

The Implications of the Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic

Introduction

Bible-believing evangelicals have long complained that Roman Catholicism treats tradition and cultural development in such a positive light that historical development is pragmatically raised to the same level of authority as the Bible. It is surprising, therefore, to see a recent move in the same direction within the ranks of evangelicalism itself.¹ There has arisen what is being called by its progenitors a *redemptive movement* or, more properly, a *redemptive movement hermeneutic*, which views itself as a new and more proper way to handle the thorny problem of deciding which statements in the Bible are culturally relative as opposed to those teachings that are transcultural. The ethical issue being discussed the most in this connection is the role of women in the world, church, and home. In the end, the new redemptive movement hermeneutic becomes a way to assert a form of evangelical egalitarianism in the Church that goes beyond the perceived isolated teachings of the Bible. That is, it is in that scheme God's intention, discovered partly through cultural developments, to allow women to be pastors and to teach men and be co-leaders in the home.

The driving force for this innovative approach to the issue is William Webb's 2001 book entitled *Slaves, Women, & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*.² Webb is Professor of New Testament at Heritage Theological Seminary in Cambridge, Ontario, Canada. That Webb's approach is being accepted as a major thinking option within evangelicalism cannot be denied. Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary wrote a foreword to the book that applauds the direction that the book is taking.³ Gilbert Bilezekian, an egalitarian on women's issues and co-founder of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois has endorsed Webb's redemptive movement hermeneutic.⁴ Apparently, other churches have adopted this way of approaching the issue of modern application of biblical teaching.⁵

The apparent rise in popularity of Webb's redemptive movement hermeneutic requires a biblical response. Therefore, his view must be fully stated and understood. Such statement will

¹ At the outset, this writer does not want to set up a guilt-by-association argument. It is my firm conviction that Webb's approach, in the end, while having some minor differences with the Roman Catholic view of historical development, actually ends up in the same place. What Catholicism does to ecclesiology, Webb does to ethics. This should become obvious throughout the following discussion.

² William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

³ Darrell L. Bock, Foreword to *Slaves, Women, & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*, by William J. Webb (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 9-10. Bock does not necessarily accept every conclusion made by Webb but believes that the methodology of application as discussed by Webb carries some promise and forces the reader to engage in a healthy dialogue about the issue.

⁴ Gilbert Bilezekian, *Biblical Community Versus Gender-Based Hierarchy* (Priscilla Papers, 2002). See also his earlier book *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says About a Woman's Role in Church and Family* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

⁵ David A. DeWitt, *The Redemptive Movement in Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan* (Paper presented to concerned members and founders of Marsh Hill Bible Church, June 4, 2003); available from <http://www.relationalconcepts.org/long%20topics/Redemptive%20Movement.doc>; Internet; accessed 3 April 2004. DeWitt mostly analyzes the redemptive movement hermeneutic of Webb but does make application of it to the teaching ministry in Mars Hill Bible Church. This writer has also dialogued with at least one other pastor who is debating this issue within his particular denomination.

require a general overview, mention of the eighteen criteria he has established to work through cultural application issues, and a study of the three case studies he presents (slaves, women, & homosexuals). Finally, a survey will show the many flaws the redemptive movement hermeneutic possesses. Overall, Webb's methodology is biblically deficient and its dangerous pursuit will lead to the erosion of biblical authority.

The Outline of the Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic

Webb does not believe that his redemptive movement hermeneutic is something new in the history of the Church. He sees elements of it in the following so-called hermeneutical approaches to the Bible: analogy of faith, canonical, progress of revelation, progressive dispensational, moderate covenant, christological, eschatological/telos, and grammatical-historical approaches.⁶ What he means by pointing to these other approaches is that these methods also acknowledge that there is some development throughout the Bible, which the reader/interpreter must take into account in the application of Scripture to everyday life. However, Webb's specific expression of his approach contains five explicit characteristics: redemptive movement, a multilevel ethic, a balanced perspective, cultural/transcultural assessment, and the underlying spirit within a text. We will explore each of these in turn.

Redemptive Movement

The first characteristic of a redemptive movement hermeneutic is the term *redemptive movement* from which the entire enterprise takes its name. The focus on the word *movement* in Webb's scheme emphasizes the need to appropriate Scripture in such a way so as to encourage "movement beyond the original application of the text in the ancient world."⁷ Webb suggests that other words could be used such as *progressive*, *developmental*, or *trajectory* hermeneutic to describe what he is trying to do.⁸ The adjective *redemptive* has been selected to reflect Webb's concern that "the derived meaning is internal, not external, to the biblical text."⁹ In other words, he uses the term *redemptive* to suggest that the Bible is at the heart of his system. However, as will be seen later, it is not at all clear that such is actually true of his approach.

