

REVIEW ARTICLE

SHOULD WE MOVE BEYOND THE NEW TESTAMENT TO A BETTER ETHIC?

An Analysis of William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals:
Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*

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I. INTRODUCTION

How can Christians today know which parts of the Bible are “culturally relative” and which parts apply to all believers in all cultures throughout history?

William Webb has provided an entirely new approach to that question in a book that focuses specifically on slavery, men’s and women’s roles, and homosexuality, but that also provides a general approach to the question of cultural relativity, an approach that Webb hopes will prove useful for solving similar questions on other topics.

The book provides an extensive and rather complex system of cultural analysis that Webb calls a “redemptive-movement hermeneutic.” Because of its amount of detail and the sophistication of its argument, the book has prompted widespread interest among evangelicals, many of whom have enthusiastically embraced its system.

In brief, Webb says that the ancient world in which the Bible was written had gravely deficient moral standards. God in his wisdom knew that it would be best to work gradually to lead his people from the moral practices of the surrounding cultures to much higher standards of moral conduct. Therefore in the OT God gave moral commands that were a great improvement over the standards of the surrounding culture, but were not yet his highest ideal. In the NT, God gave even higher moral standards, making further improvement over what was taught in the OT. But even these NT moral commands were not God’s “ultimate ethic.” Our task today is to try to understand the direction in which God was gradually leading his people, so that by observing that trajectory we can discover God’s “ultimate ethic” on various topics, an “ultimate ethic” that we should seek to teach and obey today.

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Webb uses eighteen criteria to attempt to discover the direction of God's "redemptive movement" in three specific test cases: slavery, homosexuality, and the role of women in marriage and the church. Because I will refer to Webb's eighteen criteria throughout this article, I will list them here. They are more fully explained in the material that follows, and I summarize my evaluation of each criterion in section VI near the end of this article. Webb's eighteen criteria are as follows:

1. Preliminary Movement (p. 73)
2. Seed Ideas (p. 83)
3. Breakouts (p. 91)
4. Purpose/Intent Statements (p. 105)
5. Basis in Fall or Curse (p. 110)
6. Basis in Original Creation, Section 1: Patterns (p. 123)
7. Basis in Original Creation, Section 2: Primogeniture (p. 134)
8. Basis in New Creation (p. 145)
9. Competing Options (p. 152)
10. Opposition to Original Culture (p. 157)
11. Closely Related Issues (p. 162)
12. Penal Code (p. 179)
13. Specific Instructions Versus General Principles (p. 179)
14. Basis in Theological Analogy (p. 185)
15. Contextual Comparisons (p. 192)
16. Appeal to the Old Testament (p. 201)
17. Pragmatic Basis Between Two Cultures (p. 209)
18. Scientific and Social-Scientific Evidence (p. 221)

I expect that most readers will find Webb's explanation of why the Bible regulated but did not immediately prohibit all slavery to be a helpful analysis. Readers may also find helpful Webb's explanation of why the Bible's prohibitions against homosexual conduct are transcultural, not culturally relative. This is because Webb has read widely concerning slavery and homosexuality in the cultural backgrounds that surrounded the writers of the OT and NT, and his book provides a helpful resource in those areas. However, as Thomas Schreiner pointed out in an earlier review,¹ Webb's opposition to homosexuality is a dangerously weak basis for evangelicals to use, because he fails to quote or discuss in any detail the strongest NT text on homosexuality, Rom 1:26–27, where Paul bases his argument on the natural order that God created (he gives the text only one paragraph on p. 109, lumping it together with Lev 18:22 and 20:13).² Webb never argues that homosexual conduct is wrong because the NT says so and the NT is

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, "Review of *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*," JBMW 7/1 (Spring 2002) 48–49, 51 (his review was originally published in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6/1 [2002] 46–64).

² Webb also includes Rom 1:26–27 in a list of verses in a footnote on p. 161, and it appears in the title of an article in the bibliography on p. 287.

God's final revelation to us in this age (to argue this way would be contrary to Webb's system; see below).

Regarding biblical roles for men and women, Webb's book provides a significant new challenge to those who believe that the Bible teaches that wives should be subject to their husbands today (according to several NT passages), and that some governing and teaching roles in the church, such as the office of elder or pastor, are restricted to men. In contrast to many egalitarians who have argued that the NT does not teach that wives should be subject to their husbands, or that only men should be elders, Webb takes a different approach: he believes that the NT *does* teach these things *for the culture in which the NT was written*, but that in today's culture the treatment of women is an area in which "*a better ethic than the one expressed in the isolated words of the text is possible*" (p. 36, italics added).

Webb admits that the OT and NT improved the treatment of women when compared with their surrounding cultures, but, he says,

If one adopts a redemptive-movement hermeneutic, the softening of patriarchy (which Scripture itself initiates) can be taken a considerable distance further. Carrying the redemptive movement within Scripture to a more improved expression for gender relationships . . . [today] ends in either ultra-soft patriarchy or complementary egalitarianism (p. 39).

Later in the book, Webb defines such "ultra-soft patriarchy" as a position in which there are no unique leadership roles for men in marriage or in the church, but men are given "a certain level of *symbolic honor*" (p. 243). He defines "complementary egalitarianism" as full interdependence and "mutual submission" within marriage, and the only differences in roles are "based upon biological differences between men and women," so that Webb would favor "a greater participation of women in the early stages of child rearing" (p. 241). Thus, Webb's "ultra-soft patriarchy" differs from his "complementary egalitarianism" only in the slight bit of "symbolic honor" which ultra-soft patriarchy would still give to men.

Because of its detail, novelty, and the complexity of its approach, this book deserves to be taken seriously by complementarians. However, because of concerns that are detailed below, I do not think that the book succeeds in showing that male headship in the home and the church is culturally relative. Nor do I believe that the book provides a system for analyzing cultural relativity that is ultimately helpful for Christians today.

II. CONCERNS RELATED TO THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE AND THE FINALITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. *Webb's trajectory hermeneutic nullifies in principle the moral authority of the entire New Testament and thus contradicts the Reformation principle of sola Scriptura.* At first glance, it may not seem as though Webb "nullifies" the moral authority of the entire NT, because he agrees, for example, that homosexual conduct is morally wrong and that the NT condemnations of homosexual conduct are transcultural (pp. 39–41, 250–52, and

many other places in the book). He also affirms that the NT admonitions for children to be subject to their parents are transcultural (p. 212). Is Webb not then affirming that some aspects of NT ethics are transcultural?

The important point to realize is the *basis* on which Webb affirms that these are transcultural commands. Most evangelicals today read a text such as, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Eph 6:1) and conclude that children *today* are to obey their parents because the NT was written for Christians in the new covenant age (after Christ’s death). Since we Christians today are also in the new covenant age (the period of time until Christ returns), this command is binding on us today.

Most evangelicals today reason similarly about the NT texts concerning homosexual conduct (see, for example, Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9), and conclude that these are morally binding on us because these texts were written to new covenant Christians, and we today are also part of the new covenant.

But for Webb, *the process is entirely different*, and the basis of authority is different. The commands concerning children and homosexuals are binding on us today not *because they were written to new covenant Christians* and we today are part of the new covenant (I could not find such a consideration anywhere in Webb’s book), but *because these commands have passed through the filtering system of Webb’s eighteen criteria* and have survived. Actually, the command concerning children has not entirely survived his filtering process. Webb believes that the commands for children to obey their parents actually teach that *adult children* should continue to be obedient to their parents throughout their adult lives, but that this aspect of the command was culturally relative and need not be followed by us today (see p. 212).³

In this way, it is fair to say that Webb’s system invalidates the moral authority of the entire NT, at least in the sense that we today should be obedient to the moral commands that were written to new covenant Christians. Instead, only those commands are binding that have passed through his eighteen-part filter.

