

Peeling the Androcentric “Onion”

Targeting Texts and Interpretation of Them in Feminist & Queer Theory

Feminist and queer perspectives apply a particular “hermeneutic of suspicion” to gender-related issues in society. A “hermeneutic” is an interpretive practice. A “hermeneutic of suspicion” is an interpretive practice that begins with the assumption that all human communication conceals interests, even while revealing its message. These “interests” are what the speaker or writer wants or presumes, and they often include relations of power in one form or another. A reader who operates with this critical perspective appreciates that they cannot understand something someone else says without trying to get beneath the surface of the communication to the interests that are served by the text or speech act.

Feminist and queer practice is critical in the sense that it seeks not only to analyze *what* is said, but *why*. What assumptions is the speaker or writer making? Why are they making those assumptions? Whose interests are being served? These are particularly interesting questions to ask in the realm of gender because we have so naturalized our concepts of what sex and gender are. “Male and female,” “opposite sexes,” “heterosexuality and homosexuality”—these categories have been taken by many to be givens, to be essential attributes of the person, to be defined at birth, to be attached to “natural” roles, and to be evaluated accordingly as normal or perverse/deformed. But what if we saw our categories themselves as interested, as too narrowly construed? What if nature itself doesn’t conform to what we call natural? What if we saw everything, including biological sex, as something we construct through the categories we use? This is the sort of thorough-going critique that both feminist and queer theory offer.

We’ve been examining the application of these perspectives to biblical texts and interpretations. Both the biblical texts, and how interpreters read them, are equally targets of feminist and queer analysis, because both are communication acts. Texts and interpretations are represented on the diagram below as layers of the “androcentric onion” that feminist and queer interpreters have to peel back. The black text describes some of these layers of androcentrism or “man-focus”; the purple text describes the interventions made by the various waves of feminism and queer theorists.

