

Bible, Gender, Sexuality

Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships

Author: James V. Brownson

Mid-Day Stretch Discussion Guide

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IX. "Bible, Gender, Sexuality" by James Brownson

A. The Necessity of Interpretation - The primary purpose of the Brownson book is to explore the deeper "hermeneutical" differences in the debate over same sex relationships in churches. He describes "traditionalists" and "revisionists" as having different points of view on the societal impacts of our approach to this issue, but says that for churches, the key differences of opinion stem not from what the Bible literally says on the topic, but from how we choose to interpret what the Bible says on the topic.

1. What was your reaction to Brownson's choice of words ... "traditionalists" and "revisionists"? How would you describe the groups on the two opposite sides of the issue? Are there even two distinct opposite sides?

2. How did you react to Brownson's point that even the traditionalists are generally not biblical literalists? What about his idea that it's really a matter of deciding which texts are relevant for Christians today and which ones aren't or which ones articulate major themes and which are more subsidiary (or "culturally particular")?

3. What about our discussion last week (and in prior weeks) about relational as opposed to behavioral theology? What was your reaction to the passage from Brownson quoted below?

"We must discern the deeper and more comprehensive moral logic that undergirds the specific commands, prohibitions, and examples of the biblical text. We do not interpret rightly any single passage of Scripture until we locate the text within this larger fabric of meaning in Scripture as a whole. This is necessary for two reasons: first, this kind of exposition, building on underlying values, allows the extension of core principles of biblical commands or prohibitions into new terrain not directly addressed by the literal commandment. Second, this exploration of underlying values can assist us in addressing exceptions and unusual circumstances that are not easily addressed by the literal commandment (such as why, and under what circumstances, if at all, lethal force might be justified in attempting to preserve the lives of persons)."

B. Imagination and Biblical Interpretation - Brownson says that for early Christians to discern deeper meaning in scripture, “they had to rekindle their imaginations 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.”

1. Does Brownson sound like Enns here? It’s interesting that both focused on some derivative of the word “imagination”. Why do you suppose they choose that word and what do you suppose they mean by it?

2. Brownson says he is not talking about a “voice from the blue” when he uses the term imagination or Holy Spirit, but that “it refers here to the ability to see deeper meanings and patterns that emerge in the context of cross-cultural engagements.” What does that mean? He elaborates by using the words “history, experience, wisdom, debate, and judicious assessment of a variety of forms of evidence, stories and experiences.” In what ways do we limit ourselves, when we rely exclusively on the words that we see in the pages of scripture? In what ways do we limit God?

C. Getting to Know Our Neighbor and Ourselves - In explaining why he believes the issue of same sex relationships is being raised by so many today Brownson says “[T]hese questions are arising in fresh ways simply because our culture is becoming more direct and frank in its discussion of sexual issues. What was previously relegated to the silence of “the closet” and to euphemistic speech is now being discussed more directly and openly. And with this greater directness and openness of speech comes the need to face questions that the church has not faced so directly and explicitly before.” Brownson also talks about the ways in which our society has addressed the issues of a flat earth and slavery for similar reasons.

1. Sorry to keep pounding on this issue, but as we think about this idea of relational theology... meaning starting the process of interpretation by looking at the world and the people around us, observing it and them, and then going back again to look at the words on the page ... in what ways does getting to know how our world works and getting to know the people around us help us to better understand how God works?

2. In what ways does a fear of our neighbor impair our ability to get to know them and in what ways does that impair our ability to understand and interpret scripture? What about our fears of getting to know God? What about our fears of getting to know ourselves?

D. Getting Personal - Brownson points out that it was his own son’s announcement that he was gay that caused Brownson to reconsider his approach to the passages in the Bible on homosexuality. As he says it, his work “had stayed at a level of abstraction that wasn’t helpful when it came to the concrete and specific questions” posed by same sex relationships.

1. Here Brownson uses the exact same word as Peter Enns ... that his personal experience with his own son caused him to “re-imagine” how scripture speaks about homosexuality. But what was your reaction to this? Did you have a hard time accepting his decision (something like, “it’s a cop-out so he can save his relationship with his son”)? Or were you able to empathize with James in this situation?

2. In what ways was Brownson forced to engage in the relational aspects of biblical interpretation (because of the situation he faced with his son) that we should all confront, given our responsibility to engage lovingly with the many people around us who are similar to Brownson’s son, even when they aren’t necessarily in our close family circles?

