

Selected quotations from
Jay Emerson Johnson, *Divine Communion: A Eucharistic Theology of Sexual Intimacy**
Compiled thematically by Stanton L. Jones (*emphases added*)

I. Fundamental message of the book:

“I want to invite Christian communities to reflect theologically and spiritually on the desire for God and the desire for sexual intimacy as the same fundamental desire for communion.” viii

“We can refresh our Christian witness to this profound story by turning to *human sexual intimacy as a poignant instance of divine desire.*” 5-6

“Erotic energy animates the entire cosmos with the deep desire and abiding hope for divine communion. This desire originates with God and only then as hope among God’s creatures, through Christ and in the alluring power of the Holy Spirit. This is the One Story of Christian faith and practice.” 26

“Only when Christians live the communal Eucharistic practice of divine eroticism will the wider world take notice.” 25

II. Theological method:

“The Bible itself, however, refuses to tell us what kind of story it tells, let alone a single story.... Texts do not actually ‘speak.’... A better question to ask... [is] to wonder what people want to say with the texts of the Bible. What kind of story do we want to tell with those texts? In addition to our own perspectives and commitments, the Bible’s complex and often convoluted history belongs to any story we want to tell with it.” 15

“If biblical texts cannot tell us what kind of story they tell, then Christians today, like every generation before us, must discern prayerfully and deliberately what kind of story God would have us tell with the Bible.... Today’s cultural confusions and obsessions with both food and sex represent a rich opportunity for that ‘Scripture-making’ work, for telling spiritually erotic stories and making biblical texts rhyme with our bodily hope for communion.” 19

III. The erotic as the guide to growth and wholeness...

“What if Christian theological ideas charted a spiritual path to follow marked by bodily desire?” 20

“[Diverse theological resources have arisen] providing resources for a more holistic retrieval of eroticism’s cultural and spiritual significance.” 11

“Christians can claim even further that this deep desire for love originates with God, whose longing for intimacy not only shines forth from biblical texts and theological traditions but also in every elegant, fumbling, joyous, and disappointing or even traumatic encounter we have with sex and sexual intimacy. Divine eroticism shines forth from all these moments precisely because God created their physical and material conditions. God has done something else as well. By making human bodies, with their complex physiology and all their various parts and organs, God has planted in each of us a carnal pathway for encountering divine love.” 12-13

“‘Church’ bears witness to the erotic energy that animates the whole of God’s creation with the desire for communion.” 21

“Reading that history in the shimmering light of the One Story suggests instead that all of these poignant [ie., sexual] markers of human existence belong together in a compelling invitation – to follow one’s bodily desires toward the hope for divine communion, and with the assurance that such striving is not in vain.” 23

“The pairing of those ancient texts can create a bridge from Eden to the bodily hope of incarnation.... Embodying that hope in our intimacies and at the Eucharistic Table will mean turning not only to sensual desire, but also to shame, to carnal wisdom as well as folly, to bodily glory in the midst of violence.” 27

“Forgiveness may and often does initiate a return to communion, but this alone fails to heal The Severing. What each of us needs in addition already resides in our bodies, the greatest creations of God that convey us to the Eucharist Table. We can intuit that source of healing every time we share a delectable meal with friends and family. Sharing

food in response to bodily desire displays a deep carnal wisdom that urges bodily encounters with the world of God's creation; the same wisdom prompts even closer intimate relations with a beloved partner whether a given meal satisfies our hunger for food or a more intimate encounter fulfills our longing for sexual union matters less than the bodily desire itself that led us to those moments. Attending carefully to that bodily wisdom carries the potential to transform our interactions with each other and, more widely, with Earth itself ..." 60-61

"if being human leads to deep distress – and the whole panoply of the facts deriving from shameful alienation and isolation – then the cure will come from exactly the same place, from being fully human. Indeed, our salvation as a species may come to this: the grace to embrace our humanity shamelessly free at last from our fear of intimacy and no longer compelled to hide ourselves from each other, from the world, and from God." 72

