

# More Reasons Why Stacy Johnson's *A Time to Embrace* Should Not Be Embraced: Part III: Science, Nature, History, and Logic

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This is the third in a series of essays critiquing William Stacy Johnson's multiply flawed book, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). The first essay, to be published in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, is entitled "A Book Not to Be Embraced: A Critical Review Essay on Stacy Johnson's *Time to Embrace*" (<http://robgagnon.net/articles/homosexStacyJohnsonSJT2.pdf>). The second, which has the same main title as this essay, is subtitled "Part II: Sodom, Leviticus, and More on Jesus and Paul."

## I. Johnson's Misrepresentation of Socio-Scientific studies on Homosexuality

Johnson's treatment of socio-scientific studies shows significant instances of misrepresentation. Here are three examples.

(1) Johnson makes the extraordinary claim that "in [some Scandinavian] countries the **divorce rate for gays** is even lower than it is for heterosexual couples" (122, 278 n. 32; my bold). Yet when one checks out Johnson's references, one finds that the situation is actually the reverse: "divorce-risk levels are *considerably higher*" for same-sex registered partnerships: 50% higher for male partnerships and 150% higher for female partnerships in just the limited time interval of 0-8/9 years.<sup>1</sup>

(2) Johnson argues that the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>2</sup> shows that Kinsey's **10% figure for homosexuality** in the U.S. "may not be as far off based as it is sometimes

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<sup>1</sup> Gunnar Andersson, Turid Noack, Ane Seierstad, and Harald Weedon-Fekjaer, "The Demographics of Same-Sex 'Marriages' in Norway and Sweden," *Demography* 43:1 (2006): 79-98. An earlier version is cited in William N. Eskridge, Jr., and Darren R. Spedale, *Gay Marriage: For Better or for Worse? What We've Learned from the Evidence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 110. Johnson cited an earlier work by Eskridge for a study of Denmark by Spedale and then referred to the later Eskridge/Spedale book for "more recent" confirming information. In fact, Eskridge/Spedale repudiate the earlier Spedale study for making the dumb error of comparing the risk of a same-sex registered partnership dissolving in *five* years with the risk of a heterosexual marriage dissolving in *forty* years.

<sup>2</sup> William D. Mosher, Anjani Chandra, and Jo Jones, "Sexual Behavior and Selected Health Measures: Men and Women 15-44 Years of Age, United States, 2002," *Advance Data from Vital and Health Statistics* 362 (Sept. 15, 2005): 1-56; online: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/ad/ad362.pdf>.

claimed to be” (23-25). However, properly read,<sup>3</sup> the NSFG shows a consistent pattern of 3.3-4.0 percent of those aged 18-44 self-identifying as homosexual or bisexual, describing themselves as equally or primarily attracted to people of the same sex, and having any same-sex partner in the previous year. Had the NSFG included people aged 45-59 (as did the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey) these rates likely would have been around 2-3 percent, within a percentage point or so of the 1992 NHLS. Add those aged 60+ and the population rates would have dropped to 2 percent or less—a far cry from what Johnson touts.<sup>4</sup>

(3) Regarding the effects of “gay” parenting, Johnson alleges that “there is no credible evidence that the sexual orientation of a child’s caregiver affects the sexual orientation of the child” (32). Johnson cites two works to substantiate this claim: the authoritative 2001 overview of homosexual parenting studies by two USC professors, Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz;<sup>5</sup> and a 1997 book by Fiona Tasker and Susan Golombok, *Growing Up in a Lesbian Family*.<sup>6</sup> However, Johnson fails to tell readers that Stacey/Biblarz state a somewhat different conclusion: “The evidence ... hints that parental sexual orientation is positively associated with the possibility that children will be more likely to attain a similar orientation—and theory and common sense also support such a view.... [C]hildren of lesbigay parents appear to express a significant increase in homoeroticism.”<sup>7</sup> A more careful examination of the Tasker/Golombok study on Johnson’s part would also have revealed higher rates of homosexual attraction among young adults raised in a lesbian household.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson arrives at his claim by two missteps. First, he repeatedly reports the NSFG’s figures as applying to the whole “population” when in fact the NSFG surveyed only those aged 18-44. We know from the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey (NHLS) that those aged 40-59 report a third to a half less same-gender attraction and homosexual/bisexual identity than do those aged 18-39 (cf. Edward O. Laumann, et al., *The Social Organization of Sexuality* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], 303, 305, Tables 8.1 and 8.2). Second, by sleight of hand Johnson adds to the non-heterosexual group both those who checked off “something else” (3.9%) and those who did not answer (1.8%). Had Johnson bothered to do the math for Tables 12 and 13 (pp. 30-31) he would have seen that almost three-quarters of the “something else” and “did not report” groups (79% of males, 66% of females) elsewhere described themselves as attracted *only* to the opposite sex.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the 2004 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), which reported that a mere 1.7% of Canadians 18-59 years old identified themselves to be homosexual or bisexual.

<sup>5</sup> “(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?,” *American Sociological Review* 66:2 (2001): 159-83 (<http://www.e-noah.net/ASA/MO/articles/stacey.pdf>). Stacey has since moved to NYU.

<sup>6</sup> New York: Guilford, 1997. Cf., by the same authors: “Do Parents Influence the Sexual Orientation of Their Children? Findings from a Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Families,” *Developmental Psychology* 32 (1996): 3-11.

<sup>7</sup> Pg. 178.

<sup>8</sup> Two of the 25 young adults raised in a lesbian household self-identified as a 6 on the Kinsey scale and another two as a 2 or 3 (16%), as opposed to none of the 20 young adults with a heterosexual single mother. Nearly twice as many young adults raised by a lesbian mother reported any same-gender attraction (36%) as compared to the heterosexual control group (20%). Over twice as many of the former considered a homosexual relationship a “future possibility” (27%) as compared to the latter (11%). A quarter of the former had been, or were currently, in a same-gender relationship as compared to none of the latter (Johnson mentions partially only this single point, without noting the 0% figure for the latter). Tasker/Golombok also found that the greater the display of lesbian activity in the household, the “more likely” the young adults were “to report same-gender sexual interest.” Stacey/Biblarz note a deficiency in the Tasker/Golombok study: “To be coded as [bisexual, lesbian, or gay] the respondent not only had to currently self-identify as [such], but also to express a commitment to that identity in the future” (171).