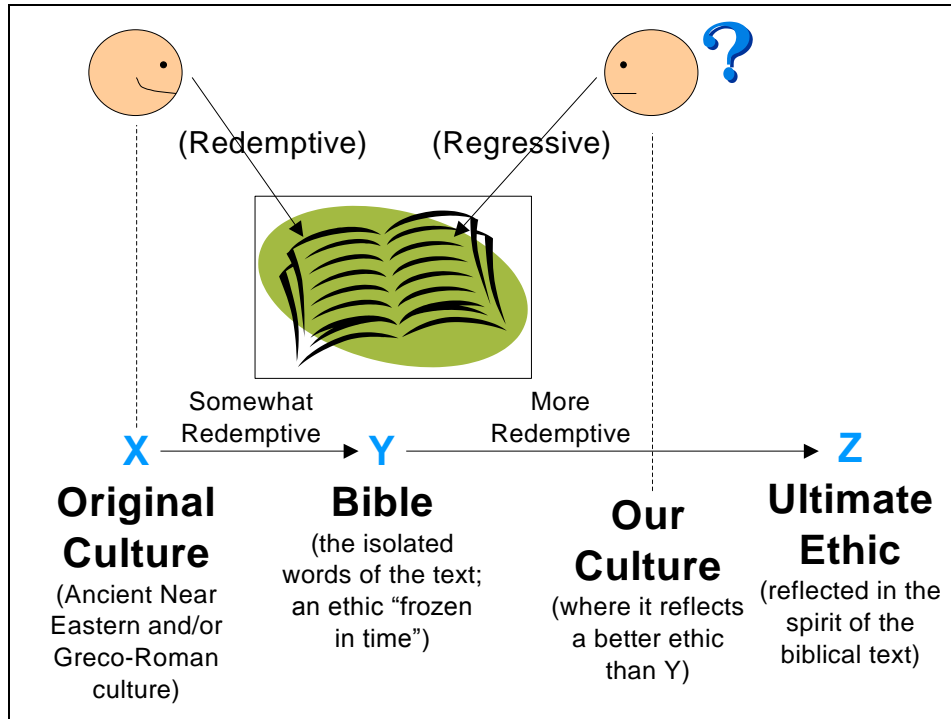
What does redemptive movement actually look like? Webb provides a helpful diagram that maps out his entire approach.

⁶ Webb, *Slaves, Women, & Homosexuals*, 35, n. 4

⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.



The original culture surrounding any given biblical text often stands, at least on some important ethical questions, in a posture of hostility to the Bible’s teaching. Therefore, from that original culture (labeled X) to the Bible’s statement (labeled Y) there is a step forward in ethical understanding (that is, there is *redemptive movement*). The isolated words of the biblical text, which give an ethic “frozen in time,” nonetheless improve upon the original cultural understanding of the issue at hand (such as the role of women). However, because of the Bible’s influence and the work of God in the world, the current culture of today’s readers has actually progressed on many issues (such as the role of women) *beyond* what the Bible’s statements actually teach. That is, there is continued *movement* after the writing of the Bible. Consequently, the current culture on such issues (not all issues) would have a superior ethic than the Bible’s statements. Moreover, a reader of the Bible in the current culture might be tempted to look back at the Bible’s statements and consider them regressive in light of the progress that current culture displays. Webb would assert that this attitude is wrong-headed since it is the spirit of the biblical text as shown by the principle of movement that is the important factor to consider, not the isolated words of the biblical text. The later case studies will help to clarify this point.

A Multilevel Ethic

By *multilevel ethic* Webb means “that not everything within Scripture reflects the same level of ethical development.”¹⁰ Not every ethical teaching or command in the Bible gives an ultimate ethic (labeled Z). This ultimate ethic may be superior to the ethics of the current culture of the reader. However, the spirit of the Bible points ahead to a time when the ultimate ethic will arrive and helps to drive us ahead to that realization of proper attitudes and behavior.

¹⁰ Ibid., 41.

A Balanced Perspective

Webb asserts that his system is a balanced perspective.¹¹ This is so, in his mind, largely because of its comprehensiveness. He offers his dynamic hermeneutic over against what he perceives to be a static hermeneutic that does not take into account all issues. For example, he reacts against those who would only use the left side of his diagram ($X \Rightarrow Y$) but ignores the right side of the diagram ($Y \Rightarrow Z$). He sees many biblicists following this approach who end up skewing the discussion toward the ancient world. Once you have understanding of the improvement that the biblical text makes upon the original culture, nothing else is needed. Webb would probably say that such interpretation is immersed too strongly in biblical theology. On the other side are the more secularist Bible interpreters who only use the right side of his diagram ($Y \Rightarrow Z$) and ignore the left side ($X \Rightarrow Y$). They want to go beyond the Bible but do not want to know how the Bible functions to correct the original culture it addresses. In his view, Webb has a balanced approach that does not fall into the ditches (conservative and liberal?) on either side.

Cultural/Transcultural Assessment

Cultural analysis automatically entails in Webb's view that the Bible contains two features relative to culture: those that are "culturally bound" and those that are "transcultural." He is thinking here of application and not of exegesis. The issue is implication or significance and not exegetical meaning of a text. When the reader of the Bible comes across an ethical imperative, he must decide if it is one that is bound up in the culture of that day (and therefore not applicable today) or if it is transcultural (and therefore applicable at all times including today).¹² On the face of things, there is not much wrong with this aspect of the redemptive movement hermeneutic. Webb admits that all views of application do this kind of thing.¹³

Redemptive Spirit of a Biblical Text

One of the most important features of the redemptive movement hermeneutic is the use of the notion of the *spirit of or within a biblical text*. Webb labels this the *redemptive spirit* within Scripture. Webb does not mean by this term the use of a principle discovered in the biblical text that is then used in other later cultural settings. Rather, it is the discovery of "the biblical spirit 'blowing on the sails' of our contemporary setting with movement-type ideas."¹⁴ How does one get at this biblical spirit? Webb notes

Finding the underlying spirit of a text is a delicate matter. It is not as direct or explicit as reading the words on the page. In order to grasp the spirit of a text, the interpreter must listen for how the text sounds within its various social contexts. Two life settings are crucial: the broader, foreign ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman (ANE/GR) social context and the immediate, domestic Israelite/church setting. One must ask, what change/improvement is the

¹¹ Ibid., 49-51.