"Eucharist invites us equally to remember honestly the context of violence bred from denying our bodily goodness and, with a honed spiritual imagination, to crane our necks to peer over that rising tide of despair toward and expanding horizon." 87-88

"Rather than providing an escape from the untidy and often messy machinations of human life, the Gospel offers instead the hope of fully embracing the flesh that God creates and cherishes." 105

IV. The diagnosis of what is wrong with the human condition...

"Only by tuning our varied intimacies to the melody of the Eucharistic Table will the 'heavenly country' appear more vividly on our collective horizon. Only then will the hope of that shimmering country inspire the radical dismantling of the countless imperial mechanisms of control, both subtle and overt, that infiltrate and thus disrupt even the most ostensibly private moments of bodily intimacy." 93

"At the very root of the imperial urge to dominate and control lies the presumed and deeply entrenched supposition of male superiority. While countless historical and contemporary examples would bolster that claim, we need not look any further than the third chapter of Genesis. There the ancient storyteller astutely identifies the source of human despair for both women and men alike – the hierarchy of gender dominance." 93

"The salvation we seek and the redemption we long for will rise up from the fullness of human life that we have not yet known. What we do know languishes in that world of 'unredeemed relationships,' a world scarred by violence, systemic racism, and entrenched misogyny. Within that very world, graceful glimpses appear of human abundance in God, including those moments of sexual intimacy when an Easter grace sloughs off bodily shame and its alienations to which we have been clinging for so long. In those moments we can taste the hope of a bodily home with another." 104

V. Ethical implications?

"The Table invites all of these bodily intimacies, yet discerning the commitments that may or may not attend our intimate relationships proves challenging. Contracts, for example, even long-term contractual agreements, need not include bodily intimacy at all, though they certainly might on occasion; my contractual agreement with my bank has little to do with intimate bodily interactions. By the same token, nothing about bodily intimacy per se demands permanence. Plenty of intimate encounters last relatively briefly yet still carry profound effects.... Circumscribing genital intimacy within a lifelong commitment likewise provides no assurance of mutual self-giving in love, to which the alarming rate of domestic violence among married couples bears painful witness." 141-142

"Imagine Christian congregations organizing all of their worship, business practices, and pastoral care around that passionate voice, doing everything possible to ensure that you and everyone else feels unmistakably wanted and desired – that you know yourself as *desirable*.... Imagine passing through the whole arc of your life and being fed continually at a table set with bread and wine – a table where all of your fumbling and fortuitous attempts at bodily intimacy with others are welcome as graceful signs of your heart's desire." 164

James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex-Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013)

Brownson reveals a personal context for the book: "At that [earlier] time I took a moderate, traditionalist position on the issues. But then something happened that altered my life in many major ways: my eighteen-year-old son told my wife and me that he believed he was gay.... I realized, in fact, that my former work had stayed at a level of abstraction that wasn't helpful when I came to the concrete and specific questions I faced with my son" (11).

"These deeper divisions [between Traditionalist and Revisionist Christians] are hermeneutical in character: they arise from different ways of interpreting biblical texts and applying them to contemporary life. **The deeper differences are the focus of this book: they are not so much disagreement about what the Biblical text says but primarily disagreements about what the Biblical text means for Christians today. They are disagreements over how Scripture is to be interpreted** (5). Specifically, "**the meaning of Scripture for Christians today must not be drawn from just one passage but from the way any particular passage of Scripture is located within the larger themes and movements of Scripture as a whole. We must discern the deeper and more comprehensive moral logic that undergirds the specific commands, prohibitions, and examples of the biblical texts**" (9). He provides legitimate examples: observance of kosher laws (overruled by the New Testament) and the New Testament's instruction to "greet each other with a holy kiss" (a general exhortation towards hospitality).

