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Are There Essential Differences Between the Sexes? – Review Article

Sharon James

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Created or Constructed?—The Great Gender Debate

Elaine Storkey
Paternoster Press, 2000, 129 pp., £8.99

Elaine Storkey is regarded by many as the leading British evangelical spokesperson on gender issues. Her latest book directly addresses the vital question 'created or constructed?' This review article summarises each chapter, and then offers a critique.

Created or Constructed? Three words summarise a debate that rages through university campuses. During the 1960s and 1970s it became popular to assert that all the masculine and feminine characteristics which we associate with being male or female are purely the result of social conditioning. They are not essential to our being. In other words sex—the biological fact of being male or female—is a given. But gender—maleness and femaleness—is an artificial social construct from which we need to be liberated. So Judith Lorber writes:

> When we no longer ask 'boy or girl?' in order to start gendering an infant, when the information is as irrelevant as the colour of a child's eyes... only then will men and women be socially interchangeable and really equal. And when that happens there will no longer be any need for gender at all.[1]

From the 1980s onwards, sex itself has been viewed by some as a construct. In universities it is commonplace to hear that sexuality is plastic. The very idea that there is any essential difference between the sexes has been defined by some academics as heresy.[2]

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Summary of contents

Chapter l: History Lessons

[1] Quoted in Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman*. Doubleday, London, 1999, 324.

[2] Robert S. McElavaine defines essentialism as the heresy that there are biological differences between males and females. Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, Touchstone, 2000, 87. Shalit discovered this heresy in a first year philosophy class. When she mentioned 'difference' between the sexes she was denounced as an 'essentialist'. 'What's that?' she enquired. 'Someone who believes in differences between the sexes' replied her classmates. 'But aren't there?' she asked. 'No!' they all chorused.
She went on to write *A Return to Modesty*, which argues that many young women today are pushed into promiscuity, and miss the beauty and romance of preserving their virginity for their husband. Along the way there are clear-sighted denunciations of those who deny the obvious differences between men and women.

The framework for the discussion is outlined: the pre-modern, modern and post-modern eras. As background, Storkey explains that during the nineteenth century, unmarried middle class women were a liability. It was not considered respectable for them to work to support themselves and so they ended up as dependent on male relatives. By the end of the nineteenth century, such women were able to take up opportunities in education and professional employment, and also by then the mission movement had absorbed large numbers of women. After the First World War many other professions opened up to women and by the time of the Second World War women were ready to move into the vocational spaces vacated by the men who were called up. Following the Second World War, men returning from the forces needed employment. Many working women found that to return 'home' was in fact a liberation from the demands of employment outside the house.

This explains why, during the 1950s, there was a strong sense that the man and father should be the breadwinner and the wife and mother, the carer at home. This attitude may be described as pre-modern and is characterised by an emphasis on tradition and predictability. There followed a massive reaction. During the modern period (1960s and 1970s) there was a questioning of authority, of patriarchy and of tradition. Everything was up for grabs. Since the mid-1980s or so we have moved into the post-modern era, an age of relativism. The rest of the book sets out to answer the question 'created or constructed' according to the thinking of each of these three eras.

Chapter 2: The Pre-modern in Sex and Gender

Manhood and womanhood created or constructed? 'Created' was the answer in the 1950s. This pre-modern era was characterised by 'essentialism: the idea that a certain "essence" defines the centre of our identity as human beings, and as men and women.[3]

> Pre-modern thinking about gender relations, if indeed it can be given the label 'thinking', was therefore largely at the level of assumption rather than analysis or explanation ... A woman's place was in the home, women were intuitive, nurturant, passive, instinctual, good with their hands, but easily distracted.[4]

The pre-modern mind justified such stereotypes by appeals to creation and tradition: 'Certain branches of the church claimed to find reinforcement of this essentialism in biblical teaching, insisting that it is implied in the very order of creation.'[5]

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In the pre-modern era there was no distinction between sex and gender. Storkey concludes: 'The main problem with the pre-modern position is now well-recognised. It rests on a biological determinism which reduces all the complexity of human relationships to basic genetic or anatomic categories.'[6]

[3] Page 11
[4] Pages 11-12
[5] Page 13
[6] Page 14

Storkey briefly examines the arguments that biology lies behind gender differences, and finds them too simplistic. Rather, she argues, 'the social framework: the location, upbringing, expectations, and belief structures that people hold.'[7]—each play their part.