To these three examples of misrepresentation of socio-scientific evidence one can add that Johnson sanitizes the picture of homosexual relationships by not mentioning any of the studies that indicate **disproportionately high rates of measurable harm** that attend homosexual practice. In particular, he fails to note significantly higher rates of sexual partners and sexually transmitted infections for homosexual males on the one hand and both significantly lower rates of relationships lasting 10 years or more and significantly higher rates of mental health issues especially for homosexual females on the other hand.<sup>9</sup> These deficiencies correlate with long-known male-female differences and reflect, to a large extent, the endemic difficulty that relationships without a sexual complement have in moderating the extremes of, and filling in the gaps of, a given sex. Johnson's silence on such matters amounts to misrepresentation of the data.

## II. Johnson's Misuse of Sexual Orientation as a Moral Argument

On p. 20, within his section on "Research into Sexual Orientation," Johnson offers a succinct explanation of his views on sexual orientation as a moral argument. Here is the argument broken down along with its flaws:

**1. *Why homosexual desire is not as normal and constitutive as heterosexual desire.*** According to Johnson, same-gender sexual desire "is as normal and as much a part of a gay person's constitution or makeup as heterosexual desire is for others." There are three problems here.

First, "normal" as used by Johnson here is an ideologically driven descriptor, not a scientific one. Homosexual desire is not as *normal* as heterosexual desire, either in terms of statistical frequency or, more importantly, in the sense of corresponding fully to embodied structures. The anatomical incongruity of attempts at same-sex merger not only illustrates this but also symbolizes the full range of non-complementary features of same-sex bonds that includes physiology and psychology. To be erotically aroused by, and to seek merger with, what one already is as a sexual being, maleness for maleness or femaleness for femaleness, is certainly not as "normal" as a desire for the sex or gender that is complementary to one's own, maleness for femaleness and vice versa.

Second, how does Johnson know that homosexual desire is "*as much* a part of gay person's constitution or makeup as heterosexual desire is for others" (my emphasis)? He offers no statistical evidence (because none exists) that persons with homosexual desire are *as* unlikely to develop any heterosexual impulses as persons with heterosexual desire to develop any homosexual impulses. He also makes no distinction between males and females even though the very NSFG study that he loves to cite (above) indicates that exclusive homosexuality and heterosexuality is a less stable feature of females than of males (so can we do more to restrict female homosexual expression?). More to the point, in terms of frequency of incidence levels, the overwhelming proportion of people in the U.S. identify as heterosexual, which would certainly suggest that this, and not homosexuality, is the default position. Even by Johnson's understanding of the "Origins

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<sup>9</sup> See *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 452-60, 471-85; and especially "Immoralism, Homosexual Unhealth, and Scripture: Part II: Science" (Aug. 2005; 40 pgs.; online: <http://robagnon.net/articles/homoHeterosexismRespPart2.pdf>).

of Same-Gender Desire” (25-28), contributing factors to homosexual development include “*abnormal*” prenatal hormone levels (androgen insensitivity syndrome for males and congenital adrenal hyperplasia for females) and a possible “*skewing* in the X chromosome” (25, 27; my emphases). In this sense, too, homosexuality is not as *constitutive* a feature of human development as heterosexuality inasmuch as we don’t speak of abnormalities as constitutive, essential, or normal to the nature of something.

Finally, by Johnson’s reasoning we would have to describe polysexual desire (an orientation to more than one sex partner) and pedosexual desire (an orientation to children) similarly. For these orientations are “as normal and as much a part of” a polysexual person’s and pedosexual person’s constitution or makeup as monosexual and teleiosexual (adult-sexual) “desire is for others.”

**2. Why difficulty in changing homosexual desire is not a validating factor.** Johnson adds: “Therefore, that desire cannot be easily discarded or eliminated as though it were somehow only an incidental part of a person’s identity.” Elsewhere he says: “If gays and lesbians do not experience their sexual orientation as a straightforward choice, then what sense does it make to ... condem[n] them?” “If the church does not choose to condemn people for their gay identity, why condemn them for their gay behavior?” (54, 60).

Few people today, myself included, would claim that homosexual desire is easily eliminated or even likely to be all but eliminated in most cases. So what? The degree of intensity and persistence with which particular desires are experienced is not relevant to ascertaining the morality of a given behavior. Polysexual impulses—sexual desires for more than one person—are common to humanity, especially to males. They “cannot be easily discarded or eliminated.” Nor can pedosexual desires, as any mental health clinician who has worked with pedophiles would attest. Other behaviors that are not normally linked to “orientations” would not be validated even if there were strong biological influences, such as adult incest (i.e. an incest orientation would not justify adult incest). As regards moral concerns, Paul in Rom 7:7-25 describes sin as an impulse running through the members of the human body, passed on by an ancestor, and never entirely within human control. Innateness in Paul’s thinking is the usual mark of sin—not surprisingly given his view of universal sin. Even homosexualist scientists recognize the moral vacuity of an argument predicated on the innateness of urges:

Despite common assertions to the contrary, evidence for biological causation does not have clear moral, legal, or policy consequences. To assume that it does logically requires the belief that some behavior is non-biologically caused. We believe that this assumption is irrational because ... all behavioral differences will on some level be attributable to differences in brain structure or process. Thus, no clear conclusions about the morality of a behavior can be made from the mere fact of biological causation, because all behavior is biologically caused.... Any genes found to be involved in determining sexual orientation will likely only confer a predisposition rather than definitively cause homosexuality or heterosexuality.<sup>10</sup>

If biological influences impact to some degree all behaviors, then any impact that they have on homosexual behavior must be deemed morally irrelevant.

