

The Kirby
Laing
Institute
For Christian
Ethics

JAMES V. BROWNSON,
BIBLE, GENDER, SEXUALITY:
A CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Andrew Goddard

Associate Director, Kirby Laing Institute
for Christian Ethics

©Andrew Goddard, 2014

Preface

James Brownson's *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church Debate* is a significant contribution to the discussions about Bible and sexuality. This working paper seeks to offer an account of his central arguments and critical engagement them in the hope that this will help both church and academy wrestle better with the important issues his work raises.

I am grateful to the many people who have supported me in various ways in writing this during 2014. In particular I want to thank Dr. David Wenham and Professor John Nolland for reading an earlier version and sharing their expertise as New Testament scholars and Nicholas Townsend for his feedback on my review of the book which draws on this fuller discussion and will appear in *Studies in Christian Ethics*. I am particularly grateful to KLICE and those who have financially supported my role there and especially to Jonathan Chaplin who as Director has not just provided feedback and attention to detail in reading drafts but encouragement and support as I worked on this when ill health has prevented me playing as full a role at KLICE as I would have wished. I am delighted it is being made available through the KLICE website. The contents page is in the form of links, allowing readers quickly to find a relevant section, and an appendix offers a short summary of the central arguments of each section.

As I finalised the text Robert Song's important book *Covenant and Calling* appeared. I have not been able to draw on it in this response but hope, through KLICE, to produce a similar engagement with his theological case for same-sex relationships in the near future.

This document is available from www.klice.co.uk. If posted elsewhere online please include an acknowledgment of KLICE as publisher and a link to this original source.

I am happy to receive comments at KLICEAD@tyndale.cam.ac.uk

Andrew Goddard, Associate Director, KLICE, November 2014.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Summary of <i>Bible, Gender, Sexuality</i>	1
1. Brownson’s Method	3
The Meaning of Scripture & Its Moral Logic – Canon and Culture	3
The Handling of Romans 1 in Part Three	4
Interpreting Experience	5
2. Brownson on Sexual Orientation.....	7
The Bible and Sexual Orientation in the Ancient World	7
Understanding Sexual Orientation	8
What is sexual orientation?	8
Does sexual orientation change?	8
Sexual orientation and culture.....	9
Narrow and broad senses of sexual orientation.....	9
The distinction of orientation and practice	9
Conclusion.....	10
3. Gender Complementarity – How Wrong are Traditionalists?	13
Defining Gender Complementarity (GC).....	13
Brownson on GC	14
Anatomical and Procreative Complementarity	15
Genesis 2 & GC.....	15
Is the original adam sexually undifferentiated?	15
Similarity and/or difference	16
The image of God.....	16
“One flesh” as kinship	17
Conclusion.....	17

4. Brownson Among the Revisionists – What Does Brownson Add?	19
Locating Brownson Among Other Revisionists	19
Revisionists and Biblical Authority	20
5. Biblical Patriarchy, Equality and Same-Sex Unions	23
Patriarchy and Creation	23
Eschatology and Marriage	24
Patriarchy and Same-sex Relationships	24
Two Streams vs One Stream: Canonical Readings on Patriarchy and Homosexuality	25
Conclusion – Patriarchy, Traditionalists and Accommodation	25
6. Is “One Flesh” Rather Than Marriage the Bible’s Central Category for Sexual Ethics?	27
“One Flesh”, Marriage, Kinship and Sexual Unions	27
“One Flesh” and Procreation	28
Canonically Normal and Universal but not Normative?	29
Conclusion – A Kinship Same-Sex Union?	29
7. Can We Separate Marriage and Procreation?	31
Procreation, Sex and Marriage – Catholic and Protestant Understandings	31
Procreation and the Bible	32
Procreation and Homosexuality	33
Contraception, Marriage and Homosexuality.....	33
Non-procreative Marriages and Same-Sex Unions.....	34
Procreation as Biologically Natural?	35
Conclusion – Marriage in Society: Much More Than Procreation.....	35
8. Celibacy, Chastity & Compulsion: Singleness and Sexual Orientation.....	37
Celibacy, Chastity and Singleness	37
Compulsion, Choice and the Definition of Marriage	38
What is Brownson’s Alternative?: Marriage or Marriage-like Union? Accommodation or Affirmation?	39

Table of Contents

9. Paul on Desire and Homosexuality	41
Paul and Desire	41
Paul’s Contextual Allusions?	42
What is Meant by “Excessive” Desire?	42
Paul’s Argument about Desire and Homosexuality Today	43
10. What is the Place for the Language of Purity and Impurity in a Biblical Sexual Ethic ?	45
Is there Movement from Old to New Testament?: Paul’s use of akatharsia	45
Movement One: from the external to the internal	45
Movement Two: from separateness to engagement	46
Movement Three: From creation to new creation	46
Impurity in Romans 1.24	47
Internal Disposition and External Action	47
11. Sex and Shame	49
Honour and Shame in Paul	49
Does Paul Refer to Lesbianism?	49
Paul’s Cultural Context and his own Moral Logic	50
Gospel and Culture	50
The Importance of Culture and Shame	51
12. Isn’t Homosexuality “Unnatural”?	53
The “Natural” in Judaism	53
Brownson’s Proposed Three Dimensions of “Nature” in Paul	53
Nature as individual nature or disposition	54
Nature as social norms	54
Nature as anatomy and biology	55
Appealing to ‘Nature’ Today	55
“Nature” Today and Procreation	56
Does “Unnatural” Mean “Wrong”?	57

Conclusion.....	57
13. Reading the “Classic Texts” Other Than Romans 1.....	59
Brownson’s Method.....	59
Genesis 19 and Judges 19	60
Leviticus 18 and 20.....	60
New Testament Vice Lists -- 1 Corinthians 6 & 1 Timothy 1.....	61
Conclusion.....	62
14. The Discussion After Brownson	63
Bible	63
Gender	64
Sexuality.....	65
Reframing the Church’s Debate.....	66
Appendix: A Critical Engagement with Brownson – Summary of Critiques	67
1. Brownson’s Method.....	67
2. Brownson on Sexual Orientation	67
3. Gender Complementarity – How Wrong are Traditionalists?	67
4. Brownson among the Revisionists – What does Brownson Add?	68
5. Biblical Patriarchy, Equality and Same-Sex Unions.....	68
6. Is “One Flesh” Union Rather Than Marriage the Bible’s Central Category for Sexual Ethics?	68
7. Can we Separate Marriage and Procreation?.....	69
8. Celibacy, Chastity & Compulsion: Singleness and Sexual Orientation.....	69
9. Paul on Desire and Homosexuality	70
10. What is the Place for the Language of Purity and Impurity in a Biblical Sexual Ethic?.....	70
11. Sex and Shame	70
12. Isn’t Homosexuality “Unnatural”?	70
13. Reading the “Classic Texts” Other Than Romans 1.....	71
14. The Discussion After Brownson	71

Summary of *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*

In *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*,¹ James V. Brownson, New Testament Professor at Western Theological Seminary, Michigan and a minister of the Reformed Church in America has made a powerful and significant contribution to an important subject not short on academic or popular writing. The book is immensely readable. Its arguments are clearly articulated and each chapter concludes with helpful summaries. Part of its significance is that its focus is articulating a thorough, biblical argument for rethinking the church's traditional rejection of same-sex unions in the context of a biblical sexual ethic. It does so aware that "at bottom – at least for most churches of the Reformation – the question has to do with Scripture and ethics. What is the moral vision regarding gender and sexuality that Scripture commends? How flexible and adaptable is that vision in different cultures and contexts?" (3).

Part One takes on the traditionalist case on its own grounds by arguing (chapter 2) that the Bible does not teach "gender complementarity" (GC). GC is, he argues, a modern construct and not a biblical rationale for the negative texts about homosexuality. Acceptance of this conclusion then removes the fundamental theological and cross-cultural justification for opposing same-sex unions as unbiblical. Although the book is primarily aimed at offering this traditionalist constituency an alternative biblical vision, it also seeks (chapter 3) to persuade revisionists that their case has much more biblical support than they usually recognise, going well beyond an appeal to general biblical principles such as love or justice.²

The main body of the book explores eight key themes in order to propose a biblical sexual ethic which can be affirmative of permanent, faithful, same-sex marriages or marriage-like unions. Part Two is about "recovering a broad, cross-cultural vision for the center of Christian sexual ethics" (55) from Scripture. At the heart of this is the category of a "one flesh" kinship relationship (chapter 5). This includes but is not limited to heterosexual marriage and shapes the form and disciplines for a biblically sanctioned sexual relationship. There are also arguments that a canonical reading will treat patriarchy in Scripture as a cultural phenomenon not binding today (chapter 4), that procreation is not biblically required for marriage (chapter 6), and that demanding celibacy (as it is claimed the traditionalist view does for gay people) is contrary to the teaching of Jesus and Paul (chapter 7). Brownson claims that each part of this vision removes some of the alleged biblical roadblocks often placed in the path of supporting same-sex unions while also giving a biblical sexual ethic that can guide everyone, whatever their sexuality.

This biblical vision is given further depth by again challenging traditionalists on their apparently strongest ground – Romans 1.24-27. The four chapters of Part Three examine the four key forms of "boundary language" Paul uses in order to discern *why* he writes as he does. He opens with the

¹ James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013). ISBN 978-0-8028-6863-3. Subsequent page references in the text are to this book unless otherwise indicated.

² All labels in this discussion have problems but I have followed Brownson in adopting the common distinction between "traditionalists" who hold the traditional Christian view that sex should be within the marriage of a man and a woman and "revisionists" who wish to revise that understanding to support same-sex sexual relationship. Apologies to those who dislike these labels.

language of lust and desire (chapter 8), a dominant theme in Brownson's interpretation which he also sees as partially shaping the other key moral criteria at work – purity and impurity (chapter 9), honour and shame (chapter 10) and nature, which he argues (chapter 11) refers to biology but also to a person's individual nature and social conventions. In each case he again concludes that what he calls the moral logic of Paul's critique is one which should, in some way, shape our sexual ethic but that it does not entail a rejection of all forms of homosexual behaviour and sexual relationship, particularly given our understanding of sexual orientation.

Part Four's final chapter brings together his conclusions. It provides a succinct summary of his case before examining the other six main biblical texts referring negatively to homosexual behaviour in order to show that they too are best understood within his vision and are not normative, permanent, universal prohibitions.

1. Brownson's Method

From the opening chapter some of the great strengths of the author and the book are obvious. This is the work of someone committed to Scripture who is working with an understanding of hermeneutics which, like that among the majority of evangelical scholars, recognises the complexity of the interpretive task and is open to Scripture challenging traditional views. He writes also out of personal experience. This has not led him to abandon his views or the Bible but to go back to Scripture and to reassess and revise his thinking through re-reading the Scriptures as a whole. Although some may have problems with such a hermeneutical method, its broad outline should not be a problem for evangelical Christians and others committed to the supreme authority of Scripture, although the details and specific outworkings of the method may be less secure.

The Meaning of Scripture & Its Moral Logic – Canon and Culture

Brownson argues that the dispute is more about what Scripture *means* than what it *says*. This is a key element in his method but one which is only briefly explored. He appears to see two key elements as important in discerning Scripture's *meaning* – canon and culture. The former is illustrated with reference to the kosher laws in the light of the New Testament, the latter through the meaning of a "holy kiss".

A *canonical* reading requires locating any passage "within the larger themes and movements of Scripture as a whole" (9). Here Brownson's emphasis is on a central category in his method of determining meaning, one which shapes the book's argument: the need to discover *why* certain moral teaching is given in Scripture, "the deeper and more comprehensive *moral logic* that undergirds the specific commands, prohibitions, and examples of the biblical text" (9, italics added).

This moral logic is crucial in relation to the *cultural* challenge. He believes it is the moral logic which should guide us "when we are in a new cross-cultural context and are forced to come up with answers to questions that no one has ever asked before" (9). Here he appeals to Acts 15 (the Council of Jerusalem's decisions relaxing key obligations of Jewish law). It is, however, debatable how far that passage is a case simply of applying the Bible's moral logic in a new cultural context. It would appear to be more a case of discerning, in the light of Scripture, the practical implications of the unique new work and full revelation of God in Christ and the Spirit that occurred with the breaking in of the new age and the inclusion of Gentiles.³

Brownson is certainly correct on the need to ask about moral logic and to affirm that the church here needs imagination led by the Spirit. However, he gives only a limited theoretical account of either the relationship between the deeper moral logic and specific texts or of how such moral logic is established. In particular, there is no attention to deeper theological categories and how they help relate Scripture and its ethical teaching to contemporary challenges. Specific problems will be noted below in relation to many of the "moral logic" claims he makes but three general points need to be made at the outset.

³ I have explored these issues in some detail in Andrew Goddard, *God, Gentiles and Gay Christians: Acts 15 and Change in the Church* (Grove Books E121, 2001).

First, although in his opening discussion of method he focusses on the importance of a canonical reading, he acknowledges in his conclusion that he is “uncovering the deeper values and commitments” through “a broader exegetical exploration of the whole witness of Scripture, *along with other ancient texts*” (259, italics added). The question of the role and authority of extra-biblical material in discerning the moral logic of Scripture is never unpacked but in a number of cases proves highly significant.

Second, in describing the task of discerning moral logic and relating it to culture he appeals to the examples of Galileo, slavery and the ministry of women. To these he now adds the witness of gay and lesbian Christians. He writes of the need “to read and put together a range of biblical texts in a *different way*, discerning a *different* and deeper set of interconnections, analogies and resonances in the Bible as a whole” (10, italics added). The difficulty here is that it presumes the issue under discussion is not only a new one but that it requires a different reading of Scripture. He seems to accept uncritically that the change in “the meaning and social function of sexuality” between biblical times and today means we have “to discern in a fresh way the underlying forms of moral logic that shape and focus biblical teaching on sexuality” (50).

Third, in describing how to discern and apply Scripture’s underlying moral logic he stresses three aspects of cross-cultural reading of the Bible but fails to notice that these do not seem to apply to the biblical witness in this area of same-sex relationships. First, while biblical diversity indeed highlights “factors of cultural variability that need to be considered – a cultural variability sanctioned by Scripture itself” (51) there is no such diversity in the biblical judgment on same-sex relationships across the Bible’s diverse cultures. Second, on this subject there is no “progressive and unfolding narrative” or “movement of scriptural revelation” (51); the New Testament apostles are as strongly negative as the Old Testament Torah. Third, there are no “exceptions that call into question whether the normal (or typical) pattern in these passages should also be construed as normative (or prescriptive)” (51).

As the more detailed engagement with his argument will show, there is a strong sense that Brownson has a commitment “to establish a wider, transcultural vision for human sexuality into which committed gay and lesbian unions might fit” (52) and to create a “wider biblical framework” which proposes “the underlying forms of moral logic” (52) that will achieve this revisionist end. The difficulty is that in order to do this he has to overturn the uniform witness of the text on the basis of a reconstructed underlying moral logic which is strongly shaped by a reading of the surrounding culture (biblical and contemporary). This reconstruction has an inordinate influence on his reading of the biblical text and a decisive role in his proposed ethic.

The Handling of Romans 1 in Part Three

In the four chapters of Part Three Brownson looks at what he calls four elements of the negative “boundary language” in Romans 1.24-27. He claims that each of these “illuminates the forms of moral logic that shape and undergird Paul’s discussion” and so “help us discern the underlying forms of moral logic that shape the Bible’s treatment of same-sex eroticism in general” (150).

Perhaps the most serious question to be raised about Brownson’s approach to the text is the way in which his method means that at no point does he offer an exegesis of this key passage as a whole, in

Brownson's Method

contrast to other major studies with which he regularly disagrees.⁴ Instead, with little or no rationale or justification other than an appeal to them as providing the moral logic, Brownson chooses four terms or themes in the text and then focusses on Romans 1.24 and “desire” in particular. Most importantly, he largely or totally ignores other features of the text, even if they are more frequent or seen as significant by commentators. This applies particularly to the strong “exchange” theme – not even listed in the index – and the echoes of Genesis and other biblical texts (noted in most commentaries and particularly explored in Brooten⁵). Furthermore, each of his four subjects are treated relatively independently and in an order which begins with the most subjective (“desire”) – that is then argued to be also implicit in the other three – and leaves what he himself describes as the most objective (“nature”) until last.

Interpreting Experience

The book on the whole offers surprisingly little in terms of critical evaluation of the diverse testimonies of gay and lesbian Christians. Whereas his outline of different hermeneutical and theological positions is reasonably fair, his opening description of the options for such Christians is rather crude. By referring to people who “seek, not to suppress their sexual orientation, but rather to sanctify it, thus drawing intimate gay and lesbian relationships into the sanctifying work of the Spirit” (11) he presents a stark and unjustifiably polarised choice between suppression and sanctification in a sexual relationship as the two options.

One particular testimony has clearly greatly influenced Brownson and the book. He helpfully describes how, following the coming-out of his eighteen year old son, his “moderate, traditionalist position” (11) was challenged for its abstraction and “that dramatic shock to my life forced me to reimagine how Scripture speaks about homosexuality” (12-13).⁶ At a number of places in the book there is a sense that this experience has played a significant role in his rethinking. This is particularly so in chapter eight where he writes of “the emotional burden imposed explicitly or implicitly by traditionalists on contemporary gays and lesbians” (177), a recognition of which is often proving a significant factor in Christian reassessments of traditional teaching. Unfortunately, he seems to pay no attention to the testimonies of those with same-sex attraction who have embraced the traditional understanding and are wrestling, and helping the wider church to wrestle, with the challenges he raises. These may be writers who remain single (such as Wesley Hill or Eve Tushnet or Martin Hallett⁷) or those who have married (such as Mario Bergner, Peter Ould, Melinda Selmys or

⁴ See, for example, Bernadette Brooten's commentary in *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 215-66, Gagnon's translation notes in Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Text and Hermeneutics* (Abingdon Press, 2001), pp. 230-40 followed by detailed study, and William Loader's detailed exegesis in *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 293-326.

⁵Brooten, *Love Between Women*, pp. 267-302.

⁶ His earlier writing, “Gay Unions: Consistent Witness or Pastoral Accommodation? An Evangelical Pastoral Dilemma and the Unity of the Church”, *Reformed Review*, 59.1 (Autumn 2005), pp. 3-18, is online at <http://www.westernsem.edu/files/1612/8171/5426/Autumn05V59N1.pdf>

⁷ Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Zondervan, 2010); Eve Tushnet, *Gay and Catholic: Accepting My Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith* (Ave Maria Press, 2014); Martin Hallett, *Still Learning to Love: A Personal Journey to Wholeness in Christ* (HOW, 2004 revised edition).

Rosaria Butterfield⁸). Although a site like Living Out⁹ only appeared after his 2013 book, and the Spiritual Friendship¹⁰ site which has been exploring many of the issues only began in 2012, there are many other sources for such testimonies. Books by several of these writers have been around for a number of years but are not engaged with at all by Brownson. Given that we are all shaped in our reading and re-reading of Scripture by our experiences, it is a major weakness that Brownson appears to privilege one particular form of experience. It is also regrettable that there is a much less nuanced and critical hermeneutic when it comes to interpretation of our culture and personal experience than in his approach to Scripture. This is particularly obvious in his accounts of sexual orientation discussed below.

⁸ Mario Bergner, *Setting Love in Order* (Baker, 1995); Melinda Selmys, *Sexual Authenticity: An Intimate Reflection on Homosexuality and Catholicism* (Our Sunday Visitor 2009) and *Sexual Authenticity: More Reflections* (Vulgata, 2013); Rosario Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of An Unlikely Convert* (Crown & Covenant, 2012). Peter Ould's writings are archived online at <http://www.peter-ould.net/>.