Chapter 3: Modernism and Gender Relationships

Manhood and womanhood, created or constructed? The 1960s and 1970s saw a shift: sex was agreed to be created, whereas gender was thought to be constructed.

To begin with, the feminists of the 1960s saw biological difference as a bad deal for women. They campaigned for abortion on demand and 24 hour nursery care so that women would not be disadvantaged by their reproductive function. Some argued that science should move towards getting men to take their fair share of pregnancy, and seriously discussed wombs implanted into male bladders.

But such thinking actually maintained biological essentialism. What if, instead of beginning with difference, one began with sameness, with shared humanity?

> ...humans are socially constructed, not biologically created. Being a human person is not just about instincts or drives, that would be animal behaviour. But as humans we think and act. We are as much products of social change as of any biological evolution.[8]

Thus, the focus moved from biological, reproductive or physiological differences, to 'the way society was structured and the roles which resulted'.[9] Sex (basic physical difference) was distinguished now from gender (learned attitudes and roles).

Modernists argued that the sexual division of labour had less to do with any innate difference than to do with the greater power held by men. Similarly, domestic violence, incest, or sexual assault was less to do with innate biological urges than with the greater power held by men. Power is the key: '...We have constructed cultures which have rewarded men for being men, and penalised women for being women...'[10]

Most feminists now argued that the biological differences had been used in the past as a smokescreen for discrimination. Even the

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'natural' division of labour where the mother takes prime responsibility for caring for children was challenged: some feminist writers challenged the myth of the maternal instinct.

But feminists differed fiercely among themselves:

A. 'Liberal' or 'equality feminists' placed emphasis on similarity, not difference. They believed that equality of opportunity in education and employment was the answer.

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[8] Page 25
[9] Page 26
[10] Page 28

B. 'Socialist' feminists saw the whole capitalist system as oppressive.

C. 'Radical' (often 'Separatist') feminists saw men as the problem—they stressed difference not sameness, and many rejected heterosexuality.

Chapter 4: The Post-modern Experience

In a sense the debate 'created or constructed' becomes redundant in a post-modern age. For the words 'created', 'constructed', 'sameness', 'difference', 'essentialism', 'sex', 'gender' are 'just words', signifying different things to different people. Each individual's own experience is the only reality. The logical conclusion is that we each make our own reality. We choose our own sex and gender because sex in any universal sense is constructed just as much as gender. Neither was created.

Post-moderns reject 'modern' feminism: in particular they criticise the search for equality. 'Egalitarianism in effect means the disappearance of women. They are admitted into the structures as token or lesser men'.[11] Women must maintain their own identity. This implies an emphasis on difference—except that as we have seen, even the term 'difference' is denied any universal meaning.

Chapter 5: Gender and 'Difference' in Popular Writings

Post-modern feminists writings are incomprehensible to most readers. Instead the popular market has been flooded with a range of books on the differences between the sexes.

One best seller is *Why Men Don't Iron* by Anne and Bill Moir. Storkey objects to the way the authors use 'masculinity' (a 'gender cultural term') interchangeably with 'maleness' (a 'sex biological term'). She argues that the 'science' purported by the authors looks alarmingly like the 'tired old stereotypes used for years to justify old gender roles'.[12] For her, the Moirs are 'non-scholars'[13] who have exhumed the corpse of biological essentialism, dressed it up in new clothes, and paraded it down the catwalk. She mocks the way that they seem to be ignorant of the latest post-modern arguments. To Storkey, they are just pre-moderns who wish to abandon the

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quest for equality. For the Moirs lament the way that gender neutrality (the insistence on sameness) has emasculated men: they wrote this book to further an understanding of the differences between the sexes so that men can be 'real men' again.

Another best seller is John Gray's *Men are From Mars: Women are From Venus*. This too, says Storkey, 'rests on essentialist assumptions which are never examined'.[14] However, Gray's purpose is 'benign'—for he simply wants to help men and women to relate more happily, and to dispel the misunderstandings that result when they fail to understand their differences.

