

James V. Brownson. *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, England: Eerdmans, 2013. 312 pages. \$29.

The preacher preaches from the Bible. And when the preacher wants to preach on same sex marriage or relationships, the preacher should also want to preach from the Bible dealing with the issue in focus. Now, in the current flood of polarized arguments on same sex marriage, most of which are based on the *same* Bible, the preacher may need a biblical resource for critical discernment. Thankfully, James V. Brownson provides a fine resource in a time of great need.

As the James and Jean Cook Professor of New Testament at Western Theological Seminary in Michigan, a Reformed branch, Brownson takes the Bible seriously in making clear his case. His proposal is as follows. On the surface of the biblical writing, both Old and New Testament writers seem to stand adamantly against any kind of same sex relationship. Yet, once we begin rigorously and faithfully exploring the underlying “moral logic” of specific passages on same sex relationship, which is also demonstrated through the Bible, we will get a totally different idea on the same issue: biblical writers or even God the Divine affirms *life-long, loving, and committed relationships among same sex couples*. Brownson himself confesses that reaching this conclusion was not easy for him as a scholar-pastor belonging to a traditional Reformed denomination. Yet, he also confesses that his genuine biblical scholarship—that is, concrete biblical evidence—cannot help but underscore that conclusion.

So, how does he actually perform his biblical study toward the resulting conclusion? It is done in two ways. First, he makes critical biblical comments on two polarizing sides. To begin with, he excavates “the traditionalist case and its problems” on same sex relations. His methodology is biblical-hermeneutical since the traditionalists, who disavow same sex relationships, base their case almost solely on the Bible and its interpretation. He thus tries to prove that the same Bible says otherwise on this issue. At the same time, he reveals the lack of biblical support in the revisionists’ affirmative case on the same sex issue. He finds the revisionists’ case largely identical to the secular liberalist idea on same sex relations. Once again, the Bible itself and its honest interpretation is key.

Second, at the core of his biblical-hermeneutical methodology lies the interpretive frame of *moral logic*. He wants to figure out the fundamental moral logic underneath specific biblical lessons on same sex relations. In other words, he wants to see *why* the Bible or its writers give such lessons, in order to dig up the actual moral *meanings* of them. One example is found in Romans 1:24-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10. Brownson finds that Paul condemns same sex relationships that occur out of human lust and misbehavior (e.g., pederasty, prostitution, abuse, sexual slavery, etc.). But, Paul does not (seem to) express the same judgment on loving and committed same sex relationships. Why not? Paul is always quick in his advocacy for genuine human sexual desire and mutual sexual commitment as essential and also “natural.” Therefore, Brownson believes, there is no reason for Paul to oppose *natural* same sex relations.

Brownson’s syllogism is explicit throughout his writing: One, the Bible affirms any genuine committed sexual relationships as natural; two, a same sex relationship can be a form of life-time, loving, and committed sexual relationship; three, therefore, committed same sex relationships are biblical and Christian. His logical argument is strong and persuasive thanks to his robust biblical scholarship and resulting evidence. What makes his argument less compelling, though, is the revisionist stance with which he identifies at the beginning. Obviously, he is not a hardcore secular revisionist, but more of a moderate biblical revisionist. The revisionist’s usual job description, is *re-interpretation* of what has already been given, not the creation of new one,

although the latter occasionally happens. This simply means his argument remains circumstantial, vulnerable to future reinterpretation of his reinterpretation. Of course, this circumstantiality does not or cannot negate the strength of his well-argued conclusion.

Overall, the book has good potential to appeal to both traditionalists and revisionists. Brownson uses the Bible as the fundamental source for his argument just as traditionalists do and reconfigures deep moral meanings of critical passages on the same sex relationships like revisionists. He seems to achieve his initial goal of “reframing the church’s debate on same sex relationships” by bridging the two polarizing and polarized parties. Then, the last question we may ask is: How are traditionalists and revisionists responding to him and his conclusion? Our Christian church has just started answering the question. Let’s see what will unfold in the near future.

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