Central argument: Though the words of Paul in the New Testament are legitimately understood as condemning homosexual conduct, the moral logic underlying the New Testament's condemnation is no longer applicable to the contemporary world. Why? Because the moral logic of the Apostle Paul in favor of sexual union only in male-female marriage is based in a patriarchal and hierarchical conception of marriage, which in turn is based on anatomical and *procreative* "gender complementarity": "because same-sex relationships are non-procreative, Paul regarded these relationships as selfish and socially irresponsible, neglecting the obligation of procreation" (267).

What Brownson reads in the Apostle Paul leads him to go back to Genesis 2, arguing that it was not the anatomical and procreative gender complementarity of Eve that made her a suitable companion for Adam, but rather her common humanity and capacity for relationality that gave her the capacity for a one flesh union. One flesh union, then, has nothing to do with biological sex, and everything to do with shared humanity and relationality. It must be conceded, based on experience he argues, that *gay and lesbian relationships have these capacities as fully as heterosexual relationships*.

Presuming that the Apostle Paul grounded the prohibition of homosexual relationships primarily on their lack of procreative potential, Brownson turns to Romans 1 to look at Paul's other objections to homoeroticism:

- *Lust and desire* (Brownson argues the Apostle Paul assumes that all homosexual relationships are the result of inordinate desire (lust) and not love, which is not valid for contemporary gay couples)
- *Purity and impurity* (Brownson argues much of what Paul objects to took place in the context of pagan idol worship, which is not valid for contemporary gay couples)
- *Honor and shame* (Brownson argues the Apostle Paul believed that homosexual sex feminizes the male, which was disgraceful in Roman society but not relevant to contemporary gay couples)
- *Nature* (Brownson argues the Apostle Paul condemns homosexual sex as unnatural because it is non-procreative which is no longer a relevant criterion)

ANALYSIS¹: The validity of Brownson's argument hinges on the validity of his focus on anatomical and procreative gender complementarity as the basic moral logic of the Apostle Paul.

The Biblical Problem: Neither Jesus in his core teaching about marriage and Matthew 19 nor the Apostle Paul at any point in the epistles ever mention procreation as a central function of marriage. To the contrary, Jesus focuses on sex between a husband and wife as creating a one flesh union. The Apostle Paul reiterates this exact point in 1 Corinthians 6-7 and elsewhere, and is emphatic that marriage is about one flesh union and about it being a mirror or image of Christ's love for his church. There is no mention whatsoever of procreation in Romans 1. Not only does Paul *never* say that procreation is *the* purpose of marriage; he never says that it is even *a* purpose of marriage.

The Historical Problem: Brownson assumes that the Apostle Paul was unacquainted with stable homosexual orientation and consensual relationships; he likely was aware of this².

¹ Preston Sprinkle, "Romans 1 and Homosexuality: A Review of James Brownson's *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* (24:4), 2014, pp. 515-528.

² See Sprinkle.

The Theological Problem: Is it possible that the gender complementarity of both Genesis 2 and the Apostle Paul *included* anatomical and-procreative complementarity but was and is more than that? Humanity as male and female were created intentionally in the Image of God so that individual humans and married couples (with procreative potential) could function as images of the Trinitarian God. It is possible to argue for a broader gender complementarity, one inclusive of but not limited to procreation; for a gender complementarity that anchors the restriction of sexual intimacy to male-female marriage.

Other Problems³

“On specific texts, there are a number of surprising judgments or omissions . To signal a selection

- **a simple dismissal of the well-established view that *arsenokoitai* is a term originating in Paul’s reading of Leviticus 18 & 20 and instead a restriction of it to an active partner in a pederastic relationship,**
- a rejection of lesbianism being a concern in Rom 1,
- **no attention to the many echoes of Genesis and creation language in Romans 1,**
- a subjective reading of impurity which fails to explore the Pauline links between this term (*akatharsia*) and the more objective category of sexual immorality (*porneia*) in vice lists, and
- **a reading of 1 Tim[othy] that makes no mention of the echoes of the Decalogue in the vice list ...**