[11] Page 43
[12] Page 52
[13] Ann Moir has a D.Phil (Oxon) in genetics.
[14] Page 55

Garrison Keillor also 'slides between nature and culture',[15] but is forgiven because he writes as an entertainer rather than a theoretician:

> ... he can also succeed in spite of inconsistencies because he brings the very ambiguities alive in his writing, and that is where his readers are. For even in our social conventions most people are not clear whether men and women are created or constructed, and most people are unsure what they want men and women to be like. So Keillor engages all our sympathies when he describes the dual messages which men and women receive from each other.[16]

These and many other writers, entertainers, and advertisers have as their main theme the differences between the sexes. Yet, Storkey argues, we are no nearer clarifying or defining any essential gender differences. She implies that the great flood of material on difference is actually just reinforcing old stereotypes.

Dismissive as she is of the 'mass paperback market', Storkey is more positive about 'competent researchers'[17] such as Carol Gilligan, Nancy Chodorow, Lillian Rubin, Lynne Segal and Deborah Tannen; and she also mentions the burgeoning literature on masculinity. All this literature, while avoiding crass biological essentialism and giving due weight to considerations of nurture/culture come up with a broad consensus on the differences:

> ... men and women are said to demonstrate different ways of interacting, expressing emotions, playing games, having a conversation, handling authority, giving and receiving instructions, initiating friendships, reacting to problems, establishing connections, relating to hierarchies, appraising situations and taking control ... Men are more likely to be separate, individualistic, oppositional, thinking in terms of binaries, whereas women show greater 'connectedness' and orientate themselves empathetically towards others. This is a conclusion similar to that of Luce Irigary and Helene Cixous, although with different philosophical underpinnings.[18]

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Storkey gives anecdotal evidence to support such differences between the sexes, but seems sympathetic with the attachment model of explanation—the boy's need to separate from his mother, and the girl's more permanent attachment to her mother. She concludes that there is helpful material around on improving relations between the sexes (notably Deborah Tannen's work) and that the best of this steers the middle way between 'abandoning or stereotyping differences between men and women'.[19]

Chapter 6: From Social Science to Theology

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[17] Page 61
[18] Page 64
[19] Page 74

A multitude of non-academic Christian books on sex and gender are available, but: 'too many of them rehash old ideas based on biological essentialism plus gender stereotypes, but support this with quotations from the Bible'.[20]

Our study of Scripture is inevitably affected by the philosophical assumptions of our own age and by our culture. We never read the Bible neutrally and we need to maintain humility—recognising that we may well be blinkered in various ways by the context in which we find ourselves:

> we need to constantly examine the assumptions that we bring to any reading of the Bible, and some of these assumptions are related to sex and gender. For, in our striving to be biblical we may be merely cultural in off-loading some of the pervading, unexamined attitudes and ideas about the relationship between men and women which we then unconsciously impose on Scripture.[21]

Even Bible translation is affected by our assumptions. Take for example Romans 16:1. Why do translators not say 'Phoebe, a deacon (or minister) of the church at Cenchrea?' Because they assume that because she was a woman, this cannot have been what Paul meant, even though it is what he said.

Storkey asks: 'How much do we take prevailing cultural ideas or arguments into our own mind-set (including ideas of biology and roles) and then overlay them with theological justification?'[22]

Chapter 7: Sex and Gender in Theology: From Pre- to Post-modernity

> There is an unavoidable pre-modernity' whenever one talks of our humanness as derivative. If we are brought into being by a Creator, and thereby dependent on that Creator for our existence, we have already come down on one side of the creation/ construction debate. Yet there is more to the pre-modern position than just believing that sexuality is put into the creation by God, for our sexuality can be given, and yet

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> our 'differences' can also be developmental and cultural. But there is little acknowledgement of this in the pre-modern mentality.[23]

Pre-modernity in a Theology of the Sexes

'Many theological writers through the ages saw difference as total, almost deterministic'.