⁹ <http://www.livingout.org/>

¹⁰ <http://spiritualfriendship.org/>

2. Brownson on Sexual Orientation

The book, focussed on biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, is structured around themes Brownson finds in Scripture. As a result, a key aspect of his argument is not as fully explored as it deserves. This is his understanding of sexual orientation in both the ancient and contemporary world. Along with the experience of committed same-sex couples, this perhaps the most important extra-biblical element in his argument. It is a crucial element in his claim that “we are in a new cross-cultural context and are forced to come up with answers to questions that no one has ever asked before” (9). He argues, for example, that modern awareness of persistent sexual orientation raises the question, “are all gay and lesbian Christians whose sexual orientation is not subject to change necessarily called to a celibate life?” (146). His view is that “the traditionalist position requires us to assume that *all* gay and lesbian Christians who cannot change their sexual orientation are called and gifted for a life of celibacy” (144) and that, as this assumption is in tension with his interpretation of Paul’s views, the rejection of same-sex marriage needs to be reconsidered.

A central plank in his overall argument against a traditionalist sexual ethic on homosexuality is that such an ethic depends on a view of gender complementarity which lacks biblical support. Sexual orientation clearly suffers from a much greater lack of biblical support as a competing anthropological category in a Christian sexual ethic. Nevertheless, despite the important role it plays in his own case, he fails to critique this category. Before turning to his handling of the biblical material on sexual ethics it is therefore important to consider his discussion of sexual orientation in Scripture, in the ancient world and today.

The Bible and Sexual Orientation in the Ancient World

Brownson claims, in relation to Romans 1, that “it is clear that Paul is not operating with the modern sense of sexual orientation here” (229). This is indisputable – the modern sense developed long after the ancient world passed into history. It is, however, far from clear that there was no sense of the phenomenon we refer to as “sexual orientation”. He grants that “an awareness of a ‘natural’ orientation towards same-sex relations is attested in some Greek and Roman sources” (229) but underplays how widespread this was. Brooten, for example, is clear that “contrary to the view that the idea of sexual orientation did not develop until the nineteenth century, the astrological sources demonstrate the existence in the Roman world of the concept of a lifelong erotic orientation”.¹¹ In relation to Scripture, Brownson relies on an argument from silence. He takes the lack of discussion by Jews and Christians as a sign that they “did not recognise even the possibility that persons might be naturally inclined....toward desiring others of the same sex” (229). This appears too strong a conclusion, particularly given the fact that, in other situations, Brownson is happy to import into Paul’s thinking what is lacking in Paul but found in the surrounding culture (for example males as superior and active in sex compared to females); but here he rejects this as a possibility. A much more honest assessment would be that we simply do not know what understanding Paul or other biblical writers had of what we understand as sexual orientation, but that, given discussions by other

¹¹ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 140 concluding Chpt 4 which explores “predetermined erotic orientations” in classical horoscopes and other writing on astrology because, in the chapter’s opening sentence, “Astrological literature contains more references to female homo-eroticism than any other type of literature in the Roman world” (p. 115).

ancient writers, we cannot rule out that they would recognise that some people were predominantly or exclusively attracted to people of the same sex without thereby concluding that this expressed God's intention in creation.¹²

Understanding Sexual Orientation

What is sexual orientation?

The lack of explicit biblical teaching about sexual orientation clearly does not mean we need not consider this phenomenon. It means serious work needs to be done exploring the evidence in this area. Central to Brownson's argument is that "most Christians on both sides of the homosexuality debate now recognize and acknowledge that sexual orientation is very resistant to efforts to change" (141). However, he never really explains what he means by sexual orientation. Most definitions, following Kinsey, recognise a spectrum ranging from wholly heterosexual (0) to wholly homosexual (6). On this spectrum, few (particularly among women) of those who experience same-sex attraction are exclusively homosexual across their lifespan.¹³ Others have developed even more complex ways of understanding the diversity of sexual attraction.¹⁴ Brownson, however, does not examine this complexity. He thus gives the impression that "homosexual orientation" is a single, simple phenomenon which contrasts with "heterosexual orientation" and would, on traditional teaching, require celibacy. This is important because anyone on the scale from Kinsey 6 (exclusively homosexual) to Kinsey 3 (equally heterosexual and homosexual) could be viewed as having a "homosexual orientation". However, the nearer they are to 3 than to 6 then the more potential they have of faithful fulfilment in heterosexual marriage even if the temptations to sexual unfaithfulness are more likely to be with the same sex than the opposite sex. In constructing a Christian ethic for contemporary society, the evidence in relation to sexual orientation points to the need to address "bisexuality" rather than simply focus, as Brownson does, on homosexuality.

Does sexual orientation change?

As signalled by the claim just quoted that "sexual orientation is very resistant to efforts to change" (141), another crucial area Brownson focusses on is the question of sexual orientation change efforts. Here again his seemingly crude binary approach and the reference to being expected "fully to change their sexual orientation" (142) clearly reduce the chances of "change". A recognition of a spectrum on which there can be for many people some degree of movement would reconfigure the discussion. His account here is surprisingly lacking any engagement with some of the most

¹² Loader, discussing Romans 1, sums up his understanding (supporting elements of Brownson's account but critiquing others) thus: "It is very possible that Paul knew of views which claimed some people had what we would call a homosexual orientation, though we cannot know for sure and certainly should not read our modern theories back into his world. If he did, it is more likely that, like other Jews, he would have rejected them out of hand....He would have stood more strongly under the influence of Jewish creation tradition which declares human beings male and female, to which he may well even be alluding in 1.26-27, and so seen same-sex sexual acts by people (all of whom he deemed heterosexual in our terms) as flouting divine order" (Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, pp. 323-4).

¹³ The most important and accessible recent presentation of evidence in this area is Lisa Diamond's 2013 lecture, "Just How Different Are Female and Male Sexual Orientation?" online at <http://www.cornell.edu/video/lisa-diamond-on-sexual-fluidity-of-men-and-women>

¹⁴ See, for example, Edward Stein, *The Mismeasure of Desire: The Science, Theory and Ethics of Sexual Orientation* (OUP, 1999), especially here chapter 2.

Brownson on Sexual Orientation

significant literature, most notably the work of Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse in their 2007 book and subsequent papers (he only cites their earlier more general study).¹⁵ In some ways this research would support his claims that change is not easy or as common as sometimes claimed but it would also require him to be much more careful and nuanced in his own account. Lest these Christian authors be thought to have an agenda, the work of others, notably Lisa Diamond (a lesbian and strong supporter of LGBT rights) first in relation to female sexuality¹⁶ and more recently regarding male sexuality¹⁷ adds further weight to the concern that Brownson's account here is much too simplistic.

Sexual orientation and culture

Brownson is very helpful in his insistence that we must locate the biblical texts in their particular culture in order to understand them correctly. In contrast, he offers little or no cultural understanding of the shaping and formation of *our* experience and understanding of sexual attraction. The social constructionist tradition, which argues that our experience, categories and identities in relation to sexual attraction are strongly shaped by our culture, is almost wholly ignored in his account. He seems to accept an essentialist understanding according to which different sexual orientations – homosexual and heterosexual – represent different natural kinds within humanity constant throughout history and across cultures.

Narrow and broad senses of sexual orientation

A further area requiring more explanation from Brownson is whether the language of orientation is broad or narrow in scope. The differences that follow from this decision are important. Like most others, he generally uses the language of orientation in the broadest sense to refer to “emotional makeup” (173), writing of “the whole continuum of desires that are part of sexual orientation” and “the entire fabric and character of relationships” (176). This is a much more complex reality than the narrower sense (which at times he seems to slip into) of sexual attraction as an inclination to or desire to engage in certain kinds of sexual behaviour (behaviour which may be considered a sin). In the former, broader sense every pattern of sexual orientation will include both created goods and elements which manifest our fallen natures and every person has the challenge of distinguishing between these two elements. This distinction between the broad and narrow sense is important for a further area Brownson discusses.

The distinction of orientation and practice

Brownson claims that New Testament texts “call into question the adequacy of the orientation/behaviour distinction in addressing gay and lesbian Christians” (175). Here

¹⁵ Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse, *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (IVP, 2007). A 2009 paper at the American Psychological Association is published online [here](http://wp.patheos.com.s3.amazonaws.com/blogs/warrenthrockmorton/files/2009/08/Jones-and-Yarhouse-Final.pdf) (<http://wp.patheos.com.s3.amazonaws.com/blogs/warrenthrockmorton/files/2009/08/Jones-and-Yarhouse-Final.pdf>) and an article in 2011 in the *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 37.5, October 2011, pp. 404-427, at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0092623X.2011.607052>.

¹⁶ Lisa Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ [Video](#) of October 2013 Cornell University presentation, “Just How Different Are Female and Male Sexual Orientation?” online at <http://www.cornell.edu/video/lisa-diamond-on-sexual-fluidity-of-men-and-women>. Various other video presentations and interviews about her work are available on YouTube.

he raises important theoretical and practical questions for traditionalists who appeal to an orientation/behaviour distinction in their moral or pastoral theology. These are questions which are often ignored. He is broadly correct that, biblically, “if the acts are sinful, all inclinations to such acts are to be understood as manifestations of a sinful nature, and are to be resisted as such” (175) although some would prefer to speak of “manifestations of the brokenness of human nature occasioned by the Fall”. However, he does not recognise that there are alternatives to a stark choice between *either* “orientation is sinful and must change” *or* “behaviour is the only concern, orientation is irrelevant”. It is quite possible to argue that orientation in the narrow sense of inclination to homosexual acts is a manifestation of our broken or sinful human nature and so to be resisted, without arguing that orientation in the broader sense of “emotional makeup” and “the entire fabric and character of relationships” (176) falls into this category and so also requires to be resisted or changed. The sort of questions Brownson raises (“Where does the sinful impulse begin? Is it when gay or lesbian persons experience a desire for friendship with others of the same sex, admiration for another’s physical beauty, the tendency to frequently think about another person, the persistent desire to be with another person, the desire to be touched by another....?” (175)) are questions which (as he acknowledges) every person has to face in analogous forms. Jesus’ references to committing adultery in the heart make clear that all of us need to consider more than our actions, including our imagination.

In summary, Brownson falls into the tendency of categorising the unique complexity of each person’s sexuality in the broadest sense into one of two types: either a homosexual orientation (perhaps then viewed as somehow more inherently a “manifestation of a distorted and sinful nature” (176)) or a heterosexual orientation (perhaps then viewed as somehow less damaged and distorted by sin). That categorisation is part of the problem. To be fair, it is one which traditionalists have sometimes lapsed into without realising the complications he points out. However, although the orientation/behaviour distinction can be described in flawed and unhelpful ways, inasmuch as it relates to the distinction between desires and actions it is one which must have a place in any account of Christian moral theology and discipleship.

Conclusion

In interpreting and applying the biblical material, Brownson seems to assume that we have a much more complete and fuller understanding of sexual orientation than the ancient writers, that this is one of the issues that places us in a radically new context and that it requires us “to come up with answers to questions that no one has ever asked before” (9).

He is right that Christians need to engage with more than the Bible and draw on understanding and insights from other areas in developing a contemporary sexual ethic, but his own work in this area is severely limited. The reality is, in the words of Edward Stein after nearly 350 pages of careful study, that we have a long way to go “in terms of justifying our metaphysical and scientific views about sexual orientation and sexual desires” and that – referring to the 4th century BC work of Plato which Brownson himself mentions in passing (229) – “our confidence that we have advanced a great deal

Brownson on Sexual Orientation

in our understanding of sexual orientation compared to Aristophanes and his fellow celebrants in *The Symposium* is premature".¹⁸

¹⁸ Edward Stein, *The Mismeasure of Desire: The Science, Theory and Ethics of Sexual Orientation* (OUP, 1999), p. 348.

3. Gender Complementarity – How Wrong are Traditionalists?

The heart of Brownson's critique of the traditionalist argument, most fully articulated in chapter 2 but recurring throughout the book, focuses on gender complementarity (GC). He rightly identifies the moral logic in the traditionalist rejection of same-sex relationships as a belief that such relationships violate GC. He claims, however, that there is no agreement on what this means, that it encompasses "a variety of forms of moral logic" (37) and that the most common form – what he calls "anatomical" or "biological" or "procreative" complementarity – is not a biblical form of moral logic. GC therefore cannot be claimed as the biblical basis for rejecting same-sex relationships. He is adamant that "the Bible neither assumes nor teaches a normative understanding of gender complementarity" (265).

The great value of this critique is that it challenges traditionalists to do more biblical and theological work in explaining, defending and perhaps refining what they mean by GC, but there are also a number of major weaknesses in Brownson's approach.

Defining Gender Complementarity (GC)

Probably the best general definition Brownson offers of GC in traditionalist thought is that

male and female are both similar and different, and this combination of similarity and difference – or gender complementarity – is foundational to human identity, and to the institution of marriage (17).

The language of GC may here not be the best vocabulary. What is at the heart of this belief is that there is theological and moral significance in the sexual differentiation of humankind in God's creation purposes. There is a created unity-in-difference which means that within the sameness of a shared humanity there are two different ways of being human – male and female – which are important for understanding what it means to be a human creature and what the flourishing of humanity consists in.

Brownson is correct that within this position there are a range of views – including patriarchal and hierarchical understandings – which disagree with each other. Those differences, however, do not in themselves undermine the claim that this bi-polarity or sexual differentiation within humanity is a significant created good which must have a place in any theological anthropology and which has moral consequences, particularly in relation to sexual ethics. Brownson, revealingly, shows no knowledge of the major recent theological study of sexual differentiation, Christopher Roberts' important book *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage*.¹⁹ Nor does he acknowledge that in most areas of Christian theology there is a doctrine (such as the Trinity or the divinity of Christ or atonement) which is widely held to be important for Christian faith even though it may be defined in ways not directly and explicitly taught in Scripture and even though there are a range of views and arguments about how best to articulate it.

¹⁹ Christopher Roberts, *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* (T & T Clark, 2007).

Brownson on GC

Brownson seems to argue that because there are different understandings of GC the concept should be sidelined or discarded as it is unable to provide any moral logic in a biblical sexual ethic. It certainly plays no obvious role in his own argument. However, several of his key categories turn out to rely on some account of GC as defined above. This is most obvious regarding patriarchy and procreation, both of which only make sense because of some form of gender complementarity. It also applies, derivatively, to some of his discussion of honour, purity and nature. In other words, if these are (as he accepts) biblical themes, then embedded within them is some concept of a combination of similarity and difference within humanity as male and female. Alternatively, to change the imagery, the categories he accepts as biblical are themselves dependent upon some category of GC and are perhaps some of the “variety of forms of moral logic” (37) encompassed within it.

In his concluding chapter, Brownson argues strongly for the importance of complementarity in committed relationships, insisting that “one need not relinquish the deep value of complementarity” (265). He understands this in terms of an otherness in which there is the “mystery...characterized by a deep and profound interaction of similarity and difference” (263), “a mingling of similarity and difference” (265). His concern is that “one need not relinquish complementarity; one must only loosen its essential link to a hard-wired understanding of gender” (265).

Given this importance of complementarity, and granted that it can take various forms, serious fundamental theological questions are raised:

- Is not the fact that humanity is made male and female arguably the deepest and most profound “interaction of similarity and difference” among humans, especially in the light of Genesis and Christ’s reaffirmation of being made male and female?
- Even if this is not explicitly taught in a detailed and normative manner in specific biblical texts do we not need to give a Christian account of it?
- Is not the link between complementarity and gender a reality of being human which – even if they rarely or never mention it – the ancient writers of Scripture might have also been aware of from their experience and assumed in what they wrote (just as Brownson argues they assumed various cultural conventions)?

These are questions Brownson never faces in his determination to undermine any appeal to gender complementarity as part of the moral logic underlying the Bible’s teaching on sexual behaviour. When he has, at times, implicitly to admit that some form of GC is present in the evidence of patriarchy or the importance of procreation he seeks to reduce the former to the mark of a different culture and relativise the latter by reference to intimacy, relationship and contraception. As a result, he simply avoids the crucial underlying question of the significance of humanity’s creation as male and female.

In short, readers are given no sense of his understanding of being made male and female. It would appear that he believes he has, in his rejection of GC, deconstructed the male-female distinction and so needs to say nothing about this or its significance for a Christian anthropology.

Gender Complementarity – How Wrong are Traditionalists?

Anatomical and Procreative Complementarity

Focussing on anatomical and procreative complementarity, Brownson claims (contestably) this is the most common traditionalist understanding of GC and warns against “genitalizing” sex (“the biological differences between the sexes seems a rather slender basis on which to build an entire marriage ethic” (22)). Nobody, however, reduces a marriage ethic to this aspect. It is surely at least as strange to build an entire marriage ethic with no reference at all to biological differences between the sexes, particularly if one grants procreation as part of Scripture’s moral logic and given Jesus’ conjoining of Genesis 1.27 with Genesis 2.24 in Matthew 19.

More fundamentally, Brownson asks whether this is “really the basic form of moral logic that the *biblical writers* have in mind or assume when they condemn same-sex erotic relations” (23). Here he claims that if it was the moral logic then “we should certainly expect to find biblical passages that treat this subject of the biological complementarity of the genders directly and explicitly” (23). But given the general Jewish reticence about speaking of genitals directly, and given the fact that humans almost universally appear as male or female (and are identified as such by their anatomy and only reproduce through the union of male and female), this is a problematic assumption. Could this not simply be so obvious that it did not need to be stated and defended? Such direct and explicit appearance on the surface of the text is also a criterion he does not consistently apply to his own subsequent claims for some alternative forms of moral logic as biblical.

Even if the problems with anatomical complementarity are accepted, it is important to remember that – as Brownson acknowledges – this is only one particular form of GC. The wider theological questions noted above about GC therefore remain on the table.

Genesis 2 & GC

Brownson rightly identifies Genesis 2 as particularly important in traditionalist claims about GC. He then takes one particular interpretation – that of Robert Gagnon – as normative and offers four critiques. The main difficulty here is that Gagnon’s is not the only (or necessarily the most representative) interpretation of this key text among traditionalists. Each element in Brownson’s critique can be assessed in turn.

Is the original adam sexually undifferentiated?

First, I would agree with Brownson, against Gagnon, that the *adam* of 1.26-2.18 is “not a binary, or sexually undifferentiated, being that is divided into male and female in Genesis 2.21” (26).

Brownson’s view is, I believe, also the majority reading among traditionalists. This is illustrated by the most significant OT scholar of sexuality, Richard Davidson, whose massive study, *The Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*, Brownson again fails to cite and list in his bibliography.²⁰ Davidson is clear that the idea of “an ideal androgynous (or hermaphroditic) being later split into two sexes cannot be sustained from the text of Gen 1”²¹ and the idea that in Genesis 2 there is originally “one creature incorporating two sexes” is a hypothesis which “is not supported by the

²⁰ Richard Davidson, *The Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Baker Academic, 2007).

²¹ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, p. 19.

text”.²² These conclusions do not prevent Davidson being a robust defender of a form of GC and the traditional reading of Scripture on homosexuality.

Brownson therefore here critiques only one prominent scholar’s reading of Genesis 2 as if it is essential to the traditionalist case. It is not.²³ By so doing, he also fails to take seriously the dynamic that, even without postulating an original androgynous being, the narrative of Genesis 2 clearly presents the woman as being created from something taken out of the man. There is thus some clear sense of a combination of sameness and difference and of the female being “a reflection of himself, a complement to himself, indeed a very part of himself” (Stott, cited 25). The union of male and female is thus being presented as a re-union in a way that a same-sex union is not. None of this requires Gagnon’s particular, actually minority, interpretation of an original sexless creature who is, in a sense, re-created in heterosexual sexual union.

Similarity and/or difference

This leads to Brownson’s second critique: the focus in the narrative is on the similarity not the complementarity of male and female. Here, although he is right to stress the similarity of humans over against the animals, he creates a false dichotomy. There is both similarity and difference, both movement “from unity to differentiation” and “from the isolation of an individual to the deep blessing of shared kinship and community” (30). As shown by his definition of GC cited above, similarity and complementarity are not incompatible. In fact, it is this desire to hold together “this combination of similarity and difference” (17) which is at the heart of the best accounts of GC. This can claim a good textual basis.