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<sup>10</sup> Brian S. Mustanski and J. Michael Bailey, “A therapist’s guide to the genetics of human sexual orientation,” *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 18:4 (2003): 432.

3. ***Why living out of homosexual impulses is not life-giving and healthy.*** Johnson then states: “To be sure, there are all kinds of things people may feel a desire to do that are immoral—the desire to steal, to kill, or to take advantage of others. Yet decades of research ... have made it clear that, when gay and lesbian people live out their sexual orientation in responsible ways, the result for them is life-giving and healthy.”

Johnson concedes the point that innate desires include immoral impulses, though conveniently leaving out polysexuality and pedosexuality. Yet he then illogically carries on his argument as if the condition of innateness *contributes* to the morality of some behaviors. If anything, one could argue the precise opposite from a Christian worldview. When believers do what is right in spite of strong impulses to the contrary, their behavior is the more morally praiseworthy (Gal 5:13-25; Rom 8:5-17). For example, when one follows Jesus’ command to deny oneself, take up one’s cross, and lose one’s life for the sake of Jesus and his gospel, then one has truly behaved in a life-giving way. “For what benefit is there for a person to gain the whole world and (yet) experience loss of his soul/life?” (Mark 8:34-36). Paul declared, “I die each and every day” because of the multiplicity of hardships that he willingly endured for the cause of Christ, “always carrying around in the body the dying of Jesus” and “being handed over to death because of Jesus” “in order that also the life of Jesus might be manifested in our body” (1 Cor 15:30-32; 2 Cor 4:7-18; 6:4-10; 11:23-12:10). So one might better flip Johnson’s argument upside down and say that when persons don’t live out of innate homoerotic desires they act in ways that are “life-giving and healthy.”

If Johnson were to counter that the same argument could be made against heterosexual desire he would miss the point. It is not the innateness of heterosexual desire for most persons that makes it morally acceptable to God in the context of the covenant of marriage. Rather it is the fact that marital heterosexual relations correspond to the God-ordained complementary structures of maleness and femaleness. Homosexual bonds dishonor the sexual self irrespective of the innateness of homosexual urges because of the logic of such bonds is that each participant is only half of his or her respective sex.

Johnson argues that “*when gay and lesbian people live out their sexual orientation in responsible ways*, the result for them is life-giving and healthy” (my emphasis). The qualification makes the claim virtually meaningless. It automatically excludes from consideration the disproportionately high rate of problems that attend homosexual relations and that arise in large measure from the absence of a true sexual complement. Almost as meaningless is Johnson’s main clause: “the result *for them* is life-giving and health” (my emphasis). The small minority of homosexual relationships that manage to dodge significant *measurable* harm do not produce something “life-giving” since the participants dishonor their sexual selves by seeing in a sexual same a sexual counterpart to themselves. They also violate the clear witness of God’s will in Scripture. Rarely do consensual sexual behaviors produce harm that is both intrinsic and measurable—certainly not adult incestuous bonds or polyamorous bonds, nor even pedosexual relationships. Johnson’s only recourse, then, is to base his entire claim on the biased self-perception of the participants (“for them”).

The end result is that Johnson’s attempt to use the innateness of same-sex attractions as a moral argument fizzles out to nothing.

### III. Is There “Little Good News” for Persons Struggling with Same-Sex Attractions in Complementarian Viewpoints?

Johnson contends that “there is little good news for gay people” in the “non-affirming” viewpoints (106). In denying them same-sex marriage it allegedly denies them “a means of grace” (97).

These kinds of remarks by Johnson represent nothing less than a denial of the gospel of the crucified Christ by which power is manifested in the midst of a cruciform life. By Johnson’s reckoning, then, there would be little good news and little grace for anyone who experiences deprivation for the cause of the gospel as a result of obeying Jesus’ command to “deny oneself and take up one’s cross” and “lose one’s life” (Mark 8:34-35). Do not the Beatitudes stress that those who will inherit the kingdom of heaven are precisely those who live in deprivation now, a deprivation that sometimes arises from obedience to God’s commands (Matt 5:3-12)? Do not the six antitheses of the Sermon of the Mount (“You heard that it was said to the ancients ... but I say to you ...”) increase the likelihood of personal deprivation for many, stressing as they do the necessity of having “righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees” as a prerequisite for entering the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:17-48)? It must be asked of Johnson: What is the good news and where is the grace for people who

- experience intense polyamorous urges on a daily basis and deep dissatisfaction with single-partner unions?
- never asked to experience exclusive, strong sexual attractions for children but do?
- struggle for their entire lives with addictions that most people never have to struggle with?
- suffer daily from serious disabilities like the loss of sight or the loss of mobility below the neck?
- live in a culture where confession of Christ brings great persecution and suffering?

Some of life’s deprivations arise from the infiltration of sin and death into the world, which befall believer and unbeliever alike. Others arise from heeding a general call to obedience to God’s commands, incumbent on all believers but at diverse points demanding greater effort by some than by others. Still others arise from specific calls or burdens given by God to specific individuals. Whatever their origin, these experiences of deprivation and difficulties are catalysts for Christ-formation, not spiritual deserts devoid of good news and grace.

God gave Paul a “thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to batter me.”<sup>11</sup> Paul pleaded with God to put it away from him. God answered with a “no.” If we adopted Johnson’s understanding of good news and grace, we would have to conclude that there was no good news or grace in God’s response. But, on the contrary, God insisted: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is being perfected<sup>12</sup> in weakness” (12:7-9). This remarkable statement defines grace not as Johnson defines it—permission to avoid hard

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<sup>11</sup> Guesses as to what the ‘thorn in the flesh’ was range from a serious eye condition (cf. Gal 4:13-15) to the whole array of apostolic hardships (2 Cor 6:4-10; 11:23-33; 1 Cor 4:9-13).

<sup>12</sup> Or: completed, brought to its goal, fully actualized (*teleitai*).

circumstances and difficult demands—but rather as empowerment from God to endure a “no” from God to one’s own request for deliverance. The good news is that God’s grace is not only “sufficient” even in difficult circumstances and demands but also “fully actualized” in such, when believers endure with thanksgiving for God’s bounty.

