enough often enough and loudly enough, people will believe it.

At first, the author seems to be very sure of his positions. He refers to the views of respected Bible scholars like John Stott, John Piper, Karl Barth, Robert Gagnon and others who disagree with his interpretations as being "wrong," "certainly mistaken," or "erroneous." Gagnon, Associate Professor of New Testament at Pittsburg Theological Seminary and author of a definitive work in this field entitled *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, is cited on 27 pages, with every citation being a rejection of his positions. One has to wonder how someone with Gagnon's credentials could be *that* wrong on *everything*.

However, as he moves on into the heart of his exegetical conjectures, Brownson becomes more cautious and employs numerous qualifiers like "maybe," "perhaps," "it seems like," "it would appear," probably," "somewhat," "could be," "might be," "if this analysis is correct," etc.. These could be attributed to careful, humble and conservative scholarship, but they also create the impression of uncertainty, hesitation and caution, leading the reader to believe that the author's inevitable conclusion may not be so inevitable after all.

**Fourth**, in a scholarly work such as this, one is surprised to find that the author employs dubious arguments from silence a number of times. For example, in his argument to downplay procreation as an essential component of marriage, he cites the absence of a specific reference to such in Genesis 2 as evidence that it is not. (p. 116) One would think that the definitive pronouncement in Genesis 1:27 setting forth child-bearing as such a component would lead one to an opposite argument from silence - that it is assumed in Genesis 2. He further argues that since there is no mention of procreation in extended discussions of marriage in the New Testament, it signifies that by that time in the history of the people of God, procreation had moved to the periphery of marriage. (pp. 116-117) If this be the case, one wonders why there are scores of references to children and parents in the New Testament.

He also argues that since there is no mention of same-sex relations between women in the Levitical texts, the prohibitions of same-sex relations between men cannot be construed to refer to the violation of biologically shaped gender roles. However, he goes on to refute his own assertion by admitting that "female-female sexual relations are rarely discussed in the ancient world generally, and there is no evidence linking such sexual behavior directly to idolatrous or cultic practices." (p. 271)

In his conclusion, he argues by extension that since none of the creeds of the church, nor any of the great confessional documents of the Reformation, mention biological gender complementarity, we more up to date moderns can ignore it. (p. 266) If the authors of these documents were alive today, they would be astounded by such a claim. They had no need to mention biological gender complementarity since that concept has been universally held by Judeo-Christians for millennia. He left-handedly acknowledges such by admitting in a footnote that both the Westminster and Second Helvetic Confessions define marriage as "between one man and one woman," but then blithely asserts that these statements exclude any notion of complementarity. (p. 266n2)

In utilizing arguments from silence, Brownson conspicuously and conveniently ignores the *key* argument from silence in this whole discussion - that nowhere in the Bible does even *one* of its authors ever say, or even imply, that *any* sexual union outside of a heterosexual marriage relationship can be condoned for *any* reason.

**Fifth**, at several key points, Brownson insists on an either/or choice where a both/and approach is called for. For example, in making his case against biological gender complementarity defining the essential purpose of marriage and in advocating the unitive meaning of marriage, he downgrades the former and promotes the latter. (p. 126) Why elevate one and demote the other when Scripture considers *both* concepts to be of equal importance, unless one has a certain outcome in mind? In chapter 5, regarding the term "one flesh" in Genesis 2:18-25, the author declares, "It is important not to overgenitalize or oversexualize this passage." (p. 87) True, but it is equally important not to *under*genitalize or *under*sexualize it.

In chapter 9, he states, "… in the New Testament, without exception, the language of 'impurity' and 'uncleanness' is reframed - away from an 'objective' approach that regards impurity simply as a 'dirty' action or bodily state. The call to purity drives deeper in the New Testament, toward a 'subjective' approach that sees purity and impurity as qualities of one's attitudes or dispositions." (pp. 196-197) However, a fair reading of the New Testament reveals that its writers are concerned with *both* objective and subjective purity. In chapter 11, he rightly criticizes the Stoics for holding that sex when practiced within marriage was good o*nly* when it was directed towards the generation of children (p. 239). He correctly argues that sex within marriage can at times be good even if there is no intention of its producing children. However, for the Scripture, it is not a matter of choosing between the two, but embracing both.

**Sixth**, the author bases his case on a re-structuring of the Biblical data regarding homosexual practice according to what he claims is its underlying "moral logic" - a logic that does not interpret a text by what it appears to *say*, but by what it *means*. However, in this case, the outcome is neither moral nor logical. It is not moral in that it moralizes what is clearly described as immoral in the texts cited, and it is not logical in that it ignores one of the most fundamental exegetical and hermeneutical tools available - common sense. Of the 10 passages in both testaments directly dealing with this subject in one way or another, we are asked to believe that *all 10* do not really mean what they appear to say. How does he come to this kind of illogical conclusion?