In highlighting the similarity, Brownson appears to see no significance in the difference. If some in defending GC have read a great deal about sex, anatomy, and gender into this text, here Brownson is missing out a great deal in his own reading. He has to grant that “of course, the story envisions marriage as the most basic form of this community, and it assumes that marriage is constituted by a husband and wife” (30-31). Nevertheless, he seems to view this assumption as incidental and able to be overridden because “the text doesn’t really explore gender differences at all”. Clearly it doesn’t *explore* differences as if it was an early form of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*²⁴ but it does present sexual difference as at the heart of God’s creation of humanity (as does Genesis 1.27, reaffirmed post-Eden at Genesis 5.2, and cited by Jesus in the gospels (Matthew 19.4 and parallels)).

The image of God

The third critique relates to the image of God and to the view attributed to Gagnon that the “image of God is only fully seen in the sexual union of male and female” (31). Here Brownson again has some valid criticisms of some traditionalist claims. However, the fact that a certain view creates

²² Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, p. 20.

²³ In fact, support for an androgynous original creature is probably more prominent among revisionists than traditionalists. See, for example, Michael Carden’s discussion of Genesis in Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West & Thomas Bodache (eds), *The Queer Bible Commentary* (SCM, 2006), pp. 26ff and Renato Lings, *Love Lost in Translation*, (Trafford Publishing, 2012).

²⁴ John Gray, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Harper Collins, 2002).

Gender Complementarity – How Wrong are Traditionalists?

ethical or theological challenges – for example, if the image of God is related to the union of male and female, then that may create issues as to how we understand singleness or Christ as the image of God – does not automatically invalidate it as a reading of the text. Brownson in this case acknowledges that not all traditionalists take this view but (apart from a brief footnote) he does not engage with Barth as the most significant modern theologian arguing along these lines. He emphasises, as would I and many other traditionalists, the connection of “image of God” language to human value (or perhaps better, dignity or worth) and dominion. He also notes the importance of “relationality” to the image of God, but this is seemingly abstracted from the material embodied nature and sexual differentiation of human beings in the narrative. In reacting against too strong and reductionist a correlation between being made in God’s image and being made male and female, Brownson appears to have gone too far in denying what appears implicit in the parallelism of Genesis 1.27. Davidson again is helpful here:

The sexual differentiation of male and female (v27c) is not identical to the image of God (v26a-b), as Barth maintains, but the two are brought into so close connection that they should not be separated....The synthetic parallelism of v27c, immediately following the synonymous parallelism of v27a-b, indicates that the *mode* of human existence in the divine image is that of male and female together.²⁵

“One flesh” as kinship

Brownson’s final critique is that the language of one-flesh union connotes “not physical complementarity, but a kinship bond” (38). This is the focus of chapter 5 and will be examined later; but again this is a false either/or. Better is traditionalist Gordon Wenham’s view which says that the ‘one flesh’ language

does not denote merely the sexual union that follows marriage, or the children conceived in marriage, or even the spiritual and emotional relationship that it involves, *though all are involved in becoming one flesh*. Rather, it affirms that just as blood relations are one’s flesh and bone, so marriage creates a similar kinship relation between man and wife (Wenham quoted 34, note 34, italics added).

Conclusion

In summary, Brownson offers valid criticism of some traditionalist views as to moral logic (notably some details in Gagnon’s approach and exegesis of Genesis 2). He also highlights the need for more work to be done on what is meant by GC. He fails, however, to do justice either to the range of traditionalist readings which argue for a form of GC or to the significance of the differentiation into male and female, particularly in the opening chapters of Genesis. To establish whether or not that differentiation is part of the moral logic in particular texts on homosexuality requires study of those texts and further argument. Overall, however, Brownson has failed to do justice to the creation narratives, to articulate a theological anthropology with any place for sexual differentiation, or to demonstrate that “Genesis 2 does not teach a normative form of gender complementarity, based on the biological differences between male and female” (38).

²⁵ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, pp. 39-40.

4. Brownson Among the Revisionists – What Does Brownson Add?

Although Brownson's main aim appears to be to challenge traditionalists to rethink their position in the light of Scripture, he also wishes to challenge revisionists to be more biblical. His third chapter critiques those revisionist readings which tend to argue that Scripture does not directly address our issue of committed same-sex relationships but can give guidance on the basis of its teaching on such issues as love and justice. Brownson argues that, although of value, these categories are not able of themselves to provide a biblical sexual ethic. There is the need for a wider and deeper engagement with biblical material if we are to find a biblical sexual ethic that can be cross-cultural and address our concerns today.

Locating Brownson Among Other Revisionists

Brownson provides a helpful summary of many revisionist arguments to show that, because they narrow down the scope of the biblical texts, they often seem only to leave the Bible silent on sexual ethics. Brownson himself will ultimately embrace much of this contextualised and narrow reading of the specific texts. He will do so, however, in some distinctive ways and only in the context of having argued for a more positive biblical vision of sexuality that both explains why the texts are narrower and provides an alternative framework affirming same-sex unions.

Although I believe his rejection of an attempt to develop a sexual ethic based solely on love or justice is sound, he does dismiss rather than engage with the detailed arguments found in works such as Margaret Farley's *Just Love*²⁶ which he mentions only in passing (46, n15) (or the more recent Ellison's *Making Love Just*²⁷ published shortly before Brownson's work). He also may have downplayed the range of existing revisionist approaches in a manner that suggests his particular revisionist approach is a more significant "reframing" of the debate than it really is. He admits that "a number of more recent studies have moved well beyond a concern only with the broad ethical categories of justice and love and have attempted to synthesize a nuanced and more comprehensive Christian understanding of sexuality into a revisionist position" (48-49). Here he refers to Stacy Johnson's *A Time To Embrace*²⁸ and Eugene Rogers' *Sexuality and the Christian Body*²⁹ as well as the work of Rowan Williams and James Alison.³⁰ In fact, his whole argument can be seen as taking up and offering a detailed biblical basis for a standard revisionist ethic, supporting for example the rather sweeping comment in Williams' "The Body's Grace":

²⁶ Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (Continuum, 2008).

²⁷ Marvin M. Ellison, *Making Love Just: Sexual Ethics for Perplexing Times* (Fortress, 2012).

²⁸ Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Eerdmans 2006, 2nd revised edition, 2012).

²⁹ Eugene Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way Into the Triune God* (Blackwell, 1999).

³⁰ Rowan Williams' main contribution remains his 1989 LGCM lecture "The Body's Grace", online at http://www.igreens.org.uk/bodys_grace.htm. James Alison has written and spoken widely and his books include *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Gay and Catholic* (DLT, 2001), *On Being Liked* (DLT, 2003), *Undergoing God: Despatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (DLT, 2007) and *Broken Hearts, New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (DLT, 2010). Many resources are on his [website](http://www.jamesalison.co.uk) at www.jamesalison.co.uk

In a church which accepts the legitimacy of contraception, the absolute condemnation of same-sex relations of intimacy must rely either on an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous texts, or on a problematic and non-scriptural theory about natural complementarity, applied narrowly and crudely to physical differentiation without regard to psychological structures.³¹

Revisionists and Biblical Authority

What Brownson fails to acknowledge is that many revisionists end up with his ethic on the basis that, unlike him, they believe the Bible condemns all homosexual practice but they reject its judgment, often by appealing to their experience. This is explicitly the approach of a number of leading advocates of same-sex unions. Walter Wink writes:

The Bible clearly considers homosexuality a sin, and whether it is stated three times or 3,000 is beside the point. Just as some of us grew up “knowing” that homosexuality was the unutterable sin, though no one ever spoke of it, so the whole Bible “knows” it to be wrong. I freely grant all that. The issue is precisely whether that biblical judgment is correct.³²

Dan Via in his dialogue with Robert Gagnon (the best guide to competing readings of Scripture) acknowledges that “perhaps most importantly he [Paul] regards same-sex relations as contrary to nature (1.26-27), contrary to the order of the world as created by God”³³ and admits that

Professor Gagnon and I are in substantial agreement that the biblical texts that deal specifically with homosexual practice condemn it unconditionally. However, on the question of what the church might or should make of this we diverge sharply.³⁴

Two of the most detailed studies by biblical scholars are similar in distinguishing between what Paul taught and what we should say today. William Loader (whose many extensive studies of Jewish and early Christian attitudes Brownson largely ignores) states that “it is not surprising that, as most conclude, Paul employs same-sex relations as a proof of human sinfulness and assumes people would then share the presuppositions which led him to that conclusion, however we might assess them today”.³⁵ Bernadette Brooten, author of the major study of female same-sex love in Scripture, concludes:

I have argued that Paul’s condemnation of homoeroticism, particularly female homoeroticism, reflects and helps to maintain a gender asymmetry based on female

³¹ Rowan Williams, “The Body’s Grace”, in Eugene Rogers, *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Blackwell, 2001), pp. 309-321, here at p. 320.

³² Walter Wink, “Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality”, *Christian Century*, Nov 7th 1979, p. 1082ff, online at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1265>. Similarly, “Where the Bible mentions homosexual behavior at all, it clearly condemns it. I freely grant that. The issue is precisely whether that Biblical judgment is correct”, in his “Homosexuality and the Bible” online at <http://forusa.org/content/homosexuality-bible-walter-wink>.

³³ Dan O. Via, “The Bible, The Church and Homosexuality” in Dan O. Via & Robert Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Augsburg, 2003), p. 14.

³⁴ Dan O. Via, “Response to Robert A.J. Gagnon” in Via & Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, p. 93.

³⁵ Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament*, p. 34.

Brownson Among the Revisionists – What Does Brownson Add?

subordination. I hope that churches today, being apprised of the history that I have presented, will no longer teach Rom 1.26f as authoritative.³⁶

A common form of the argument is summed up by New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson:

The task demands intellectual honesty. I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says. But what are we to do with what the text says? *I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good.*³⁷

From this perspective, the issue is simple and summed up clearly by leading church historian Diarmaid MacCulloch:

This is an issue of biblical authority. Despite much well-intentioned theological fancy footwork to the contrary, it is difficult to see the Bible as expressing anything else but disapproval of homosexual activity.³⁸

Brownson himself rejects such an approach to Scripture. One of the major contributions of his book is that it is in effect an attempt to convince the church that the revisionist conclusions of these scholars about the ethics of homosexuality can be reached without rejecting the Bible's authoritative teaching. It would, however, have been good for him to acknowledge that this alternative method is prominent, perhaps predominant, among revisionist thinkers who share his conclusions and to offer as robust a critique of that approach as he does of the traditionalist claims to be biblical.

³⁶ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 302.

³⁷ Luke T. Johnson, "Homosexuality and the Church: Scripture and Experience", *Commonweal*, June 11th 2007, online at <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-1> (italics added).

³⁸ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490-1700* (Penguin, 2004), p. 705.

5. Biblical Patriarchy, Equality and Same-Sex Unions

Although the most important of Brownson's four elements of the moral logic of Scripture is "one flesh", he begins Part Two with a study of patriarchy and its relevance to "gender". As in all four chapters of Part Two, Brownson's argument has a dual focus: he is proposing a "broad, cross-cultural vision for a center of Christian sexual ethics" (55) through a reading of Scriptural teaching on sex, but also (as is evident at the end of each chapter) doing this very much with an eye on his goal of offering a defence of same-sex unions as consonant with Scripture. Both goals need therefore to be considered in any evaluation; his conclusions in one area are sometimes more convincing than those in the other.

In chapter four, Brownson argues that across both Old and New Testaments we can find both patriarchal and egalitarian streams as regards the relationship between men and women. He claims, however, that the Bible's eschatological vision clearly favours the egalitarian stream. We are, however, "not yet" there and while we should see some elements present "already" in human history, these could disrupt the Christian community. He argues that gender hierarchy therefore cannot be appealed to as a biblical trans-cultural norm and used to oppose same-sex unions. Furthermore, classic texts on homosexuality, being shaped by patriarchy, "may be limited in their ability to speak directly to same-sex relationships today" (84).

Patriarchy and Creation

Clearly much could be said about the complex issue of patriarchal and egalitarian readings of Scripture.³⁹ Although I am broadly sympathetic to Brownson's approach,⁴⁰ I judge that he sometimes gives a patriarchal reading of the text too much weight. For example, he refers to "contrasting streams in the Creation Narrative" (57), whereas a much better reading is that Genesis 1 and 2 do not have a patriarchal stream and that this appears only post-Fall in Genesis 3.⁴¹

This leads to a wider concern, that, while Brownson does not offer a clear locating of the question of male and female within the biblical drama as a whole, he appears to see the egalitarian vision as exclusively eschatological and to construe it in a way that is in tension with or even contradicts creation. He will grant only that "the creation narratives themselves provide a glimpse of the new creation" (81). This concern reappears in his treatment of "nature". At one point he characterises the two "countervailing" streams as a patriarchal one which "assumes life in this world, shaped by the structures of creation" and an egalitarian one which "assumes life in the age to come, shaped by the structures of the gospel, lived out in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus" (80-81). This opposition between creation and gospel is a serious theological problem. Less explicitly, it also

³⁹ For a helpful set of papers representing different views among Anglican evangelicals see the collection of material produced for the Awesome-Reform conversations online at http://www.awesome.org.uk/?page_id=736.

⁴⁰ His approach here is similar to William Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (IVP, 2001).

⁴¹ I have argued this in "An Exploration of Evangelical Exegetical and Hermeneutical Differences Over Gender Hierarchy", a paper for the AWESOME-Reform conversations downloadable from <http://www.awesome.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Papers-Session-1.zip>

impacts his discussion of homosexuality which ends up lacking sufficient place for a doctrine of good creation.

Eschatology and Marriage

Brownson's understanding of eschatology and its impact on marriage is also unclear and problematic. With reference to Galatians 3.27-8 he talks of New Testament emphases that "sweep away, in categorical terms...the distinctive pairing (male and female) devoted to procreation...that form the basis for the structures of society as it was known in the ancient world" (67).

Even if one grants some truth in this (subject to careful qualification), it is important that in Scripture what Brownson calls "sweeping away" is *not* in order to make room for new forms of sexual relationship beyond marriage. Rather it is to relativise marriage by opening up the way of celibacy as a witness to the coming Kingdom and a way of life more free to serve that Kingdom. Furthermore, Brownson says that Galatians 3 and other texts mean that "humans draw their core identity from their union with Christ and their participation in the age to come" (81). This would appear to undermine the appeals he makes elsewhere for the significance of sexual orientation in relation to human identity (in order to qualify and limit biblical texts and advance his overall argument) at least as much as any identity rooted in creation as male and female or as married.

Patriarchy and Same-sex Relationships

Turning to the relevance of this subject to same-sex relationships and contemporary debates, it has to be asked how significant a patriarchal reading is to arguments against such relationships. It is true that those who emphasise "headship" generally appear to be firmer in their opposition to same-sex unions. I have, however, never heard such unions critiqued on the basis that they are unable to provide the hierarchical pattern that such views uphold as necessary in marriage. This is in large part because Scripture does not make such an appeal to patriarchy in its discussion of homosexuality. Brownson refers to "hierarchical assumptions" which "shape the Bible's negative portrayal of same-sex eroticism" and claims "such assumptions are evident in multiple places" (84). He fails, however, to demonstrate by reference to the texts themselves (the criterion he used in assessing GC) that patriarchy is the moral logic for the biblical prohibitions.

As noted in discussion of his treatment of GC, patriarchy is in fact one particular form, or a sub-set, of the wider understanding of GC. This means that if, as he claims, patriarchy *is* the rationale for the biblical prohibitions then some form of GC (i.e. a vision of the nature and significance of human sexual differentiation and otherness) is the rationale. It could be that what Brownson puts down to patriarchy (in order to limit the text's ability to speak) is actually an appeal to (or assumption of) some alternative broader form of GC which stresses the importance of sexual difference. This could be fully compatible with the egalitarian strand, and also cross-cultural, and so not able to be side-stepped in the way patriarchal readings might be.

A further related aspect of his reasoning is unclear here. He refers to the problem with male homosexuality being patriarchal assumptions that it was "inherently degrading to treat a (higher-status) man as if he were a (lower-status) woman" (83). He then critiques this "based on the larger biblical movement we have chronicled, away from patriarchy toward a more egalitarian vision" (83).

Biblical Patriarchy, Equality and Same-Sex Unions

Leaving aside whether this is the biblical objection, there are two distinct issues here. One could believe it is valid to understand male homosexuality as treating a man as if he were a woman but see nothing wrong with this once patriarchal views are discarded (although, as argued above, this could still be wrong based on a non-patriarchal view that it is wrong to confuse male and female, which he notes at 72, note 15 could be behind the difficult 1 Corinthians 11). Or, more likely, one could believe that this whole interpretation of homosexuality in terms of men acting as women is wrong-headed. In this case the problem is not patriarchy but the alleged biblical conceptualisation of male same-sex intercourse in terms of treating a man as a woman. Brownson's discussion of the issue in terms of patriarchy would point to him following the first option but given its rarity in contemporary debate this seems highly unlikely.

Two Streams vs One Stream: Canonical Readings on Patriarchy and Homosexuality

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Brownson's argument in relation to patriarchy and gender hierarchy is the contrast of its appeal to two biblical streams with the form of argument he advances in the book as a whole. This demonstrates clearly why the common method of arguing for women in leadership as biblical does not, indeed cannot without major modification, lead to an argument for same-sex unions.

Chapter four stresses (I believe exaggerates) the existence of two strands in the text of Scripture which need somehow to be reconciled. In relation to Scripture's attitude to homosexual relationships there is only one strand. Nothing in what God says through Scripture on homosexuality leaves us with the hermeneutical and theological challenge of making sense of diverse voices in tension with each other. But that is exactly the challenge readers of Scripture face in relation to what God says through Scripture concerning men and women. The further challenge is why there is this lack of two streams. As Brownson notes, there are places in Paul (such as 1 Corinthians 7.3-4) which radically break out of hierarchical understandings prominent elsewhere in Scripture and in Paul's wider cultural context. Why, then, did the distinctive genius of the New Testament's eschatological vision fail to prevent the uniform and negative assessment of homosexual behaviour (especially if that assessment was driven by patriarchal beliefs)? Why did New Testament writers instead perpetuate what Brownson must see as a wrong and unjust?

Conclusion – Patriarchy, Traditionalists and Accommodation

While Brownson's discussion of patriarchy fails to establish what he wants, it does – although he does not draw this out – present some interesting challenges to traditionalists. These are particularly significant for those who are egalitarian, although even defenders of hierarchy today are not patriarchal in the manner of ancient society. It seems clear that for many centuries God tolerated and worked with hierarchical patterns of gender relationship and marriage that fell short of his eschatological purposes (and I would argue his ordering of creation) as revealed in Scripture. It seems also that, at times, Paul was willing not to insist on achieving these purposes fully out of a pragmatic concern for the effect of such insistence on both the unity of the church and the effectiveness of its mission. This raises the question of whether, in our situation, traditionalists can consider making any similar accommodations in some way. These would allow some form of space not to a distorted and fallen patriarchal understanding of gender and its practical outworking (as in Scripture) but to something which Scripture itself never gives a space: a distorted and fallen

understanding of the nature of human sexual orientation and identity and its outworking in the forming of same-sex quasi-martial unions.

6. Is "One Flesh" Rather Than Marriage the Bible's Central Category for Sexual Ethics?

One of the most surprising aspects of Brownson's scriptural study is that in setting out his alternative vision he pays little or no attention to *marriage* and its various forms in Scripture. Instead he argues that the heart of a biblical understanding of marriage is that it is a "one-flesh" union (Genesis 2.24) and that this refers to a lifelong *kinship* bond. He sees this wider understanding reflected in the prophets using marriage to describe God's covenant with Israel and in the New Testament references to Genesis 2.24. It provides the basis for rejecting sexual promiscuity. He also argues that although in Scripture the consistent usage is for this union to be between a man and a woman, this structure need not be normative, for "there is nothing inherent in the biblical usage that would necessarily exclude committed gay or lesbian unions from consideration as one-flesh unions" (109).