Someone may object, “Doesn’t everyone have to use some kind of cultural filter? Doesn’t everyone have to test the New Testament commands to see if they are culturally relative or transcultural before deciding whether to obey them?”

My response is that there is a fundamental difference in approach. Most evangelicals (myself included) say that we *are* under the moral authority of the NT, and we are morally obligated to obey its commands when we are in the same situation as that addressed in the NT command (such as being a parent, a child, a person contemplating a divorce, a church selecting elders or deacons, a church preparing to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, a husband, a wife, and so forth). When there is no exact modern equivalent to some aspect of a command (such as, “honor the emperor” in 1 Pet 2:17), then we

³ Webb does not consider the far simpler possibility that first-century readers would have understood the word “children” (Greek *tekna*) to apply only to people who were not adults, and so we today can say that Eph 6:1 applies to modern believers in just the same way that it applied to first-century believers, and no “cultural filters” need to be applied to that command.

are still obligated to obey the command, but we do so by *applying* it to situations that are essentially similar to the one found in the NT. Therefore, “honor the emperor” is applied to honoring the president or the prime minister. In fact, in several such cases the immediate context contains pointers to broader applications (such as 1 Pet 2:13–14, which mentions being subject to “every human institution” including the “emperor” and “governors” as specific examples).⁴

But with Webb the situation is entirely different. He does not consider the moral commands of the NT to represent a perfect or final moral system for Christians. They are rather a pointer that “provides the direction toward the divine destination, but its literal, isolated words are not always the destination itself. Sometimes God’s instructions are simply designed to get his flock moving” (p. 60).

At the heart of Webb’s system is what he calls a “redemptive-movement hermeneutic.” He says that some may prefer calling his approach a “progressive” or “developmental” or “trajectory” hermeneutic and he says “that is fine” (p. 31). Webb explains his hermeneutic by what he calls “the X→Y→Z Principle.” The letter Y indicates what the Bible says about a topic. Webb says, “The *central position* (Y) stands for where the isolated words of the Bible are in their development of a subject” (p. 31). The letter X represents “the perspective of the *original culture*,” and the letter Z represents “an *ultimate ethic*,” that is, God’s final ideal that the Bible is moving toward.

Therefore in Webb’s system, what evangelicals have ordinarily understood to be “the teaching of the Bible” on particular subjects is in fact only a point along the way (indicated by the letter Y) toward the development of a final or ultimate ethic (Z). Webb says,

The X→Y→Z Principle illustrates how numerous aspects of the biblical text were *not* written to establish a utopian society with complete justice and equity. They were written within a cultural framework with limited moves toward an ultimate ethic (p. 31).

Therefore, Webb discovers a number of points where “our contemporary culture” has a better ethic than what is found in the words of the Bible. Our culture has a better ethic today “where it happens to reflect a better social ethic—one closer to an *ultimate ethic* (Z) than to the ethic revealed in the isolated words of the biblical text” (p. 31).

Webb’s approach to Scripture can also be seen in the way he deals with biblical texts regarding slavery. Most evangelical interpreters today would say that the NT does not command or encourage or endorse slavery, but rather tells Christians who were slaves how they should conduct themselves within that situation, and also gives principles that would modify and ultimately lead to the abolition of slavery (1 Cor 7:21–22; Gal 3:28; Phlm 16, 21). By contrast, Webb believes that the Bible actually endorses slavery; however, it is a kind of slavery with “better conditions and fewer abuses” (p. 37).

⁴ For the small handful of slightly more difficult cases, such as a “holy kiss” and “footwashing,” see section VII below.

Webb's redemptive-movement hermeneutic approaches the slavery question by saying that the original culture (X) approved of "slavery with many abuses" (p. 37). Partially correcting that original culture, the Bible (Y) endorses "slavery with better conditions and fewer abuses" (p. 37). However, Webb believes that on the issue of slavery "our culture is much closer to an ultimate ethic than it is to the unrealized ethic reflected in the isolated words of the Bible" (p. 37). Today, the ethic of our culture, which is superior to that of the Bible, has "slavery eliminated and working conditions often improved" (p. 37). Webb believes our culture is much closer to an "ultimate ethic" (Z) in which we will see "wages maximized for all" (p. 37).⁵

At the end of the book, Webb recapitulates the results of his analysis regarding slavery:

Scripture does not present a "finalized ethic" in every area of human relationship. . . . To stop where the Bible stops (with its isolated words) ultimately fails to reapply the redemptive spirit of the text as it spoke to the original audience. It fails to see that further reformation is possible. . . . While Scripture had a positive influence in its time, we should take that redemptive spirit and move to an even better, more fully-realized ethic today (p. 247).

Therefore, rather than saying that *the NT* does not endorse or command slavery, Webb believes that it does approve a system of slavery for the people at the time at which it was written. However, in its modifications and regulations of slavery, the Bible starts us along a trajectory that would lead to the ultimate abolition of slavery, though the NT never actually reaches that point.

Webb asks why the Bible is this way:

Why does God convey his message in a way that reflects a less-than-ultimate ethic . . . that evidences an underlying redemptive spirit and some movement in a positive direction, it often permits its words to stop short of completely fulfilling such a spirit? Why did God not simply give us a clearly laid out blueprint for an ultimate-ethic utopia-like society? How could a God of absolute justice not give us a revelation concerning absolute justice on every page? (p. 57)

Webb's answer to these questions is to see this incomplete movement toward an ultimate ethic as a manifestation of God's wisdom. In showing us that the Bible was making progress against the surrounding culture, but not completely correcting the surrounding culture, we can see God's pastoral wisdom (p. 58), his pedagogical skill (p. 60), his evangelistic care for people who might not have heard the gospel if it proclaimed an ultimate ethic (p. 63), and other aspects of God's wisdom (pp. 64–66).

According to Webb's system, then, Christians can no longer simply go to the NT, begin to read the moral commands in one of Paul's epistles, and be-

⁵ Webb does not explain what he means by "wages maximized for all," but readers might wonder if it means that profits would be minimized and capital investment would be minimized, in order for wages to be maximized? Or does it mean that all would have equal wages, since "all" would have maximized wages and this must mean that none would have lower wages than others? He does not make clear in what sense he thinks wages would be "maximized for all."

lieve that they should obey them. According to Webb, that would be to use a “static hermeneutic” that just reads the “isolated words of the text” and fails to understand “the spirit-movement component of meaning which significantly transforms the application of texts for subsequent generations” (p. 34). Rather, we must realize that the NT teachings simply represent one stage in a trajectory of movement toward an ultimate ethic.

So how can Christians discover this “ultimate ethic”? Webb takes the rest of the book to explain eighteen fairly complex criteria by which Christians must evaluate the commands of the Bible and thereby discover the more just, more equitable ethical system toward which the Bible was heading. Once that ultimate ethic has been discovered, that ultimate ethic is the moral standard that we should follow and obey.

What this means in actual practice is that the moral authority of the NT is completely nullified *at least in principle*. There may be some NT commands that Webb concludes actually do represent an ultimate ethic, but even then we should obey them *not because they are taught in the NT*, but because Webb’s system has found that what they teach is also the moral standard found in his “ultimate ethic.”

