

J. Alan Branch. *Born This Way? Homosexuality, Science, and the Scriptures*. Wooster: Weaver, 2016.

Born This Way? is a critical discussion of one of the most controversial issues in contemporary America and in global society. The argument hinges on whether or not homosexuality is innate and immutable; the argument is scientific and theological. J. Alan Branch, Professor of Christian Ethics at Midwestern Seminary, is currently a research fellow in Christian ethics for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Branch has approached this debate with great dexterity. This book has eleven chapters, each being devoted to addressing some key developments in the argument concerning homosexuality. In each chapter he analyzes the homosexual claims, points out their lapses, and concludes with biblical injunctions to the appropriate Christian response. He gives a historical analysis of the development of the controversy and points out the inconsistencies in the positions of reputable scientific groups over the years down to the present.

Proponents of homosexuality argue that since “science confirms a biological-genetic causation for homosexual behavior” and that their condition is inherent and as a matter of fact, God-given, there should not be any prejudice against those who are gay (2).

Branch critically engages the scientific research that makes such claims and concludes that while “there are some genetic or biological factors that *correlate* with the incidence of same-sex attraction and homosexual behavior, as of yet there is no proof of genetic or biological *causation* for homosexuality” (2). His goal is to “summarize some of the most important research regarding same-sex attraction in order to foster a clear understanding of what science has or has not discovered about homosexuality” (3).

Branch raises serious questions about the adverse reactions in debates about homosexuality. Proponents of same-sex attitudes and behavior seek to intimidate Christians by describing those who are opposed to their lifestyles as racists, bigots, or homophobes. This threatens free argumentation for, as well as against, homosexuality. This development, in the end, coerces even objective researchers to come to biased conclusions in favor of homosexual practice to avoid harassment. Consequently, this attitude deprives people of an accurate and sound knowledge of the problem, which can be harmful to the growth of a free society.

In spite of the polemic surrounding the debate, Branch interacts and evaluates the historical development of the scientific claims concerning

biological causation of homosexual behavior. He begins with Sigmund Freud and Alfred Kinsey, early popular authorities who influenced subsequent action for homosexual practice. Notably, homosexual practice was placed under psychiatric conditions. Freud advocated that some forms of homosexuality are innate. Branch analyzes how Freud was inconsistent in his conclusions, as he has been quoted by both pro and contra homosexual behavior arguments.

Then Branch takes on Kinsey, who was regarded as the father of the sexual revolution. Kinsey's research was flawed because of a number of factors. First, he renounced Christian faith and embraced atheism, so his views inevitably tilted against biblical teachings on sexuality. Second, he himself became a homosexual, a fact that influenced his bias in favor of homosexuality in his research. Again, Branch shows how Kinsey's data sampling and analysis were distorted and unreliable when he chose only those inmates who were into homosexual practice in order to draw his conclusions. To demonstrate the flaws in Kinsey, Branch notes that John Bancroft, who was a director in the Kinsey Institute, even accused him of deliberately falsifying his data by claiming they came from several people when in fact they came from one man.

Branch also stresses how the American Psychiatric Association in the 1940s and 1950s considered homosexual behavior as "a disease in need of a cure" (33). Other research on homosexuality, however, gave more weight to environmental factors, and the gay movement gained strength over time and pressured the American Psychiatric Association into changing its stance. The pro-homosexual lobby opposed attempts to help homosexuals to change their lifestyle, as they deemed nothing was inappropriate with their behavior.

After his historical examination, Branch goes into greater depth on the scientific arguments over issues of genetic formation and attitudes. He argues that although human genetic codes correlate to behavior, environmental influence plays a key role in shaping attitudes and actions. This conclusion is based on long-term research where "certain changes in the way the brain is structured are clearly related to our interaction with the world in which we live" (44). He demonstrates this in the way that pornography affects brain plasticity, and so we can better understand how we have a moral responsibility in responding to our temptations. Branch insists that, contrary to the absolute claims that prenatal hormones make a person either homosexual or heterosexual, "we are not merely sexual automatons mercilessly unable to resist any desire whatsoever" (65). On the contrary, the gift of gender distinction is beautifully authored by God from the beginning (Gen 1:27).