Just as the greatest demonstration of God’s power came in Jesus’ greatest moment of weakness (1 Cor 1:18-25), so too for believers it is the endurance of difficult times, not immediate deliverance from them or avoidance of them, that constitutes the supreme moment of God’s power. “So I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I think well of<sup>13</sup> weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9-10). Similarly Paul could tell the Philippians: “I have learned in the circumstances I find myself to be self-sufficient,” whether in need or in abundance, “initiated” into the mystery that “I can do all things in/through (*en*) the one who empowers me” (4:11-13). Even near-death experiences serve the purpose of teaching us to “rely not on ourselves but on the God who raises the dead” (2 Cor 1:9). But for Johnson, apparently, such moments of deprivation are bereft of good news and grace.

There is no denying that a two-sexes prerequisite for sexual relationships makes a demand that is keenly felt by a subset of the total population. At the same time all rules create special burdens for a particular part of a population. For example, a rule against multiple-partner sexual bonds or against adultery creates a special burden on persons with an intense polysexual orientation; a rule against adult-child sex creates a special burden on people with a pedosexual orientation; and a rule against covetousness and theft creates a special burden on the poor.

Moreover, obedience to such rules is not without benefits. In the case of refraining from homosexual practice, one avoids dishonoring the sexual self that God created as wholly male or wholly female, since homosexual unions effectively treat the participants sexually as only half their own sex. One also avoids the high risk of contracting a life-threatening STI (if male) and a likelihood of persistent relational failures with their attendant risks for mental health (problematic in both male and female homosexual bonds, but especially the latter).

The pastor who out of a desire to be “pastoral” gives his blessing to someone with persistent homosexual attractions to engage in homosexual practice has unwittingly interfered with God’s special efforts at shaping Christ in the latter and at increasing the latter’s reliance on God’s love. Worse still, without having the power to act as Judge to acquit, such a pastor has put that individual at risk of not inheriting the kingdom of God, if Scripture is to be believed (1 Cor 6:9-10). The church simply does not have the right to change God’s foundational requirements for holy living embedded consistently in Scripture and then guarantee that in doing so no harm will befall the practitioners. Appealing on the Day of Judgment to Johnson’s permission to engage in homosexual practice will be of no value in securing an exemption before God for failing to keep God’s commands.

In addition, without diminishing the difficulties that a male-female requirement places on some “category 6” homosexual persons, it is far from being the greatest demand that God’s makes of anyone. Despite the homosexualist claim of “sexual starvation,” no one will starve from this sexual prerequisite. A high degree of intimacy is possible in non-

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<sup>13</sup> Or: am content with, delight in, am pleased with (*eudokō*).

sexual relationships—and non-erotic same-sex relationships should be encouraged, not eschewed, for persons with same-sex attractions. Johnson dismisses any comparison with “a heterosexual person who, for whatever reason, is without a marriage partner,” contending that the latter at least “may nurture the hope of a union the church will gladly bless” (61). Such a remark glosses over the fact that three-quarters of all persons who experience significant same-sex attractions will experience one or more shifts on the Kinsey spectrum in the course of life, even apart from therapeutic intervention (at least according to the Kinsey Institute). This means that the great majority of such persons will experience at least some heterosexual functioning at some point in life. But aside from that, a heterosexual person who has “hope” of marrying but is continually disappointed may find life harder, not easier, than a person who experiences same-sex attractions and has soberly faced the improbability of getting married. And there is certainly no *functional* difference between a heterosexual person who has never had sexual relations, in part because of an unwillingness to violate God’s purity demands, and a person with exclusive same-sex attractions who abstains from sexual relations out of obedience to God’s commands. Surely God has not withheld grace to either party.

In short, Johnson’s claim that a position that prohibits homosexual practice is void of good news and grace is itself an anti-gospel stance. It presumes that the power and grace of God can only operate in a context where God allows people to gratify intense, innate urges to do what God expressly forbids. Against this notion stands the image of the cross, which signals God’s earnest efforts at crucifying “the flesh with its passions and desires,” especially passions and desires for “sexual immorality, sexual uncleanness, and sexual licentiousness” (*porneia, akatharsia, aselgeia*, Gal 5:19, 24).

#### IV. Plato’s *Laws* and Johnson’s Exploitation-Hedonism Argument

Let us see how Johnson’s use of an exploitation and hedonism argument fares in comparison to one of the most important anti-homosex texts in Greco-Roman antiquity: Plato’s *Laws*. Here Plato discusses the ideal state and particularly how the young should be educated, through a dialogue between an Athenian stranger (who represents Plato’s views) and a Spartan named Megillus. The objections raised by the Athenian to homosexual practice, which are absolute,<sup>14</sup> have nothing whatever to do with issues of hedonism and exploitation, at least as defined by Johnson and others. Rather, the Athenian objects that nature shows homosexual practice to be wrong, in three ways.

First and foremost, “joining with (adult) males and boys in sexual intercourse as though with females” puts the receptive partner in the place of a female, engendering “softness” instead of a “manly character” in the beloved “who imitates the female.”<sup>15</sup> It also damages the character of the active partner by the loss of self-control with respect to gratifying unnatural pleasures (836C-E, 837B-C, 636D).

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<sup>14</sup> *Laws* is Plato’s last work. It shows an absolute opposition to homosexual practice not in evidence in earlier works. *Phaedrus* provides a transition to this critical view by speaking of sexual intercourse between a man and his beloved as “contrary to nature” and encouraging a relationship without sexual intercourse while yet tolerating lapses given the beauty of his beloved and the intensity of the sexual desire.

<sup>15</sup> The translations of excerpts from *Laws* are my own.

Second, “the pleasure experienced . . . when male mates with male or female with female” is “contrary to nature” because such unions are structurally incapable of procreation and could lead to the extinction of the human race (636C, 838E, 841D-E).

Third, nature shows its aversion to homosexual practice in not giving animals the desire to engage in such behavior (636B, 836C, 840D-E).