Storkey quotes some of the more offensive and misogynous comments by the early church fathers. From our own day; William Oddie is quoted as providing a 'classical exposition of a pre-modern view of difference: fixed, immutable, God-given. The whole of male-female

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reality is permeated by their differences which are reflected in biology, roles, and spiritual identity'.[24]

Many evangelicals who maintain role distinctions are the product of a 'consumerist, American, macho culture ... often nationalistic, rightwing and patriarchal'.[25] They are too blinkered to see that their assumptions are cultural rather than biblical. Many of them are so ignorant that they confuse gender concepts and sexual difference; many of them cling to biological essentialist views which ‚masquerade as biblical wisdom'.[26] But now there is not only an 'unyielding essentialism',[27] there is an appeal to the principal of authority: 'the belief that women's nature decrees them as different from men, and thus subservient to men'.[28]

Modernism in Theology and Gender

Although there were Christian women involved in the first wave of feminism, feminist theology was developed from the 1960s onwards. One development was the discovery of the 'hidden history' of women both in Scripture and church history. Another development was the rejection of pre-modern notions of difference. The focus shifted to similarity—the shared humanity of men and women. Some feminist theologians found ways to interpret the Bible which allowed the old restrictive attitudes to be left behind. Others began to reject the Bible as irrevocably chauvinist—and there are many variations in between.

The Bible as Canon

Biblical feminists accept the Bible as God's Word. They reject biological essentialism, and argue that culture shapes gender roles. They differ from many other feminist theologians because the Bible is seen as normative—above female experience.

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A Canon outside the Canon

Other feminist theologians do not allow that the patriarchal texts in Scripture can be normative. Thus Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza places authority in the 'women-church'—the experience of women. Only those parts of Scripture which mesh with the lives of those who struggle against patriarchy are to be accepted. Locating experience as the final authority means that Fiorenza could be placed equally within post-modernity rather than modernity.

A Canon within the Canon

Rather than looking outside Scripture for the final authority, Rosemary Radford Ruether looks within for those core elements which faithfully reflect the redemptive message of liberation and justice.

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Post-modernity in Theology and Gender

Post-modern writers deconstruct God altogether. Mary Daly sees God as a verb not a noun—the I am of women coming into their own authentic liberation'.[29] Carter Heyward sees god as the verb 'to god' which for her equals lesbian lovemaking.

Summary

Feminist theology reacted against the essentialism of the pre-modern attitude, and against the 'abuses of a religion which has sometimes used its authority to deny both full humanity and full dignity to women'.[30]

Chapter 8: Post-post-modern Postscript

Storkey acknowledges that each perspective (pre-modern, modern, post-modern) incorporates some insights, while containing considerable weaknesses. She prefers to start from another point: a credal starting point. We accept our sexuality as a 'given'. We are accountable to God for how we express our sexuality (there are boundaries). We should distinguish between sex and gender—but it is a mistake to view sex as creational and gender as cultural in too rigid a way.

The Bible does not tell us how to be 'masculine' or 'feminine'—it tells us how to be Christian. The Bible includes the perspectives of difference, similarity or sameness, complementarity (not hierarchy) and union. The four have to be held together—otherwise you end up with hierarchy on the one hand or androgyny on the other.

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A Critique

The strength of this book is that Dr Storkey is a Christian who has read widely in modern feminist writing, and has the necessary background knowledge in history, sociology and theology to interact meaningfully with current thinking. Her purpose is to outline recent developments in thinking *vis-a-vis* gender. If one takes the book as an overview of how modern thinkers have handled the question 'created or constructed?' then there is much of interest. If one is looking for a Biblical treatment of the question, this is not the book to turn to. The concluding chapters about theology are really too brief to be useful, and her concluding comments about the Biblical evidence are even more frustrating.

Her protestation of academic neutrality at the beginning ('I have tried to present the ideas of others as faithfully as I have presented my own',[31]) and the brief Biblical affirmations at the end sit uncomfortably with the tone of the rest of the book. For much of it resembles a 'spot the heretic' tract—the heresy in question being biological essentialism. This is variously referred to as crass, outdated, unthinking—a corpse that should be left to slumber peacefully

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in the grave.[32] The sin of all sins is to be trapped in pre-modernity, and to fail to draw the 'obvious' distinction between sex and gender.[33]

Let's remind ourselves that this monster (biological essentialism) is the idea that there are certain fixed characteristics which go along with being male and female. These characteristics are rooted in our being, connected to the way we are made, and express themselves even independently of nurture or societal influence. According to the modern mind-set this notion is dangerous because it imprisons men and women in certain stereotypes. Storkey associates it with a relentless determinism: it implies that we are denied free choice and responsible decision making. For her the logical conclusion of biological essentialism would be, for example, to accept that men are predestined for promiscuity ('you can't blame them—they're just being men!').

