

A new theory of normal?

PLASTIC PEOPLE

How Queer Theory is Changing Us
(Latimer Studies 73)

By Peter Sanlon.

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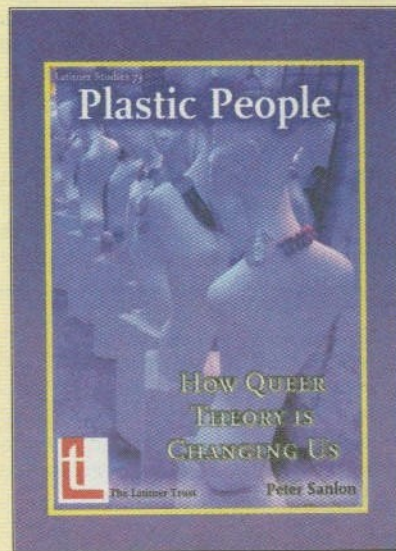
During the past few decades, many in the church have been busy engaging with the issue of homosexuality. Peter Sanlon shows that this issue is secondary.

More fundamental is the way in which our presuppositions have shifted as a result of the 'startling success' of the advocates of 'queer theory'. They set out to change the way that all of us think about our identity. Queer theory is 'a hugely ambitious academic project which seeks to re-imagine all aspects of human existence' (p.10). Michael Foucault argued that 'self-creation' has no limits, and it is now commonly assumed that we are free to make ourselves what we want to be. Thinkers such as Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*, 1990) assert that our 'sexed identity' as male or female is socially constructed. Butler attacks 'heteronormativity' (i.e. the assumption that heterosexual desire

is 'normal'). She argues that, actually, heterosexual desire is 'predicated upon a latent, usually subconscious, homosexual desire' (p.22), in other words she claims to know the 'true' identity of heterosexual people — they are all latent homosexuals. Her 'conception of freedom is an absolute freedom which forces itself upon people who may not want it, or may not realise they want it. As such it is a freedom which enslaves' (p.24).

Constructing identity

How are Christians to respond? Merely repeating traditional Christian ethical arguments is inadequate (p.20). We need to engage with the claim that we are free to construct our identity. Queer theorists profess to break free from any absolute claims (e.g. the claim that 'a man ought not to become a woman because he was born a physical man'). However, Butler's own theory is based on an absolute statement (that all heterosexual desire is based upon repressed homosexual desire) — a statement for which she cannot produce any definitive evidence. Christians do not have to be afraid of using arguments based on ontological reality. We accept gender as 'created, given and



preserved by God' (p.41). Yes, humanity has been damaged by sin, but God does preserve what he has created (p.40). Most important of all, given that queer theorists claim to have discovered true freedom, we need to demonstrate that this can only be found in Christ and the Church.

Legislative measures

This all may seem very remote and theoretical. It is not. A series of radical legislative measures have, effectively,

redefined 'family' and granted equal rights of partnership and parenting to lesbian, gay, and transgender people. Queer 'theory' is no longer just theory. Given the subtitle ('How Queer Theory is Changing Us'), it is surprising that Sanlon does not refer to these landmark pieces of legislation and how they are changing our society. An academic bibliography is provided, but it would have been more helpful for both pastors and students to be given a list of accessible recommended reading. There is no mention of the few popular level works which help Christians engage with this issue (such as Marcus Honeysett's *Meltdown*, published by IVP). It would have been helpful to have some acknowledgement of where to locate further resources, for example by mentioning the organisations such as the Christian Institute which provide information about and response to the way the demands of queer theorists are translated into public policy. Apart from these omissions, this short book is very helpful in outlining a history of queer theory, and offering a Christian response.

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