1. He employs what one can only characterize as far out "Dan Brown-like theories." For example, in constructing the moral logic underlying Paul's definitive statement in Romans 1:18-27, he repeatedly suggests that what Paul had in mind were the atrocious immoral acts of Emperor Caligula, not ordinary homosexual practices. (pp. 156-58, 160, 166, 178, 197-98, 207)

2. He cherry picks his historical data to suit his purpose. For example, he repeatedly asserts that the New Testament writers could not possibly have known anything about our modern concept of long term, committed same-sex relationships because there is no mention of such in secular literature prior to or during their day. This assertion cannot be substantiated. For example, long discourses extolling this view of homosexual relations can already be found in Plato’s *Symposium* (416 B.C.) and in the Pseudo-Lucianic *Affairs of the Heart* (300 A.D.). Seven of Greek poet Theocritus' (c. 200 B.C.) thirty *Idylls* are homoerotic. It is common knowledge that homosexuality and bisexuality were considered “normal” in many if not most parts of the Roman Empire during the first century. Pauline contemporaries such as Virgil, who wrote "The love of Corydon and Alexis" in his *Second* *Eclogue* and Tibillus, who wrote *The Marathus Cycle*, extol what we today call long term, committed same-sex relationships. So did the Roman poet Juvenal and the Spanish poet Martial, writing around the end of the century. And this list could be added to.

3. He attempts to construct a new inclusive vision for the future by leaving the less inclusive vision of the past behind. This conflicts with the Scripture's own view that presents the future as the redemption and restoration of a past gone wrong. For example, Isaiah's peaceable kingdom (Is. 11) and Paul's redeemed creation (Rom. 8) envision a restored creation devoid of strife and evil. Jesus and Paul both refer back to the creation narrative to make their points about male-female relationships (Mk. 10; 1 Cor. 6; Eph. 5). The New Jerusalem is presented as a restored Eden - a garden city that includes the water of life and the tree of life. (Rev. 22:1-2) It is not inclusive, it is exclusive. "(Unrepentant) cowards, traitors, perverts, murderers, the immoral…the place for them is the lake burning with fire and sulfur, which is the second death…Nothing that is impure will enter the city, nor anyone who does shameful things or tells lies." (Rev. 21:8, 22:27 - TEV)

4. He argues that since other prohibitions in the Bible have been abrogated because of cultural shifts (long hair, veils, the role of women, divorce and re-marriage, etc.), prohibitions concerning long term, committed and loving same-sex unions should be viewed in the same light. (pp. 235-236) However, in his book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, Robert Gagnon lists five convincing reasons why this principle does not apply in the case of any kind of homosexual practice. "1) It is proscribed *by both Testaments* that are in complete agreement. 2) It is proscribed *pervasively within each Testament.* There are no dissenting voices anywhere in either Testament. 3) It is *severely* proscribed behavior. The revulsion expressed in both Testaments is as strong as it could be. 4) It is proscribed *absolutely*. The proscription encompasses every, and any, form of homosexual practice. 5) It is proscribed in a way *that makes sense*. The complementarity of male and female is a clear indication in the natural order of God’s will for sexuality." (pp. 449-450)

5. He suggests that the homosexual question is comparable to the slavery question. The church erred on the latter because it did not pay attention to the moral logic underlying the Bible's treatment of that subject and it is erring today because it is not paying attention to the same on this subject. (p. 105) However, this is to draw a bad analogy. The Bible nowhere expresses a vested interest in preserving slavery, but it does express a clear countercultural interest in preserving an exclusive male-female dynamic to human sexual relationships. The biblical stance on slavery was fairly liberating in relation to the cultures out of which these texts emerged. The precise opposite is the case with its stance on same-sex intercourse in that it expresses far greater disapproval of such behavior than do the cultures of its day. One can discern a trajectory within the Bible that critiques slavery, but there is no indication in either testament that same-sex intercourse is anything other than a detested practice to be rejected under all circumstances.

**Seventh**, when Brownson occasionally wanders into the social aspects of homosexual practice, he makes unwarranted assumptions based on faulty sources and flawed data.

1. He claims there is clear scientific evidence that homosexuality is not a choice and that it is not basically determined by functional factors, but by organic hereditary factors. (p. 246) It is not that simple. Stanton L. Jones puts it succinctly when he writes:

We know much more now than we did ten and thirty years ago about the emotional well-being of homosexual persons, the complicated interaction of nature and nurture in the causation of sexual orientation, of the complicated and difficult possibilities of sexual-orientation malleability, of the functional and descriptive characteristics manifest in same-sex partnerships, and of the contours of the psychological identities of homosexual persons. The contributions of science to this area, however, remain sketchy, limited, and puzzling. It is remarkable how little scientific humility is in evidence given the primitive nature of our knowledge. ("SAME-SEX SCIENCE", First Things, February 2012).