¹² Ibid., 51-53.

¹³ Ibid., 52.

¹⁴ Ibid., 54.

text making in the lives of people in the covenant community? And, how does the text influence the larger ANE/GR world? Through reflecting upon these social-setting questions the modern reader will begin to sense the redemptive spirit of the text. Also, a third setting permits one another [sic] way of discovering the redemptive spirit, namely the canonical movement across various biblical epochs.¹⁵

From this presentation, it would appear that Webb is looking for two things to determine the redemptive spirit of the text. First, he wants to know in what direction the actual words of the Bible deviate from the original culture to which the text in question was written. For example, does the Bible make things stricter or looser? Is it harder or more lenient about certain behaviors? Second, he wants to know if there is a trajectory of development across time within the entire Bible relative to the issue in question. These two factors help to establish which direction in the water the boat of interpretation and application is moving. It is important to understand that it is the idea of the *redemptive spirit* of a biblical text that drives the engine of the *redemptive movement* necessary for the redemptive movement hermeneutic.

The Eighteen Criteria For Cultural/Transcultural Analysis

In the scheme outlined above, it is quite obvious that Christian interpreters of Scripture must do some serious cultural analysis in order to rightly divide the Word of God and apply it in our present time. The culture of each Bible passage must be clearly understood as well as the present culture in which we live. True to this need, Webb describes in four chapters and in great detail the necessary criteria for determining what in the Bible is transcultural and what is culturally relative.¹⁶ One positive aspect of Webb's approach is that he does take the question of cultural analysis seriously, something that many evangelicals have totally ignored. However, the sheer volume of his eighteen criteria along with the various sub-points and analyses communicates that such an endeavor is an intimidating task.

Webb gives two major categories of criteria: intrascriptural and extrascriptural. He lists sixteen criteria for the former category and two for the latter. Under the grouping of intrascriptural criteria he posits three major sub-divisions: (1) persuasive criteria, (2) moderately persuasive criteria, and (3) inconclusive criteria. While these labeling conventions immediately convey some general ideas to the reader of Webb's presentation, the actual criteria under each category require quite a bit of thought.

Persuasive Criteria

Under persuasive criteria, Webb lists five criteria which appear to be the major decisive factors to be used to determine if the Bible's statement is culturally relative or transcultural: (i) preliminary movement, (ii) seed ideas, (iii) breakouts, (iv) purpose/intent statements, and (v) basis in fall or curse. *Preliminary movement* refers to the idea that the biblical author has "pushed society as far as it can go at that time [the time of the biblical writing] without creating more damage than good; however, it can and should ultimately go further."¹⁷ This observation in the text is set over against *absolute movement* in which the biblical author "has pushed society so far and that is as far as it is supposed to go; further

¹⁵ Ibid., 53.

¹⁶ Ibid., 73-235. Needless to say, Webb's development of these eighteen criteria forms the bulk of his book.

¹⁷ Ibid., 73.

movement is not desired.” One example of this (see the later case studies) can be seen in various slavery passages. The Bible regulates behavior within the slavery system of Bible times while not directly telling the biblical audience to abandon slavery altogether. However, such regulative principles actually point ahead to a future time when slavery will be eliminated. Thus, biblical statements about slavery show a kind of preliminary movement relative to the culture of Bible times. Webb would say that if the reader is not aware of this, he might (as some did in pre-Civil War days in the United States) come to the conclusion that the Bible sanctions slavery.

Webb’s second criterion is the observation that “a text may be cultural if ‘seed ideas’ are present within the rest of Scripture to suggest and encourage further movement on a particular subject.”¹⁸ One sample which Webb cites relative to the slavery example is I Corinthians 7:21 (“If you [as a slave] can gain your freedom, do so”). Webb comments that passages like this one are “quietly suggestive ...[and] foster the idea that the legislative texts could be adapted or modified by later generations to take the redemptive-dimension of Scripture to a higher level.”¹⁹

Webb calls his third criterion “breakouts.” What he means by this is that there are some Bible passages that “break out” of the mold of previous cultural norms so that there is a complete overturning of those norms.²⁰ What this means for the biblical reader is that he cannot take some passages as transcultural if there are other passages which overturn the teaching. For example, it would seem clear that the dietary laws of the Pentateuch are not transcultural norms since later passages appear to overturn them. Of course, any so-called breakouts would have to develop in the same direction as the first two criteria for any meaningful coordination of the criteria themselves.

By *purpose/intent statements*, Webb refers, in his fourth criterion, to the fact that “a component of a text may be culturally bound, if by practicing the text one no longer fulfills the text’s original intent or purpose. The other side of this criterion is that a text is more likely to be transcultural to the degree that its original purpose is fulfilled when practiced in a subsequent culture and time.”²¹ One example would be the Pauline exhortation for Christians to greet each other with a holy kiss (Rom. 16:16). Obviously, kissing, at least in the North American context, does not carry the same connotation as such a greeting in biblical culture. One must understand the purpose of the biblical statement in order to help evaluate whether it is culturally bound.

Webb’s fifth criterion is *basis in the Fall of man*, that is, the curse of Genesis 3: “Since the curse has an ongoing effect (it is still painful to have babies, the ground still produces weeds and people still die), then it might appear that something rooted in the curse should be classified as transcultural.”²² This criterion is the most difficult one to apply from Webb’s list of persuasive criteria. This is due to the breadth and depth of the curse itself. A simplistic response might be to suggest that since everything post-Fall reflects an ongoing effect of the curse, then everything in the Bible is transcultural, a conclusion that will not have many proponents.²³

¹⁸ Ibid., 83.