The implications of this for Christian morality are extremely serious. It means that our ultimate authority is no longer the Bible but Webb’s system. Of course, he claims that the “redemptive spirit” that drives his hermeneutic for each area of ethics is derived from the biblical text, but by his own admission this “redemptive spirit” is not the same as the teachings of the Bible, but rather is derived from Webb’s analysis of the interaction between the ancient culture and the biblical text. Here is his key explanation:

The final and most important characteristic of a redemptive-movement hermeneutic is its focus on the spirit of a text. . . . The coinage “redemptive-movement hermeneutic” is derived from a concern that Christians apply the *redemptive spirit* within Scripture, not merely, or even primarily, its isolated words. *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 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 way of discovering the redemptive spirit, namely, the canonical movement across various biblical epochs (p. 53, italics added).*

This paragraph is remarkable for the candor with which it reveals the subjective and indeterminate nature of Webb’s ethical system. If the heart of the “most important characteristic” of his hermeneutic is discovered through “reflecting upon” the way the Bible interacts with ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman cultures, and through such reflection the interpreter will “begin to sense the redemptive spirit of the text,” we have entered

a realm so subjective that no two interpreters in the future will be likely to agree on where the “redemptive spirit of the text” that they are beginning to “sense” is leading, and what kind of “ultimate ethic” they should count as God’s will for them.

Those with a predisposition toward socialism will no doubt be delighted that Webb has begun “to sense” a “redemptive spirit” that will lead to “wages maximized for all” (p. 37). But those more inclined to capitalism will no doubt “begin to sense” quite another “redemptive spirit” in which the dominant biblical themes of freedom and liberty and fair reward for one’s labor lead to an “ultimate ethic” (Z) that encourages investment and a free enterprise system, one with *maximization of profits* for those worthy individuals who through their business activities best meet the material needs of mankind, and thus by means of the high quality of goods they produce for others best show that they love their neighbors as themselves.

No doubt Arminians will “begin to sense the redemptive spirit” of Arminianism moving against the fatalism of the ancient world in a much more Arminian direction than we find even in the NT. And Calvinists, through serious and sober reflection upon the way in which the biblical text corrects the puny, weak gods in the Greek and Roman pantheon, will “begin to sense the redemptive spirit” of Calvinism moving through the NT toward an even higher emphasis on the sovereignty of God than we find in any current NT texts.

And on and on it will go. Baptists will “begin to sense the redemptive spirit” of believer’s baptism as the NT corrects the all-inclusive nature of the religions of the ancient world, and paedobaptists will “begin to sense the redemptive spirit” of inclusion of infants in the covenant community, as the NT decisively corrects the neglect and abuse of children found in many ancient cultures. People seeking justification for their desire to obtain a divorce will “begin to sense the redemptive spirit” of more and more reasons for divorce, moving from the one reason that Jesus allowed (adultery in Matt 19:9), to the increasing freedom found in Paul, who allows a second ground for divorce (desertion by an unbeliever in 1 Cor 7:15), along a trajectory toward many other reasons for divorce as we move toward an “ultimate ethic” (Z) where everyone should be completely happy with his or her spouse.

Now Webb may object that these hypothetical “redemptive spirit” findings could not be derived from a responsible use of his eighteen criteria. On the other hand, 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 and make a case for almost anything they desire. But whether or not my hypothetical suggestions are the result of a proper use of Webb’s criteria, the point remains: *the standard is no longer what the NT says, but rather the point toward which some biblical scholar thinks the Bible was moving.* And that is why I believe that Webb’s redemptive-movement hermeneutic nullifies in principle the moral authority of the entire NT.

Webb’s system therefore constitutes a direct denial of the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*, the doctrine that “the Bible alone” is the ultimate

authority for what we are to believe and do, and that its teachings constitute the norm to which all our beliefs and practices are to conform. In Webb's system the norm is no longer the teachings of the Bible but what we can discover about the "ultimate ethic" (Z) toward which the Bible was heading.⁶

2. *Webb fails in nearly every section of the book to recognize that Christians are no longer bound by old covenant laws, and thus he neglects to use the fundamental structural division of the entire Bible (the difference between the Old and New Testaments) as a means of determining moral obligations for Christians today.* It is remarkable that in most of the sections of the book (not all), Webb fails to distinguish between the teachings of the OT and the teachings of the NT. Thus, in dealing with slavery, he often combines NT and OT passages in the same list, without noticing any distinction between them (pp. 44, 74–76, 163–64, and elsewhere). He does the same thing with texts referring to women (pp. 46–47, 76–81, 160, 165–67) and primogeniture (pp. 94–95, 136–42) and with other elements of the Mosaic law code.

Although Webb occasionally gives limited attention to what he calls "canonical movement" from the OT to the NT (see pp. 77–78, for example), for him such development is just additional evidence that we should move beyond the NT even as the NT developed beyond the OT. He sees the OT and NT as just two steps along the way toward further redemptive-movement in ethical development beyond the NT. *He never considers the possibility that the development from OT to NT is the end, and that the NT itself provides the final ethical standard for Christians in the new covenant.*

When Webb claims that "a redemptive-movement hermeneutic has always been a major part of the historic church, apostolic and beyond" (p. 35), and therefore that all Christians believe in some kind of "redemptive movement" hermeneutic, he fails to make one important distinction: evangelicals have always held that the redemptive movement within Scripture ends with the NT! Webb carries it beyond the NT.

In doing this, Webb fails to recognize the centrality of Jesus Christ for all of history. Yes, there is movement and development beyond the OT, because in the OT "at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets." By contrast, "in these last days he *has spoken to us by his*

⁶ In a recent article Webb responded to Thomas Schreiner's criticism of him (in "Review of *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*") by affirming that he too believes that "For Christians the NT is most assuredly our final expression of canonical revelation We do not expect any further revelation until the coming of Jesus Christ The finality of the NT as the apex of revelation is not actually a point of disagreement between Schreiner and myself" (William Webb, "The Limits of a Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: A Focused Response to T. R. Schreiner," *EQ* 75 (2003) 328–29. But the way Webb thinks the NT is our final revelation is just that it proves his system to be correct. He says, "I would argue that the NT expresses an ultimate ethic in its underlying redemptive spirit (redemptive-movement meaning) but not in all of its concrete 'frozen in time' particulars" (p. 329). He says the NT *revelation* is not final in its *realization* of ethical standards; it expresses "an incremental or developing (not ultimate) ethic in certain concrete particulars" (p. 330). This is anything but the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*, in which the teachings and moral commands of the NT are themselves our final and ultimate authority.

Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Heb 1:1–2). In the writings of the NT we have a written record of the revelation that God gave us in Christ and the revelation that Christ gave to his apostles. We are not to look for doctrinal or ethical development beyond the teachings and commands of the NT, for that would be to look for development beyond the supreme revelation of God in his Son.

Yes, the NT explicitly tells us that we are no longer under the regulations of the old covenant (Heb 8:6–13), so we have clear warrant for saying the sacrificial laws and dietary laws are no longer binding on us. And we do see the apostles in a process of coming to understand the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church (Acts 15; Gal 2:1–14; 3:28). But *that process was completed within the NT*, and the commands given to Christians in the NT say nothing about excluding Gentiles from the church! We do not have to progress on a "trajectory" *beyond* the NT to discover that.

Christians living in the time of Paul's epistles were living under the new covenant. And Christians today are also living under the new covenant. This is "the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor 11:25), which Jesus established and which we affirm every time we take the Lord's Supper. That means that we are living in *the same period in God's plan for "the history of redemption"* as the first-century Christians. And that is why we can read and directly apply the NT today.

To attempt to go *beyond* the NT documents and derive our authority from "where the New Testament was heading" is to reject the very documents that God gave us to govern our life under the new covenant until Christ returns. It is to reject the Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura* and establish an entirely new basis of authority distinct from the Bible itself.

When Webb does touch on the relationship between the OT and NT, he says that he is not going to decide how the OT relates to the NT. After saying that he rejects both the idea that "only those particulars of the Mosaic law that the New Testament *expressly sanctions* apply to New Testament believers," and the idea that "Christians are bound to obey *all* those particulars in the Mosaic law that the NT does not *expressly abrogate*," Webb tells us: "Nor am I going to establish a more durable and alternative dictum about how the Old Testament relates to the modern Christian. Such is beyond the scope of this work" (p. 205).