The Ten Commandments Exodus 20:1-17	1 Timothy 1:8-11 Vice List ⁸ Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, ⁹ understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy
³ “You shall have no other gods before me.	lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners,
⁴ “You shall not make for yourself a carved image...	for the unholy
⁷ “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain...	and profane,
⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy....	
¹² “Honor your father and your mother...	for those who strike their fathers and mothers,
¹³ “You shall not murder.	for murderers,
¹⁴ “You shall not commit adultery.	¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality,
¹⁵ “You shall not steal.	enslavers,
¹⁶ “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.	liars, perjurers,
¹⁷ “You shall not covet your neighbor's house...	and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine

³ <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/review-of-bible-gender-sexuality-reframing-the-churchs-debate-on-same-sex-relationships-by-james-v-brownson>

Summary of Argument

- I. **Essentialist Core Assumption:** "It seems that increasingly people are recognizing that there are some – a minority, but a significant one – for whom the natural sexual orientation is toward people of their same sex. The more people share such experiences, the more it has become widely accepted as something that just happens and that this is the way some people are." (18)
- II. **Three Options for Inclusion:**
 - A. "Repent or Repair?": change the desires and behavior of disordered individuals
 - B. "Accept and Refrain?": change our understanding what Scripture says (specifically, normalize the orientation if not the behavior)
 - C. "Accept and Affirm?": "uphold both" by being willing to "update biblical writers' understanding and assumptions and respectfully acknowledge that the witness, which we treasure and in which we hear the Word of God, was expressed in the language and thought-world of its time"(20)
- III. **Paul's "Perversion Psychology"**

The witness of Scripture, in which he basically affirms traditional exegesis of all the major relevant passages with one exception: Romans 1. Loader is intent on emphasizing what he calls Paul's "Perversion Psychology":

"He accounts for the perversion of self-understanding and sexual orientation and behavior as resulting not from Adam's fall, but from people's rejection of God and God's true nature." (40)

"For Paul, people with a perverse understanding of God, which produces in them a perverted understanding of both God and themselves, are 'without excuse' ([Romans] 1:20)." (41)

"Paul appears to assume, like other Jews whose discussions have survived, that all people are heterosexual. Homosexual orientation is contrary to nature as God created people. Thus he treats such attraction psychologically. A perverted understanding of God results in a perverted mind now sexually attracted to its own gender.... [More than pederasty, more than idolatry, more than excessive passion...] He sees it as sin generated by the sin of not acknowledging God's true nature." (42-43)
- IV. **Three Options for Inclusion Revisited:**
 - A. "Repent or Repair?": "this option does not take the reality of human experience seriously enough, especially widely accepted reality that some people, a minority, including highly respected individuals, seem to be naturally attracted to those of their own sex. In its wake are many sad stories of genuine and often traumatic failed attempts by gay people to seek to have their homosexual orientation reversed." (43)
 - B. "Accept and Refrain?": "This option, however, is vulnerable to critique as an unsatisfactory compromise between Scripture and human experience that fails to do justice to either.... This option's re-reading Paul fails, as I see it, to do justice to what he was saying, in contrast to option one. Like other Jews, whose works have survived, Paul does not appear to embrace the notion that some people are gay, but rather explains same-sex attraction as the result of the state of mind perverted by sin." (44)
 - C. "Accept and Affirm?": "A third option... is often misunderstood and lampooned as giving up on Scripture.... If, then, we need to acknowledge that Paul's understanding about the nature of human sexuality was limited, we cannot simply apply this judgments to the situations where people are genuine gay." (44-45)
- V. **Wesley Hill in response (pp. 55-60) focuses on two claims:**
 - A. that Paul did not believe that there is such a thing as "genuinely gay people" with stable homosexual orientation, to which Hill responds
 - i. that it is "most probable that Paul – like other ancient authors of his time – thought of people neither as 'heterosexual' nor 'homosexual,' and
 - ii. sexual orientation is not reducible to erotic impulses.
 - B. that Hill's position "bars genuinely gay people from ever expressing her sexuality, something which seems unfair and equitable if their state of being gay is in itself acceptable," to which Hill responds
 - i. the historic Christian tradition has focused on acts, not inclinations
 - ii. "I also find reason to question Loader's notion that celibacy must always be a 'free' choice if it is to be seen as properly Christian