These arguments are appropriated and expanded by Jewish writers of Paul’s day such as Philo and Pseudo-Phocylides so that one cannot argue that Plato is too distant in time from the New Testament to be of relevance.<sup>16</sup> As none of these reasons for disavowing homosexual practice fit Johnson’s main thesis, the exploitation-hedonism argument, he is obligated to acknowledge its error and cease using it.

After being compelled to drop the exploitation-hedonism argument, Johnson would then have recourse only to orientation and misogyny arguments. Doubtless, Johnson would respond that: (1) Plato’s first argument about female-like “softness” is misogynistic (225); (2) his second argument is inconsistent given that we don’t reject infertile heterosexual intercourse and irrelevant given today’s overpopulation (30, 51, 137, 286 n. 60); and (3) and his third argument is scientifically false since we are aware today of congenitally influenced homosexuality among both animals and humans (80). However, such a response on Johnson’s part would miss the underlying argument that ties together Plato’s tripartite defense of a male-female prerequisite for sexual activity; namely, that same-sex sexual bonds are *structurally* incompatible because the only sexual complement to one’s sex is the other sex, anatomically, physiologically, and psychologically.

Against the use of a misogyny argument, Plato’s discussion here is actually quite affirming of women for the conventions of the day. He speaks of the sexual pleasure not only of a male for a female but also of a female for a male as “in accordance with nature” (636C, 836A). The Athenian also stresses the necessity of promoting through law and other cultural inducements marriages where “men [are] truly fond of their own wives” (839A) and where both husband and wife are faithful to each other in lifelong monogamous bonds of mutual love (840E).

Nor would an orientation argument have any material impact on Plato’s overall argument since he acknowledges both the innateness of male sexual desires for males and the difficulty (though necessity) of mastering such pleasures (636C-D, 837B-C, 839A, 840C). In this connection one should compare Plato’s portrait of Socrates in *Symposium* 216-18 and *Charmides* 155D as someone who learned to manage intense sexual desires for males. Plato’s discussion of love of boys in *Phaedrus* 249-56 vividly illustrates the powerful sexual temptation that confronts the philosophic lover of boys.<sup>17</sup> Relevant too is

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 166-83.

<sup>17</sup> Plato, in the persona of the early sixth century poet Stesichorus, talks about the great internal struggle that the lover of boys feels in his efforts to keep the relationship with a beautiful boy from devolving into sexual intercourse. Using the illustration of the soul as a tripartite structure consisting of charioteer, a good horse, and a bad horse, Plato states that the good horse “by its sense of shame . . . prevents itself from jumping on the boy” (254A). The bad horse, however, continually leads the other two to the boy in order to proposition the boy for sex. The charioteer must repeatedly yank back the reins and bit, bloodying the bad horse’s mouth, in order to bring him back into line. When the boy accepts the lover’s companionship, and indeed develops his own desire for the lover, “the lover’s undisciplined horse” becomes the more eager to reassert its desire for sex (255). At this point many even of the philosophically minded succumb to the temptation. In *Phaedrus* Plato, though advocating love of boys without sexual intercourse, depicts the

Plato's portrayal of Aristophanes' myth for justifying congenital homosexuality in *Symposium* 189-93. Plato does not see "contrary to nature" as implying no innate sexual urges for the male but rather as implying incompatibility with embodied structures (woman as the sexual complement to man). To act "contrary to nature" is to demonstrate an inability to control innate passions in a manner that accords with nature's structures.

Nor will it do to isolate Plato's procreation argument from his overall argument of structural discomplementarity, since the Athenian treats infertile homosexual unions as far worse than infertile, and even adulterous, forms of heterosexual intercourse. The former is to be banned "entirely" whereas the latter might be barely tolerated if attempts are made to keep such heterosexual misbehaviors hidden (841E). Later in the first century C.E. even Philo, who insisted that men not marry infertile women "already proven to be so by other husbands" and commented often on the non-procreative incapacity of homosexual relations, recognized the difference between infertile heterosexual unions and infertile homosexual unions.<sup>18</sup> This is even more likely to be the case for Paul, who did not stress procreation as a requirement for marriage but rather viewed procreation primarily in heuristic, rather than prescriptive, terms.

Adult consensual incest provides a nice parallel case, all the more because Plato cites in *Laws* sex with one's sibling, grown child, or parent as his sole example of how powerful cultural sanctions can effectively preclude men "from (engaging in) sexual commerce with beautiful persons" (838A-C, 839A). As with homosexual practice, Plato's rejection of incest obviously is not limited to exploitative or hedonistic forms. The rejection is absolute. Now suppose Plato had cited as the "traditional" justifications for rejecting incest absolutely: first, that incest blurred hierarchical boundaries;<sup>19</sup> second, that it led to complications in childbirth; and, third, that it was not generally practiced even by

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beauty of boys as one of the powerful images on earth of the true heavenly beauty. The philosophic mind that beholds it is driven to divine "madness" and cannot bear to be separated even for a moment from the boy. Plato himself is clearly obsessed with youthful male beauty, even as he tries to keep the obsession under control. Even in *Phaedrus* he calls male love of males a "pleasure contrary to nature" (250E) and attributes to the charioteer and good horse of the soul a "sense of shame" that inhibits the controlling influence of such pleasure. Yet Plato in *Phaedrus* is gentle to the philosophic pair that ultimately succumbs to sexual intercourse:

[W]hen they have consummated [the relationship] once, they go on doing this for the rest of their lives, but sparingly, since they have not approved of what they are doing with their whole minds. So these two also live in mutual friendship, though weaker than that of the philosophic pair [that has not succumbed to intercourse]. (256C)

They never break their "firm vows" to each other. "In death they are wingless when [their souls] leave the body," but they have nevertheless "begun the sacred journey" and "will grow wings together when the time comes." And so "the rewards" that come "from a lover's friendship ... are as great as divine gifts should be" (256; trans. of *Phaedrus* by A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff [1995] in Hubbard).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-68. For instance, Philo did not recommend that husbands divorce a young bride after discovering her infertility over a period of years (*Special Laws* 3.34-36). He would, however, have vehemently insisted on the immediate discontinuance of a man-male sexual bond, if not also the execution of the parties involved. At least "men mad after women or women (mad) after men ... [paid] tribute to the laws of nature"; such, however, was not the case with "men (mad) after males" (*Contemplative Life* 59).