Furthermore, the argument of “born this way” and data claiming to support homosexuality have either been oversimplified or exaggerated. Branch acknowledges the anomalies that are found in the genetic formation related to homosexual attitudes due to the fall of humanity, which affected the entire creation. The condemnation of sexual practice in Romans 1 alludes to intentional attitude and moral choice.

Branch notes research by Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen that objectively attributed factors in addition to genetics as causal of homosexual behavior, claiming that their studies of twins and homosexual behavior are distorted and come to erroneous conclusions: while demonstrating a “correlation for higher incidence of homosexuality when one twin brother is homosexual,” they do not prove “causation or that someone is ‘born this way’” (92). And indeed, “science has not discovered a gene which causes homosexuality,” whereas genetic research has shown that environmental factors play “a critical role in the formation of a person’s sexual identity” (105–6).

Branch raises an important question for Christians who take Scripture and classic hermeneutics seriously in the context of this homosexual debate: “Does this mean we must then surrender Scriptural teaching concerning the sinful nature of homosexual acts?” (107). Christians who support homosexual positions fail to reconcile Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 3. The “born this way” approach seeks to defeat the call for repentance, since it insists that one cannot change even if one desires such change. This standpoint is contrary to other proven cases of homosexuals who have changed and never gone back to their old ways. Branch shows how cases of repentant homosexuals who have or have not gone back to their old ways can be explained better in terms of social influence rather than of genetic gravitational force.

Branch has consistently noted that the American Psychiatric Association’s and Kirk and Madsen’s research, which previously held homosexuality to be a mental derailment but have changed to support it, owe much to political and psychological pressure from growing social and sexual revolutionary movements rather than new scientific discoveries. Kirk and Madsen inconsistently argue that “homosexuality is the result of a complex set of factors, but [they] urge fellow homosexuals to claim to be ‘born this way’ because it is an advantageous public relations stance” (85). While the data that led to their previous position is still intact, they have been compelled to change their position, which is a major contradiction in the “born this way” stance.

In contrast, the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality published its research, which, while “not denying a biological component to homosexuality,” also asserted more factors for such behavior,

such as family, peer, and social influences (121). A founder of the association, Charles Socarides, argues that one of the strongest causes of homosexual attitude is “a failure in sexual identity,” which requires some form or reparative measures (123).

The strength of Branch’s position is twofold: it points out the inherent flaws and inconsistencies in the “born this way” argument and draws on the teachings of Scripture. The Pauline moral-spiritual code puts a contrast between the former life that was characterized by the domination of sinful practices including homosexuality and the new life in Christ that has been sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:9–11). The biblical message is a call to repentance from sins, whereas homosexual advocates removing homosexuality from the list of sins in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11. This teaching draws the line between autonomous man and God in the battle over who determines what is and what is not sin. The argument of the autonomous man is to admit our inherent sinfulness and enjoy it as much as possible. The debate turns out to be either/or: either we rebel against the teaching of Scripture and embrace sinful pleasures, or we reject the homosexual stance and behavior as having no biblical or scientific proven ground or justification.

What Branch argues is of critical importance. The Scriptures warn about social and environmental influences that can have a negative impact on behavior, thus ruining good morals (1 Cor 15:33). It is also noteworthy that all sin, including homosexuality, is inherent in the sense that we are conceived and born in it (Ps 51: 5) but is transformed by the grace of God. Scriptures attest to homosexual behavior being mutable like any other sin when it pronounces God’s judgment on its practice (Rom 1:24, 26–27; 1 Cor 6:9; Gal 5:19; Col 3:5, 7), and God is not so unjust as to judge what is immutable in human nature. Paul attests that certain believers in Corinth once lived in such sins but were changed and sanctified. Again, when Paul admonishes believers to marry in order to overcome sexual temptation, he explicitly and exclusively speaks about the relationship between male and female (1 Cor 7:2).

Overall, Branch has given us a clear direction to continue critically engaging gay debates in future scientific investigation.

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