

***Paul for Everyone: I Corinthians* by N. T. Wright (John Knox Press, 2004) 272 pp.; *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* by James V. Brownson (Eerdmans, 2013) 300 pp.**

A popular Anglican bishop grants that two words in I Corinthians 6:9 “have been much debated” but he claims that “experts have now established [that they] clearly refer to the practice of male homosexuality.” That’s *not* been established. Yet Wright insists, again against scholarly consensus, that the “two terms refer respectively to the passive or submissive partner and to the active or aggressive one”. Obsessing over *body parts* while overlooking historical practices and cultural context, his “submissive partner” includes heterosexuals’ slaves, prisoners of war, sojourners and, as in attempted rape at Sodom, *angels*. Yet he insists that Paul “places both roles in his list of unacceptable behaviour.” Wright contends that, “in our day”, such sexual activity “distorts and defaces [God’s] image” and leads to “the opposite direction” from God’s kingdom. Sneering it’s turned into the “novelty [of] ‘gay’ ‘identity’ [he mocks, it’s] ‘discovered’”. Such a typically disturbing *discovery* of un-asked for and unwanted same-sex attraction is just as much a *discovery* as was his own *heterosexual* orientation – though, for his *discovery*, he was culturally prepared. Moreover, the anal sex he deems so unacceptable is *less* common among homosexuals and *more* common among heterosexuals than he seems to assume.

When it comes to the same-sex oriented, this *married* bishop belittles “the implication that all humans need active sexual experience ... in order to be complete, to be fully alive”. Yet, for folks with needs like the Wrights, “the central place of sexuality within the human make-up indicates that we shouldn’t take it lightly.” To him, a loving *same-sex* marriage is “distorted” by definition and *distracts* from “that full humanness ... which will be completed in the final ‘kingdom of God’ [where] they will neither marry nor be given in marriage”. Of course, the good and privileged folks will have already enjoyed *their* marriages *here*.

G. C. Berkouwer knew his Bible better: “Love is the only meaning of the law.” So did Edward John Carnell: “Examine any form of wickedness – any whatever – and it will be discovered that the cause is a lack of love.” And, in this centenary of Carl F. H. Henry, it’s well to recall his saying: “Christian love is only half biblical when it deteriorates into a concern only for souls and is indifferent to the needs of the body” – *needs* that Wright admits *he* needs to meet, but *gays* don’t.

For more careful scholarship on these issues, we turn to Brownson who teaches New Testament at Western Seminary (RCA). In his Foreword to Brownson’s book, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson notes that our “polarized debate about same-sex relationships ... is creating painful divisions, subverting the church’s missional intent, and damaging the credibility of its witness.” Broken lives, broken families, lost life and lost faith are tragic examples of what he’s talking about. They’re among the latest tragedies in the here-today, gone-tomorrow conflicts that have ruptured and ruined lives throughout church history. Sadly, before this one’s resolved toward an increasingly profound appreciation of Jesus’ Golden Rule, many more people will have suffered and died. After they’re gone, Christians will, once again, shake their heads in disgust and shame, bewildered about what in the world all the brawling was about.

Brownson underscores the importance of historical distance between ancient texts and applications today. For instance, any sex act between men in the ancient world involved assumptions of status difference between them. Pushing today’s same-sex marriages into ancient texts is an act of abuse against both couples and texts. He argues that moral logic transcends ancient settings of rape, pederasty and sex slavery, but that other aspects are culture-specific, requiring “cross-cultural perspective when we attempt to apply them in contemporary contexts.” Ancient oppressive and violent same-sex acts “explain Scripture’s negative stance toward the types of same-sex eroticism the Bible addresses, but they do not directly address the case of committed and loving same-sex relationships.”

As other scholars have recognized, Brownson concludes that ancient writers “show no awareness of the modern notion of sexual orientation”. On sexual impurity, he sums: For Paul, “impurity focuses on internal attitudes and dispositions, particularly lust (excessive desire) and licentiousness (lack of restraint)” and strongly questions whether “committed gay and lesbian unions, which seek [the] discipline ... of lifelong commitment, should still be characterized as ‘impurity’.”

Contrary to today’s common assumptions about “one flesh”, Brownson explains that the “entire discussion of one flesh in Genesis (and indeed throughout the Bible) takes place without even a hint of concern with procreation.” He writes: “‘one-flesh’ union ... in Genesis 2:24 connotes, not physical complementarity, but a kinship bond.” He penetratingly critiques Robert Gagnon’s exegesis of Genesis, on which Gagnon builds his antigay argument.

He well notes the importance of “honor-shame” assumptions in biblical culture. “Paul’s characterization of the sexual misbehavior in Romans 1:24-27 as ‘degrading’ and ‘shameless’ requires that we understand this form of moral logic.” He suggests, as even prominent early church fathers did, that “reference to ‘their women’ in Romans 1:26 probably does not refer to same-sex activity.”

Brownson identifies Galatians 3:27-28 as the New Testament’s most sweeping text [on] patriarchy” and – countering others’ carelessness – he renders it, in Christ, “there is no longer male and female” (Paul’s reference to Genesis 1:27).

Discussing what’s “natural”, he reminds us that, for Christians, the “created order” is no longer “normative.” He concludes: “The biblical vision of a *new* creation invites us to imagine what living into a deeper vision of ‘nature’ as the convergence of individual disposition, social order, and the physical world might look like, under the guidance and power of the Spirit of God” and he leaves room for how “committed gay and lesbian relationships might fit into such a new order.”