The problem is that throughout the book Webb uses dozens of examples from the OT to establish and support the need to use his eighteen criteria in determining what is culturally relative and to support the idea that we should abandon what he calls "biblical patriarchy" and move beyond it by "taking . . . a redemptive-movement approach to the present-day application of biblical patriarchy" (p. 172, after appealing to several Mosaic covenant laws regarding the treatment of women [pp. 165–67, for example]). Rather than saying, for example, that we should not follow the law that a woman was to be stoned if she was not a virgin at the time of marriage (Deut 22:20–21) *because we are under the new covenant and no longer subject to the laws of the Mosaic covenant*, Webb uses this law about stoning as one of his examples showing that "the Christian who embraces the redemptive-movement

hermeneutic will surely carry the redemptive spirit of *the biblical text* forward in today's setting" (p. 167). What is telling in this statement (and dozens like it throughout the book) is his phrase "the biblical text." Anything found in any part of the Bible for Webb is simply part of "the biblical text," which is heavily affected by its ancient culture and which we need to move beyond today.

When Webb repeatedly gives long lists of Mosaic laws on slavery or wives, and then says it would be foolish to obey what "the Bible" says on these subjects today, unsuspecting readers may think that he has built a persuasive case for his eighteen criteria. But he has not, because the change from old covenant to new covenant means that those dozens of Mosaic laws are not part of what "the Bible" requires of Christians today. We are not under the Mosaic law.⁷

Yet this fundamental omission is pervasive in Webb's book. If someone were to go through his book and remove all the examples he takes from the OT, and all the implications that he draws from those examples, we would be left not with a book but with a small pamphlet.

Webb's failure to adequately take into account the fact that Christians are no longer bound by Mosaic covenant legislation is an omission of such magnitude as to nullify the value of this book as a guide for hermeneutics.

3. *Webb denies the historicity of Genesis 2–3 in order to deny the contemporary validity of the male headship that he finds recorded in the text.* Another concern related to the authority of Scripture emerges from Webb's treatment of Genesis 2–3. Webb agrees that "the practice of primogeniture in which the first born is granted prominence within the 'creative order' of a family unit" (p. 135) is found in the narrative in Genesis 2. Webb sees this as support for male headship within the text of Genesis 2. He also thinks this is how it is understood by Paul when he says, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve" (1 Tim 2:13). But Webb sees this "primogeniture" theme in Genesis 2 as a cultural component in that text.

But how could there be changing cultural influence in the pre-fall Garden of Eden? Webb answers this question in three ways. First, he says these indications of male headship may be a literary device that anticipates events in the future rather than accurately recording what was in fact true in the garden: "A second question is how cultural features could possibly be found in the garden before the influence of culture. Several explanations exist. First, the whispers of patriarchy in the garden may have been placed there in order to anticipate the curse" (pp. 142–43).

Webb then claims that the literary construction of Genesis 2–3 includes at least one other example of "literary foreshadowing of the curse" in the pejorative description of the serpent as "*more crafty* than any of the wild

⁷ Webb does at one point note that Christians are no longer bound to obey laws concerning OT sacrifices, food laws, and circumcision (pp. 201–2), because these are explicitly discontinued in the NT, but the recognition of these specific points of discontinuity is nowhere else expanded into a general realization that NT Christians are not under the Mosaic law code.

animals" (Gen 3:1). Webb then asks, "If the garden is completely pristine, how could certain creatures in the just-created animal kingdom reflect craftiness? Obviously, this Edenic material embraces *an artistic foreshadowing of events to come*" (p. 143, italics added).

Webb's analysis here assumes that there was no sin or evil in the garden *in actual fact*, but that by a literary device the author described the serpent as "crafty" (and therefore deceitful and therefore sinful), thus anticipating what he would be later, after the Fall.

There are two problems here. First, it makes Gen 3:1 affirm something that was not true at that time, and this denies the truthfulness of a section of historical narrative in Scripture. Second, it fails even to consider the most likely explanation, namely, that there was sin in the angelic world sometime after the completion of the initial creation (Gen 1:31) but prior to Gen 3:1.⁸ Because of this rebellion in the angelic world (see 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6), Satan himself was somehow speaking through the serpent.⁹ So Webb's claim that there must be "artistic foreshadowing of events to come" is not persuasive with respect to the serpent in Gen 3:1.

The same should be said of his claim that "the whispers of patriarchy in the garden may have been placed there in order to anticipate the curse" (pp. 142–43). Webb is saying that patriarchy did not exist in the garden *in actual fact*, but the author placed hints of it in the story as a way of anticipating the situation that would come about after there was sin in the world. This is also an explicit denial of the historical accuracy of the Genesis 2 account.

Webb goes on with a second explanation for the indications of male headship in Genesis 2:

Second, Eden's quiet echoes of patriarchy may be a way of *describing the past through present categories*. The creation story may be *using the social categories that Moses' audience would have been familiar with*. God sometimes permits such accommodation in order not to confuse the main point he wants to communicate with factors that are secondary to that overall theme (p. 143, italics added).¹⁰

This is another way in which Webb denies the historicity of the Genesis 2 account. He says that Moses in the time he wrote used "present cate-

⁸ This is a fairly standard view among evangelical scholars, but Webb does not even consider it. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: InterVarsity and Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 412, and the relevant pages given for other systematic theologies on pp. 434–35.

⁹ The serpent, the act of deception, and Satan are connected in some NT contexts. Paul says, "I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be lead astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Cor 11:3, in a context opposing false apostles whom he categorizes as servants of Satan who "disguise themselves as servants of righteousness," v. 15). Revelation 12 describes Satan as "that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (Rev 12:9). See also John 8:44 and 1 John 3:8, with reference to the beginning stages of history.

¹⁰ Webb explains in a footnote that the "main point" of the creation narrative "is that Yahweh created the heavens and all that is in them, and Yahweh created the earth and all that is in it—God made everything" (p. 143, n. 46).

gories” such as patriarchy to describe the past, and this was simply an “accommodation” by God “in order not to confuse the main point.” Patriarchy did not actually exist in the garden of Eden, but Moses inserted it there so as not to confuse his audience. Thus, Moses inserted into Genesis 2 facts that were not true.

Finally, Webb gives a third reason:

Third . . . *the patriarchy of the garden may reflect God's anticipation of the social context into which Adam and Eve were about to venture. An agrarian life-style . . . would naturally produce some kind of hierarchy between men and women. . . . The presentation of the male-female relationship in patriarchal forms may simply be a way of anticipating this first (and major) life setting into which humankind would enter* (p. 144).

Again, Webb believes that the element of primogeniture (Adam being created before Eve) in Genesis 2 may have been written there, not because it reflected the actual facts of the situation in the garden of Eden, but *because Adam and Eve after they sinned would enter into a situation where Adam as husband had leadership over his wife*. This again is an explicit denial of the historical accuracy of the headship of Adam and his prior creation as found in Genesis 2. It was simply “a practical and gracious *anticipation of the agrarian setting into which Adam and Eve were headed*” (p. 145, italics added; repeated on p. 151, note 55).

It is important to realize how much Webb is denying as historical fact in the Genesis narrative. He is not just denying that there actually was a “crafty” serpent who spoke to Eve (Gen 3:1). He is also denying the entire *theme of primogeniture* in Genesis 2. That is, he is denying the entire narrative structure that shows the man as created before the woman, for this is the basis for the “primogeniture” theme that Webb sees Paul referring to in 1 Tim 2:13, “For Adam was formed first, then Eve.”