<sup>19</sup> For example, parental authority over children is disregarded when transgenerational incest occurs or when a man takes to marriage a woman and her daughter. Such hierarchical concerns undoubtedly did influence laws against incest. The mistake, however, would be to truncate all opposition to incest to this one concern while ignoring concerns for too much structural, embodied sameness.

animals. Suppose too that someone today countered each one of these explicit justifications by noting, for example, that ancient views of patriarchal dominance are no longer applicable; that childbirth can now be readily prevented and at any rate leaves unaffected unions where one of the family members is infertile (or both partners are the same sex!); and that we now know that incest occurs both among animals and, cross-culturally, among some human population groups.

Would such a rebuttal really get at the heart of the problem with incest for most ancients and moderns? Probably not. The real rationale behind prohibitions of incest and prohibitions of same-sex intercourse is often deeper and more difficult to formulate than the explicit surface arguments used. The reason for this is that one is touching on irreducible minimums of human sexual ethics. Why not have sex with your mother? The answer is quite simple: She's your mother. Arguments about hierarchy, procreation, and the animal kingdom identify secondary or "symptomatic" rationales for an underlying, unstated opposition; namely, the problem of too much structural or embodied sameness, whether on the level of familial relations (incest) or on the level of sex or gender (same-sex intercourse). Attempting to refute each of the surface rationales separately does injustice to the underlying, yet often unstated, rationale that ties the whole together.

So, for example, the discovery that some animals participate in same-sex intercourse or in incest does not undo the foundational point that "nature" involves not just innate impulses but, more importantly, embodied or material congruities. The fact that some animals and some human population groups practice incest or, for that matter, pedophilia does not make such behavior "natural" in the deepest sense. Similarly, one may try to dismiss a procreation argument against homosexual unions by noting (as Johnson repeatedly does) that we do not condemn infertile heterosexual unions, just as one may dismiss a procreation argument against incestuous unions by diverting attention to incest where procreation is impossible or prevented. Such dismissals ignore the fact that these procreation problems are symptoms of, and clues to, the foundational problem with these unions; namely, their noncomplementary character.

There is a difference between an infertile union of a man and a woman, where the "equipment," so to speak, doesn't work, on the one hand, and an infertile union between two members of the same sex, where the equipment doesn't even exist, on the other. One might refer to the latter as "structural infertility" and view it as one surface-sign of, or clue to, the deeper incongruity of homoerotic relationships. The same applies to higher incidences in birth defects for incestuous bonds. Such birth defects are neither inherent to such unions nor unique to them. It is a matter of degree. But a difference in degree only does not mean that the entire procreation argument has to be thrown out. The higher structural propensity of birth defects among incestuous couples can be rightly viewed as a sign of a deeper, structural incompatibility in such a sexual pairing.

## V. Other Illogical Arguments Put Forward by Johnson

Problems with the logic of Johnson's argumentation abound in his book, as we have seen. Here are a few more.

**1. An illogical attack on "prohibitionists."** According to Johnson, "prohibitionists" have twisted themselves into an illogical position:

Remarkably, prohibitionist arguments contradict themselves by alternating between a rhetoric of disgust and a rhetoric of trivialization. On the one hand, prohibitionists treat gay life as abhorrent.... This is quite interesting. If gay sex is so disgusting, then the question arises, why are prohibitionists constantly drawing so much attention to it? On the other hand, there is also a rhetoric of trivialization. According to the natural-law argument, because same-gender sexuality is nonprocreative, it is therefore trivial and meaningless. Again, one has to wonder: if gay sex is so trivial and meaningless, why is so much energy being expended to denounce it? (52)

The answer to the “on the one hand” portion is easy. Johnson asks: If people opposed to homosexual practice find it so abhorrent, why are they “constantly drawing so much attention to it?” The answer is that some like Johnson are constantly pushing for church and society to embrace abhorrent acts and, in the process, attack those who oppose homosexual practice as adopting a position akin to racism and sexism. If homosexuals stop pushing their agenda, as they have been vigorously doing for 35 years, then those who support a two-sexes prerequisite will revert back to the relative inattention to the issue that existed before the homosexualist push.

Try applying Johnson’s argument to an act that presumably we can all agree is abhorrent such as pedophilia. By Johnson’s logic, if groups like NAMBLA (North American Man-Boy Love Association) were ever to gain significant influence in church and society, it would be contradictory for those who viewed pedophilia as abhorrent to oppose pedosexual advocacy vigorously. Obviously that would be ridiculous. The more abhorrent the sexual act, the more vigorously such acts *should* be opposed when influential movements attempt to foist incentives for such behavior on church and society.

The answer to the “on the other hand” portion is equally easy. I don’t know any reputable figure who, in opposing homosexual practice, regards homosexual intercourse as the moral equivalent of nonprocreative heterosexual acts, as if the *only* thing wrong with homosexual practice was its nonprocreative quality. The position is akin to arguing that incest becomes trivial once precautions are taken against abnormal births. The *intrinsic* inability of a homosexual relationship to bring about procreation is qualitatively different from an “equipment failure.” The former gives us clues into the deeper incongruity of type of sexual bonds, much as does the problem of a higher risk of birth defects when close blood relations procreate.

Moreover, if one looks at Johnson’s “on the one hand ... on the other hand” argument, one can see the contradictory premises clearly. On the one hand, according to Johnson one shouldn’t expend energy in denouncing an act if it is abhorrent and being pushed on society. One might then presume that one could spend energy denouncing an act that is not abhorrent. Not so, says Johnson. One also shouldn’t spend energy denouncing an act that is trivial. When, pray tell, should one spend energy denouncing an act? Apparently only when one agrees with Johnson’s denunciation of a complementarity viewpoint. Then one can write a book about it and make the rejection of homosexual practice abhorrent.