¹⁹ Ibid., 84.

²⁰ Ibid., 91.

²¹ Ibid., 105.

²² Ibid., 111.

²³ Ibid., 121. Webb seems to be aware of this tension when he suggests, “There is one sense in which the curse is transcultural (as an indicative, “what is”) and another sense in which it is not transcultural (as an imperative, “what we should do”). However, the dichotomy between the indicative and the imperative is not always easy to see.

Moderately Persuasive Criteria

In Webb's approach, the largest general category for criteria to determine whether Scripture statements are culture-bound or transcultural is what he calls moderately persuasive criteria. Within this categorization he lists eight criteria (Webb's numbers 6-13): (6) basis in original creation – patterns, (7) basis in original creation – primogeniture, (8) basis in new creation, (9) competing options, (10) opposition to original culture, (11) closely related issues, (12) penal code, and (13) specific instructions versus general principles. A summary of each of these will not be given here. In general, Webb finds these criteria useful but not as strongly persuasive as the occurrence of the previous category of persuasive criteria.

One of the more interesting areas of debate relative to this list is the discussion of the pre-Fall account in Genesis. Is the original creation order useful for establishing transcultural elements throughout the biblical text? Webb answers “no.” He notes, “Due to a dependency upon a far too narrow sampling, Edenic patterns often get portrayed as something of an *automatic* universal.”²⁴ At one level, it makes some sense to see that there is more continuity between the present age and the post-Eden world affected by the curse than there is with the pristine Garden environment in Genesis 2. This dovetails nicely with Webb's conviction that the biblical teaching on the headship of the husband over the wife was not part of God's original design for the created order, but flows from the advent of the curse. However, the greatest weakness of this approach stems from its inability to incorporate statements by both Jesus (Matt. 19:4-6) and Paul (1 Tim. 2:13) that incline one in the opposite direction that male and female roles are transcultural in light of God's design before Satan tempts Eve.

Inconclusive Criteria

Webb provides a third category of intrascriptural criteria, which he calls *inconclusive criteria*. Presumably this category is less persuasive overall than the prior two groupings. From Webb's discussion and analysis, one gets the impression that in these areas, the cultural analysis of a text might go either way – transcultural or culture-bound. However, Webb uses the criteria to help the interpreter of the text consider the issues involved.

There are three criteria in this class (Webb's numbers 14-16): (14) basis in theological analogy, (15) contextual comparisons, and (16) appeal to the Old Testament. By use of theological analogy, the interpreter can explore the question of whether “a component of a text may be transcultural if its basis is rooted in the character of God or Christ.” This would perhaps have some significance if a feature of the text draws a “theological or christological portrait that parallels the human life setting.”²⁵ By reference to contextual comparisons, transcultural behavioral norms may be established if a specific behavior (good or bad) is contained within a list of other kinds of behavior which are easily discernible as transcultural (such as the sin of pride) even if on the grounds of other criteria.²⁶ By appeal to the Old Testament, Webb follows the rule that “continuity between Testaments offers no assurance of transcultural status.”²⁷ This is important, at least for women's issues, in that

²⁴ Ibid., 123, n. 1.

²⁵ Ibid., 185.

²⁶ Ibid., 192-94. The appeal to vice lists is one of the illustrations that Webb gives. In general, the criteria apply to any other contextual features that point to a specific conclusion about culture-bound or transcultural behavior. Vice lists are just the easiest kinds of passages to notice such features. This may be nothing more than a contextual reading. Differences this writer may have with Webb at this level are probably exegetical.

²⁷ Ibid., 201.

both Testaments present a unified view of male leadership. Webb goes on to argue more reasonably “discontinuity between Testaments is a fairly reliable indicator that a practice/text has a significant cultural component within it.”²⁸

Extrascriptural Criteria

Webb lists two “persuasive” extrascriptural criteria for determining if a biblical text is culture-bound or transcultural (numbers 17-18): (17) pragmatic basis between two cultures, and (18) scientific and social-scientific evidence. Webb does not see these criteria as standing alone, but as factors within the overall process that need to be discussed. He describes the criterion of pragmatic basis between two cultures in the following way:

A component of a biblical imperative may be culturally relative if the pragmatic basis for the instruction cannot be sustained from one culture to another. The converse is that a biblical command is more likely to be transcultural in its articulated form to the extent that the pragmatic factors are themselves sustainable across various cultures. When moving between two cultures, the lack of a sustained pragmatic basis serves as a signal that something might be cultural, while continuity in pragmatics raises the probability that something is transcultural.²⁹

One example discussed by Webb relative to this criterion is the idea of washing one another’s feet as taught in John 13. He would suggest that there is a pragmatic basis in the culture of Jesus’ day for the command. However, as modern culture has progressed, the pragmatic basis for the command no longer exists.³⁰ Therefore, it is hard to take the command as anything other than a culture-bound imperative according to Webb. Today, we are not to wash each other’s feet in a literal way, but to practice servanthood.

Webb’s criterion of scientific and social-evidence refers to the belief that “a text may be culturally confined if it is contrary to present-day scientific evidence.”³¹ Remarkably, Webb wrongfully treats the Bible as if it teaches a flat earth and that the earth is the astro-spatial center of the universe. He then defines such teaching as culturally bound. Therefore, the interpreter has the right to dismiss those biblically based notions, according to Webb, and accept the more modern understanding of the universe.³² Ethically, Webb invokes the more modern understandings from physical and social sciences about the nature of women to posit that one’s view of women should progress beyond the mere words of the Bible.