X. “Bible, Gender, Sexuality” by James Brownson (Chapter 2)

A. Scriptural Analytics - Brownson starts the analytical process by explaining the concept of “gender complementarity” as a basis for the traditionalists’/behavioralists’ conclusion that same sex relationships are not acceptable to God. He then goes into a detailed analysis of Romans 1:26-27, which another primary prong of the analysis.

1. First, as we approach this topic, are we asking the right questions? If you aren’t sure, have you considered what types of questions we should be asking as we go to scripture in search of answers? At the same time, when you read scripture in search of answers to your questions about behavior, have you considered what types of questions scripture is trying to answer ... or if it is even trying to answer a particular question at all?

2. Are there problems in a reading scripture in order to prove or disprove whether a specific behavior is acceptable to God? What are some examples of things that can go wrong? In what ways are those problems amplified when using letters written to specific churches at specific points in history as a basis for forming conclusions about specific behaviors?

3. What happens when we use flawed analytics in scriptural analysis as a means for understanding and assessing issues within societal systems and structures that benefit some and oppress others... or that benefit some and are a detriment to others?

B. “Shameless Acts” - Brownson points out that the core issue for traditionalists/behavioralists on the question of same sex relationships can be found in the text of Romans 1:26-27. “Men committed shameless acts with other men...” Let’s actually read Romans 1:18-32 together (see below).

1. As we read through it, what jumped out at you? What is the overarching point that Paul is making? In what ways does a relational model of interpreting scripture help us

to better understand and appreciate the overarching point, as compared to a behavioral model?

2. Brownson says that some traditionalists argue that Paul's tone here is "vehement" and "intense". Do you agree? If so, what is he most vehement and intense about? After having a quick look at the beginning of Romans Chapter 2, does your answer change? Who is Paul even talking to here?

Rom 1:18-32 (emphasis mine):

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; 21 for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools; 23 and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

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

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

28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. 29 They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet not only do they do them but even applaud others who practice them.

C. And Now Back to Complementarity - To a traditionalist/behavioralist, the question of same sex relationships appears decisively closed. This is because neither male-male nor female-female relationships can fully embody the complementarity nature of humanity intended by God in creation.

1. Brownson says that complementarity is not really a form of logic ... that it is merely a category that embodies complex differences and similarities. How did this strike you and what do you think he means by it? Does it seem like we are dancing on the head of a pin? The parts just don't fit, right? Or do you agree with Brownson that the "biological differences between the sexes seem a rather slender basis on which to build an entire marriage ethic"?
2. What are some other purposes that the writer of Genesis might have intended in telling the creation story? Do you think the writer was concerned that all humanity for all time be made aware of the core truth that same sex relationships are not acceptable to God? Are there problems with the "if a man can't lead a woman" in a relationship, that relationship is inherently flawed theory?
3. What did you think of Brownson's analysis of Gagnon's arguments around complementarity? ... "Filling or populating the earth with humans is a precondition for ruling it, and procreation is a precondition for filling the earth..."
4. What about Brownson's four basic assumptions that lead to a misunderstanding of the issue? 1. That the original Adam was not an undifferentiated being that was divided into male and female; 2. Similarity as opposed to complementarity; 3. Both male and female are created in the divine image (and that complementarity is not necessary to fully express the divine image); 4. That "one-flesh" connotes a kinship bond, as opposed to physical complementarity.
5. Stepping back a bit here, have we asked ourselves at what level of detail in intimate relationships churches should even be involved and/or taking a stand? At what point does it make more sense to equip Christians with over-arching principles, and then trust them to make good decisions?

XI. "Bible, Gender, Sexuality" by James Brownson (Chapter 3)

A. Behavioral Modification vs. Relational Reconciliation - Brownson starts Chapter 3 by digging a bit deeper into the differences between a "traditionalist" approach to topic of human sexuality as over and against a "revisionist" approach. Having addressed the weaknesses in the traditionalist approach in Chapter 2, he then probes some of the weaknesses of the revisionist approach.

1. Before we dig too much into the weeds, let's pause for a minute and talk about where we are on this journey. First, how are you finding the Brownson book? Is it helpful? How does it compare to the other books we've read together?

2. Stepping back a bit, we've asked this before, but having heard and read more, do you agree with Brownson's distinctions... traditionalist and revisionist? In what ways, is that approach flawed... even assuming the distinctions are accurate?