How much of Genesis 2 does that involve? How much inaccurate material has to be inserted into Genesis 2 either as a literary device foreshadowing the fall (reason 1), or as an accommodation to the situation familiar to readers at the time of Moses (reason 2), or as an anticipation of an agrarian society that would be established after the fall (reason 3)? It is no small amount.

According to Webb’s view, the entire narrative of God putting the man in the garden “to work it and keep it” (2:8, 15) and commanding the man by himself that he may eat of every tree of the garden but not of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:16–17), and saying, “It is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him a helper fit for him” (2:18), and bringing the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens to the man to see what he would call them (2:19), and the man giving names to all livestock and all the birds of the heavens and every beast of the field (2:20), and there not being found a helper fit for man (2:20), and God causing a deep sleep to fall upon the man and taking one of his ribs and forming it into a woman (2:21–22)—all of this sequence that is summarized by Paul in the statement “For Adam was formed first then Eve”—all of this is a mere literary device that did not actually happen, according to Webb.

And all of this then enables him to say that criterion (7), “basis in original creation, section 2: primogeniture” is only a “moderately persuasive criterion” (p. 123), so that he can then say that Paul’s appeal to the creation of Adam prior to Eve is not proof of a transcultural ethical standard.

III. CONCERNS RELATED TO INCORRECT OR HIGHLY UNLIKELY INTERPRETATIONS OF SCRIPTURE

1. *Webb repeatedly confuses events with commands, and fails to recognize that what the Bible reports as a background situation (such as slavery or monarchy, for example) it does not necessarily approve or command.* Again and again in his analysis Webb assumes that “the Bible” (in Webb’s undifferentiated form, lumping OT and NT verses together) supports things such as slavery (see pp. 33, 36–37, 84, 106, 186, 202–3). He also uses monarchy as an example, assuming that the Bible presents monarchy as a favored form of government, one that people should approve or even say that the Bible requires (see, for example, pp. 107, 186, 203).

With respect to slavery, therefore, Webb says that

[A] static hermeneutic [this is Webb’s term for the hermeneutic used by everyone who does not use his redemptive-movement hermeneutic] would apply this slavery-refuge text by *permitting the ownership of slaves today*, provided that the church offers similar kinds of refuge for runaway slaves. . . . *Christians would dare not speak out against slavery.* They would support the institution of slavery (p. 33, italics added).

What is rather astonishing is that the only alternative that Webb acknowledges to his position is what he calls a “static hermeneutic.” But then he affirms that such a “static hermeneutic” would have to support slavery:

Even more tragic is that, in arguing for or *in permitting biblical slavery today*, a static hermeneutic takes our current standard of human rights and working conditions *backwards* by quantum leaps. We would shame a gospel that proclaims freedom to the captive. . . . A static hermeneutic would not condemn biblical-type slavery if that social order were to reappear in society today (pp. 34, 36).

In his eyes there are only two choices: Do you support Webb’s system or do you support slavery? Which will it be? He appears oblivious to the historical fact that for centuries many Christians have opposed slavery *from the text of Scripture itself*, without using Webb’s new system of interpretation, and without rejecting the final moral authority of the NT. To say we have to choose between Webb’s system and slavery is historically unfounded, is biblically untrue, and is astonishing in its failure to recognize other alternatives.

Webb sometimes appeals to the fact that proponents of slavery or proponents of monarchy in the past appealed to the Bible to prove their case. He says, “slavery proponents frequently argued from theological and christological analogies in the text” (p. 186), and that “in the past, the submission texts cited above were used by Christians to support monarchy as the only

appropriate, God-honoring form of government” (p. 107). But the fact that some Christians in the past used the Bible to support slavery does not prove that the Bible supports slavery any more that one can prove that the Bible supports any number of false teachings (such as Arianism, or the Crusades, or the Inquisition, or salvation by works) that were supported in the past by people “using the Bible,” but were ultimately rejected by the church. The devil himself even quoted the Bible to support his enticement to Jesus to throw himself down from the top of the temple (Matt 4:5–6), but that does not prove that the Bible actually supports the devil’s ideas!

With regard to slavery, the Bible was used by more Christians to *oppose* slavery than to *defend* it, and eventually their arguments won, and slavery was abolished. But the fundamental difference from Webb is that the evangelical, Bible-believing Christians who ultimately brought about the abolition of slavery *did not advocate modifying or nullifying any biblical teaching*, or moving “beyond” the NT to a better ethic. They taught the abolition of slavery from the Bible itself.

Webb shows no awareness of biblical anti-slavery arguments such as those of Theodore Weld in *The Bible Against Slavery*,¹¹ a book which was widely distributed and frequently reprinted. Weld argued strongly against American slavery from Exod 21:16, “He that stealeth a man and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death” (KJV) (pp. 13–15), as well as from the fact that men are in the image of God and therefore it is morally wrong to treat any human being as property (pp. 8–9, 15–17). He argued that ownership of another person breaks the eighth commandment, “Thou shalt not steal,” as follows:

The eighth commandment forbids the taking of *any* part of that which belongs to another. Slavery takes the *whole*. Does the same Bible which prohibits the taking of *any* thing from him, sanction the taking of *every* thing? Does it thunder wrath against the man who robs his neighbor of a *cent*, yet commission him to rob his neighbor of *himself*? Slaveholding is the highest possible violation of the eighth commandment” (pp. 10–11).

In the rest of the book Weld answered detailed objections about various verses used by slavery proponents. The whole basis of his book is that the moral standards taught in the Bible are right, and there is no hint that we have to move beyond the Bible’s ethics to oppose slavery, as Webb would have us do.

The NT never commanded slavery, but gave principles that regulated it and ultimately led to its abolition. Paul says to slaves, “If you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity” (1 Cor 7:21). And he tells Philemon, regarding his slave Onesimus, that he should welcome him back “*no longer as a slave* but more than a slave, as a beloved brother” (Phlm 16),

¹¹ The following citations are from the 1838 edition: Theodore Weld, *The Bible Against Slavery* (fourth ed., New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838). The book was first published in Boston in 1837.

See also several essays in Mason Lowance, ed., *Against Slavery: An Abolitionist Reader* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

and that he should “receive him as you would receive me” (v. 17), and that he should forgive anything that Onesimus owed him, or at least that Paul would pay it himself (vv. 18–19). Finally he says, “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do *even more than I say*” (v. 21). This is a strong and not very subtle hint that Philemon should grant freedom to Onesimus. Paul’s condemnation of “enslavers” (1 Tim 1:10, ESV)¹² also showed the moral wrong of forcibly putting anyone into slavery.

When we couple those verses with the realization that every human being is created in the image of God (see Gen 1:27; 9:6; Jas 3:9; see also Job 31:15; Gal 3:28), we then see that the Bible, and especially the NT, contains powerful principles that would lead to an abolition of slavery. The NT never commands people to practice slavery or to own slaves, but rather gives principles that would lead to the overthrow of that institution, and also regulates it while it is in existence by statements such as, “Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven” (Col 4:1).

The Bible does not approve or command slavery any more than it approves or commands persecution of Christians. When the author of Hebrews commends his readers by saying, “You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” (Heb 10:34), that does not mean the Bible *supports* the plundering of Christians’ property, or that it *commands theft*! It only means that *if* Christians find themselves in a situation where their property is taken through persecution, they should still rejoice because of their heavenly treasure, which cannot be stolen. Similarly, when the Bible tells slaves to be submissive to their masters, it does not mean that the Bible supports or commands slavery, but only that it tells people who are in a situation of slavery how they should respond.

Webb’s mistaken evaluation of the Bible’s teaching on slavery forms a fundamental building block in constructing his hermeneutic. Once we remove his claim that the Bible condones slavery, Webb’s Exhibit A is gone, and he has lost his primary means of supporting the claim that we need his “redemptive-movement hermeneutic” to move beyond the ethic of the Bible itself.