Case Studies: Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals

Webb’s book gives many textual examples and has some merit in pointing out the many places the student must turn in the sacred text to analyze ethical decisions. However, there are three primary issues that dominate the discussion, the three that help make the title of the book: slaves, women, and

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 209.

³⁰ Ibid., 211.

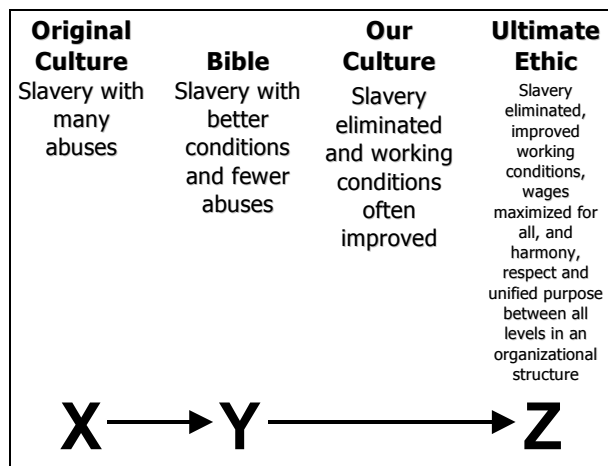
³¹ Ibid., 221.

³² Ibid., 221-23.

homosexuals. These three issues become case studies for using Webb's redemptive movement hermeneutic to determine application of biblical teaching. His general conclusion is that the biblical teaching about homosexuality is transcultural and there is no ground for modifying biblical texts toward a higher ethic. In short, homosexuality is wrong for our day and will never be right behavior in any future day. However, with respect to the issues of slavery and the role of women, Webb uses his system to assert that present day interpreters of the biblical text must go beyond what the text actually says and move toward a higher ethic toward which the Bible's movement points. Thus, we see biblical teaching pointing ahead to the elimination of slavery (even though there are no imperatives to that effect in the text) and leading to the eradication of most, if not all, distinctions in the roles of men and women.

Slavery

Webb's analysis of the ethical issue of slavery is summarized in the chart given below:³³



The original culture during Bible times (including Old and New Testament) practiced slavery as a major part of the culture with many abuses. In the Bible, we find texts which may not sanction slavery but which acknowledge its existence. Within that context, statements in the Bible attempt to regulate the practice to mollify its worst effects. One could cite the release of certain slaves at the time of Jubilee (Leviticus 25) and the exhortation for masters to treat their slaves well (Eph. 6:9) in this respect. Furthermore, there are passages that suggest a direction culture needs to go on the issue such as Paul's admonition to Philemon: "Perhaps the reason he [Onesimus] was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (Philemon 15-16).

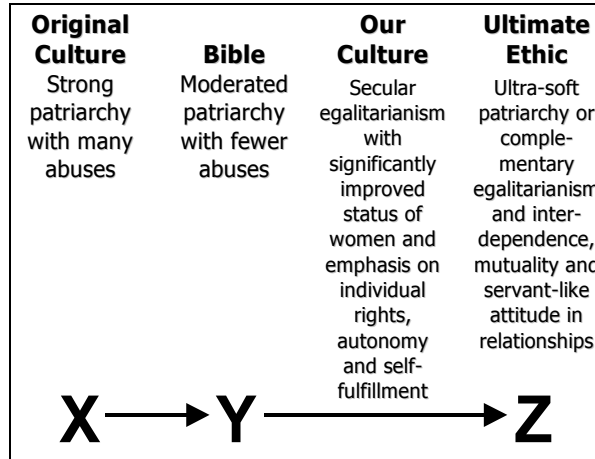
In light of the comparison of the original culture of Bible times with Bible teaching, there is a difference on the issue of slavery. Moreover, a comparison of our own modern culture shows that on the issue of slavery, we actually possess a superior ethic to that found in the Bible. So there is progression or redemption movement beyond the Bible. In addition, we should expect that culture is moving in a direction to improve more on the issue. Webb's description of the ultimate ethic about improved working conditions and wages maximized for all sounds at best like modern unionized slogans and at worst like socialistic jargon. He does not actually define these terms clearly nor does he

³³ Ibid., 37. The charts provided throughout the paper are adaptations of the actual charts provided by Webb.

express whether these goals are actually rooted clearly in Scripture other than the so-called redemptive movement he has ascertained from X to Y.

Women

The main issue at the heart of the discussion appears to be the role of women in the world, home, and church. Webb's analysis of this issue is summarized in the chart given below:³⁴



The original culture during Bible times practiced strict male leadership with many abuses of women. The Bible itself distances itself from such abuse of women with a kind of “softened” patriarchy. Although Webb does not say so explicitly in the discussion at this point, presumably the moderated patriarchy of the Bible still has some abuses of women since there are indications that they are viewed as property (in Webb’s view) and they are subservient to men. However, Webb goes on to say “the softening of patriarchy ... can be taken a considerable distance further.”³⁵ Such an approach (Webb would argue) to the application of Scripture is begging to be done.