**2. An illogical attempt at rebutting a nature argument.** According to Johnson, focusing on body parts leads to a contradictory embrace of rape and incest:

[A natural-law argument that focuses] on body parts for the sake of body parts implies that every heterosexual union of those parts is uniquely able to symbolize God's grace in a way that same-gender unions are [*sic*] not. We need only think of the examples of heterosexual rape and incest to see that this is a false argument. (51)

Would that Johnson might respond to an earlier rebuttal that I made to this argument when the press first reported it.<sup>20</sup>

First, who is focusing *only* on body parts? I have stated over and over again that the obvious complementarity of male and female genitals is part of, and emblematic of, the fact that maleness and femaleness, more broadly conceived, represent the two halves of the sexual spectrum. In addition, the focus on a holistic male-female complementarity is not “for the sake of body parts,” as Johnson erroneously characterizes it, but for the sake of the Creator who designed us in our embodied existences for certain kinds of sexual activity and not others.

Second, Johnson's counterexamples of heterosexual rape and incest would obviously work only if the nature argument made sexual complementarity the *sole* prerequisite for acceptable sexual behavior. But that is *not* the nature argument; it is rather a false caricature of the nature argument. The nature argument, which Scripture supports, is that a two-sexes prerequisite is a *necessary*, but not a *sufficient*, formal or structural criterion for valid sexual bonds. It would be absurd to presume, as Johnson apparently does, that one prerequisite forbids all others.

This leads to my third point: Johnson's counterexample of incest actually establishes the very nature argument that he seeks to reject therewith. For, if we apply Johnson's argument against an anti-homosex view to an anti-incest view, we come out with untenable results:

A focus on blood unrelatedness for the sake of blood unrelatedness implies that every non-incestuous union is uniquely able to symbolize God's grace in a way that incestuous unions do not. We need only think of the examples of nonincestuous rape, polyamory, and pedophilia to see that this is a false argument.

Again, no one is arguing, or implying, that a certain degree of blood unrelatedness is the *only* formal or structural criterion for valid sexual relationships. Furthermore, the motive for prohibiting all incest, even in adult loving relationships, is analogous to the motive for prohibiting all homoerotic activity: sex with persons who are too much alike on a structural level where a minimum of embodied otherness is required.

In a footnote Johnson adds: “People who use this argument about the inherent excellence of heterosexual union counter that rape is wrong because of an *absence* of ‘intent’ and ‘commitment’; but if this is so, then the *presence* of such ‘intent’ and ‘commitment’ on the part of exclusively committed same-gender persons ought to qualify them for similar moral praise” (265 n. 22). Again, Johnson makes an elementary mistake in logic. A necessary prerequisite in one area (here “intent” and “commitment”) does not make that prerequisite sufficient, ruling out prerequisites in other areas (here a male-female requirement). If it were otherwise, then the presence of intent and commitment of the part of exclusively committed adult siblings, or adult and parent, or three or more

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<sup>20</sup> “Gagnon to Johnson: Two Positions on Homosexual Practice” (2004; 12 pgs.; online: <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homoStacyJohnson6ViewsSB.pdf>), 3.

persons, or an adult and child “ought,” in Johnson’s own words, “to qualify them for similar moral praise.”

**3. *An illogical analogy to responses to violence, warfare, and torture.*** Johnson finds it amazing when society

whips itself into a frenzy over the prospect of gay marriage but greets the overwhelming evidence of torture by its own country’s military leaders with a casual shrug of the shoulders? Or how do we explain the fact that, when it comes to same-gender sexuality, some religious-minded people are quick to interpret biblical prohibitions strictly and literally, yet when the subject is violence or warfare, they find flexibility and numerous alternative interpretations to the Sermon on the Mount’s admonition to “turn the other cheek”? (7)

He adds: “Why are certain people in American churches more upset about gays than they are about unjust war or torture?” (16).

As a theologian Johnson ought to know that Scripture contains various views about the state’s use of force and engagement in warfare but, contrary to what Johnson argues, a clear univocal view on a two-sexes prerequisite for sexual relations. It is not likely that Jesus intended his “turn the other cheek” principle to govern the administration of justice by the state. Certainly Paul didn’t understand it in the way that Johnson is using it (Romans 12-13). By Johnson’s reasoning John the Baptist should not have made such an issue over Herod Antipas’s participation in adult consensual incest (for which protest John got beheaded). Jesus should not have been so willing to recommend payment of taxes to the emperor and to make so sharp a divide between what is Caesar’s and what is God’s, given the oppression of Roman rule, while making an issue of a remaining loophole in Scripture’s sexual ethics, divorce and remarriage (Mark 10; Matt 5). Ironically, Johnson uses a ridiculous argument from silence to infer that Jesus may have approved of some alleged sexual activity between the centurion and his “boy” slave (141-42), but draws no conclusions about Jesus’ unreserved support for the military.

There is also a difference between reacting to isolated instances of moderate abuse of prisoners in connection with obtaining information that could save the lives of thousands from future terrorist attacks (supported even by Democrat and former president Bill Clinton), on the one hand, and reacting to a full-court press by people such as Johnson in foisting ecclesiastical and civil mandates for accepting immoral sexual practice that will change societal standards for the foreseeable future, on the other hand. Hopefully Johnson will react vigorously to any future attempts to provide civil incentives and marital recognition for adult incestuous bonds and polysexual bonds, even though Johnson’s current support for homosexual unions undermines the very principles upon which a rejection of incest and polyamory are based.

**4. *Bad revisionist history.*** According to Johnson, “Our two thousand years of Christian history have been more mixed than monolithic” (14). He cites isolated examples of “committed, spiritual friendships” in the late Renaissance and beyond that allegedly challenge “the claim that Western civilization in general and Western Christendom in particular have been uniformly negative in their treatment of same-

gender love” (16).<sup>21</sup> He suggests, absurdly, that prior to the eighteenth century there were “merely symbolic condemnations” of homoeroticism (16).