2. *Webb repeatedly assumes unlikely interpretations of Scripture in order to present a Bible that is so clearly wrong that it is impossible to believe and obey today.* In numerous sections Webb presents what he claims is the teaching of the Bible in order to build up a long list of culturally relative teachings, teachings to which readers will evidently respond by thinking, “Of course we cannot believe or obey those things today!” Webb then uses these lists of “impossible for today” teachings in order to show that his eighteen criteria are necessary and valid to determine cultural relativity.

¹² The NIV has “slave traders” in 1 Tim 1:10, but the term *andrapodistes* included not only trading but also capturing slaves to be traded.

The problem is, most evangelicals do not need Webb's "redemptive-movement hermeneutic" to know that the Bible does not teach these things. In fact, few if any responsible exegetes claim that the Bible teaches any of these things as ideas or ethical standards that should be followed by Christians today.

Here is a list of things that Webb assumes the Bible teaches:

1. *People should pursue farming as an occupation* (pp. 124–25). Webb derives this from the fact that "in the garden man was instructed to till the ground and eat of its produce" (p. 124). The problem here is that Webb takes a *good* thing in the Bible (raising food from the ground) and wrongly makes it into a *requirement for every person*, rather than seeing it as one among several responsibilities that God gave the human race. A more sound application of this text is to say that God still expects human beings to gain food from the ground, but the diversity of occupations within Scripture shows that this never was an expectation or a requirement of every single person.

2. *People should use only ground transportation*. Webb says that "the mode of transportation within the garden was walking," and he allows for extending that to "transportation by horse and other animals" (p. 125). He says that the creation pattern thus "squares nicely" with the lifestyle of those who restrict their transportation to horse and buggy today. But he says most Christians would see this as a "non-binding pattern within the creation texts" (p. 125). The problem in this case is that even within the first two chapters of Genesis the commands to "subdue" the earth and "have dominion" over it imply an expectation that human beings would develop all sorts of products from the earth, including many different means of transportation. We do not need Webb's redemptive-movement hermeneutic to know that the Bible never presents "ground transportation" as the mode of transportation that people should use exclusively (think of all the journeys by boats in the Bible), nor is this pattern of transportation ever used elsewhere as a basis for commands to God's people, nor does the Bible ever command people to use only ground transportation.

Webb has taken an event (Adam and Eve walking) and has mistakenly viewed it as a requirement that has to be overcome by Webb's redemptive-movement hermeneutic.

3. *Singleness is outside the will of God*. Webb says, since Adam and Eve were married in the garden of Eden, "if the creation material provides a tightly ordered paradigm for all of humanity to follow, one might get the impression that singleness was outside the will of God" (p. 124). Here Webb has misread the Genesis narrative. Genesis 1–2 does not present a pattern where no human being could rightfully be single, for God's command to Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28) envisions a situation where they would have children, and these children would have to be single for some time before they could be married. What we see rather from the creation narrative is that God created marriage, that marriage is "very good," and that the relationship between Adam and Eve in marriage was not sinful but was good in God's sight. But to say that marriage is *good* does not imply

that singleness is *bad*, or that marriage is *required* for every single individual, nor does the Genesis narrative imply those things.

4. *Women should be viewed as property.* Webb says, "Within the biblical text one discovers an ownership mentality in the treatment of women. Women are frequently listed with the cattle and servants (Exod 20:17; cf. Deut 5:21; Judg 5:30)" (p. 165). But Webb over-simplifies when he assumes that listing "with" something implies a similar status. The main verse he cites is Exod 20:17: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

This does not imply an "ownership mentality" toward women any more than it proves that people thought of women as houses! This amazing commandment actually establishes a high level of protection and honor for women and for marriage, for it addresses purity of heart.¹³ People were not to covet someone else's house or wife or animals, but this surely also implies that wives were not to covet their neighbors' husbands, and surely the commandment does not also imply that husbands were viewed as property. Hearers could easily distinguish between houses, animals, and wives. Moreover, in the previous verses the seventh commandment (against adultery) is separate from the eighth (against stealing), thus clearly making a distinction between husbands and wives, on the one hand, and property on the other. In any case, it is not hermeneutically legitimate to take aspects of the Mosaic law code as part of what the Bible teaches about women, for Christians are no longer under the Mosaic covenant. We do not need Webb's redemptive-movement hermeneutic to understand this, nor do these Mosaic covenant provisions demonstrate the legitimacy of Webb's hermeneutic.

5. *Families should practice primogeniture.* Webb sees a system of primogeniture, in which the oldest son received "a double portion of the inheritance . . . led in military protection for the family . . . avenged wrongs done against family members . . . performed religious ceremonies" (p. 141), and so forth, as a pattern that is found in the ethical system contained in the Bible. But he says primogeniture is culturally relative and should no longer be practiced today. But again Webb has mistakenly confused *events that are reported by the Bible* with *things that are required in the ethical system taught in the Bible*. Nowhere does the Bible command people to follow primogeniture customs (and Webb himself shows many examples where Scripture deviates from this pattern, pp. 136–39), and therefore we do not need a redemptive-movement hermeneutic to know that such a pattern is not required for people to follow, nor was it ever something that God required everyone to follow, even in the ancient world.

In addition to these five items, Webb claims that the Bible teaches a number of other objectionable things that few or no responsible evangelical

¹³ Webb mentions other factors, such as a bride price paid to a father, and the fact that a husband is sometimes called a *ba'al* ("master"). But these things do not establish a view of women as property, for the bride price could simply be an expression of the honor and high value that the future husband was attributing to his bride, and the word *ba'al* can simply mean "husband" (*BDB* 127).

scholars today would say are taught by the Bible. I do not need to comment on each one, but what is surprising is that Webb seldom shows awareness of, to say nothing of responding to, the reasoning of competent interpreters who argue that the Bible does not in fact teach these things. Webb simply asserts that the Bible teaches the following:

6. *We should establish and support slavery* (pp. 33, 36–37, 84, 106, 186, 202–3).¹⁴

7. *People should establish and support monarchy as the right form of government* (pp. 153, 186).

8. *People should wash each others' feet* (pp. 204, 211).¹⁵

9. *Adult children should obey their parents* (p. 212).

10. *The earth is the center of the universe*. Webb says, "Scripture depicts a geocentric or earth-centered model of the universe. The earth is placed on a stationary foundation in a central location with other luminous bodies revolving above it" (pp. 221–22).

11. *The earth is flat*. Webb says, "The church had difficulty accepting [that the earth was round] . . . because the Bible incorporated a 'flat earth' view of the world" (p. 223).

12. *Wives should be subject to their husbands because husbands are older and better educated* (pp. 213–16).

13. *Husbands should be allowed to physically discipline their wives* (pp. 167, 189–90). Webb actually claims that the Bible gives approval to the idea that a husband should "strip his wife" and "physically confine" her (p. 189). Webb basis this on his misinterpretation of Hosea 2:1–23. He claims that in this passage,

"unless Gomer puts away her sexual promiscuity, Hosea will take action against his wife:

I [Hosea] will strip her [Gomer] naked
and make her as bare as on the day she was born. . . .
Therefore I will block her path with thorn bushes;
I will wall her in so she cannot find her way" (p. 189).

What Webb does not disclose to readers is that the overwhelming majority of commentators understand this entire chapter to be speaking, not of Hosea and Gomer, but of God's judgment upon Israel. Speaking in prophetic imagery, as is common among the OT prophets, God says that unless Israel abandons her sins, he will "strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born" (Hos 2:3), vividly portraying God's judgment on the nation.¹⁶

¹⁴ I discuss the question of slavery in section III below.