Carrying the redemptive movement within Scripture to a more improved expression for gender relationships, as I will argue, ends in either ultra-soft patriarch or complementary egalitarianism, depending upon whether one sees primogeniture ... as a transcultural or as a cultural-component value. The implication of a redemptive-spirit hermeneutic cries out for this kind of movement in the appropriation of Scripture.³⁶

There is a sense in which Webb views himself as trying to find common ground between egalitarians and complementarians in the gender debate. He actually opts for a complementary egalitarianism. The very use of the two terms together implies his desire to satisfy both. However, in the end his position is one of egalitarianism. His option for a possibility of ultra-soft patriarchy actually allows only a dimension of symbolic honor for men rather than any true leadership function that is different

³⁴ Ibid., 38.

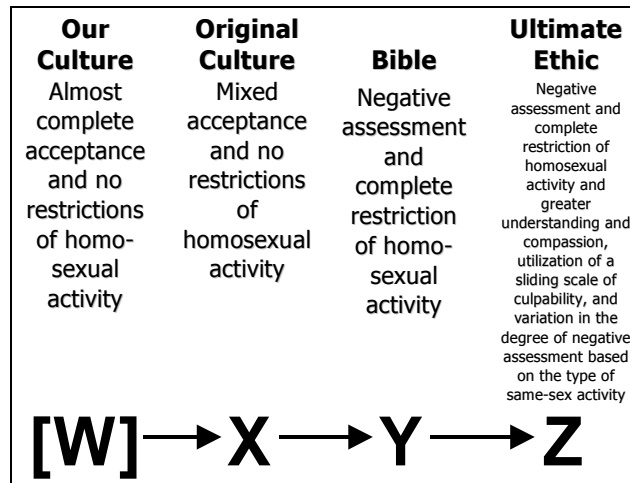
³⁵ Ibid., 39.

³⁶ Ibid.

from women. Thus, in the end, it is not at all clear that from a functional viewpoint he really allows two different views.³⁷

Homosexuality

Webb sees redemptive movement in the Bible leading away from homosexuality. The key is that the statements of the Bible actually restrict the practice more than (actually prohibits it) the culture of Bible times. The chart below summarizes Webb's view:³⁸



While Webb is to be applauded for his seemingly strong stance on this issue, he does teach “Within a pluralistic society, such as we experience today, Christians should actually defend the rights and freedoms of homosexuals to live out their beliefs. We should not legally impose our sexual ethic on others. Furthermore, the emerging biological and environmental research suggests that for some individuals the degree of non-volitional disposition toward homoerotic behavior is quite strong. For others it is simply a matter of personal choice, not clouded by volitional issues.”³⁹ This statement, while showing perhaps a compassionate spirit, nonetheless demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of true Christian goals. Should not Christians try to influence their culture toward Christian standards? How then should we defend homosexuals to live out their beliefs? We should oppose abuse of them by others, but not the sanctioning of their behavior as public policy.

In addition, Webb's ultimate ethic is based largely upon emerging biological and environmental studies. On what grounds can we consider such studies as part of an “ultimate” solution to be desired? In the end, Webb has created a syncretistic statement placing cultural developments on equal footing with Scripture.

Eight Problems with the Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic

As this reviewer read Webb's book, several critical points came to mind. Upon reading other reviews of his book, the same criticisms that initially intruded upon my thoughts were also being raised

³⁷ Ibid., 241.

³⁸ Ibid., 40.

³⁹ Ibid.

by others. Below are outlined eight problem areas with respect to the redemptive movement hermeneutic.

Use of the Word *Hermeneutic*

The critique here may be unique to this writer and is not simply a critique of Webb. Webb seems to be following the broad-based use of the term *hermeneutic* as it is current in biblical scholarship. As such, the word has come to mean over the last couple of decades, not the art and science of biblical interpretation, but the art and science of “using” the Bible. This functional approach to the term covers a wide range of interests including the rubric of application. Thus, Webb speaks of his hermeneutic as a way of going from (1) the culture of the Bible to (2) the statements of the Bible to (3) the present culture and (4) beyond the present culture. This four-step view complicates the way that discussions of these issues are handled and makes it easier to lose sight of biblical authority. While one cannot deny the relationship between Bible exegesis and application, this use of the word *hermeneutic* is probably not helpful. However, because it is commonplace, it must be dealt with on its own terms as Webb uses it.

A Culturally-Based Ethic Instead of a Bible-Based Ethic

Under Webb’s scheme, what really is the final authority? We saw that his discussion of homosexuality clearly relied heavily upon emerging biological and environmental studies (in the field of sociology). In the statement of his ultimate ethic it was the Bible’s negative assessment of homosexuality *plus* these extra-biblical concepts, which formed the basis of his ethical statement. This leaves open the possibility that the Bible is not the ultimate authority for Webb’s ultimate ethic. This conclusion follows largely from the fact that Webb does not actually weigh the evidence of biological and environmental studies by surrendering their judgments to the wisdom of Scripture. Scripture might justify the conclusions of such studies, but Webb shows no predisposition to consider the need to judge them at all. He simply accepts them within his scheme.

There is no question that Webb’s presentation has some good points along the way such as the need to examine the culture of Bible times as well as trajectories within the canon about ethical issues. However, Webb’s developmental scheme that goes beyond Scripture to determine ethical action stands in stark contrast to the focus normally held in evangelicalism on biblical authority. Meadors describes the classical evangelical model of application, which Webb rejects in favor of his developmental model, in the following way:

The classical model derives its understandings from the consistent trajectories of the text. It does not feel free to revise these trajectories via modern cultural understandings. This model applies ‘common sense’ to discerning cultural and transcultural contexts and determines ‘normative teaching’ by analyzing the prescriptive and descriptive nature of texts. ‘Progress of revelation’ is confined to the canon. This ‘progress’ does not justify extra-canonical models. The classical model lays great weight on contextual exegesis and chooses to live with the variety and tension of interpretive results. One must construct views from trajectories in the text, but our constructs that go beyond the text do not have the same authority as those in the text. The classical view does reason out of a worldview beyond the direct statements of texts but never in isolation from or in contradiction to the clear teaching and patterns of texts.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Gary T. Meadors, “Exegetical Essentials: Exploring the Application of Text to Culture” (Unpublished paper, Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, November 17, 2003), 3.