There is much of importance and value in this account, such as the centrality of covenant and the personal bond in marriage, the need to speak truth with our bodies in our sexual behaviour, and the relating of "one flesh" to kinship, thus requiring us to connect marriage to a wider relational category. There are, however, quite a number of loose ends and leaps in argument which weaken Brownson's case.

"One Flesh", Marriage, Kinship and Sexual Unions

The connection of "one flesh" to kinship is neither original nor particularly contentious; as noted above, Gordon Wenham argued this point in his commentary on Genesis. What is not clear is how Brownson then uses this in relation to same-sex unions and in particular the relationships between marriage, kinship and sexual union.

The language of "one flesh" is understood as a reference to kinship and so used to locate marriage in relation to wider patterns of kinship. Marriage is both similar to other kinship ties – in terms of the "shared life and experience" and "meaning" (87) – but it is also significantly different from them. It is not based on blood (although within Israel endogamous marriage, i.e. marriage within the wider kinship group, was often common, as seen among the patriarchs) and, crucially, it is a sexual union. So Brownson notes that "the 'one flesh' union flows from sexual union, but is distinct from that sexual union, and is expressed in ways that extend beyond sexual union alone" (87). In contrast to marriage, sexual union was prohibited in all other close kinship ties or "one flesh" bonds within the Old Testament law. In addition, other kinship bonds were naturally shared or extended (parents had more children, the fraternal relationship was shared with many others) whereas the marriage bond was meant to be singular and exclusive – one husband and one wife (although the practice of polygamy undermined this). All this makes the move from "one flesh" in marriage to the wider category of "one flesh" in kinship and then to "one flesh" in the form of an exclusive, sexual same-sex union much more difficult to justify.

Brownson struggles with how much significance to give to this sexual element, particularly given 1 Corinthians 6.16 where Paul clearly correlates becoming "one body" (even with a prostitute) with Genesis 2.24 and the language of "one flesh". He nevertheless wants to argue that "the language of

'one flesh' is not simply a euphemistic way of speaking about sexual intercourse; it is a way of speaking about the kinship ties that are related to the union of man and woman in marriage, a union that includes sexual intercourse" (87). In defending this broader reading he warns that "it is important not to overgenitalize or oversexualize" the use of "one flesh" (87). The difficulty is that he risks completely de-genitalizing and de-sexualizing it. He risks this by sidelining the bodily, sexual union aspects of the language and privileging the kinship language in order to establish the base on which to argue for same-sex unions as a form of marriage or akin to marriage.

The sexual and bodily (and genital) aspect is clear from 1 Corinthians 6 and Paul's application of the language to non-marital sexual intercourse with a prostitute. Brownson's downplaying of this – claiming that "the basic kinship background...is evident" (102) and stressing "the wider metaphorical kinship meaning" (102) – is unconvincing. The bodily and sexual aspect of "one flesh" comes from the flow of the narrative itself where, without postulating an androgynous original, Genesis 2 clearly sees a separation from one body (the creation of the woman from *adam*) as the necessary narrative background for the "one flesh" (re-)union established in marriage. This has physical expression in the couple's sexual union. Brownson only considers this in relation to "recovering an alleged original unity of the genders", claiming that the text focusses attention on "the establishment of a new primary kinship bond, rather than an overcoming of the incompleteness of male and female" (86). This, however, risks ignoring the sense in which "one flesh" clearly is explained in part by the earlier bodily separation from the "one flesh" of *adam*.

There is an even more serious challenge for his wider argument that "one flesh" can be extended to same-sex unions. This is the fact that, in Jesus' appeal to this text in Matthew 19.4-5 and Mark 10.6-8, he conjoins Genesis 2.24 not simply with the wider narrative of Genesis 2 and a reference to the joining of husband and wife. Jesus connects it directly to Genesis 1.27. He thus strongly ties together the creation of male and female with the leaving, joining and uniting in one flesh. This is something to which Brownson pays no attention.

"One Flesh" and Procreation

The importance of male and female in this form of "one flesh" kinship bond is also likely related to procreation. Brownson himself will talk about marriage as "a new primary kinship bond" (86) and "the foundational kinship bond" (96). He does not explore the fact that this is surely because it (albeit not in every instance) is a kinship bond which – unlike other kinship bonds – has the potential of generating new kinship bonds through procreation. Given the significance even he attributes to *this* "one flesh" kinship bond, his claim that "this entire discussion of one flesh in Genesis (and indeed throughout the Bible) takes place without even a hint of concern with procreation" (89) is thus too strong. Furthermore, a key way in which the female solves the problem of "being alone" within Genesis 2 is arguably not only by doing so in her own right but by the fact that through her distinctive form of "one flesh" union with the man, the couple are also not left alone as a couple but become parents. That in turn is necessary if the calling of humanity as God's image bearers – set out in Genesis 1.28 and rooted in procreation ("Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground") – is to be fulfilled.

Is 'One Flesh' Rather Than Marriage the Bible's Central Category for Sexual Ethics?

Canonically Normal and Universal but not Normative?

The fundamental challenge that Brownson faces and which he fails to answer is in his claim that, although "Scripture *assumes* that this one-flesh bond only takes place between a man and woman", nevertheless, "what is *normal* in the biblical witness may not necessarily be *normative* in different cultural settings that are not envisioned by the biblical writers" (109). Elsewhere he claims that we need to consider "whether the *consistent* reference to male and female in discussion of the one-flesh union in Scripture should be interpreted in *exclusive* terms" (105). He asks if there is "anything inherent in the moral logic that shapes the Bible's discussion of one-flesh unions that not only *assumes* but also *requires*" (106) such unions to be male and female.

Despite raising these important questions, no criteria are ever given by which we can judge the validity of such cases of going beyond the Bible and arguing that normal is not normative, assumed is not required, consistent is not exclusive. Furthermore, in talking of something as "normal" and "consistent" he also fails to acknowledge that in fact the biblical witness in relation to "one flesh" sexual unions is *universal*. There is – unlike with patriarchy or even monogamy – no testimony to something else; there is no alternative, no exception in the biblical witness. The development he advocates of justifying same-sex unions as a form of "one flesh" union thus faces the twin problems of (1) affirming a sexual relationship between two people of the same sex despite the universal negative witness to homosexual behaviour *and* (2) establishing a new sexual kinship bond other than male-female marriage – one never exemplified in Scripture – despite the strong negative witness to sexual relationships within any close kinship bond other than marriage.

Conclusion – A Kinship Same-Sex Union?

Despite these problems, Brownson's work does raise important challenges to much traditionalist argument. First, is it possible for there to be a legitimate form of non-sexual, intimate relationship – a form of kinship relationship – between two people of the same sex who are not related? If so, should it be formally recognised and celebrated? The classic example here would be the covenantal relationship between David and Jonathan. Second, his emphasis on the strength and significance of the "one flesh" bond – equivalent to a kinship bond – is also a challenge to how easily in recent decades we have come to terms with divorce and often subsequent remarriage without recognising how corrosive it is to the biblical vision.⁴² This again raises the question of the different ways in which the church can and has developed a path of accommodation in order to accompany people whose patterns of life fall short of biblical norms, a question to which I return later.

⁴² Stating this does not necessarily imply a strong doctrine of marriage as absolutely indissoluble except by death.

7. Can We Separate Marriage and Procreation?

Brownson's sixth chapter focusses on "the procreative character of marriage" (112) and the significance of procreation reappears in a number of later chapters. He appeals to Scripture to reject the views that procreation defines the essential purpose of marriage, that marriage therefore requires procreation to be valid, and that inability to bear children may be sufficient grounds for divorce. Stressing that society supports marriage for reasons other than the desire to care for children he argues that "the lack of procreative capacity cannot of itself be a sufficient reason to deny the legitimacy of stable gay or lesbian marriages or marriagelike relationships" (126).

Procreation, Sex and Marriage – Catholic and Protestant Understandings

Brownson sets out the view of different Christian traditions on the relationship between sex, procreation and marriage. One of the difficulties is that his account of those traditions and the key questions to be addressed fails to recognise the complexity and nuance of the ethical discussions. An underlying theme appears to be that the Roman Catholic view is that "procreation is the essence of marriage" (119). He argues that we therefore need to ask Scripture the question, "Does marriage always assume and require the purpose of procreation in order for marriage itself to be valid or to fulfil its purpose?" (115). He rightly concludes that when we ask this question we find this view lacks biblical warrant. Turning from marriage to the sexual act, Brownson also rejects what he states is the Catholic view that "the only legitimate purpose of sex is procreation" (121). He acknowledges that Catholic teaching often takes a weaker form – that being open to procreation is sufficient and so "it may be lawful for married partners to engage in sex without intentionally seeking procreation" (121) – but then claims that this is inconsistent with its teaching on homosexuality. In contrast to these views that he critiques, he argues that heterosexual marriage "does not exist solely or even essentially for the purpose of procreation" (123).

The difficulty in Brownson's treatment of this subject is that while the privileging of procreation which he critiques has a prominent place in parts of the Christian tradition, few have held the views he states or implies are standard Roman Catholic understandings of marriage. There are few if any significant Christian theologians who have reduced the essence of marriage simply to procreation without reference to other goods or who have claimed that the lack of children invalidates marriage or is a ground for divorce. For example, *Humanae Vitae*, which reasserted traditional Catholic teaching against contraception, was clear that "the unitive significance and the procreative significance ... are both inherent to the marriage act" and speaks of "each of these essential qualities, the unitive and the procreative".⁴³

In addition to minimising, almost eliminating, the essential nature of the unitive or relational good of marriage in Catholic thought, Brownson is then guilty of a similar error of minimising, almost eliminating, the procreative good from Protestant doctrines of marriage. As a result he polarises Christian thinking in a crude manner with caricatures that are mirror-images of each other. His

⁴³ Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 1968, para 12, online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html

account has, for example, no place for the Anglican-Roman Catholic (ARCIC) statement *Life in Christ* which stated:

Both our traditions agree that procreation is one of the divinely intended goods of the institution of marriage. A deliberate decision, therefore, without justifiable reason, to exclude procreation from a marriage is a rejection of this good and a contradiction of the nature of marriage itself. On this also we agree.⁴⁴

The authors then noted:

The immediate point at issue in this controversy would seem to concern the moral integrity of the act of marital intercourse. Both our traditions agree that this involves the two basic goods of marriage, loving union and procreation. Moral integrity requires that husband and wife respect both these goods together.⁴⁵

In short, Brownson appears here to have little understanding of the ethical debates in this area. In particular he sets up a reductionist caricature of the Catholic view and quickly and rightly dismisses it as unbiblical. Although he then grants that in the moral logic of the Bible “procreation is an important purpose of marriage” (118) he nevertheless aligns himself with a similarly reductionist summary of the Protestant view to claim that “the unitive meaning of marriage defines its essence” (126).

Procreation and the Bible

The chapter devoted to the subject of procreation, tellingly, has much less engagement with biblical material than the previous chapters. The material it covers is also strongly filtered through the specific questions he believes need asking about the relationship between marriage and procreation in the light of his flawed account of Christian debates. The chapter itself does not give much attention to procreation and homosexuality in the biblical texts but, significantly, he later acknowledges that this is part of their moral logic – it is part of the “unnatural” judgment of Paul in Romans 1 and the purity concerns in Leviticus. Given this, his discussion of why procreation should not have the same function in our moral logic today is important but very limited.

Because Brownson really only examines Scripture through the lens of whether procreation is essential to marriage or not (and in order to rebut his caricature of Catholic teaching), his study fails to do justice to the potentially vast subject of the role of procreation and the importance of children in the biblical witness. His treatment would have been strengthened if he had critically engaged, for example, with the biblical material in Bryan Hodge’s recent attempt to offer an evangelical Protestant case against contraception.⁴⁶ A further intriguing fact is that, for all his emphasis on the

⁴⁴ Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church*, 1994, para 78, online at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19930906_life-in-christ_en.html

⁴⁵ Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Life in Christ*, para 81.

⁴⁶ Bryan Hodge, *The Christian Case Against Contraception: Making the Case from Historical, Biblical, Systematic, and Practical Theology & Ethics* (Wipf & Stock, 2010).

Can We Separate Marriage and Procreation?

difference between our culture and that of the biblical world, he also underplays just how closely the act of sexual intercourse and procreation are practically connected in cultures which lack reliable contraception. Once this is granted, the failure to refer explicitly to procreation when discussing sexual activity (or discussing marriage as the context for sex) does not necessarily mean it is considered secondary and unimportant. With our contraceptive mindset we easily forget that people in biblical times could not separate procreation from sex – in their minds or with their bodies – quite as easily as we can.

Procreation and Homosexuality

Turning to homosexuality, Brownson once again says little or nothing about this in chapter six where he sets out his understanding of the biblical vision. Only later does the significance of his moral logic become clear. Instead he focusses on a 1986 statement from the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith which talks of “a disordered sexual inclination which is essentially self-indulgent” (quoted at 120).⁴⁷ He argues that logically this judgment should apply to all forms of non-procreative sexual behaviour or indeed “any inclination to engage in sex while even attempting or hoping to avoid procreation” (120-1). The argument here could have some force but needs much more careful delineation. The teaching is that engaging in homosexual activity leads to confirming a disordered and essentially self-indulgent sexual *inclination*. This is based on more than the action being unable to transmit life. It is interesting that the long quotation which Brownson cites (at 120) begins just after the statement’s description of the choice of a sexual partner of the same sex as a decision “to annul the rich symbolism and meaning, not to mention the goals, of the Creator’s sexual design”.⁴⁸ Given this claim (which Brownson does not quote) it is unclear whether one can therefore talk of an equivalent form of “disordered sexual inclination” which is “essentially self-indulgent” and similarly confirmed in all non-procreative sexual conduct.

Contraception, Marriage and Homosexuality

The real concern Brownson has is clear when he sums up his central argument thus:

if one accepts in any cases the possibility of intentional contraception in Christian marriage, it means that the unitive meaning of sexual relations is entirely sufficient to sanction sexual intercourse within marriage, quite apart from the purpose of procreation (122-3).

If contraception is accepted then, he claims, “it is impossible to sustain the argument that forms the heart of Roman Catholic social teaching, that homosexual acts are inherently self-indulgent because they cannot be procreative” (123; note that here Brownson refers to acts rather than the inclination as “inherently self-indulgent”). This is all part of advancing his wider argument that “it is difficult to see, therefore, how the biblical treatment of the relationship between procreation, sexuality and marriage precludes gay unions from consideration as marital unions” (125).

⁴⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, 1986, para 7. Online at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html

⁴⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter*, para 7.

Among the issues this highlights is the need for a more careful consideration of (a) the relationship between inclination and act and (b) the relationship between the unitive/relational and procreative goods of marriage understood as an institution and the unitive/relational and procreative goods of sexual acts whether as isolated sexual acts or taken as a whole within marriage. Although Brownson shows no signs of being aware of it, this is at the heart of the debate between Anglicans and Roman Catholics over contraception as expressed in the ARCIC statement at para 80:

Anglicans understand the good of procreation to be a norm governing the married relationship as a whole. Roman Catholic teaching, on the other hand, requires that each and every act of intercourse should be open to procreation.⁴⁹

In other words, it is quite coherent – indeed it is the mainstream Protestant view – that one can accept “the possibility of intentional contraception in Christian marriage” (Brownson) while still insisting that “the good of procreation” is “a norm governing the married relationship as a whole” (ARCIC). If one does this then it is quite possible to hold that same-sex unions – as inherently, structurally non-procreative – cannot be marital unions. Brownson, in contrast, seems to be arguing that any acceptance of any non-procreative sexual acts within marriage must logically mean that marriage itself is held to lack a procreative good and if that is the case then the lack of procreative capacity in a same-sex union cannot invalidate it as a marriage.

Non-procreative Marriages and Same-Sex Unions

Despite these problems in his argument, Brownson is here raising one of the most serious challenges to traditionalists: if they are willing to accept that lack of procreative capacity does not render an opposite-sex couple incapable of marriage (as all Christian churches accept when, for example, they marry an elderly couple or people otherwise known to be biologically incapable of procreation) then why does that lack of capacity mean two people of the same sex cannot marry?

If, as Brownson argues, the essence of marriage is solely the unitive or relational good, and the procreative good is incidental to marriage as an institution, then such a position does not make sense. It appears to be an injustice, likely due to prejudice. If, however, as we have argued, he has gone too far in rejecting the procreative good of marriage, then some sense can be made of the traditionalist view which distinguishes these two categories.

Part of the answer here is that there are significant differences in the various forms of procreative incapacity. These mean that although not all specific instances of an opposite-sex union or marriage are procreative (or even capable of procreation), that *pattern* of relationship represents, as regards procreation, a distinct category or class of relationship compared to same-sex unions. Even if not procreative in a particular instance (as a result of age or illness or some other incidental factor), each marriage embodies and represents the bringing together of male and female persons which is the only procreative union within humanity and the form of humanity as created according to Genesis.

⁴⁹ Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Life in Christ*, para 80. Cf. also Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, para 11 (“The Church, nevertheless, in urging men to the observance of the precepts of the natural law, which it interprets by its constant doctrine, teaches that each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life”).

Can We Separate Marriage and Procreation?

The couple's sexual union therefore occurs in the manner which is the divinely ordained means of procreation even if, for whatever reason, it never results in new life. The reality is that while not every male-female sexual relationship is procreative, every single human being born by means of sexual union has come from such a relationship while no human being can ever be born from the sexual union of two people of the same-sex.

Interestingly, Brownson does not really explore the extent to which the use of reproductive technologies represents a cultural shift which may also be used to reconfigure Christian understandings about marriage and same-sex unions.

Similarities undoubtedly exist between same-sex unions and marriages as regards relational qualities. However, as long as the institution of marriage maintains some connection to procreation (which does not require either every sexual act in marriage to be open to procreation or every husband and wife themselves to be capable of procreation), there are significant differences between the two categories of same-sex and opposite-sex unions. These make it difficult to justify the inclusion of a same-sex union which is inherently non-procreative within the category of marriage.⁵⁰

Procreation as Biologically Natural?

A further aspect of any discussion of homosexuality and procreation, especially in relation to Scripture, must be the claim – based on Romans 1 – that its non-procreative character renders it unnatural. This argument, and Brownson's handling of it, is explored later in relation to his account of nature in Romans 1.

Conclusion – Marriage in Society: Much More Than Procreation

The final challenge which Brownson offers on the basis of his purely relational account of marriage is also an important one to be addressed by traditionalists. Even if procreation plays a more significant role in the definition and meaning of marriage as an institution than he grants, marriage does much more socially than provide a context for children. Given that many of the benefits society gains from marriage are also to be found in quasi-marital same-sex relationships, traditionalists need to give more serious thought as to how best to recognise and support such relationships even if they are not classed as marriage.

⁵⁰ During the final editing of this engagement with Brownson, Robert Song's important book, *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships* (SCM, 2014), appeared. This argues for same-sex relationships but as one form of a calling that is distinct from marriage, and for the very reason that they are non-procreative whereas marriage is procreative. I have been unable to relate Brownson's work to Song's here but intend to write a similar engagement with Song's argument.

8. Celibacy, Chastity & Compulsion: Singleness and Sexual Orientation

The final chapter of Part Two explores the content and implications of biblical teaching on celibacy. Brownson argues that celibacy as a lifelong calling is unknown in the Old Testament. He then outlines the different views in the ancient world focussing on the Cynics and Stoics within what he describes as the ancient world's generally pragmatic approach as to whether to marry. Jesus' teaching (as in Matthew 19.12) shows a commendation of celibacy while recognising that God calls some but not all to a single life. Paul is similarly balanced in 1 Corinthians 7 where, although single people are invited to remain so, he "clearly recognizes that not all people are gifted with lifelong celibacy" (146). He then argues that modern awareness of persistent sexual orientation raises the question, "are all gay and lesbian Christians whose sexual orientation is not subject to change *necessarily* called to a celibate life?" (146). He claims that if this were so then it would be in tension with the teaching of Jesus and Paul.