Yet Storkey herself concedes that there are differences between men and women beyond the merely physical. She seems to believe that these are constructed not created: they are the result of nurture and culture. This is the only way to allow any individual to develop in their own way and express themselves even in a way opposite to popular stereotypes. But it is impossible to prove that these differences are purely the result of nurture and culture. When one looks at the differences—differences which Storkey accepts—why not allow that they were part of God's good design? Surely, if as Christians we accept that God created man and woman with distinctive physical characteristics, that's already accepting

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biological essentialism. (By affirming sexual difference we distance ourselves from post-modernists, who say 'choose your own sexuality'.) Why not go one step further and say that God's good design went deeper than the merely external physical appearance? The efforts of some modern feminists to deny the maternal instinct show just how foolish the doctrinaire rejection of essentialism is. I cannot see why we cannot give thanks for God's good design, rejoice in the complementary differences, but also affirm that God created everyone as an individual. There will always be exceptions to the general rule, and each human being is to be valued for what they are and the gifts they have.

Storkey pleads for humility, and points out that:

> In our striving to be biblical, we may be merely cultural in off-loading some of the pervading, unexamined attitudes and ideas about the relationship between men and women, which we then unconsciously impose upon Scripture.[34]

Here she is probably alluding to traditionalist theologians who assume that men should be breadwinners and women should be at home, and then find texts to justify it. Yet while she is quick to condemn anyone stuck in the mire of pre-modernity, she seems oblivious of the way in which her thinking seems stuck in the modern perspective. Modernity insists on a dogmatic division between sex and gender and is intolerant in condemnation of stereotyping. Storkey buys this line wholesale. Any who differ with her on this are stupid, badly read, outdated and wrong (yes, she did plead for humility!). She is anxious for women (and men) to be liberated

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from restrictive expectations. She detests a rigidly hierarchical interpretation of Scripture which would imply that men are more significant and valuable than women. She groups together misogynists, chauvinists, biological essentialists, and those who believe that God created men and women for distinctive callings. Guilt by association is the name of the game!

Try coming at discrimination from a different angle. When we look at wife battering, incest, or any other of the abuses of women that have gone on through history, it is inadequate to blame a pre-modern mind-set or a belief in biological essentialism. Rather, blame sin! God's good design that men and women should complement each other and live in harmony was wrecked by the Fall. The battle of the sexes commenced in Genesis 3:16 and continues to this day. Sin means that all aspects of our manhood and womanhood are tainted, relationships are distorted, and every social structure may discriminate in various ways against men and women. In calling for men and women to be viewed as equally in the image of God, and to be treated with dignity and respect, we are challenging sin, rather than a concept of biological essentialism.

The other way in which Storkey seems to be in thrall to the modern perspective is in her use of the word 'stereotyping' as a smear.

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All stereotyping is by definition wrong: there isn't such a thing as 'masculinity' or 'femininity'—they are just socially constructed stereotypes. Certainly, says Storkey, the Bible doesn't say anything about being masculine or feminine—just about being Christian.

Really? It seems that Storkey has absorbed the 'sameness' mentality of the feminist thinking of the 60s and 70s. (Just as Charles Sherlock did when he wrote *The Doctrine of Humanity*.[35] The only certainties were physical, so his chapter on women focussed on menstruation, and his chapter on men focussed on phallic symbols.) I have read Storkey's book four times now but I still can't find any specific reason given to rejoice in my womanhood. As one woman has said, 'We've been fully liberated to be human now, but please, can we be liberated to be women again?'