It is therefore not clear that Webb is within the boundaries of historic evangelicalism on this issue. His modeling of “development” or “progression” in a text rather than the actual didactic content of the text locates the real authority for ethical decisions in the hands of the modern interpreter’s understanding of present culture.⁴¹

A Denial of the Sufficiency of the Scriptures

A corollary of the previous point is that the Bible is viewed in Webb’s approach as insufficient for moral and ethical application. It is not that Webb merely thinks through issues beyond Scriptural statements. All views of application do this. It is that he requires such thinking beyond Scripture to arrive at a higher and better ultimate ethic, which is the norm of behavior for a given issue (such as the role of women). The ultimate ethic is not a statement of behavior, which flows from and is rooted in the content of the Bible on a given issue. It is an ethical statement that is superior to the Bible’s teachings on the given topic. Thus, the majority view in modern culture that husbands should not have authority over their wives and that women can be pastors trumps the Bible’s outline of those areas because it is an enlightened understanding that goes beyond the Bible. The Bible is simply insufficient to get us where we need to go. One wonders if Webb is embarrassed by the so-called “abuses” he finds in the text of the Bible on various issues. The Bible appears not to be “up-to-date.” In fact, to call anything in the Bible an abuse requires one to judge the Bible based upon present cultural understanding of ethical issues. In short, the interpreter judges the Bible rather than the Bible judging the interpreter’s life. In the end, the denial that the Bible is sufficient is the flip side of a denial of the Bible’s role as the final authority in ethical matters.

The Denial and Irrelevancy of Inerrancy

It stands to reason that if the Bible is not sufficient as the final authority in ethical norms, then even if one holds to inerrancy of Scripture, that doctrine is useless, at least in the area of determining behavior. If we must go beyond the text to find the ultimate ethic, one does not need exegetical details of the text to be accurate, only that the trajectory or movement of the text be exact. Such a movement might be seen even if one or two details in certain texts were viewed as errant.

When one reads Webb, it does seem that he at least implicitly denies the inerrancy of the Bible, although it is not his stated intention to do so. He appears to deny the historicity of Genesis chapters 2 & 3 in certain respects. If this understanding of Webb is correct, the story of the original Adam and Eve did not necessarily happen the way that the text tells in a straightforward way. Adam was created first and then Eve according to the account. Webb believes that the headship of the man was introduced by the Fall and not by the design of Creation, so the text at face value creates a tension for him. Thus, he interprets the account in chapter two as containing “whispers of patriarchy in the garden” which “may have been placed there in order to anticipate the curse.”⁴² At the very least, this is

⁴¹ Another example would be Webb’s cultural handling of 1 Peter 3:1 in which he sees it as culturally bound because in the modern culture it would not help evangelism as the text implies. Wayne Grudem strongly replies: “It is better to reject Webb’s redemptive-movement hermeneutic and see the New Testament as words of God for us today, words which contain God’s morally pure standards for us to obey, and to obey *all* of the New Testament commands *simply because they are the words of God* who holds us responsible for obeying them. We do not have the right to take it upon ourselves to say, as Webb’s position implies, ‘If a wife today submits to here unbelieving husband according to 1 Peter 3:1, I don’t think that will help evangelism in our modern culture, so women should not follow that text today.’ That is simply setting up our own moral judgment as a higher standard than God’s word” (“Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic? An Analysis of William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* [Atlanta, GA: Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 2003], 24).

⁴² Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, 142-43.

a denial of any literal understanding of the historical event as given in Genesis 2 (more below on this). It appears best, however, to see Webb as simply denying the account as an actual historical event. He gives reasons based upon the literary structure of Genesis, but his view of the literary structure seems driven by his disdain for patriarchy rather than the textual details.⁴³

Exegetical Abuses

At the level of exegesis this reviewer found that the general tenor of Webb's handling of the text was slanted overwhelming toward his favored conclusions. He certainly denies literal interpretation when it suits his purposes. Often times the grounds for doing so are weak. However, due to lack of time and space, only one exegetical issue will be dealt with – the continued egalitarian abuse of Galatians 3:28 (“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”). This verse serves almost as a slogan for the egalitarian cause in spite of a lack of contextual support. Webb rightly understands and mentions the focus of complementarians upon the fact that this verse focuses on a soteriological truth. He asserts that egalitarians agree. The context is clearly that we are all one in salvation with Jesus. Verses 26-27 emphasize that all who have put faith in Christ have been joined to him. Verse 29 suggests that all those who belong to Christ share all that Christ will give us as heirs of promise. This will find ultimate fulfillment in the coming kingdom. Nowhere in the context is there a hint that verse 28 was intended by the apostle to mean that all distinctions in social roles were now to be abandoned.