3. Returning to the theme of a behavioral/relational approach to scripture, have you thought much about the purpose of scripture, as it relates to the many distinctions of approach we have been discussing? What about your purpose in reading and trying to understand it? In other words, what is scripture trying to accomplish and what are you trying to accomplish by reading it?

4. What happens when our purpose in reading scripture is more through the lens of "relational reconciliation" as opposed to "behavioral modification"? How do you suppose God thinks about it?

B. The Need for Labels - As you know, we love labels. The fact that we are studying this issue stems from our love of labels. "Gay" vs "straight"; "male" vs "female"; "rich" vs "poor"; "conservative" vs "liberal"; "Christian" vs "Atheist"; "traditionalist" vs "revisionist".... The list goes on.

1. Have you ever known someone who doesn't fit neatly into one or more of the binary categories described on this list? How about yourself? Notwithstanding the way we talk about these kinds of issues, has your experience led you to conclude that, on most issues, people exist more on a spectrum, as opposed to being at either end of a pole?

2. Assuming that is the case, why do we talk about so many of these issues as being binary choices then? How does that approach, if it is disconnected somewhat from what we know to be true, impact us negatively?

3. Why do you suppose our culture and society puts so much pressure on people to label themselves in one way or another? Is that necessary? Is it helpful?

C. Weaknesses in the Revisionist Approach to the Issue of Same Sex

Relationships - Although I remain reluctant to do so, let's spend a minute talking about how Brownson describes the revisionist approach to same sex relationships and some of the weaknesses of those arguments.

1. Brownson says that the primary arguments in support of same sex relationships in scripture using a revisionist approach is girded by two core principles: (a) understanding historical distance/context and (b) overarching principles of love and justice. Do you agree and has this been consistent with your experience?

2. Are these arguments compelling to you and what are your thoughts about Brownson's views on their weaknesses?

D. A Christian Sexual Ethic - Brownson's seems to believe that the primary weakness in the two core principles that gird a revisionist approach is that it fails to fully develop a core Christian ethic on human sexuality. He then probes a bit about what that Christian sexual ethic might look like and spends a good part of the rest of his book exploring it in greater detail.

1. What did you think about what Brownson describes as “normal” or “descriptive” patterns of scripture as compared to “normative” or “prescriptive” patterns of scripture? What is the difference? Does this distinction help you to better understand the specific passages that have historically been used as a basis for understanding same sex relationships?
2. Do you believe it is incumbent upon Christians to develop a “Christian sexual ethic” as Brownson describes it? How should that look? Is it something churches should have a strong and/or specific position on?
3. Or do you think churches should act more as facilitators to help individuals and families to develop their own framework on the topic?
4. As we go forward from here, do you prefer to dig further into Brownson's ideas on this topic? Should we dive back into the Peter Enns book now? Or would you prefer to head in a different direction?

XII. “Bible, Gender, Sexuality” by James Brownson (Chapter 4)

A. Patriarchy ... Normative? Or Simply Normal? - Brownson spends a good portion of Chapter 4 analyzing patriarchal paradigms in a cultural/historical context, as well as in the language of scripture. He also asks us to consider whether scriptural references on the topic are simply “normal” or both “normal” and “normative”. Recall that Brownson equates “normal” as more “descriptive” of specific situations and circumstances; whereas “normative” is more “prescriptive” and refers to overarching rules for living.

1. Regardless of whether the patriarchal paradigms in scripture are simply “normal” or both “normal and normative”, what does it say about God that God is willing to allow those patriarchal paradigms to persist without being addressed more directly in scripture? Does God care? If so, what does that mean about how God views patriarchy?
2. Without really digging too much into specifics, what are some examples of directives in scripture that you believe are simply “normal” or “descriptive”? What are some examples that you believe are both normal and “normative” or “prescriptive”?

B. Interpretive Method; Bias and Control - Brownson points out that the theological “right” and “left” both fall into the trap of assuming that a paradigm of “patriarchy represents the totality of the witness of the New Testament”, even though they have different conclusions about what that means for us today. However, he points out the “striking portrayal of stories and statements” in both the old and New Testaments that seem to move against the perceived patriarchal ideal. And then spends a great deal of time digging into the details on that topic.