¹⁵ I discuss the question of footwashing briefly in section VII below. See also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP and Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 962.

¹⁶ Thomas McComiskey writes, "It is obvious that the lengthy address in 2:3–25 [English 2:1–23] is directed to the nation and not to Gomer personally" ("Hosea," in *The Minor Prophets* [ed. Thomas McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992] 32). See also C. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 6 vols. (repr. Grand Rapids: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d.) 6.829; Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 42–48, and the section heading before chapter two in many English Bible translations, which say something similar to the *NIV Study Bible* heading, "Israel Punished and Restored" (p. 1323). McComiskey points out that the phrase in verse 15, "as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt," cannot apply

14. *People should greet one another with a holy kiss* (pp. 203–4).¹⁷

15. *Women are simply “reproductive gardens” and husbands provide 100 percent of the baby’s new life.* Webb says that the biblical picture is one in which

... a woman provides the “soil” into which a man planted the seed of the miniature child ... to grow for nine months. ... A tight agricultural analogy—the man provides the totality of the new life in seedling form while the woman provides only the fertile environment for its growth—reflects a culture-based component within the text (pp. 223–24).

16. *The Bible approves obedience to many details of the OT narrative and the OT Mosaic laws, such as “polygamy and concubinage, levirate marriages, unequal value of men and women in vow redemption . . . the treatment of women as spoils of battle” and so forth* (pp. 166–67).

If readers believe Webb when he says that the Bible teaches these things, then they will be inclined to agree with his argument that we need to go beyond the ethical system of the Bible and use Webb’s “redemptive-movement hermeneutic” to move closer toward an “ultimate ethic.”

But the Bible teaches and commands none of these things for Christians today. And that is not because Webb’s “redemptive-movement hermeneutic” enables us to move *beyond* the ethics of the Bible. It is rather because new covenant Christians know that the ethical system of the Bible itself does not support or require these things. Webb has given us a pot of stew mixed with Mosaic covenant laws that no longer apply, fragments of narrative history that were never commanded, cultural customs or habits the Bible never commanded us to follow, and phenomenological observations of the natural world which the Bible never presented as a description of the shape of the earth or the structure of the universe. We do not need a “redemptive-movement hermeneutic” to know that the Bible does not require these things of people today. We simply need the Bible itself, understood in each case with sensitivity to the immediate context and to the larger old covenant–new covenant structure of redemptive history found within the Bible itself.

IV. CONCERNS RELATED TO SHIFTING THE LOCATION OF OUR MORAL NORMS FROM THE OBJECTIVE COMMANDS OF THE NT TO THE SUBJECTIVE THEORIES OF CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARS

1. *Webb creates an overly complex system of interpretation that will require a class of “priests” who have to interpret the Bible for us in the light of*

to Gomer and indicates that the entire passage must have Israel primarily in mind. (Since the passage is an extended allegory, there are elements of it that of course could apply to the situation between Hosea and Gomer as well, but that does not mean that the primary reference is to Gomer, and it certainly does not mean that the passage provides justification for a husband to physically discipline his wife.)

¹⁷ See section VII below for a discussion of using a holy kiss in greeting.

ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman culture. At the heart of Webb's system is his requirement that the interpreter "must listen for how the text sounds within its various social contexts," especially "the broader, foreign ancient Near-Eastern and Greco-Roman (ANE/GR) social context and the immediate, domestic Israelite/church setting" (p. 53).

How does one do this? Webb gives eighteen criteria which one must use in order to carry out his redemptive-movement hermeneutics properly. His first criterion is called "preliminary movement," and here is how he says it should happen:

Assessing redemptive-movement has its complications. Without going into an elaborate explanation, I will simply suggest a number of guidelines: (1) the ANE/GR *real* world must be examined along with its *legal* world, (2) the biblical subject on the *whole* must be examined along with its *parts*, (3) the biblical text must be compared to a number of other ANE/GR cultures which themselves must be compared with each other and (4) any portrait of movement must be composed of broad input from all three streams of assessment—foreign, domestic, and canonical (p. 82).

And this is just his procedure for the first of eighteen criteria! Who will be able to do this? Who knows the history of ancient cultures well enough to make these assessments?

Speaking from the perspective of over twenty-five years in the academic world, I will not say that only one percent of the *Christians* in the world will be able to use Webb's system and tell us what moral standards we should follow today. I will not even say that one percent of the *seminary-trained pastors* in the world will be able to follow Webb's system and tell us what moral standards we should obey today. I will not even say that one percent of the *seminary professors* will be able to have the requisite expertise in ancient cultures to use Webb's system and tell us what moral standards we should follow today. That is because the evaluation and assessment of any one ancient culture, to say nothing of all the ancient cultures surrounding the Bible, is a massive undertaking, even with one narrow subject such as laws concerning marriage and divorce, or property rights, or education and training of children. It is time-consuming and requires much specialized knowledge and an excellent research library. Therefore I will not even say that one percent of the *seminary professors who have academic doctorates in OT or NT* will be able to use Webb's system and tell us what moral standards we should follow today. No, *in the end Webb's system as he describes it above can only be used by far less than one percent of the professors of NT and OT in the Christian world today*, those few scholars who have the time and the specialized knowledge of rabbinic studies, of Greco-Roman culture, and of ancient Egyptian and Babylonian and Assyrian and Persian cultures, and who have access to a major research library, and who will then be able to use Webb's "redemptive-movement hermeneutic" in the way he describes in the paragraph just quoted. This tiny group of experts will have to tell us what moral standards God wants us to follow today.

And that is only for Criterion 1 in his list of eighteen criteria.

If the evangelical world begins to adopt Webb's system, it is not hard to imagine that we will soon require a new class of "priests," those erudite scholars with sufficient expertise in the ancient world that they can give us reliable conclusions about what kind of "ultimate ethic" we should follow today.

But this will create another problem, one I have observed often as I have lived and taught in the academic world: *Scholars with such specialized knowledge often disagree*. Anyone familiar with the debates over rabbinic views of justification in the last two decades will realize how difficult it can be to understand exactly what was believed in an ancient culture on even one narrow topic, to say nothing of the whole range of ethical commands that we find in the NT.

Where then will Webb's system lead us? *It will lead us to massive inability to know with confidence anything that God requires of us*. The more scholars who become involved with telling us "how the Bible was moving" with respect to this or that aspect of ancient culture, the more opinions we will have, and the more despair people will feel about ever being able to know what God's requires of us, what his "ultimate ethic" is.

How different from Webb's system is the simple, direct teaching of the NT! Consider the following commands:

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another (Eph 4:25).

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need (Eph 4:28).

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear (Eph 4:29).

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Eph 4:31-32).

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints (Eph 5:3).

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18).

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord (Eph 5:22).

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Eph 5:25).

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right (Eph 6:1).

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4).

I do not believe that God gave us a Bible that is so direct and clear and simple, only to require that all believers throughout all history should first filter these commands through a complex system of eighteen criteria before they can know whether to obey them or not. That is not the kind of Bible that God gave us, nor is there any indication in Scripture itself that believers have to have some kind of specialized academic knowledge and elabo-

rate hermeneutical system before they can be sure that these are the things God requires of his children.

2. *Webb creates a system that is overly liable to subjective influence and therefore is indeterminate and will lead to significant misuse.* A built-in liability to subjective influence is evident in Webb's treatment of several subjects, particularly his treatment of texts relating to the role of women in marriage and in the church. With few exceptions, *the selection of materials and the evaluation of the criteria are skewed in order that Webb can show again and again how male leadership in the home and in the church is a culturally relative idea.* For example, he places his first three criteria (1) Preliminary Movement, (2) Seed Ideas, (3) Breakouts within the category of "persuasive criteria" (p. 73), because all three of these *assume* that one needs to move to a higher ethic than that of the NT. These categories therefore allow him to say that the NT teachings on women are only "preliminary," and that the exceptions he finds in Gal 3:28 and in Deborah and Junia are the truly "persuasive" examples that point to the far better "ultimate ethic" toward which the NT is heading.