The concluding section of her book affirms, albeit briefly, that the Bible includes the perspectives of difference, similarity, complementarity and union. Both man and woman were created equally in the image of God and both were given the creation mandate. Together, and equally, they were to represent God on this earth—ruling and stewarding the earth on his behalf. They were to work together as a team to fulfil that mandate. Agreed. However Storkey refuses to acknowledge that they were not designed to work in the same way. In Genesis 2:15 it is Adam who is commanded to work the garden. Eve is made 'from him' and 'for him' (1 Cor. 11:8, 9) to be a 'suitable helper' for him. She is created with the capacity to bear and nurture new life. There are many pointers to the way that God ordained Adam to be the leader in the relationship: especially the way that he was held to account after the Fall, and the way that in the NT he is regarded as the leader of the old humanity (Rom. 5:12ff.; 1 Cor. 15:22). The way that they were cursed after the Fall (Adam with regard to working the earth; Eve with regard to marriage and motherhood) points to the fact that from the beginning they had

[35] Leicester: IVP, 1996

different primary callings, for which they were equipped by the many providential differences.

Storkey will not admit that men and women were created for different primary callings because for her, this belief is inextricable from chauvinist oppression. She seems unable to differentiate between extreme misogyny, the traditional teachings of the church, and current complementarian thinking. For her, anyone who believes in 'headship' must logically believe that 'a woman's moral responses are ultimately reduced to being about whether they are obedient or disobedient to male structures'.[36] She ignores the careful qualifications to submission made by all responsible complementarians. As a wife, my submission is always 'in the Lord', Jesus is Lord, not my husband! My moral responses are ultimately reduced to obedience to Christ. But part of my obedience to Christ is to respect the various authority structures ordained by God—in the church and state as well as in the family.

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Storkey picks the worst arguments advanced by traditionalists and assumes that anyone who 'still' believes in headship must hold those views. Is that good scholarship? What if we picked the most irresponsible of arguments ever put forward by feminists, and assumed that all feminists accepted those arguments? Or what if we identified a Bible-believing Elaine Storkey with a Bible-deriding Mary Daly? Storkey would, rightly, be incensed.

This book is a missed opportunity. Manhood and womanhood are part of God's good creation, which Satan loathes and seeks to destroy. His strategy through most of history was to over-emphasise the differences, and for men to use their greater physical strength to oppress women (this is still his strategy today in much of the non-western world). The feminist movement rightly worked against discrimination. But once equal opportunities were achieved, Satan's next strategy was to deny the differences. When we are told that gender is just a construct, or that our sexuality is plastic—Satan is at work to overthrow God-given distinctions. In academic circles and in the media he seems to have triumphed. It has become trendy to mock stereotypes, it is fashionable to deride biological essentialism. Public policy is driven by the radical feminist agenda, and the effects have been devastating—as has been powerfully documented by Melanie Phillips.[37] But everyday experience affirms differences—hence the widespread popularity of those works on difference so derided by Storkey.

Within this cultural context Christians need to affirm loud and clear that the idea of plastic sexuality, fashionable as it is, runs counter to the Bible. For God created male and female, he designed marriage as an institution to unite one male with one female. Maleness or femaleness is intrinsic to our identity as human beings. Indeed, we may infer that we will be either male or female for eternity, even after the functions associated with our sexuality have ceased. When Jesus was presented with the hypothetical scenario of a woman who married seven brothers in turn and was asked whose wife she would be after the resurrection, he

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[37] Phillips, Melanie, *The Sex Change Society: Femmised Britain and the Neutered Male*, Social Market Foundation, 1999. Phillips argues that most families still choose to follow what may be called 'traditional' sex roles—the husband/father as primary breadwinner, the wife/mother as primary carer. Radical feminists hate this pattern, and have influenced those policies which have sought by various means to break it down. She exposes these efforts, and the suffering that has ensued.

replied that there would be no marriage then. He never denied the fact that the woman in question would still be a woman, and the husbands in question would still be men! Christ was incarnate as a man, and when he was raised from the dead he was clearly recognisable as the man he had been—not some kind of androgynous sexless being.[38]

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Rather than joining Storkey in the fashionable campaign against stereotypes and biological essentialism, is it not more urgent that we affirm with unqualified clarity that men and women are created not constructed? Rather than falling in with Storkey's belief that the Bible has nothing distinctive to say to men as men and women as women, is it not imperative that we give men and women a positive vision of God's design for manhood and womanhood?

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[38] Daniel R. Heimbach, *Eternally Fixed Sexual Being*. Paper presented at the Building Strong Families Conference, sponsored by Family Life and CBMW, Dallas, Texas, March 2000.