**Four Significant Reservations Regarding the Ethical Arguments Advanced in
Karen R. Keen, *Scripture, Ethics and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships* (Eerdmann: 2018)**

I. Paul, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Same-Sex Passion

“The point is that Genesis is not the backdrop for Paul [in Romans 1]; *Wisdom of Solomon* is the text he is engaging” (p. 38). She bases this argument on the conclusion drawn on the previous page (37) that “Instead of Genesis, Paul makes his argument in conversation with *Wisdom of Solomon*.” The two options are not, however, exclusive: it is not a disjunctive choice between Genesis or *Wisdom* as the backdrop for Paul in Romans 1.

It seems quite evident that *Wisdom* itself has Genesis in mind as backdrop, which brings in Genesis as the backdrop for Paul in Romans 1. Chapter 10, the pivotal chapter of the book, begins with the claim that Adam was redeemed by Wisdom and died a righteous man; there then follows a recitation of the Genesis historical account of the development of Israel for *the rest of Wisdom* from Adam through Moses and Israel in the desert. In Chapter 12, the author turns to examine the origins of wickedness in the inhabitants of the Promised Land. Three things are notable from examining these passages:

- A. Keen interprets Paul as arguing that same-sex desire and passion is *directly caused in the present* by the *individual pagan consciously rejecting faith* in favor of idolatrous foolishness; see her statement that “Paul describes adult pagans whose thinking became ‘futile’ after they knowingly rejected God. He portrays this futility of mind as the cause of same-sex desire and behavior” (p. 38). The depiction in *Wisdom* is indeed stark: Idolatry is the source of all evil. But this clearly is a historical account or argument. It is the background of the Gentile people of the time of the author of *Wisdom*; there is no claim that it is the current active, conscious, and deliberate practice of people in the present who are nevertheless moored in foolishness. In other words, careful reading of *Wisdom* does not necessitate attributing personal idolatry in the present of those who experience same sex attraction, nor does it necessitate abandoning a “metaphorical” interpretation of human history by Paul in Romans 1 (per Hayes).
- B. In our phone interview, Keen stated that even if *Wisdom* had Genesis in mind, and hence that was background for Paul, it was still clear that Paul did not have original sin in view when he was writing Romans 1. It could be argued that Original Sin is exactly what he had in view as he leveraged the discussion of idolatry in the direction of everyone being guilty in the mind of God.
- C. It is notable that there is no mention whatsoever of same-sex desire or behavior in *Wisdom*. Paul imports this *new* into the narrative created in conversation between Paul and Wisdom of Solomon. Does Paul do this under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit?

II. Failure to Take Seriously Enough One Flesh Union in Marriage as an Image of God

Keen rightly protects and retains holy matrimony between one man and one woman as the ideal representation of Christ’s relationship to his Church as a Creation Ordinance. When discussing the nature of marriage, however, she inadvertently (?) minimizes the importance and uniqueness of “one flesh union.” She interprets one flesh union as a kinship bond (32); on that basis, she then interprets the imperative of not breaking the fidelity of the marital union merely to the importance of preserving covenant fidelity and keeping two together (“The crux of the argument is about keeping two people together.... [Hence] Marriage is defined by fidelity”; 32).

I tend to see one flesh union as metaphysically real and as a metaphysical mystery. This is a sacred bond that is not to be dissolved. The only other comparable institution in the Christian faith is our metaphysical union to Christ through conversion and our membership in the church universal.

III. Dangers of Reliance on General Ethical Principles and the Resulting Discernment/Deliberation Processes

Keen starts with a reasonable premise: “Therefore, to understand the enduring theological significance of the Old Testament laws, we must attend to both the historical-cultural background and the narrative context” (45). She shows how biblical authors adapted secular material, and then moves to how biblical scribes in turn adapt and alter other biblical material. She extends the idea of biblical interpretation from asking “what does the text teach?” to the actual *alteration of the text of scripture*. She does so on the basis that this is somehow parallel to putative scribal alteration of biblical texts in pre-canonical times when the canon was not yet finalized but rather was being assembled.