Four main planks in Brownson's argument merit further scrutiny. The difficulties in his discussion of one of these – the nature, significance and fixity of sexual orientation – has already been explored. Three other areas merit discussion here: the meaning of celibacy and chastity, the implications of his argument against requiring celibacy, and the nature of the alternative he proposes.

Celibacy, Chastity and Singleness

In relation to celibacy, there is much of value in his account of New Testament teaching, including the importance of not equating the self-control which is required of all (and which is part of what the tradition has called chastity) with celibacy (141). There is, however, also a failure to address the complexities of celibacy, as is seen in this attempt at a definition:

a lifelong discipline that involves not only the avoidance of sexual relations but also the capacity to sustain faithful discipleship without the deep intimacy and mutual support and care established by sexual relations with a lifelong partner. Celibacy means more than simply going without sexual relations for a period of time. It entails constructing one's whole life apart from sexual intimacy (141).

The difficulty here is that while some do have a positive call to celibacy in this sense of a lifelong vocation, the disciplines called for of living "without the deep intimacy and mutual support and care established by sexual relations with a lifelong partner" are also required for a much larger group of people: all who are single, for however long or short a period of time. People in that situation may not choose it but still find themselves having to live it and discern in it God's call, his gift, and his grace. They may find the alternative of marriage not open to them due to life circumstances. They may judge marriage to be a pattern of life whose different disciplines would be even more arduous for them than singleness. They may believe they should only marry a fellow Christian and so find (as many Christian women do) that marriage becomes highly unlikely. Given that none of us know or have the power to determine the future, for any unmarried person the situation and the self-control demanded within the single life could prove to be a lifelong discipline even if it is not chosen as a

vocation and even if they would wish to marry (either in general or even to a specific partner who is unwilling or considered illegitimate because they are not a Christian or are married to someone else). Each such situation is unique but clearly this demonstrates there are many different categories of long-term, unchosen, unwanted, potentially lifelong singleness.

Within these, those challenges arising due to a person's sexual orientation are distinctive but they are not wholly unparalleled. Brownson's failure to locate the particular demands on gay and lesbian Christians within this wider category and to consider his understanding of celibacy in relation to singleness more widely are a significant weakness in his argument particularly when combined with his view of a fixed, dichotomous view of sexual orientation. This leads to the issue of his alternative and its rationale.

Compulsion, Choice and the Definition of Marriage

Brownson claims that "the traditionalist position requires us to assume that *all* gay and lesbian Christians who cannot change their sexual orientation are called and gifted for a life of celibacy" (144) and that this assumption is in tension with Paul's views. He therefore concludes that the rejection of same-sex marriage needs to be reconsidered. In effect he is identifying a category of people who conclude they are not fitted for marriage as traditionalists define it. He then argues that traditionalists must say these people are automatically called and gifted for lifelong celibacy. This traditionalist claim is, he believes, not only implausible and harsh but contradicts New Testament teaching and so the traditionalist teaching must be wrong.

One difficulty with this line of reasoning is that, as noted above, there are other groups of people whose members do not believe they will find fulfilment in traditionally defined marriage. For example, there are those who for whatever reason understand that they cannot make an exclusive and/or lifelong commitment. There are those who believe they could only make such a commitment to someone whom it would be wrong to marry, for example to someone who is already married to someone else or to someone who does not reciprocate or to someone who is not a fellow-believer. Yet others do not feel a call to celibacy and would wish to marry but recognise that the nature of God's call on their lives makes fulfilment in marriage impossible. All these face the prospect that – unless something radical changes – the discipline of self-control may prove to be the same in practice for them as the calling of lifelong celibacy, even though they have not willingly chosen celibacy. Brownson's methodology requires him to ask whether all of these people are also "called and gifted for a life of celibacy" (144) and either say they (unlike gay and lesbian Christians) are or to follow through the logic of his argument in these situations as well.

While clearly each of these categories is distinctive, Brownson needs *either* to show why the category of sexual orientation (particularly if one grants the caveats about his treatment of it) is unique in requiring redefinition of traditionalist marriage doctrine *or* to accept that, given his logic about apparently compelling people to be celibate, other changes may need to be made to traditional Christian sexual ethics.

What is Brownson's Alternative?: Marriage or Marriage-like Union? Accommodation or Affirmation?

Brownson is, finally, not clear about the exact nature of his alternative to traditional teaching. He writes of marriage as “the natural God-given answer to deep and persistent sexual longing” (145). This suggests that he is saying the whole understanding of marriage as a union of a man and a woman is wrong and, given the reality of homosexual orientation, we need to recognise that marriage is gender-blind. At other times, he claims that the logic he attributes to Paul leads to “lives of faithful commitment in gay or lesbian marriages or marriagelike relationships” (143). He here seems to be open to suggesting a new form of life, distinct from marriage. He even floats the idea that this “may not fully reflect God’s purpose seen in heterosexual marriage” (144, summarising Lewis Smedes’ view) and later writes of “at least two ways” (253) in which Christians might argue for embracing a normative vision for gay and lesbian unions.

The distinction he draws between accommodation and full affirmation is an important one but his account of the two approaches fails to do justice to the significant differences between them. He claims that “in either case, what emerges is a vision of a redeemed and transformed ‘natural’ order where the convergence of individual natures, the larger social order, and the natural world ushers in a deeper harmony and provides a transforming vision that can shape and guide individual choices toward a future in which the creation moves toward its culmination in Christ” (253). This description fails to give due acknowledgment to the fact that, in normal understanding, accommodation represents an avowedly “second-best” approach in which God’s best is unable to be embraced due to human brokenness or hardness of heart. In this, as he acknowledges, one comes to terms with “a broken world” by allowing, as a concession, that something that is not “itself expressive of the divine will” (253) is nevertheless permitted within the life of the church. As such the position is significantly different from that of full affirmation where “the inclusion of committed gay and lesbian union represents...an offbeat redemptive purpose in the new creation” (253).

Part of his defence for not exploring these important distinctions is that the book does not seek to address every contemporary question in detail but rather focusses on “the interpretation of Scripture in relationship to these questions” (278). Nevertheless, his failure to explore the theological and other differences between these alternative categories of sanctified same-sex union (marriage or something else) and the level of affirmation or accommodation which can be shown seriously weakens his reading of Scripture.

Although he does not press it strongly, despite the flaws and weaknesses in his own argument Brownson here poses a number of serious challenges to the traditionalist position in the light of his account of biblical teaching on celibacy. Even if Paul’s logic cannot be pushed as far as Brownson would like, can it open up the possibility of recognising that “committed gay and lesbian unions....may represent a substantial moral improvement over anonymous and unrestrained sexual activity” (144)? If they are such a moral improvement, can churches, perhaps drawing an analogy from 1 Corinthians 7, allow “greater tolerance and accommodation toward gays and lesbians in committed relationships” (145)? If not, why has such tolerance and accommodation been possible in most churches towards those who divorce and even subsequently remarry?

Whatever answers are given to these questions (but especially if more limited concessions are not acceptable), Brownson's account is a stark reminder of the difficult demands traditionalist teaching places on those who are exclusively or predominantly same-sex attracted. He also highlights the dangers in simply assuming that marriage to someone of the opposite sex is the solution to those challenges. This places a heavy responsibility on churches and individual Christians who uphold such teaching to understand and support all those – including those with same-sex attraction – who seek to live in accordance with that teaching, particularly when it seems most likely that this will entail embracing a calling of lifelong singleness. A church which upholds biblical teaching but does not equip and support people to live it out is, no less than a church which rejects biblical teaching, being unfaithful to her Lord.

9. Paul on Desire and Homosexuality

In Part Three of the book Brownson sets out four areas of negative “boundary language” in Romans 1.24-27. Each of these, he argues, “illuminates the forms of moral logic that shape and undergird Paul’s discussion” and can “help us discern the underlying forms of moral logic that shape the Bible’s treatment of same-sex eroticism in general” (150). He begins with the characterisation of the actions in terms of “lust and desire” (the title of chapter eight). He claims that same-sex relations were generally viewed in the ancient world in terms of excessive lust and uncontrolled, self-centred desire and, moreover, that in describing them Paul may be alluding to the excesses of the Roman emperor Gaius Caligula. Paul, he argues, does not view sexual desire *per se* as evil but only lustful, out-of-control desire. This more subjective element in Paul’s account is, he notes, often ignored and it does not sit easily with our understanding of sexual orientation. He then critiques traditionalist attempts to distinguish orientation and behaviour, in order to argue that “if we keep Paul’s focus in Romans 1.24-27 on out-of-control desire firmly in focus, we will recognize that these concerns may not be reflected in committed gay or lesbian relationships” (178). As in other areas, it is helpful in evaluation to distinguish Brownson’s handling of the text and his application of it to the contemporary debate.

Paul and Desire

A central issue when the language of desire is used negatively by Paul is determining what is being condemned. Brownson seeks to narrow down the moral logic of the language of desire in these verses to excessive, insatiable, out-of-control, self-centred sexual desire. On this basis he is able to argue that the verses therefore do not directly address those situations (such as committed same-sex unions) which lack “the intensity and excessive self-seeking and self-centred drive that lies at the heart of Paul’s understanding of sinful lust” (168) (although he has at times to note that the logic of the “unnatural” may be in play as well). Although it is claimed that this “self-centred lust that refuses any boundaries” (155) is a major concern in other ancient writers, it is notable that (as in Romans 1) this pattern of desire is not the only description or critique of the behaviour in other writers. For example, the passage he quotes from Philo (at 155) refers to “men mount[ing] males without respect for the sex nature which the active partner shares with the passive” and to the behaviour resulting in a lack of procreative ability.

Paul uses a variety of terms for desire(s) in his writing and – despite Brownson’s chapter title – it is difficult fully to equate any of these simply with “lust” as we commonly understand it. *Epithumia* (v24) is a noun which refers to desire or longing and, as Brownson notes, has a wider range of meaning than simply “lust”. It can have “either neutral or positive meanings” (167) although it has a focus on the intensity of the desire. *Pathos* (v26) speaks of passion (and is also used by Paul at Colossians 3.5 in a list after sexual immorality and impurity and before evil desires; and at 1 Thessalonians 4.5 in relation to the passionate lust of pagans). *Orexis* is simply desire and the verb *ekkaio* means to be kindled or enflamed (v 27, the only uses of these two terms in the New Testament).

Brownson puts too much stress on excessive desire in the description of Romans 1 where it is far from clear that this is Paul's predominant concern. The fact that those described *abandon* "natural" relations (Brownson accepts "leaving behind" as a more accurate translation, 155) rather than *supplement* them with same-sex relationships suggests excessive sexual desire is not Paul's primary problem and that Loader is right to argue that "the focus is not primarily or solely excess, as Martin suggests, but the misdirection it inevitably entails".⁵¹ Loader also cites Ellis (whom Brownson himself quotes favourably in note 29 on 164 against Martin) who makes clear that describing something in terms of excess is not the same as condemning it only on those grounds: "even if Paul does see homosexual activity as the result of excess, we have no reason to conclude that its association with excess is the reason Paul condemns it".⁵²

Paul's Contextual Allusions?

Brownson's critique that traditionalist exegetes often sidestep or downplay a language of lust and passion which does not so easily apply to committed unions, has some weight but at times his arguments about how controlling an interpretive framework it represents in Paul's account are weak. This is particularly so in his appeal (drawing on Elliott⁵³) to echoes of Caligula. The examples he cites (incest, rape, claiming to be divine) are not particularly highlighted in Paul's description. The difficulty is particularly obvious in relation to v26 and the reference to women, where Brownson acknowledges that "the argument seems to focus less on the lustful abuse of power" (159), but then appeals to Caligula's incest with all his sisters (160). It is surprising that he looks to this for a specific context rather than seeking to locate the account of out-of-control lustful sexuality within pagan cultic orgies (as argued by Alison, Townsley and others).⁵⁴

Rather than narrowing the passage down to either the imperial court or temple orgies, it is better to understand it as a standard broad-brush Jewish portrait of Gentile immorality (cf. Ephesians 2.3, 4.22; 1 Thessalonians 4.5; Titus 3.3) which Paul elsewhere describes in terms of the desires of sin (Romans 6.12, 7.8) or "flesh" (Romans 13.14; Galatians 5.16, 24).

What is Meant by "Excessive" Desire?

There are also questions – which Brownson does not really explore – as to how one measures and determines "excess" and "lust". He uses a range of descriptions of the desire condemned here without exploring the differences between them or justifying them as interpretations of the terms Paul uses in his description. He often refers to the *intensity* of the desire (e.g. 167ff), but it is not

⁵¹ Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, p. 305.

⁵² Quoted in Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, pp. 305-6, n49.

⁵³ Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Fortress, 2008).

⁵⁴ James Alison, "'But the Bible Says...'? A Catholic Reading of Romans 1", online at <http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng15.html> and published in James Alison, *Undergoing God: Despatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (DLT, 2007), pp. 123-140. Jeremy Townsley, "Paul, The Goddess Religions and Queers: Romans 1.23-28", online at <http://www.jeramy.org/papers/paulcybl.html> and published in *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, 2011, 130.4, pp. 707-727, and more recently, "Queer Sects in Patristic Commentaries on Romans 1:26-27: Goddess Cults, Free Will, and Sex Contrary to Nature?", online at http://www.academia.edu/2200723/Queer_Sects_in_Patristic_Commentaries_on_Romans_1_26-27_Goddess_Cults_Free_Will_and_Sex_Contrary_to_Nature and published in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 2013, 81.1, pp. 56-79.

Paul on Desire and Homosexuality

acknowledged that a critique on the basis of intense sexual desire can also apply to a committed sexual relationship. This concern with intensity is often merged with the claim that the moral issue is *excessive* desire but at what point a desire becomes excessive is unclear. It could, for example, be argued that if acting in a particular way is *always* wrong then *any* desire to so act, even if not particularly intense, is, in a certain sense, objectively excessive because we should not desire at all something that is wrong. It might therefore be argued that any desire (whether heterosexual or homosexual) for sexual relations with someone other than one's spouse is, in one sense, excessive (even if the desire is only to be classed as lustful and something for which we are culpable if we nurture or indulge it). Related to the language of "excessive", a common description in Brownson's discussion is "out-of-control" desire but it is unclear if this is a necessary criterion and whether this lack of control is something measured subjectively by the agent or something determined by an observer.⁵⁵ At other times the focus is on the *self-serving* nature of the desire (where he again refers to the Vatican's language of "self-indulgence") while another concern is the desire's *scope* or *extent* as voracious and wide-ranging. This opens up a range of important and complex questions in both the interpretation of this and similar passages and in sexual ethics far beyond the question of homosexuality (including how one discerns excessive and lustful desire even for one's spouse). But these are not explored here by Brownson.

Paul's Argument about Desire and Homosexuality Today

Despite these weaknesses, the central challenge remains that the description of lust and desire in Romans 1 and the relationship of the homosexual behaviour mentioned there to excess, seem far removed from the experience and arguments of many gay Christians today. Here I simply note three issues that deserve further treatment. First, the phenomenon of sexual attraction and our default interpretive category of orientation are not simply able to be mapped onto Paul's language of "desire" and even less "lust" – even though, as discussed elsewhere, our categories are much more complex than Brownson allows. Second, there are major questions (discussed below in relation to "nature") as to whether it is right to read Romans 1 as primarily describing the experience of individuals. Third, there are advocates of gay relationships – including Christian advocates – who argue that the pattern of homosexual desire is such that it cannot be expected to be monogamous. Leading gay Christian clergyman Malcolm Johnson is not alone when he argues, "consensual sex between men is not sinful if it causes no pain or hurt to each other or other people"⁵⁶ and the work of Andrew Yip⁵⁷ gives some support to Johnson's claim that only "a tiny number of male couples are physically faithful to each other".

⁵⁵ Interestingly, he later (at p. 158, note 15) denies that Romans 1 speaks of sin as slavery, in order to rebut Gagnon's appeal to Romans 6; but out-of-control desire appears very similar to Paul's idea of slavery to sin and Brownson does earlier speak of Romans 1 describing being "enslaved to lustful passions" (154).

⁵⁶ Malcolm Johnson, *Diary of A Gay Priest: The Tighrope Walker* (Christian Alternative Books), 2013.

⁵⁷ Andrew Yip, "Gay Male Christian Couples and Sexual Exclusivity", *Sociology* 31.2 (1997), pp.289-306, abstract online at <http://soc.sagepub.com/content/31/2/289.short>

10. What is the Place for the Language of Purity and Impurity in a Biblical Sexual Ethic ?

Brownson's ninth chapter focusses on a single word in Romans 1.24 – *akatharsia* (impurity or uncleanness) – and the moral logic surrounding the broader issues of purity and impurity in relation to sexuality. He explores the Old Testament use of purity and then proposes three movements that occur in the New Testament (discussed below). On the basis of this he argues that Paul uses the language of impurity to refer not to the objective realm of external actions which are wrong but to the internal realm of dispositions and attitudes. Here he again stresses that Paul's concern is "particularly lust (excessive desire) and licentiousness (lack of restraint)" (203) and argues that this understanding means it is open to serious question whether disciplined and faithful same-sex unions today can be characterised as "impurity".

Is there Movement from Old to New Testament?: Paul's use of akatharsia

In Romans 1, the term *akatharsia* appears only in verse 24 but it is used elsewhere in Paul, particularly in vice lists. In setting out his case, Brownson does not offer a systematic account of this usage but instead interprets the term in the light of his proposed three "basic movements in redefining purity in the New Testament". These are briefly set out in under four pages (189-93) and leave a number of key unanswered questions.

Movement One: from the external to the internal

Brownson first proposes that there is the New Testament "a movement away from defining purity *externally* toward defining purity in terms of the motives and dispositions of the *heart and will*" (189). This stress on the "subjective" and "internal" proves crucial to his whole argument but is set out in a single paragraph with reference to only a few texts. In relation to Paul and sexuality it is defended by noting that "Paul regularly links the language of sexual impurity with reference to lust (*epithumia*) and licentiousness, or lack of self-restraint (*aselgeia*)" (190). He ignores, however, that the linkage is even more with *porneia* (2 Corinthians 12.21, Galatians 5.19, Ephesians 5.3, Colossians 3.5, 1 Thessalonians 4.3-7). This, as he implicitly acknowledges (194), falls more on the "objective" side of patterns of behaviour.

Brownson also fails to explore the extent to which, in as much as this is a movement, it is more a *movement toward* a focus on the heart which maintains but then deepens and internalises a concern with external actions (so, for example, a focus on the uncleanness of lust does not deny the uncleanness of adultery). His language, however, suggests, a *movement away* from external purity. His account comes perilously close to suggesting that there are no impure actions which, even when the agent lacks impure motives, can render the agent impure. This is a view which appears to have parallels with some of the errors Paul sought to correct in Corinth.⁵⁸ He has to reaffirm in 1 Corinthians the importance of the body and the seriousness of acts of sexual immorality. This may have been because the Christians there misunderstood or twisted Jesus' teaching about nothing from outside entering a person defiling them by applying it to sex.

⁵⁸ I am grateful to Dr. David Wenham for suggesting this parallel.

Movement Two: from separateness to engagement

The second movement is “away from *defensiveness and separateness* toward *confidence and engagement* in matters of purity and impurity” (190). Here he appeals mainly to Jesus’ ministry but also refers to 1 Corinthians 7.14. This is clearly an important New Testament theme but its focus is more on ritual purity than moral purity. Brownson does not even acknowledge the strong theme of separation in Paul, particularly in relation to sexual sin, which reflects the OT response to impurity. So there is the call to flee sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6.12) and to expel and not even eat with the immoral brother because of the dangers of contamination (1 Corinthians 5) as well as warnings of exclusion from God’s kingdom (1 Corinthians 6.10) (also seen in relation to the new creation in Revelation 21.27, noted by Brownson at 193). These texts suggest this “movement” is not as simple as he portrays.