2. He cites British neurologist, and practicing homosexual, Simon LeVay, author of *Born Gay* and *Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why: The Science of Sexual Orientation* as a credible source. (p. 246n42) LeVey caused a media sensation when he announced the results of his brain size research in 1991. His findings were trumpeted on the cover of *Time Magazine*, for example, as proof that people are "born gay." The facts are that LeVey was roundly criticized by his peers for sloppy "science." His brain measurements were inaccurate and inappropriate; he measured in volume rather than cell count; his sample size was too small; and he compiled inadequate sexual histories. LeVay himself was dismayed that his work was cited as proof that gays are genetically determined at birth. He wrote, "It’s important to stress what I didn’t find. I did not prove that homosexuality is [genetic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genetics), or find a genetic cause for being gay. I didn’t show that gay men are born that way, the most common mistake people make in interpreting my work. Nor did I locate a gay center in the brain. The INAH3 is less likely to be the sole gay nucleus of the brain than a part of a chain of nuclei engaged in men and women's sexual behavior." ("Sex and the Brain*",* [*Discover Magazine*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discover_Magazine), March 1994).

3. He claims that gay reparative therapy does not work and that it is even harmful. (p. 141-143) A report by respected psychologists Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse refutes this. After an exhaustive seven-year study in which the authors followed 61 homosexual subjects, recording their failures and successes in their attempt to leave homosexuality, they found significant change in 53% of their subjects, with 23% reporting a successful conversion to heterosexual attractions. (Florida Baptist Witness, August 25, 2009). A 1997 NARTH survey of homosexual recovery therapy programs shows that homosexuals have *better* recovery statistics than Alcoholics Anonymous (25-30%). That being the case, one would hope the author would not also advocate shutting down alcoholic and drug treatment programs because their success rates aren't high enough.

4. He blithely dismisses concerns that if his moral logic analysis is correct, then there is no Scriptural basis upon which to deny Christians their "right" to enter into any kind of sexual relationship they wish so long as the parties involved consent and enter into long-term loving commitments. (pp. 199-202) However, this is a legitimate concern. Co-habitation is mushrooming. There are now two TV reality shows that feature loving polygamist households. Jillian Keenan writes, "While the Supreme Court and the rest of us are all focused on the human right of marriage equality, let's not forget that the fight doesn't end with same-sex marriage. We need to legalize polygamy too, which is the constitutional, feminist, and sex-positive choice that would actually help protect, empower, and strengthen women, children, and families." (April 15, 2013, Slate.com). A casual perusal of the Internet reveals that the advocates for consensual incest and pedophilia are not far behind.

5. He contends that celibacy is not a fair option to suggest to people with a homosexual orientation since it is only a gift for some and denies homosexuals the intimacy and sexual fulfillment that is the right of every person. Even though not ideal, it is better for them to have a stable relationship within which they can find this fulfillment than to be driven to engage prostitutes or have one-night stands. (pp. 141-146) One might ask, are not at least *some* homosexuals gifted with celibacy? What about single heterosexual-oriented persons who wish to get married, but who cannot find a mate? How can these Christian singles be asked to accept the teaching of Scripture that enjoins them to abstain from fulfilling their longings for intimacy and sexual fulfillment outside of marriage while same-sex unions are partially justified on the basis of satisfying those same longings? And since when are moral questions decided on a sliding scale - namely, since people can't achieve the ideal, allow them some sexual slack in order to keep them from engaging in even more destructive sexual practices. Scripture clearly teaches that there is to be *no* sexual activity outside of a one man - one woman marital union under *any* circumstances.

6. He asserts that research has shown that long term same-sex unions are just as stable as heterosexual ones and that children growing up in a unisex household are just as well-developed as those in heterosexual households. (pp. 124-125) However, reliable studies suggest otherwise and show that long term, stable relationships among homosexuals are not the norm. *Touchstone Magazine* reports in its January 2005 issue that noted columnist Mike McManus recently wrote that 66% of first marriages in America last 10 years, while 50% last 20 years or more. By contrast, a 2003-2004 Gay/Lesbian Consumer Online Census found that only 15% of homosexual people in “a current relationship” describe it as having lasted 12 years and only 5% as having lasted 20 years, and these relationships were rarely monogamous. Another study found that only 4.5% of homosexual males were faithful to their partner, compared with 85% of married males. As for children, he cites David Myers' citation of unsubstantiated "evidence" in a 2004 report in his book *What God Has Joined Together: The Christian Case for Same-sex Marriage* that "gay or lesbian parents are no more likely to become gay or lesbian themselves than others in the general population." (p. 122) Stanton Jones reports in the February 2012 issue of *First Things* that"the small bit of research that exists suggests that gay parenting approximately triples or even quadruples the rate of same-sex attraction among their children."

Through the publication of this book, Professor Brownson has attempted to move the discussion concerning same-sex unions forward. However, in so doing, he has further muddied the waters and opened the door to even greater confusion for Christians in general and for seminarians in particular. There is a fine line, particularly for seminary professors, between academic freedom and adherence to the stated policy and Biblical interpretation of the Reformed Church, between the prophetic and the pseudo-prophetic. In the opinion of this reviewer, the thesis of this book crosses those lines.

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