Webb tries to blunt this fact by appeal to other “in Christ” passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:13, Ephesians 2:15, and Colossians 3:11. However, he assumes unconvincingly that these passages automatically entail social reorganization and cultural implications regarding roles of the parties listed and then reads that assumption into the allegedly similar passage of Galatians 3:28. Gudem rightly challenges Webb on this point by noting “Galatians should not be seen as a ‘seed idea’ pointing to some future, ‘higher ethic,’ but as a text that is fully consistent with other things the apostle Paul and other New Testament authors wrote about relationships between men and women. If we take the entire New Testament as the very words of God for us in the new covenant today, then any claim that Galatians 3:28 should overrule other texts such as Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2 should be seen as a claim that Paul the apostle contradicts himself, and therefore that the word of God contradicts itself.”⁴⁴

Abuses in Theological Method

Webb's attempt to exegete Galatians 3:28 and apply it in the world today showed a lack of concern for the actual context in that book by Paul. Beyond that, his appeal to other passages, in order to “elevate” the understanding of Galatians 3:28, showed problems in the integrating of texts. Another example where Webb is off the mark in comparing Scripture with Scripture is his insistence that passages which teach general ideas about justice should be used to govern specific passages about the role of women. In other words, some passages veto other passages. Naturally, Webb chooses the superiority of passages that fit his notion, taken from modern culture, that women should have equal roles with men.

In contrast to the biblical culture, our contemporary culture generally endorses equality for women on every level: job opportunities, pay equity (equal work, equal pay between genders), marital equality (marriage rights, divorce laws, etc.), educational equality, property law and

⁴³ Gudem, “Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic?,” 19.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

political equality. Is this not a fairer and more just social environment than the one that we find in the biblical text? In the case of marriage, would a shift from unilateral submission to mutual submission be a greater demonstration of love or a lesser demonstration of love? It would appear that the broad ethical principles of justice, love, fairness, compassion, etc., offer a rationale for change to, or at least further improvements in, the kind of treatment that women received in the biblical text.⁴⁵

Such a statement is astounding for its hubris. Can we really say that modern developments in these areas are superior? After all, the rush to have women in the work place a couple of decades ago in American culture, with all the attending issues, has devastated the family in many cases and hurt children. Webb again assumes by modern notions of fairness that the modern culture is superior. However, he goes to texts about general justice and uses them to import his modern cultural ideas into the text in such a way that he essentially unravels the detailed biblical passages that teach a structure of roles that differ from his own.

Subjectivism

The casual reader of this paper may already have detected an element of subjectivism in Webb's proposal. While there are subjective elements to Bible interpretation such as recognizing one's preconceived notions, it is not at all certain that the Bible reader cannot rise above them. However, the problem is exaggerated when we try to interpret either the culture of Bible times (X) or the culture of our own times in order to see how redemptive movement has occurred since the Bible was written. While such a task has some value, it should *not* be placed at the heart of one's understanding of biblical teaching about behavioral norms. The subjective nature of interpreting wide open cultural claims which constantly change can easily be contrasted to the more manageable and reasonable attempt to understand the finite words God has given us in space and time in order to manage our lives. As Peter said, "His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence" (2 Peter 1:3).

Grudem comments rather sardonically, "I have lived in the academic world for over thirty years, and I have a great deal of confidence in the ability of scholars to take a set of eighteen criteria like this [Webb's system] and make a case for almost anything they desire, through skillful manipulation of the variable factors involved in the criteria. But whether or not these are the result of a proper use of Webb's criteria, the point remains: *the standard is no longer what the New Testament says, but rather the point toward which some scholar thinks the Bible was moving.* And that is why I believe it is correct to say that Webb's redemptive-movement hermeneutic nullifies in principle the moral authority of the entire New Testament."⁴⁶

Elitism and the Clarity of the Bible

While reading Webb's presentation, this reviewer came to the conclusion that there was no biblical basis to judge the eighteen criteria he proposes to determine whether a biblical statement is culture-bound or transcultural. The presentation of these criteria is largely arbitrary. However, beyond that, these criteria taken together form a rather unwieldy and obtuse system of application that is not easy to manage, even for biblical scholars. Grudem complains that few biblical scholars have the

⁴⁵ Webb, "Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals," 181.

⁴⁶ Grudem, "Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic?, 7."

knowledge in the various ancient cultures in order to evaluate completely the move from X to Y in Webb's system.⁴⁷ Compound that with the question of what individual or group of individuals have the knowledge, time, and inclination to unravel the ongoing developments of present culture in order to help us understand the ongoing redemptive movement that is heading to the ultimate ethic. Also, when will we know we have arrived at the ultimate ethic? Only within an elitist view does such a project have meaning. Are we setting up a rival to the Catholic "magisterium" where the behavioral norms for Christians are not really within the grasp of the common man on his own reading of the text? If so, he must always defer to the experts. As I read Webb's well-meaning proposal, the Jewish Talmud came to mind, the large and daunting multi-volume set of rabbinic commentary on the Mishnah, which in turn was a large volume commentary on the Old Testament and Jewish traditions. The Talmud was codified around A.D. 500. So with any luck, we will perfect Webb's system in about five centuries.

Conclusion: Hermeneutical Suicide

There are other areas in which Webb could be criticized including the lack of eschatological perspective and lack of historical perspective. However, exploration of those notions must wait for another time. Hopefully, the short survey of problems presented is enough to raise concerns about Webb's proposal for application of biblical texts. Due to a movement away from biblical authority and sufficiency for ethical norms, the redemptive movement hermeneutic has moved away from evangelical roots. In short, as far as biblical ethics is concerned, it is moving in the direction of hermeneutical suicide.

⁴⁷ Grudem, "Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic?" 15-16.