From that, she makes a momentous claim: “Inspiration resides not necessarily in the particular case but in the overarching reason for the laws – namely, *a good and just society*” (50). She concludes “What is inspired is not the genre or particular Ancient Near Eastern legal concerns, but rather what the laws signify: a good and just world” (52). Inspiration applies not to the letter of the law but to the good purposes behind.

She presumes that we are empowered and capable of discerning those good purposes, as when she declares that “Jesus teaches us that when we derive ethics from Scripture, it is always ‘lawful to do good’ (Matt. 12: 12)” (64) or that we should always act “on behalf of people” (65).

The remedy is a deliberative process. “The way they [the biblical authors] interpreted divine revelation to apply ethics provides a model for us as we contemplate the ethical question of same-sex relationships – namely, biblical mandates, including creation ordinances, require a deliberative process” (58). The discernment process she proposes is unprecedented. She begins by observing that “the biblical authors interpreted earlier divine revelation in fresh ways” (58) “Biblical scribes felt comfortable not only editing and adding commentary to scripture texts passed down them, but also offering fresh interpretations” (59). Her example is the alteration, supposedly by a biblical scribe/interpreter, of biblical law from its initial revelation in Exodus 21:2-11 translator form in Deuteronomy 15:12-18 (59-60). “The biblical authors understood the nature and function of revelation in a way that is different from what many of us have been taught in our churches. They did not view it as inflexible and impervious” (61). “We see a similar interpretive principle at work in the New Testament when it comes to laws on divorce” (61). She interprets the differing divorce texts in Mark 10:11-12 and Matthew 19:9 to different ethical opinions of the respective Gospel authors, and then in terms of Paul.

“But we see that the biblical authors did not consider that [specifically, that we had a specific teaching from Jesus about divorce and that it was founded on a creational ordinance] a reason to forgo the discernment process” (63). The discernment process has suddenly become a rewriting of Scripture itself, rather than a discernment of how to apply Scripture.

The discernment practice she is proposing now becomes driven by the general ethical principles she has been noting, of doing good, pursuing justice, working towards a better life and on behalf of people; this in contrast to “the arbitrary appeasement of God’s sensibilities” (65). This ignores the prerogative of God to define terms of good and just by his authority. It also undervalues the weight of the historic witness of the church.

If the new moral rule is to be good and act on behalf of people, then what about the polyamorous and other sexual proclivities? She seems to have arrived at same destination point of so many others: God wants to bless each person’s individual sexual proclivities as they are self defined.

IV. Is Chastity Possible, and What Are the Implications? (Some Thoughts)

- Keen moves from anecdotal evidence to more systematic evidence, all of which indicates that not everyone committed to celibacy will be able to maintain it. We must keep in mind that all of this evidence simply documents that some people who say they are committed to chastity not remain chaste.
- It is a significant deductive step to go from an acknowledgment that 1) a certain percentage of persons committed to celibacy are in fact sexually active in a meaningful way in violation of the their celibacy vow to 2) for some people celibacy is impossible. The fact that some people sometimes stumble does not constitute proof that celibacy is impossible for anyone in particular.
- Even if celibacy were impossible for some, how would we know that it is impossible for us? If one were to attempt celibacy and fail, how can you prove that this was a result of celibacy being impossible for that person?
- Keen believes that if she had been able to cultivate her love interest when she was 20, she would have been able to live happily ever after. She can never know this. We do not know what’s going to happen in our relationships.
- Under what circumstances are we given a break in our struggle to remain chaste? Doesn’t her logic open the door to someone making a halfhearted commitment to chastity, falling into sexual sin, and then drawing a happy conclusion that chastity is impossible for them personally!? Wat about a theology of suffering?

Chastity is the call to holiness in the singleness and marriage. Does the same logic apply to marriage? Is it impossible for some people to stay monogamous? Does God make accommodations for them?