Movement Three: From creation to new creation

Thirdly, Brownson claims that in the New Testament there is “a shift in defining purity, away from a backward look to the old creation to a forward look toward the new creation” (191). He adds caveats about how “this shift of focus....cannot and must not be absolutized, as if the original creation narratives no longer have anything to teach us” (192) but fails to consider whether the clear echoes of creation order in Romans 1 might have any bearing on the language of impurity.

This is particularly surprising given that Brooten, in her study of Romans 1, looks at the work of Mary Douglas (as does Brownson himself, and Countryman whom he also quotes). This explains how purity and impurity relate to order in Genesis, where “those species are unclean which are imperfect members of their class, or whose class itself confounds the general scheme of the world”.⁵⁹ Brooten is clear that this is the background to Paul’s argument in relation to love among women (an argument Brooten herself rejects):

This description fits ancient homoeroticism perfectly. Homoerotically involved women do not conform fully to the class of women....To define as impurity this blurring of gender boundaries is to solidify the boundaries themselves....I am applying her [Douglas’] insight about purity to Paul’s use of “impurity” in Rom 1.24 and simply stating the obvious: homoeroticism is fundamentally about gender. Impurity applied to gender thus means that people are not maintaining clear gender polarity and complementarity....[T]aking seriously Paul’s description of homoeroticism as “impurity” helps us to see it as a societal, rather than a private concern.⁶⁰

The failure to engage with or even note this alternative understanding of purity in Romans 1 is a major weakness in Brownson. The same applies to his treatment of Leviticus where he acknowledges that “preserving what was perceived as the order of creation” (269) is part of the moral logic but then appeals to the three movements to avoid addressing its continuing significance. These problems in his third movement highlight the much more fundamental problem in Brownson’s

⁵⁹ Douglas quoted in Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 235.

⁶⁰ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, pp. 235, 237.

What is the Place for the Language of Purity and Impurity in a Biblical Sexual Ethic ?

account which extends well beyond the discussion of purity: it appears that he has no place for the order of creation in a Christian sexual ethic.

Impurity in Romans 1.24

A further textual difficulty is that at no point does Brownson address the fact that Paul relates *akatharsia* in 1.24 not only to “the lusts of their hearts” (a point he stresses, at 198, for example) but also, perhaps more strongly, to “the degrading of their bodies among themselves”. This is clearly not a matter of internal disposition but of external physical conduct. The construction in the Greek is open to various interpretations but there is clearly a strong connection between this and impurity. One possibility – the exegetical understanding – would read the reference to degrading of bodies as a spelling out of the meaning of *akatharsia*. Even on other readings there is clearly a strong connection with behaviour. Loader, for example, talks of the phrase “into impurity” indicating that Paul “sees these desires leading people to commit acts which count as sexually immoral”,⁶¹ and cites Jewett’s comment that “Although the ritual aspects of impurity were redefined and partially abandoned in the NT, the deep sense of revulsion about polluting behaviour remains”.⁶²

Internal Disposition and External Action

This link in Paul between *akatharsia* and what we do with our bodies returns us to the difficulty in the decisive first of the three movements. While there are important distinctions between internal dispositions and external actions, these two cannot be totally separated because dispositions are expressed through and discerned in particular actions.

In relation to *akatharsia* the problem is even sharper. Despite Brownson’s extravagant claim that, “in the NT, without exception, the language of ‘impurity’ and ‘uncleanness’ is reframed – away from an ‘objective’ approach that regards impurity simply as ‘dirty’ action or bodily state” (197), the use of *akatharsia* is not in fact removed from particular acts. This is seen most clearly (a) in its close connection to *porneia* in many passages as noted above, (b) in its use as an umbrella term for a range of actions and dispositions described in the verses preceding 1 Thessalonians 4.7, and (c) in the language of indulging in *akatharsia* in 2 Corinthians 12.21 (cf. also Ephesians 4.19). So Loader is clear that Paul uses the term “to refer to sexual *wrongdoing*”⁶³ which places it more on the external side of Brownson’s too stark internal/external, subjective/objective division. Brownson’s assertion that “impurity is thus marked in Rom 1.24, as it is everywhere else in Paul, by excessive lust and lack of self-restraint, which in turn leads to sexual immorality” (197) is therefore very difficult to substantiate from the use of the various terms by Paul. Indeed, at least as strong a case could be made from Paul’s usage that the language of impurity refers not primarily to the subjective *origins* and *causes* (e.g. in excessive desire) of immorality but the *outcomes* and *consequences* of performing certain actions which can also therefore describe the actions themselves.

⁶¹ Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, p. 303.

⁶² Jewett quoted in Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, p. 303, n 40.

⁶³ Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, p. 235, italics added.

11. Sex and Shame

Three times in Romans 1.24-27 Paul uses the language of dishonour or shame. Brownson argues that this moral logic needs to be explored and explained by reference to honour-shame cultures and in particular those of the ancient world. He sees this as tied to definite gender roles where women's sexual conduct shames either their father or husband and where men who were penetrated were degraded as this was to treat them as a woman. He argues that while honour and shame are universal experiences, their specific forms vary with time and place. While gay and lesbian people are often made to feel shame, the behaviour in Romans 1 is shameful for reasons – "the presence of lust, licentiousness, self-centredness, abuse, and the violation of gender roles that were widely accepted in the ancient world" (222) – that do not necessarily apply to committed relationships today. Here again Brownson helpfully highlights an element in Paul's critique which we can easily pass over as it is less salient in our culture. His handling of it however raises concerns in relation to the text and the context and how these relate to today.

Honour and Shame in Paul

Brownson offers rather limited textual work either on the passage in Romans 1 or the use of language of honour and shame elsewhere in Paul (other than in 1 Corinthians 11). The reader would, for example, not easily realise that there are three different terms used in Romans. There is only a passing reference (204) to the two related terms (the verb *atimazo* in v24 and the noun *atimia* in v26) and even less attention to *aschemosyne*, the noun in v27. The usage elsewhere and its important features are not considered. For example: (1) the only other use of *atimazo* in Paul is in Romans 2.23 where it is not the breaking of social norms but the dishonouring of God which is his concern; (2) in the LXX the language of *aschemosyne* is particularly concentrated (although not in relation to homosexuality) in Leviticus 18 and 20 (appearing 32 times in these two chapters); while (3) its other New Testament uses (Revelation 16.15 and the related adjective in 1 Corinthians 12.23) also refer to genitals. Nor is there any exploration of the different concerns when the terminology appears in Romans 1 – actions which dishonour *bodies* in v24, *passions* of dishonour in v26 and *acts* which are shameless in v27 – and how these differences may be significant in the argument. Paul's various statements are all simply subsumed into "part of a larger cultural reality that scholars describe using the language of 'honour and shame'" (204). The question of why there is a focus on genital acts and the dishonouring of bodies is left unaddressed, with the focus being put instead on honour and shame in relation to gender and the social status of people.

Does Paul Refer to Lesbianism?

One area which does get attention is whether Paul even refers to female homosexuality. Here Brownson argues that "there is good reason to question the contemporary assumption that Romans 1.26 refers to lesbian sexual behaviour" (208). Instead he argues that the real concern is with shameless acts which for women would include "other forms of heterosexual misbehaviour between men and women, either oral/anal intercourse or simply a failure to act in sexually proper ways" (207). The strongest argument for this is that it was the only reading until the late fourth century, one favoured by Augustine among others. Brownson, however, totally ignores the fact that the major study of this subject by Brooten (providing a strong rebuttal of Miller whom Brownson cites in

support of his reading), strongly argues that it “refers specifically to sexual relations between women”.⁶⁴ Similarly, Loader is quite clear that the link with v27 is important, for “those...who see ‘natural’ here as having the same sense as in the following verse and see both verses addressing same-sex sexual relations, are almost certainly hearing Paul aright”.⁶⁵ As in other places, Brownson’s failure to provide an exegesis of the passage as a whole, his separation of this discussion from his discussion of “natural” (acknowledged in note 5, 208), and his lack of engagement with biblical creation language and theology, are all part of the problem here.

Paul’s Cultural Context and his own Moral Logic

If Brownson’s attention to the text is limited, the same cannot be said about his attention to context. There is much here of value and importance but it remains unclear exactly what Brownson is arguing or indeed claiming that Paul is arguing. A large part of the argument relies on linking shame to excess passion but the case for this close connection is not convincingly made and, as argued above, his treatment of excess passion is also susceptible to criticisms.

The other main concern is that Brownson believes that Paul condemned the behaviour because it “violated established social expectations of the time regarding gender – and regarding behaviours that are appropriate to males and females” (211), and in particular because it violated “established gender roles of that time and culture, understood in terms of masculine rationality and honour” (218). This seems to suggest that Paul here simply takes on board his cultural honour/shame code (and the subsequent argument is that our cultural code is different so we need not and should not follow Paul and his culture). Brownson, however, acknowledges that this is not strictly what is happening. The culture saw the passive partner as dishonoured but “the passive partner is not singled out for special reproach” (209) by Paul who condemns both partners. Despite this major difference he seems to believe that Paul’s moral logic was, as in the wider culture, that in homosexual acts men took the role of women: “dishonour or shame was more particularly a result of either actively degrading others into the female role or shamefully adopting the passive female role for oneself” (211). Nothing in the text itself makes this claim (a test used by Brownson to rule out gender complementarity as part of Paul’s moral logic) and Brownson acknowledges Paul’s distinctively egalitarian view of men and women in relation to sex in 1 Corinthians 7 (where the man’s body belongs to his wife and, far from being active, he yields it to her). It is therefore not at all clear why breaking the active male and passive female roles should still be considered so shameful by Paul and indeed extended to include the active male partner. One option would be that Paul retained some view of the distinctiveness (or complementarity) of men and women in God’s purposes, but Brownson’s arguments against gender complementarity as part of God’s purpose seems to have prevented him from considering this option.

Gospel and Culture

The wider problem is that Brownson’s whole argument presumes, on the part of Paul, an uncritical acceptance of the wider culture’s views of honour and shame. This is despite the fact that we know that, as Brownson has to acknowledge, “the New Testament also challenged the honour-shame

⁶⁴ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 249.

⁶⁵ Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, p. 311.

Sex and Shame

codes of its day” (214) and rejected various sexual practices (such as sex with slaves, 209) which were not considered shameful in wider culture. This critique of honour-shame culture should be unsurprising coming from Jews who followed a crucified Messiah. It means, however, that there is no basis for the uncritical assumption made in this chapter that when we read Paul’s use of honour and shame in these verses we can avoid any serious study of the wider textual context (for example the proper honouring of God and the echoes of Genesis) and simply interpret the text in terms of the surrounding culture’s honour codes.

Brownson speaks positively of the call “to reframe prevailing codes of honour and shame in light of the gospel” (214) but he offers very little guidance as to what that means. In particular he seems to have no place for creation order as a trans-cultural guide and critical tool. Here he seems to hold that Paul reframes his culture by extending shame to both parties because “the summons to justice, love, and religious faithfulness” (210) render the active partner equally culpable. Nevertheless, because Paul still erroneously accepts and presumes the culture’s honour/shame code based on gender roles, Brownson must conclude that he did not follow the gospel’s logic fully. If Paul had really understood the gospel he would not, it seems, have widened the culture’s honour/shame logic to encompass both parties but rejected it altogether and instead would have addressed homosexuality counter-culturally in terms of justice, covenant love and faithfulness.

The Importance of Culture and Shame

Despite these problems, Brownson’s analysis here has two important challenges to traditionalist understandings. First, it reminds us that Paul was seeking to nurture a distinctive Christian witness within his culture and that our culture is significantly different. Among the consequences of this is that we need to be aware of how our teaching relates to wider culture and whether, and in what ways, what we say and how we say it has to be adapted to that culture. In this area we face the major challenge that homosexuality has, on the whole, moved in the West (but not in other cultures) from being a matter of shame to being something that is honoured. If anything, it is those who uphold traditional Christian understandings who often are made to feel shame and are dishonoured in wider society. Second, the traditionalist understanding has often uncritically accepted the wider historic culture of shame and this, as Brownson points out, has often brought great distress to those who experience same-sex attraction. This is an attitude about which traditionalists need to be much more aware and which they need to reject. The example of the testimonies on the Living Out website is, however, evidence that refusing the stigma of shame does not entail abandoning the traditional Christian ethic.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ <http://www.livingout.org/>

12. Isn't Homosexuality "Unnatural"?

The final chapter of Part Three turns to the pattern of moral logic most often associated with Romans 1 and with much Christian rejection of homosexual practice in the tradition: the claim that it is "unnatural". Brownson accepts that this is indeed Paul's assessment of what he describes but argues that, shaped by Stoic thought, there are three components in Paul's understanding of what is "natural": individual disposition, social good and physical biology. He explores how Paul's integrated understanding of these led him to his conclusion but argues that this holistic approach would not necessarily yield such a conclusion today in relation to faithful marriage-like same-sex unions.

The "Natural" in Judaism

Compared to his discussion of other key boundary language, Brownson spends quite some time exploring Paul's use of the key term (*physis*) outside Roman 1 (although as noted below his treatment is problematic in places). However, he rather too rapidly dismisses Old Testament influence. He does so on the flawed basis that because that particular term is not used in the LXX, "the concept of 'nature' in the sense that Paul uses it in Romans 1 is not found explicitly in the Hebrew Bible" (225). He thus concludes that "nature" is "not an inherently Jewish concept, and it plays no role in either Hebrew or Aramaic Jewish literature" (225). The lack of a particular word does not, of course, mean that the concept is lacking and some engagement with the wide literature on the moral significance of nature and creation and the place of natural law in the Old Testament and wider Jewish thought would have been of value (for example, scholars such as Barton,⁶⁷ Levering,⁶⁸ Novak,⁶⁹ Bockmuehl,⁷⁰ Brown⁷¹ and vanDrunen⁷²). It is also very surprising that there is no reference to the important work of Pronk who, coming from a Reformed tradition similar to Brownson, offered an extensive re-interpretation of the natural in relation to homosexuality in order to argue for similar conclusions.⁷³ The main consequence of limiting the Jewish influence is that Brownson presents Paul as simply following a pattern of trying "to bring Jewish understandings of ethics and the law into a dialogue with Hellenistic philosophy, particularly Stoicism" (225). He makes no mention of the strong echoes of Genesis in the passage nor does he explore the moral significance of a Jewish doctrine of creation or the place of the natural in Old Testament ethics.

Brownson's Proposed Three Dimensions of "Nature" in Paul

As noted, Brownson critiques reductionist understandings of "natural" (and hence "unnatural") and offers a more comprehensive three-fold analysis which he claims provides a better, more holistic understanding of this important term. Each part of this merits brief comment in relation to the

⁶⁷ Originating with his doctoral work on the oracles in Amos, John Barton discusses the role of the natural in Old Testament ethics in a number of his works, including *Understanding Old Testament Ethics* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) and *Ethics and the Old Testament* 2nd revised edition (SCM, 2010).

⁶⁸ Matthew Levering, *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach* (OUP, 2012).

⁶⁹ David Novak, *Natural Law in Judaism* (CUP, 2008).

⁷⁰ Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches* (Baker, 2000).

⁷¹ William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 1998).

⁷² David VanDrunen, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* (Acton Institute, 2012) and more recently and in great detail his *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Eerdmans, 2014).

⁷³ Pim Pronk, *Against Nature?: Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality* (Eerdmans, 1993).

meaning of the term and in relation to its use in Romans 1 and Paul's understanding of homosexuality.

Nature as individual nature or disposition

First, Brownson understands nature to refer to an individual's nature or disposition. Here his argument from Paul's use elsewhere is not as strong as it appears. He looks particularly at Romans 2.14 which he reads as describing what Gentiles do by nature (i.e. instinctively) or "in accord with one's nature or identity" (226). No mention is made of the alternative reading, favoured by a number of modern commentators such as Cranfield, Wright and Gathercole and with supporters in the tradition including Augustine.⁷⁴ This understands "by nature" to qualify and refer to the actors in question (i.e., Gentiles) rather than to the actions as springing from the individual's nature. It means "by birth" and so refers to those who are Gentiles by birth and yet also (as Gentile Christians) do what the law requires. This reference to "by birth" also seems the best reading of Galatians 2.15 (which Brownson does not explore) and probably Ephesians 2.3 (which he seeks to claim for his reading, but see, e.g. Thielman's commentary on Ephesians).⁷⁵

It is also far from clear that Paul thought of each individual having their own "true personal and individual natures" (245), distinct from other individuals, rather than sharing in a common, shared human nature. This, however, is crucial for Brownson's argument on Romans 1. He sees this as arguing against the behaviour described on the basis that it is "unnatural" because it involves abandoning "one's personal nature or disposition" (230). He simply dismisses Gagnon and Schmidt who argue for a corporate rather than individual reading of the "exchange" described in Romans 1 but then claims that "Richard Hays is more precise and more helpful" (230). He does not acknowledge that Hays too argues that "The charge is a corporate indictment of pagan society, not a narrative about the 'rake's progress' of particular individuals".⁷⁶ We do not read vv20-23 and v25 as claiming that every individual moves from a conscious knowledge of God which they reject and instead purposefully chooses to exchange this for idols and lies. We read this as an account of corporate humanity. Similarly, there is no need to claim that vv26ff is offering a biography of each individual. While it is welcome that Brownson rejects Boswell's attempt "to read 'nature' in Paul to refer *only* to one's individual disposition" (231) he himself still gives too much weight to *individual* disposition as important and to Romans 1 as personal biography in Paul's thought.

Nature as social norms

Second, the "natural" in Romans 1 is also, Brownson claims, to be understood as a matter of social norms: there is not a sharp contrast between nature and society in the understanding of Paul and the ancient world. It is unclear what he is saying here. Is he primarily rejecting a purely individualist understanding of the "natural" and rightly emphasising the social and communal aspect of what is

⁷⁴ See N.T. Wright, *Romans in The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume X (Abingdon, 2002), pp. 441-2. Those rejecting this view include James Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A (Word, 1988), p. 98; and, approaching it in relation to debates about natural law, David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, pp. 231ff.

⁷⁵ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* (Baker, 2010), p 127.

⁷⁶ Richard B. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14.1 (1986), pp. 184-215, here at p. 200.

Isn't Homosexuality "Unnatural"?

"natural" (against Boswell)? Or is he instead insisting that any appeal to "nature" is always in reality only an appeal to one's particular cultural and social norms which are viewed as "natural"? The latter appears to reduce the apparently cross-cultural references to "nature" to nothing more than a statement of the writer's cultural norms or social conventions. This in turn prevents any appeal to "nature" to critique those existing cultural norms.

The main argument used by Brownson and others here concerns Paul's use of *physis* in 1 Corinthians 11.14-15, where Calvin is one of many commentators who argue that the term refers to "what was accepted by common consent and usage at that time".⁷⁷ The question is not whether the phrase *can* have this meaning but whether there is not scope for a wider sense, as in Thiselton's translation as "ordering of how things are". This "ordering" includes but is not reducible to the particular social and cultural context and construction of "nature". It also encompasses "the way humans are created i.e. their constitution as men and women" and "the physical reality of how the world is ordered".⁷⁸ It may be that, taken as a whole, Brownson's three-fold account is not too far removed from Thiselton's perspective but, as elsewhere, there appears to be a neglect (bordering on a rejection) of any sense of a divine ordering of creation. This leads to the third sense of "nature" Brownson highlights.

Nature as anatomy and biology

Referring to traditionalist writers such as Gagnon, Schmidt and Hays, Brownson accepts that "nature" also refers to anatomy and biology. He acknowledges that in the ancient world "natural" sex was related to biology and anatomy, in particular to procreation. Indeed, he believes this "would have been immediately clear – even self-evident – to Paul's readers" (239). The question here is whether, by focussing simply on anatomy and biology and then on procreation, Brownson has not lost sight of the wider sense of "nature as order" which is lacking in his other two senses but contained within the use of the term. This recognition of a natural, created order allows a critique of culture that is not simply biological, and relates to what Thiselton describes above, an ordering of creation which includes but is not reducible to the givens of physical anatomy and biology.