1. In what ways does our interpretive method shape our approach and our thinking on topics like these? In other words, in what ways does reading scripture for the purpose of determining whether certain things are “normative” (to use Brownson’s word) shape the conclusions we draw from them? What are some other methods of reading scripture?
2. In what ways can our interpretive method be used as a means of control and oppression (e.g., bias, control, manipulation, subjugation, etc)? Do you think it’s possible that this idea of patriarchy, and the ways that the scriptures have been used to perpetuate it over the centuries, has been used in that way and, if so, in what ways is that antithetical to the message of Jesus? In what ways can a “relational reconciliation” model of interpretation help us to avoid using the interpretive method in this way?

C. “Not Yet” vs “Already Arrived” - Brownson says that in scripture, especially in the New Testament, there is an overarching message to Christians that while certain aspects of our new lives “raised with Christ” have already arrived, others have not happened yet. The reasons can be spiritual, social, physical, etc., but ultimately are driven by the reality of this present world.

1. What was your reaction to this (for example when Brownson talks about Paul contrasting the triumphalism of the Corinthians with the suffering example of the apostles)? Brownson says “Christian faith is not about transcending and escaping the troubles of this world, but about the sacrificial offering of lives to one another in hope and love.”

2. In what ways have societal norms and even “pre-requisites for survival” changed such that the “already arrived” makes certain seemingly “Christian” rules for behavior and social order no longer relevant? Does thinking about things in this light help you to understand how better to interpret these passages? Or does it potentially lead us down the same path with potentially different outcomes?

3. Do you agree with Brownson that Paul’s willingness to subjugate the Corinthian women, who were claiming a radical new sort of freedom in Christ (which, ummm, I think those women were right, by the way), should be understood as an “attempt to rein in imbalances in the ‘already/not yet’ tension of New Testament eschatology”? Is it possible that Paul just got it wrong? Is it possible that Paul was just focussed on holding everything together as best he could and didn’t intend for us to take it as a rule for all time? Why is it so bad to make the men feel uncomfortable, by the way?

D. The “Nitty-Gritty” - Let’s dig into Brownson’s analysis of patriarchy in the Bible.

1. What did you think of Brownson’s analysis on women staying silent... i.e., that Paul is trying to say it’s ok for them to prophesy, but not ok to ask questions (the reason being that they might challenge or shame some others in the congregation)? Is it ever ok to challenge or potentially shame someone in a congregation?

2. What if Paul meant exactly what he said? How does that change your view of things? Does it mean the Bible has less value in our current culture? If it does have value in that paradigm, how does that play out in your view? In what ways does working through an issue like that help make the Bible all the more relevant in the here and now?

3. What about Brownson's analysis of the passage in Timothy, where women were "aggressively disrupting the life of the community"? Do you find this characterization problematic? If not, why? If so, in what ways? Does it make you feel better to know that, according to Brownson, Paul was actually exhorting women to remain "calm, composed and peaceable", as opposed to imposing total "silence"?

4. Brownson uses the term "reign in" frequently when speaking about what the writers of New Testament were doing in passages that have historically been read to dictate certain behaviors and social structures. How does that phrase hit you? Do you think that's what the writers were doing? Do you think those "egalitarian excesses" disrupted the Christian community and "damaged its witness"? Assuming you agree with Brownson, what does that say about how we should be reading those passages today?

5. What did you think of Brownson's conclusion that "humans draw their core identity from their union with Christ and their participation in the age to come"?

E. Back to Same-Sex Relationships - Brownson says that "hierarchy or patriarchy cannot be construed to be the essence of normative 'gender complementarity' that is allegedly violated by same-sex unions".

1. Do you agree? What is your take on that?

2. What do you think about Brownson's point regarding same sex relationships in the ancient world (i.e., that they generally involved older vs younger, free vs slave, higher status vs lower status? How can we apply a "relational reconciliation" as compared to a "behavioral modification" model in this instance?

3. Had you considered the patriarchal implications of same sex relationships in the ancient world (i.e., that the higher status male was typically the pursuer in these types of relationships and that they were as much about dominance and control as they were about intimacy and relationship)? Or the fact that being penetrated by another man was socially unacceptable because it was akin to being treated like a woman? What implications does that have for our interpretive model?

4. In what ways are we seeing once again the tendency to treat some people as less than fully human (refer back to our discussions of and the stories of the people in "The Cross and the Lynching Tree"; "Take This Bread" and "Affirming")? Should that be a core guiding principle in our interpretive model?

Is it possible that some of the writers of the New Testament, given the cultural context in which they lived, were slow on the uptake in that regard?