Of course, almost every form of immorality has at one time or another and in one locale or another been tacitly accommodated in Western society (even incest). However, that is an entirely different matter from any widespread public acceptance or official endorsement. Since overtly homoerotic bonds were not publicly validated in Western Christian civilization before relatively recent history, Johnson can substantiate his revisionist view of history only by deliberately blurring the distinction between erotic and non-erotic same-sex interrelationships. This makes about as much sense as blurring erotic and non-erotic multiple-partner bonds, bonds between close blood relations, and bonds between adults and pre-adolescents. The presence or absence of an erotic component in all such relationships makes all the difference in assessing the morality of the relationships. Yet Johnson instead would have us not be “fixated on genital sex” (p. 15).

**5. *Some confusion about choice.*** At one point Johnson argues: “One does not simply choose one’s sexual orientation—that much is clear. Instead, it is something one experiences as a ‘given’” (19). Similarly: “By definition a sexual orientation is a given and thus something beyond one’s own choosing” (47). These statements are too black-and-white. They completely eliminate any human development from life’s experiences and choices. They also partly contradict admissions that Johnson makes elsewhere. “Whatever may be its cause, we know that *most people* do not experience their sexual orientation as a choice” (28; my emphasis). This statement at least carries an implicit admission that *some* may experience their sexual orientation as a choice (p. 28; my emphasis). Better still is the following statement:

Biological factors may play some role in the formation of sexual orientation.... In no way do we have evidence that such factors play the *only* role.... [T]here are also developmental and psychological processes in early childhood, as well as culturally bound determinants throughout life, that contribute to the way each individual experiences sexual orientation. (27)

Of course, generally people don’t wake one morning and say, “I think I’ll be a homosexual.” Yet that is different from arguing that homosexual development is always and only something “given.” Edward Stein, a homosexualist scholar, challenges deterministic models of homosexual development and posits instead a nondeterministic model that incorporates a significant role for choice—often blind, incremental, and indirect but choice nonetheless.<sup>22</sup> Like various forms of sexual impulses, the degree to which a homosexual “orientation” becomes fixed in an individual’s brain and the intensity with which it is experienced, at least in part and for some, can be affected by

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<sup>21</sup> Similarly, pp. 50-51. There Johnson adds the following illogical argument: “In addition, the ‘two thousand years of tradition’ argument actually points us in another direction. For two thousand years and more, biblical religion has promoted exclusively committed, covenantal relationships. Why should the church not extend its endorsement to the faithful integrity of gay and lesbian couples?” The answer ought to be obvious: Because the church has never maintained *only* this requirement. If it were the only requirement, then the church should “extend its endorsement to the faithful integrity of” committed polyamorous and/or incestuous arrangements.

<sup>22</sup> *The Mismeasure of Desire: The Science, Theory, and Ethics of Sexual Orientation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); referred to by Johnson on p. 28.

choices regarding fantasy life, responses to social and environmental factors in childhood and adolescence, the degree to which one acts on impulses, and the degree of self-motivation for change.<sup>23</sup> Finally, irrespective of the impact that incremental choices have on any given individual's homosexual development, people are always responsible for what they do with what they feel.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

When it comes to treating issues of science, nature, history, and logic Johnson gives readers ample reason to withhold approval of his arguments. One sees the same inadequate research, misrepresentation of data, and logical missteps that characterize Johnson's treatment of Scripture.

**To go to "A Book Not to Be Embraced: A Critical Review Essay on Stacy Johnson's A Time to Embrace" [Part I: the Scottish Journal of Theology article], click:**

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<sup>23</sup> See the studies cited in "Why the Disagreement over the Biblical Witness on Homosexual Practice? A Response to Myers and Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together?* *Reformed Review* 59 (2005): 30-33 (online: [http://www.westernsem.edu/files/westernsem/gagnon\\_autm05\\_0.pdf](http://www.westernsem.edu/files/westernsem/gagnon_autm05_0.pdf)); *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 403-30. Even Myers and Scanzoni, for example, admit that "women's sexual orientation also tends to be less strongly felt and potentially more fluid and changeable than men's" (David G. Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together? A Christian Case for Gay Marriage* [HarperSanFrancisco, 2005], 67). The Columbia and Yale authors of one twin study using an enormous and nationally representative sample of adolescents (30,000) concluded that "less gendered socialization in early childhood and preadolescence shapes subsequent same-sex romantic preferences" (Peter S. Bearman and Hannah Brückner, "Opposite-Sex Twins and Adolescent Same-Sex Attraction," *American Journal of Sociology* 107.5 [2002]: 1179-1205). Another social factor for *some* homosexual development, though by no means all, is childhood sexual abuse. According to William H. James, "There is an abundance of data suggesting that male homosexuals and paedophiles report having experienced more sexual abuse (however defined) in childhood (CSA) than do heterosexual controls.... There are grounds for supposing that some of the reports are veridical [causally related], and there is support from a longitudinal study reporting a small but significant increase in paedophilia in adulthood following CSA. To summarize: most boys who experience CSA do not later develop into homosexuals or paedophiles. However, the available evidence suggests that a few do so as a result of the abuse" ("Two Hypotheses on the Causes of Male Homosexuality and Paedophilia," *Journal of Biosocial Sciences* 36 [2004]: 371-374; the quotation is from the abstract).

<sup>24</sup> The following comments on pedophilia by Dr. Fred Berlin, founder of the Sexual Disorders Clinic at Johns Hopkins, provide an interesting parallel to homosexual orientation, so far as the issue of ethics and orientation are concerned: "The biggest misconception about pedophilia is that someone chooses to have it.... It's not anyone's fault that they have it, but it's their responsibility to do something about it.... Biological factors play into [the development of pedophilia].... We've learned that you can successfully treat people with pedophilia, but you cannot cure them" (*People Magazine*, Apr. 15, 2002). On Berlin's comments to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1997 see my article, "Bearing False Witness: Balch's Effort at Demonization and His Truncated Gospel" (2004; 23 pgs.; online: <http://robgagnon.net/articles/homoBalchFalseWitness.pdf>).