Appealing to 'Nature' Today

In relation to the first two senses of 'nature', Brownson argues that we can accept Paul's categories but would need to apply them differently today. He links "nature" as individual disposition to sexual orientation arguing (as explored and critiqued above) that Paul lacked not just our modern sense of this category but "did not recognise even the possibility that persons might be naturally inclined....toward desiring others of the same sex" (229). In other situations, Brownson is happy to attribute ideas to Paul which are not explicit in his writing but found in the surrounding culture (for example males as superior and active compared to females) but here he rejects this as a possibility in relation to any knowledge of a disposition to those of the same sex. This contrasts with his rather uncritical assumption that Paul's moral logic is that of the wider culture, something which becomes clear in relation to the second sense of nature. Here he relates the language of "unnatural" in terms of "against social convention" to the earlier criticisms of the behaviour as a "manifestation of

⁷⁷ Calvin cited in Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 2000), p. 844.

⁷⁸ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 844.

passion and lust, as shameful” (236) and against nature because of the subversion of male rationality, dominance and honour.

In both these senses of nature, Brownson wishes to argue that our different situation prevents us from simply accepting Paul’s judgment of homosexual behaviour as “unnatural”: (1) we recognise that for some there is a “natural” individual disposition towards those of the same sex in a way that Paul did not and (2) we do not share his cultural assumptions about “natural” gender roles. While the question of cultural transfer here raises some challenges, both of these hermeneutical moves have been critiqued above and elsewhere: (1) not only may Paul have known of those whose disposition was to the same sex (and Brownson’s own account of sexual orientation is problematic) but his focus is not exclusively on an individual’s personal disposition and (2) it is far from clear in the biblical text that Paul was really working with his culture’s conceptions of gender roles in the way claimed by Brownson.

“Nature” Today and Procreation

The third sense of “nature” is more difficult for Brownson to sidestep because clearly biology remains the same and same-sex unions remain inherently non-procreative (Brownson does not open up the debate about the use of reproductive technologies). If “Paul’s references to sexual misbehaviour in Romans 1.24-27 as ‘unnatural’ spring in part from their non-procreative character” (255) why should we not still judge them as unnatural today at least in this respect? The reason this judgment is also no longer binding remains unclear. It appears to relate to the fact that we must not reduce marriage or sexual union to procreation (though Brownson does not show that Paul did so and his claims on this, as argued above, are open to challenge). Another reason seems to be the fact that contraception “has altered the way we think about the relationship between sex and procreation, dramatically increasing the significance of sex as intimate bonding in addition to – and in some cases displacing – the procreative meaning and purpose of sex” (246). Brownson, however, offers no alternative account of how we should relate sex, procreation and the “natural” in the light of Scripture other than the descriptive statement that “the procreative purpose of sex remains an important – though not all-defining – aspect of sexual existence for most men and women” (254).

There is a deeper problem. In chapter 11 Brownson again rejects the view that Paul’s judgment on homosexual behaviour as “unnatural” is based on gender or anatomical complementarity. However, he never addresses the indisputable fact that the non-procreative character of such sex (which he grants renders it “unnatural” in Paul’s eyes) is precisely because “natural” procreative sex requires, as a necessary but not sufficient condition, a man and a woman. In other words, the “unnatural” judgment based on lack of procreative capacity is inescapably also a judgment based on the same-sex nature of the sexual union. The lack of any gender difference is why all same-sex unions are non-procreative. Unless we are to claim that procreation is a result of the Fall, theologically this must be related to a doctrine of God’s good creation. Here again his consistent failure to offer any account of the meaning and significance of humanity’s differentiation into male and female becomes a major weakness in his reasoning.

Isn't Homosexuality "Unnatural"?

Does "Unnatural" Mean "Wrong"?

In seeking to overcome this hurdle that Paul believes homosexual behaviour to be unnatural because it is non-procreative, Brownson introduces a further complexity and tension into his argument. At the start of the chapter he is clear that "Paul certainly does equate what is 'unnatural' with what is wrong" (224). A central argument is that Paul's three-fold account of what is 'natural' remains crucial for a Christian ethic: "the call to live in accordance with nature still embodies an important vision worthy of our consideration" and contemporary Christians can learn from the ancients and "reach toward an analogous contemporary synthesis" as "the need for a comprehensive and embodied vision of what is natural remains as urgent as it ever was" (247). However, Brownson then relates "nature" to redemption in a manner that questions its value as a moral guide. He states that "one does not need to probe too deeply before encountering tensions between the comprehensive Stoic concept of nature (which almost all scholars think is evoked in Romans 1) and the will and purpose of God revealed in Paul's gospel of Christ" (248). In particular, echoing the argument in his proposed third movement in the biblical account of purity, he holds that "for Paul, Christian life entailed a powerful and important movement from the old creation to the new creation" and "redemption moves beyond the framework of 'nature'" (248). He claims that, in contrast to Jewish writers, Paul radically re-read the law and held that "the resurrection of Christ opened up a vision of a new creation in which the 'second Adam' fulfilled the intent of the original creation, but moved far beyond it as well, drawing humanity into participation in the Trinitarian divine communion" (249).

Here, it appears, Brownson contradicts, or at least very heavily qualifies, his earlier statements about the ethical significance of the natural. At least some of the examples he cites (but fails to justify) in defence of his view are also highly contentious. For example, most egalitarians read Paul's statements about gender equality as a gospel-based restoration of our original equality in creation, overcoming the effects of the Fall, not an eschatological transcending of an original created patriarchy. Brownson, in contrast, claims that accepting women in leadership in the church "suggests that 'natural' gender roles are already being displaced in the emerging new creation....the 'new creation' does not merely restore the old natural order but transforms it" (251). Although there is little detail, and it may be that 'natural' here refers more to the second sense of cultural convention, the overall impression is that the new creation transcends and effectively eliminates any created order of gender difference (whose significance even in creation is never explained). So he writes that just as the supposedly "natural" division of circumcised and uncircumcised no longer has any meaning in Christ, "likewise, the 'natural' division of humanity into male and female for the purpose of procreation loses its ultimate significance in Christ" (248-9).

Conclusion

Once again there is much of value in Brownson's account, notably his holistic explanation of "nature" and the importance of understanding the cultural and social context of its biblical usages. Whether or not one accepts his understanding of "individual disposition" as part of Paul's argument, a concern with the individual's personal history, self-understanding and situation is indeed of vital importance in the church's pastoral teaching and practice. However, the greatest disappointment is his failure to offer, even in his discussion of "nature", a study of the Genesis/creation language in Romans 1 and his lack of engagement (whether in Judaism, in Paul, or for today) with the doctrine of

creation's goodness and in particular with the significance of being male and female in a Christian understanding of humanity.

13. Reading the “Classic Texts” Other Than Romans 1

Brownson’s method of setting out a broader biblical sexual ethic and a detailed study of the moral logic of Romans 1 means that the other classic biblical texts appealed to in debates about homosexuality are only examined in detail at the end of the book. There, in his final chapter, he provides a clear outline and summary of his central argument in the preceding chapters before asking *why* the biblical texts are negative about same-sex behaviour. Here his argument is that “the evidence suggests that there are no forms of moral logic underpinning these passages that clearly and unequivocally forbid all contemporary forms of committed same-sex intimate relationships” (277).

Brownson’s Method

Before evaluating his treatment of the specific texts, a number of comments need to be made about his broader methodology and claims.

First, it is significant and problematic that, apart from Romans 1, he leaves his discussion of the classic texts until this final stage. Rather than letting these texts contribute to his broader understanding of a biblical sexual ethic or interpretation of Romans 1 he here seeks to fit them into the moral logic he has developed in his wider approach. As a result, he tends to avoid aspects of the texts which do not fit with that proposed moral logic.

Second, in explaining his method he refers not only to “uncovering the deeper values and commitments” through “a broader exegetical exploration of the whole witness of Scripture” but also the need to do this “along with other ancient texts” (259). This highlights what has already been evident – that other ancient texts (relating to honour and shame, gender roles etc.) play a significant role alongside Scripture in his account of moral logic. While in itself this is right and proper – Scripture has to be read in its original context – these ancient texts at times seem to impose their own values and commitments on his readings or at least distort rather than uncover the values and commitments which are actually present in the biblical text.

Third, by denying that the prohibitions are universal and by rejecting any trans-cultural moral logic based on being created male and female, Brownson’s account of the various texts has, as in standard revisionist readings, to postulate a variety of forms of moral logic and a wide but selective range of patterns of homosexual behaviour. So the objections are to “either an expression of the monstrous ego of the Roman imperial house, or an expression of prostitution, child abuse, or promiscuity, an absence of mutuality, a neglect of the obligation to procreate, or a failure of persons to express with their bodies what they say with the rest of their lives” (261). This is despite the texts themselves lacking any obvious differentiation of, or limited reference to, these varied forms of sexual behaviour.

Fourth, there is a marked lack of engagement with biblical commentaries on the key texts studied. This means several key elements are not explored, particularly those that would weaken his case.

Genesis 19 and Judges 19

Brownson's treatment of Sodom and Gomorrah along with Judges 19 is relatively uncontroversial. He argues, in line with many, that the violent nature of these actions challenges any appeal to them for assessing committed relationships and also notes that the offer of women highlights the different moral world of the narrative.

Leviticus 18 and 20

In his handling of the two Leviticus texts (Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13) Brownson is much less secure, even slipping, uncharacteristically, into a caricature of traditionalist understandings as part of his critique. Does anyone seriously seek "to build an ethic based on the prohibitions of Leviticus alone" (273)? Four areas in his own reading are unclear or unpersuasive.

First, Brownson seems initially to grant that, as part of a purity code, the law reflects an "attempt, in general, to replicate the order of the original creation" (269). However, he then uses his argument about purity to transcend that point with a claimed canonical trajectory away from externals and from original creation. This sense of created order also finds some support in his acknowledgment that there is a concern with the male seed and the need for procreation. Later, however, he attacks the idea that the moral logic is a "failure to act out one's proper gender role in sexual relationships" (271) and thus appears to claim that Leviticus itself is uninterested in any sense of a proper gender role given in creation order. It is thus unclear whether he accepts an appeal to creation underlying the Levitical code but understands it to be relativised by the canon as a whole or whether he rejects any such appeal.

Second, Brownson argues that the text is concerned only with cultic, idolatrous patterns of homosexual behaviour. He is right to highlight this context; even Gagnon acknowledges that this is the most common form of homosexual behaviour in the ancient world. However, his attempt to root it in the text by appealing to a few verses fails to consider the fact that most of the surrounding verses relate to patterns of sexual behaviour which were either unlikely to be part of cultic practice (forms of incest) or unlikely to be prohibited only in the context of idolatrous religion. It seems highly implausible that any of the sexual behaviour condemned in these chapters – including the male homosexual behaviour – would only have been condemned in the context of pagan cultic practice. Furthermore, the key prohibitions of Leviticus 20.10-16 can be seen as set out in a structure which is delineating different forms of distance from the norm of sex between a man and a woman within marriage.⁷⁹ This is at least as plausible a moral logic as some of those Brownson proposes.

Third, the claim that the tie to idolatry is supported by the use of *toevah* elsewhere in the Old Testament is not set alongside other evidence about the use of key terms. This evidence includes: (1) the fact that the only specific sexual act in the whole of the Pentateuch which is described in these terms is the homosexual behaviour condemned in these verses; (2) the fact that there is a term (*qedisim*) used elsewhere in the Old Testament for male homosexual cultic prostitutes but this

⁷⁹ This is most fully and persuasively argued by Jonathan Burnside in *God, Justice and Society: Aspects of Law and Legality in the Bible* (OUP, 2010), pp. 349ff.

Reading the “Classic Texts” Other Than Romans 1

is not used here; and, finally (3) that although *toevah* is indeed often used elsewhere in relation to idolatry there is a wide range of conduct which can be categorised as “abominations”; there is no simple one-to-one correspondence with idolatry.

Finally, a major reason Brownson gives for rejecting an appeal to created gender complementarity is that “there is no parallel injunction against same-sex relations between women in Leviticus” (271). This, however, is not decisive, given – as he argues – the patriarchal context of the text and the concern (as with bestiality, where women are mentioned) with penetrative sex.

In summary, the Levitical texts are much more complex than he allows and interpretations of moral logic based on creation and the sanctity of marriage are at least as plausible as those he offers.

New Testament Vice Lists -- 1 Corinthians 6 & 1 Timothy 1

Turning to the New Testament vice lists in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1, Brownson again seeks to limit the scope of these prohibitions. He then argues that his alternative forms of moral logic are better explanations as to why the behaviour is condemned. He makes great play about terminology (“the most important thing to realize about these texts is that the reference is found in multiple words, not just one” (273)) but his handling of this and other matters is out of line with the scholarly consensus.

First, he pays no attention to the widely accepted view that the novel term Paul uses in both passages – *arsenokoitai* – is coined from two words found in the Greek (LXX) translation of the Levitical text to speak of lying with a man. He had earlier summarily dismissed this when discussing Leviticus as “speculative and lack[ing] external confirming evidence” (271).

Second, he insists, following Scroggs, on arguing that Paul uses *arsenokoitai* to speak of the older, active partner in a pederastic relationship and *malakoi* for the younger, passive partner. Although he cites the common Greek terms used for these two roles in such a relationship, he offers no explanation as to why Paul avoids these recognised words and instead uses terms which cannot be so easily tied only to pederastic relationships.

Third, he speaks of “multiple words” when most scholars refer to two. This is because he argues that *pornoi* and *andropodistai* in 1 Timothy 1 are also relevant: “we see kidnappers or slave dealers (*andropodistai*) acting as ‘pimps’ for their captured and castrated boys (the *pornoi*, or male prostitutes), servicing the *arsenokoitai*, the men who make use of these boy prostitutes” (274). Although he claims this as the view of “many scholars”, in fact few have embraced this reading. This narrowing interpretation has several problems: (a) *pornoi* is better translated, as in NRSV which he notes, as “fornicators”; (b) the order in the list – *pornoi*, *arsenokoitai*, *andropodistai* – is very odd if the focus is as he claims, a reality illustrated by his different ordering in the quotation above; (c) by combining all these terms he makes the vice list concerned with a very narrow focus which few if any of the original readers would be likely to be implicated in, rather than the usual broad range of vices; (d) taking the list as a whole there is a strong case that it mirrors the fifth to ninth commandments of the Decalogue (hence the reference to the Law), with *pornoi* and *arsenokoitai* referring to heterosexual and homosexual violations of the prohibition on adultery and

andropodoistai referring to the command against stealing. Once again, rather than offering a careful reading of the text and exploring various possible moral logics, Brownson has imposed his own schema of moral logic onto the text.

The handling of the New Testament vice lists also highlights a further methodological problem. In defending his reading and hence the limited applicability of these texts today, he refers to “the assumption of the practice of pederasty, or male prostitution, in both of these lists” (274-5). Here it is clear that his logic is based on this assumption. Yet in this chapter he is once again vehement in his rejection of a moral logic of gender complementarity which he insists is an assumption brought to the text rather than the moral logic underlying it. It is unclear why the lack of explicit reference to gender complementarity rules this out as a moral logic but the same rule does not apply to his alternatives. These alternatives *either* limit the scope of the prohibitions on certain assumptions about the phenomenon being rejected *or* they assume that forms of moral logic which are not present in the text but in other ancient sources – relating to gender roles and honour or procreation – can be taken to be the moral logic of the biblical writers.

Conclusion

In his discussion of the classic texts, Brownson simply reproduces a number of standard but dubious “revisionist” arguments and provides no new exegetical insights. His hope is clearly that, by approaching them in the context of his wider biblical “reframing” in Parts Two and Three, these familiar arguments will be more persuasive to those who have not yet been convinced by the revisionist claims that the texts have little or no relevance to our contemporary debates about faithful same-sex unions. It is telling, however, that the eight areas explored earlier in the book fail to shed any new light on these texts. The best that can be claimed is therefore that, by providing the elements of a wider biblical sexual ethic, they offer more weight to various readings which have already been proposed by various writers. Those less convinced that much of his earlier reframing is biblically and theologically secure will, however, be disappointed that no new light is shed on the texts while his lack of engagement with the strong textual arguments for the well-established traditional readings (as recognised even by many revisionists) severely weakens the persuasiveness of his case.

14. The Discussion After Brownson

In the light of the preceding critiques on matters of detail it is helpful finally to draw together some of the issues raised afresh or in new ways by Brownson's important contribution. These can be highlighted by reference to the four central themes in the book's title and subtitle.

Bible

The great value of Brownson is that, in a way sadly uncommon in revisionist writings, the focus of his work is grappling, not primarily with personal experience or social change or a theology of sexuality, but with the biblical text. The great challenge he then presents to traditionalists is whether the revisionist case for affirming same-sex unions can claim to be at least as biblically based as the traditionalist view. This is particularly important in the evangelical constituency, where the legitimacy of describing a position as "evangelical" depends on it being able to be recognised, even by those who do not share it, as having a biblical foundation. The preceding critiques have signalled why I am not convinced by his various arguments. But there is a deeper issue of the various ways in which a reading can claim to be authorised by Scripture.

The fundamental problem faced by revisionist appeals to Scripture is that it is incontrovertible that the biblical writers always disapprove of those same-sex sexual activities to which they refer. One response is to say, as with many revisionists, that this means there is an inevitable contradiction between these texts if we now offer a more affirmative response. The biblical writers' consistently negative view simply represents an error of moral judgment on their part which, with our better understanding, we can and must correct. Here any claim to be "biblical" can only be made by appealing to broader biblical themes in order to justify overturning its specific teaching in this area. Brownson's work attempts something more nuanced and works at a number of levels (never fully differentiated). Exploring these in more detail, both in relation to his own arguments and as to whether they can be seen as respecting the supreme authority of Scripture, is one of the tasks his work sets defenders of the traditional position.

Brownson's central argument proceeds by means of an appeal behind the specifics of the text to their rationale or moral logic and the moral logic of the canon as a whole in relation to sexual ethics. This appears to work with something akin to Cosgrove's first hermeneutical rule that "the purpose (or justification) behind a biblical moral rule carries greater weight than the rule itself".⁸⁰ Brownson's argument thus appears to be that he is being "biblical" in accepting the authority of the Bible's moral logic (as he understands it) in relation to sexuality for his own sexual ethic. He sees that logic as now enabling – perhaps even requiring – a positive judgment rather than the biblically negative judgment on certain forms of same-sex behaviour. This clearly has a much stronger claim to be a method seeking to respect the authority of Scripture than a cruder "the biblical authors got it wrong" response. However, it pushes the question to the deeper level of "why, if the moral logic is biblical, does it seem to lead to a different conclusion from that reached by the biblical writers themselves?"

⁸⁰ Charles H. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Eerdmans, 2002), p. 12.

Here there appear to be at least four different answers within Brownson's book as to why applying the biblical moral logic to our situation leads to a conclusion which appears, on the surface, to contradict the conclusions within the biblical text.

One response is to say that the biblical writers in their time and place never worked with a full canonical moral logic. As a result they were limited in a way we are not and so reached conclusions which, taking Scripture as a whole, we need not and should not follow. Their moral logic was never fully biblical as they lacked the full canon and that is why they reached different conclusions. Brownson appears to argue something like this in relation to patriarchy and procreation as elements of moral logic within Scripture.

The other responses focus on the differences between our situation and that of the biblical writers rather than the difference in the moral logic. One response, which may be seen as the most conservative, is to say that the biblical writers simply never had the occasion to apply their logic to permanent, faithful, stable relationships in their world because they were unaware of them as a moral question. Their judgments refer to various forms of homosexual behaviour – abusive, exploitative, promiscuous, idolatrous – that we, following their moral logic, still view negatively. If they had known of the forms of homosexual behaviour which we are being asked to evaluate they too would have followed their moral logic and reached a more positive conclusion. In other words, they could and would have reached our conclusion but had limited knowledge of homosexuality in their world. This appears to be an element in Brownson's case but the weight of his argument appears to follow one of the remaining two forms.

The third form of argument is that the biblical writers applied their moral logic to homosexuality as they understood it but their understanding of the phenomenon – not their moral logic or their limited experience of patterns of homosexual behaviour – was the problem. Because this was incomplete, or even wrong, they reached conclusions which we need to revise with our more complete understanding. Brownson appears to argue something like this in relation to homosexuality as a feminising of the male passive partner and as a form of out-of-control lust rather than a sexual orientation.

The final form of argument is related to this. It argues not that biblical writers were mistaken but that they simply could not apply their moral logic to our situation. This is because of the cultural differences that exist between their worlds and ours. This means that we need to start from scratch in our context and apply their moral logic to new questions and challenges that they were incapable of addressing simply because of their time and place in history. Brownson appears to argue something along these lines in relation to honour and shame as applied to understandings of sex.

One of the challenges Brownson's work therefore raises in relation to Scripture is the need to distinguish these different hermeneutical moves and evaluate them both in terms of this particular question and also more widely in terms of their relationship, as a form of biblical hermeneutics, to doctrines of the nature and authority of Scripture.

Gender

The most obvious and significant challenge that is raised by Brownson's work in relation to gender is his critique of the traditionalist appeal to gender complementarity (GC). There are a number of

The Discussion After Brownson

questions raised here for traditionalists: What do they mean by GC and is there sufficient common ground among the diverse articulations for these to be coherent (just as we might recognise a common and coherent core to significantly different formulations of the doctrine of Trinity⁸¹)? In what sense is GC “taught” by Scripture (again there may here be analogies with Trinitarian doctrine)? Does Scripture teach it as the basis for its negative judgments about homosexuality? Does a doctrine of GC require a negative judgment on all forms of same-sex behaviour and committed same-sex relationships?

As noted above, however, there are also major questions as to what understanding and significance Brownson and other revisionists give to the creation of humankind as male and female for sexual ethics and whether their sexual ethic requires a significant reconfiguration of the Christian doctrines of creation and humanity.

Related to this is the separate question of the consequences of the widespread move from a patriarchal (or headship or complementarian) understanding to an egalitarian understanding of gender for the debates about same-sex relationships. A number of writers (for example, William Webb, Willard Swartley and R.T. France⁸²) have sought to argue that one can read Scripture in support of an egalitarian perspective without embracing a hermeneutic which leads to a revisionist sexual ethic. There are, however, both many complementarian traditionalists and also many supporters of same-sex unions who remain unconvinced by the attempt to hold together egalitarian views of gender and traditionalist views of sexuality. In addition to the hermeneutical questions there are also questions about whether traditionalists need to give more attention to the impact on their theology of sexuality of embracing an egalitarian theology of gender.

Sexuality

In relation to sexuality, there are two main areas where Brownson’s work leaves much to be done. The first relates to our understanding of sexual orientation. As already noted above there is the important question as to whether Brownson has properly represented the scientific evidence in relation to the nature and fixity of sexual orientation. There are also interesting questions to explore as to the inter-relationship – logically and within the literature – between different understandings of sexuality and different conclusions in relation to the biblical teaching and its implications for today. There are also important questions as to how a biblical understanding of desire and of personal identity may be brought to bear on the various scientific debates.

The second area relates to a question which Brownson largely ignores – whether, if there is to be acceptance of same-sex unions, these are best understood as a form of marriage or as a distinct

⁸¹ See, for example, Jason Sexton, ed., *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Zondervan, 2014).

⁸² Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* and William Webb, “Gender Equality and Homosexuality” in Ronald W. Pierce & Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy* (IVP Apollos, 2004), pp. 401-13; Willard Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Herald Press, 1983) and his *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment* (Herald Press, 2003); R.T. France, *A Slippery Slope? The Ordination of Women and Homosexual Practice – A Case Study in Biblical Interpretation* (Grove Brooks, 2000). I have set out my understanding in “The Bible and today’s debates – Issues in Human Sexuality and the Ministry of Women”, a paper for the AWESOME-Reform conversations, downloadable from <http://www.awesome.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Papers-session-3.zip>

pattern of relationship.⁸³ As yet there is no serious exegetical and hermeneutical work showing that the church has been wrong in reading the canon of Scripture as teaching that marriage is between a man and a woman and yet if Brownson's arguments about the Bible's sexual ethic are to be accepted this becomes a major issue for Christians.

Reframing the Church's Debate

The great strength of Brownson's contribution is his conviction that the way through the current impasse in the church's debate is by going back to Scripture and seeking to discern its vision for our flourishing as sexual beings by reading it as a whole. This focus (rather than his specific proposal) would indeed provide a helpful "reframing" of much of the church's debate away from appeals to a few texts or selected broad themes such as love or justice or equality or inclusion which are held to settle the matter. Such a focus also would allow other important matters (such as personal experience and pastoral and missional realities) and additional sources of authority to take their proper place by being located with reference to the teaching of the Bible.

In addition to questioning whether Brownson's treatment of the biblical texts is always convincing, the other major challenge facing us in the light of his exegetical and hermeneutical work is that of articulating and debating various issues of biblical theology and biblically-based doctrine in the light of his reframing, particularly in relation to the doctrines of creation and humanity.

Finally, for those who remain unconvinced by Brownson's conclusion and so continue to maintain a traditionalist understanding, there remains (as noted at various points) the increasingly demanding challenge of how to relate this understanding of biblical teaching to the realities of pastoral care and engagement with contemporary culture. The Church of England's Pilling Report⁸⁴ proposed a path of "pastoral accommodation" (paras 118, 275) while the Roman Catholic Church's *Instrumentum Laboris* (paras 103, 151, 157) used the better language of "pastoral accompaniment". There are important questions of what that accommodation or accompaniment might look like and what lessons can be learned from the church's response in other areas of sexual ethics (such as cohabitation and remarriage after divorce) and in other spheres. These issues are now among the major challenges facing traditionalists and need to be given greater prominence in the church's debate.

⁸³ Not least because of the changing cultural context, the recent trend has been to argue for same-sex marriage (as in the most recent edition of Jeffrey John, *Permanent, Faithful, Stable* (DLT, 2012) now subtitled "Christian Same-Sex Marriage" whereas previous editions were subtitled "Christian Same-Sex Partnerships"). For an argument for a calling other than marriage, see Robert Song, *Covenant and Calling*.

⁸⁴ The report is online at https://www.churchofengland.org/media/1891063/pilling_report_gs_1929_web.pdf. For discussions of it see Sean Doherty's "[A Response to the Pilling Report](#)" for *KLICE Comment* and [Malcolm Brown's response](#), both at <http://klice.co.uk/index.php/news/comment>.

Appendix: A Critical Engagement with Brownson – Summary of Critiques

What follows is a short summary of the central lines of critique developed in more detail in each section:

1. Brownson's Method

In its broad outline Brownson's method would fit within that espoused by most evangelical/Reformed biblical scholars committed to a canonical method of biblical interpretation. However, some of the specifics raise important questions, in particular the authority he gives to his category of moral logic and how biblical text and wider cultural context enable that logic to be discerned. He never really faces the fact that stressing canon and culture as he does cannot hide the reality that the uniform witness of Scripture about homosexual behaviour is negative. In addition, although he is greatly interested in a critical reading of the biblical text in cultural context, he is much less critical and contextual in his interpretation of contemporary experience and he ignores the testimony of those who experience same-sex attraction and accept traditional Christian teaching.

2. Brownson on Sexual Orientation

The most obvious example of his weakness in relation to contemporary context is his treatment of sexual orientation. This plays a significant role in his raising questions about the applicability of the biblical text today given his claim that biblical authors lacked any awareness of this phenomenon. Brownson's various brief discussions do not explore the strong social constructionist school of thought, implicitly accepting an essentialist view of orientation as a trans-cultural given of human nature. He then presents a rather crude dichotomous or binary division into "homosexual" or "heterosexual" and does not engage the complexity of a spectrum of attractions and the growing number of people who identify as "bisexual". He also makes very strong claims about the fixity of orientation without reference to the significant Christian and secular studies which challenge his account. Finally, while his discussion of the common distinction between orientation and practice in traditionalist thinking raises some important challenges and critiques, he too quickly dismisses the distinction and its role in developing a sexual ethic.

3. Gender Complementarity – How Wrong are Traditionalists?

Central to Brownson's whole argument is his rejection of gender complementarity (GC). Although he offers some valid criticisms of some traditionalist views and highlights the need for traditionalists to do more work on the meaning and role of GC, he does not deliver the knock-out blow he claims. His lack of engagement with some key biblical scholars (notably Davidson) and theologians (notably Roberts) is also disappointing. His four-fold critique of Gagnon's reading of Genesis 2 has some force, but in those areas where Gagnon's interpretation is a minority reading among traditionalists. On the whole, Brownson presents false either/or choices so as to rule out any place for GC in the Genesis narrative. His account has two major deficiencies: (1) a failure to address any of the questions about the theological and moral significance of human sexual differentiation in God's creation purposes and (2) an unwillingness to acknowledge that some of the categories he deploys

in building his own moral logic (notably patriarchy and procreation) themselves presuppose some sort of GC.

4. Brownson among the Revisionists – What does Brownson Add?

Turning to his critique of revisionists, Brownson here offers a valid warning about simply silencing the classic texts and relying on broad moral principles. He could, however, have engaged more with those who have articulated a biblical sexual ethic based on justice or love. He also perhaps over-estimates the extent to which this approach characterises revisionist thought, just as he also fails to acknowledge that many revisionists – in contrast to his approach – simply accept the traditionalist conclusion that Scripture rejects all homosexual behaviour but then claim Scripture is in error. While he himself offers relatively little new of substance in terms of ethical argument in his proposal, his major contribution is developing an argument which roots the common broadly revisionist vision much more thoroughly in biblical texts, language and concepts than most of those advocating a similar approach. The key question is how convincingly he does this.

5. Biblical Patriarchy, Equality and Same-Sex Unions

Part Two offers four categories in order to shape a cross-cultural vision for Christian sexual ethics and to argue that same-sex unions may be consonant with Scripture's moral logic. In relation to patriarchy, Brownson follows those who argue for two streams in Scripture – patriarchal and egalitarian. A distinctive and troubling feature of his portrayal is a seeming acceptance of both streams as present in the creation narratives and a privileging of the egalitarian primarily on the basis of eschatology, potentially opposing creation to kingdom, new creation and gospel. Appealing to the cultural context of the biblical texts on homosexuality, he argues that it is patriarchal concerns (particularly about feminising males) which explain their negative judgments. But he struggles to demonstrate that this form of logic is actually present within the biblical texts or that it is patriarchy rather than GC more generally which is the concern. In terms of method, although he does not address this, the ability to argue for "two streams" in Scripture in relation to gender cannot get around a fundamental difference between debates about the roles of men and women and debates about homosexuality: in the latter there is indisputably only one, negative Scriptural stream. Although Brownson therefore struggles to link homosexuality to patriarchy his account does raise the question as to whether, just as, historically, patriarchy could be accommodated for some cultures within God's ultimate purposes, same-sex unions may now be similarly accommodated in our culture.

6. Is "One Flesh" Union Rather Than Marriage the Bible's Central Category for Sexual Ethics?

Brownson's central proposal is to replace marriage with "one flesh" union – understood as a kinship bond – as the central pattern of proper sexual relationship. This has the value of emphasising covenantal relationship and the importance of telling the truth with our bodies but it also has a number of problematic elements. The encompassing of marriage within a broader category of "one flesh" kinship, and then allowing other forms of sexual relationship within this category (when in Scripture kinship and sex are usually kept separate), raises questions which he does not explore. He struggles with recognising the strong sexual element of "one flesh" language (his attempt to argue that sex with a prostitute (1 Corinthians 6.16) can fit in his "kinship" framework is weak) and does not consider the significance of Jesus combining Genesis 2.24 with Genesis 1.27. The fundamental

question this argument raises is on what basis he makes his claim that, although the Bible only considers heterosexual unions as “one flesh” marriage, this normal, universal and assumed pattern is not normative or required. Once again, although his strong claims are not persuasive, his account does open up the possibility of considering whether some forms of non-sexual same-sex relationships (as with David and Jonathan) could or should be understood in “kinship” terms.

7. Can we Separate Marriage and Procreation?

In discussing procreation, Brownson rightly argues that Scripture does not see this as the essential purpose necessary to make a marriage valid. However, he gives limited attention to procreation in Scripture as a whole and never clearly explains why, if procreation is part of Scripture’s moral logic (including in its rejection of homosexuality), we are not bound by that logic. His whole discussion is shaped by a simplistic and flawed understanding of different Christian views of the relationship between marriage and procreation. He portrays Catholic views as unbiblical because they supposedly see procreation as uniquely essential to marriage and represents Protestant views as treating procreation as merely incidental to marriage. In short, he severs the unitive/relational and procreative goods, assigns one to each tradition, thus creating polarised mirror-image caricatures of a complex reality, and then judges the Protestant relational focus to be biblical. Here is the one place in the book where he appears out of his depth as a Protestant biblical scholar engaging with the complexities of Catholic and Protestant moral thought. His other focus – the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s statement about the “self-indulgent” nature of non-procreative homosexual acts – opens up important questions about the difference between homosexual and heterosexual non-procreative sex and sexual unions. These raise some of the most serious challenges to those who accept contraception but reject homosexuality. But he again does not seem aware of the complexities and nuances in the ethical debates or of possible traditionalist responses to his critiques.

8. Celibacy, Chastity & Compulsion: Singleness and Sexual Orientation

In his treatment of celibacy, Brownson’s summary of biblical teaching is again broadly fair but his contemporary application and engagement with ethical arguments is weaker. A major factor here is the problem noted above of his strongly essentialist, binary and largely fixed understanding of sexual orientation. If revised, this would require quite a lot of his argument to be revisited, although as long as there are some whose same-sex orientation is exclusive and seemingly fixed the issue of unchosen celibacy which he raises does remain a challenge for traditionalists. There are, however, other issues as well. His definition of celibacy rightly highlights that it means more than foregoing sex but he fails to address the fact that any single person may find themselves “constructing one’s whole life” (28) without an intimate lifelong partner even if they do not feel called to that. In other words, long-term, unwanted, potentially lifelong singleness is a prospect for various groups not just those with a homosexual orientation. Brownson’s logic would therefore appear to entail at least openness to creating other categories of sexual relationship to meet these examples of unchosen celibacy where self-control seems to be imposed as a lifelong discipline. He is also unclear as to whether he is ultimately seeking to redefine marriage or to create a new sanctified form of marriage-like life for gay couples. Yet despite these problems, the questions he raises here do press traditionalists to consider what form of accommodation (his own account of this is unclear) may be

made for same-sex unions given the reality of an exclusively same-sex attraction and to give more attention to pastoral support for those who are single.

9. Paul on Desire and Homosexuality

Turning to Romans 1, the first issue Brownson explores, and one which in turn shapes the later three areas covered, is that of desire. He understands Paul here to be talking of out-of-control and self-centred lust and thus something not applicable to all forms of homosexual relationship. This narrow understanding of the terms for desire in Romans 1 is difficult to defend from their use in Romans 1 or elsewhere in Paul. In the context, misdirection also seems as least as important as excess (the key to Brownson's view but a description he doesn't analyse in depth). Not only is his specific appeal to the context of Caligula's court unconvincing, the terminology is better understood as a broad-brush Jewish rejection of Gentile immorality.

10. What is the Place for the Language of Purity and Impurity in a Biblical Sexual Ethic?

Continuing his selection of key terms, Brownson turns to the language of impurity or uncleanness. Again his treatment of this elsewhere in Paul is weak, in particular where he fails to note the regular connection with *porneia*, i.e. sexual immorality. His proposed three-fold canonical movement fails to do justice to the continued importance in the New Testament of the external (particularly what we do with our bodies), the need for separateness from sin, and the place of creation order. The language of Romans 1 itself warns against a view that Christian purity is concerned only with the heart and pays no attention to the actions of the body. Internal disposition and external action cannot be totally separated even if they are rightly distinguished.

11. Sex and Shame

Turning to honour and shame, Brownson again is selective in his appeal to Paul's usage of the key terms; the wider evidence weakens and undermines some of his claims. He instead focusses on the cultural context and its standards of honour and shame, particularly in relation to gender. He fails, however, to provide textual evidence that these standards are accepted by Paul within his own moral logic or to explain how we (or the apostles) decide whether to accept such cultural norms or reject them by being counter-cultural. His rejection of any reference to female homosexuality in Romans 1 is in part driven by his focus on culturally shameful conduct and he fails to acknowledge that the overwhelming majority of scholars (including the major study by Brooten) have rejected this and see instead an argument relating to both female and male homosexuality, shaped by God's creation of male and female.

12. Isn't Homosexuality "Unnatural"?

The best known of Paul's critiques in Romans 1 is that based on nature. Brownson offers a holistic three-fold understanding of "nature" which he believes should still guide us but which need not require rejection of same-sex unions. In developing this understanding he gives attention to Paul's usage elsewhere but sadly not to Jewish understandings of creation and its moral significance (or any of the major studies of this). Drawing more on Stoic and other ancient thought, his focus on nature as individual disposition depends on one particular reading of Romans 2.14 and dismisses rather than engages with the claim (by Hays and others) that Romans 1 offers a corporate indictment rather than individual biography. His reminder that an appeal to the natural can refer to

social norms again seems to reduce the language to that of the cultural context and eliminate any reference to a trans-cultural ordering of reality. There is an element of such an order in his third biological understanding of nature in which he grants that the non-procreative nature of homosexuality rendered it unnatural for Paul. The reasoning behind his claim that we should not follow Paul in this judgment is, however, less clearly articulated. There are also hints that the fact something is “unnatural” need not mean that it is wrong as sometimes we must transcend nature because eschatology over-turns creation.

13. Reading the “Classic Texts” Other Than Romans 1

Having set out his “reframing”, Brownson locates the other classic biblical texts within it. His method raises a number of questions and, while he is right to highlight the distance of the attempted gang rapes of Genesis 19 and Judges 19 from our concerns, his handling of the Levitical and New Testament texts is particularly problematic. Here he effectively reproduces standard revisionist readings which seek to limit these to cultic sex (Leviticus), pederasty and prostitution (1 Corinthians & 1 Timothy). While these readings now claim to be stronger because they are set in the context of his wider proposed biblical framework, he fails to engage with (or in most cases even to acknowledge) the challenges made to them by traditionalists. Nor does he do justice to the possible alternative readings. These argue for a wider original context and an alternative moral logic (e.g. departing from marriage as the norm in Leviticus and the Decalogue in 1 Timothy). These readings therefore understand the classic texts to have a broader and permanent validity in their negative judgments which continue to have contemporary applicability, including to same-sex unions.

14. The Discussion After Brownson

Taking the four key terms in the book’s title – Bible, Gender, Sexuality and “Reframing the Debate” – this section notes various issues raised by Brownson’s work requiring further consideration. In relation to the Bible and its authority there are questions as to the different ways – four are identified – in which it is argued that his position is “biblical” despite the consistently negative witness of Scripture. Regarding gender, the major question for all perspectives is that of what significance is to be given to humanity’s creation as male and female and the value and substance of any claim to gender complementarity. There is also the question of the relationship between the hierarchical vs egalitarian debate on the role of women and the debate over same-sex unions. Brownson’s work on sexuality signals the need for further study of the nature of sexual orientation and of whether those affirming same-sex unions should class them as marriage or as a separate calling. Finally, Brownson’s reframing of the debate so as to focus on Scripture is very welcome but major issues remain in relation to both exegesis of specific passages and wider questions of biblical theology. Even where his approach does not persuade traditionalists it challenges them to consider whether and how they may offer some form of pastoral accommodation to those they are called to accompany in mission, pastoral care and growth in discipleship who are living in a committed same-sex relationship.