By contrast, when he gets to Criterion 6, which is "Basis in Original Creation, Section One: Patterns" (p. 123), Webb brings in several bizarre items such as "farming as an occupation" and "ground transportation," which no responsible interpreter would ever say the Bible requires for everyone today. Why does he do this? These allow him to claim that "original creation patterns do not provide an automatic guide for assessing what is transcultural within Scripture" (p. 126). But when someone brings in such bizarre interpretations in order to be able to say that original creation patterns of marriage are not clearly transcultural, then the reader rightly suspects that a subjective bias has entered into the selection of material.

Similarly, when we reach Criterion 14, "Basis in Theological Analogy" (p. 185), the difficulty for egalitarians is going to be the fact that in Eph 5:22–33 Paul makes an analogy between the relationship of a husband and wife and the relationship between Christ and the church. How does Webb evade the force of the argument that this is obviously a transcultural comparison? He says there are other "theological analogies in Scripture that are not transcultural" and he says that slavery, monarchy, and "*right-handedness*" are also supported by "theological analogy" within Scripture (pp. 186–87). The problem is of course that the examples are not parallel. The Bible never says, "Support monarchy as the best system of government because God is a heavenly king," or "Support slavery as an institution because God is the ultimate slave owner in heaven," or "It is better to be right-handed because Christ sits at God's right hand." So Webb's examples are not parallel to the example of Paul's statement,

... the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church.
 ... As the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Eph 5:23–25).

The fact that Webb brings in what he calls examples of “theological analogy” that are not really parallel is again evidence of subjective bias in the formulation and development of his criteria. Once he brings in these examples, he is able to classify “Basis in Theological Analogy” as an “inconclusive” criterion (p. 185), one that really cannot rightly be used to prove that a wife’s submission to her husband is transcultural.

Webb follows a similar procedure in Criterion 16, “Appeal to the Old Testament” (p. 201). In order to show that this also is an “inconclusive” criterion, Webb brings in examples that are not parallel to the OT quotations about the role of women. Webb says that “several slave/master texts within the New Testament rely heavily on the Old Testament for their formulation for their ideas and words” (p. 202), but the passages he mentions (such as 1 Pet 2:22–25) are simply used by the NT authors to show that Christians should trust in God when they are mistreated, and the passages in no way affirm that mistreatment of others is proper or that slavery is a morally right institution. In the same way, when Webb talks about “kings and subjects,” he says, “The monarchy texts within the New Testament derive their message largely from the Old Testament” (p. 203), and he mentions particularly 1 Pet 2:13–17 and Rom 13:1–5. But these passages do not support what Webb claims. They tell Christians to be subject to the ruling authority, but they nowhere quote the OT to prove that monarchy as an institution is required. Webb even goes so far in this section as to claim that the “holy kiss” and “foot-washing” are supported from the OT (pp. 203–4), though no OT verses are ever quoted to support them.

Once Webb has claimed that all these things are supported from the OT but are not transcultural, it gives him the basis on which he claims that the NT teachings on the role of women are not transcultural just because they are supported by quotations from the OT (he mentions 1 Cor 14:34, 1 Tim 2:14–15 [sic], and 1 Pet 3:5–6 (p. 204)). But because his examples like monarchy, slavery, and right-handedness are not really supported by OT quotes, this argument has little force.

Why is it then that Webb brings in these examples that are not parallel in his Criterion 16, “Appeal to the Old Testament”? Readers may well suspect that a subjective bias has entered into the selection of material here. But the same criteria could easily be used by others, with other examples selected, to produce widely divergent results.

V. CONCLUSION REGARDING MEN AND WOMEN: WEBB FAILS TO DEMONSTRATE THAT NT TEACHINGS ON MEN AND WOMEN IN THE HOME AND IN THE CHURCH ARE CULTURALLY RELATIVE

Throughout Webb’s book he attempts to dismantle the complementarian arguments for male leadership in the home and the church by claiming that the biblical texts on male leadership are culturally relative. Yet in each case, his attempts to demonstrate cultural relativity are not persuasive. In the following section, I consider each of Webb’s claims for culturally relativity

in the order they occur in his book. (At several points in what follows I will briefly summarize arguments that have been made earlier in order to apply them to Webb's specific reasons for rejecting of a complementarian view).

1. *Webb fails to show that NT commands regarding male headship are only a "preliminary movement" and that the NT ethic needs further improvement (Criterion 1).* Webb claims that the commands regarding wives submitting to their husbands in Eph 5:22–33 are not a final ethic that we should follow today, but are simply an indication of "where Scripture is moving on the issue of patriarchal power" (pp. 80–81). But this claim is not persuasive, because it depends on his assumption that the ethical standards of the NT are not God's ultimate ethical standards for us, but are simply one step along the way toward an "ultimate ethic" that we should adopt today (pp. 36–39).

2. *Webb fails to show that Gal 3:28 is a "seed idea" that would ultimately lead to the abolition of male headship once cultural changes made it possible to adopt a superior ethic to that of the NT (Criterion 2).* Once again, Webb's conception of a "seed idea" is based on his claim that some NT commands are inconsistent with that seed idea, and those commands show only that "the biblical author pushed society as far as it could go at that time without creating more damage than good" (p. 73). Webb claims that the "seed idea" is simply a pointer showing that there should be "further movement" toward a "more fully realized ethic" that is "more just, more equitable and more loving. . . a better ethic than the one expressed in the isolated words of the text" (p. 36).

But, as I indicated above, it is not necessary to "move beyond" the ethic of the NT in order to argue for the abolition of slavery, for the NT never condones or approves of slavery and never says it was created by God (as marriage was). And the NT provides statements that would eventually lead to the abolition of slavery *based on the NT ethic itself*, not based on some "higher ethic" that would later be discovered. Similarly, Gal 3:28 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 NT authors wrote about the relationships between men and women. If we take the entire NT as the very words of God for us in the new covenant today, then any claim that Gal 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.

3. *Webb fails to show that 1 Cor 7:3–5 establishes an egalitarian model within marriage (Criterion 3).* In 1 Cor 7:3–5 Paul says,

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Webb claims that the explanation that John Piper and I gave for this text in our book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*,¹⁸ nullifies all male headship within marriage. Webb says that Piper and Grudem's approach "ultimately abandons their own position" because "once one has eliminated any power differential and set up mutual deference and mutual consent as the basis for *all* decision making in a marriage (such as Piper and Grudem have done) there is nothing that makes the view substantially different from egalitarianism" (p. 101).

But Webb has misread our argument. In the very section to which he refers, we say,

What are the implications of this text for the leadership of the husband? Do the call for mutual yielding to sexual need and the renunciation of unilateral planning nullify the husband's responsibility for general leadership in the marriage? We don't think so. But this text . . . makes clear that his leadership will not involve selfish, unilateral choices (p. 88).

Thus, Piper and I agree that 1 Cor 7:3–5 shows that there are areas of mutual obligation between husband and wife, and that we can extrapolate from that and say that the husband's leadership in the marriage should not be a selfish leadership that fails to listen to the concerns of his wife. But in that very context, and in dozens of places throughout the rest of the book, we argue that the husband has an authoritative leadership role in the marriage that the wife does not have. To say that the word "authority" is sometimes misunderstood is not to say that we deny the concept. We qualify and modify the concept of authority, as Scripture does, in many places, but we nevertheless affirm it throughout the rest of the book.

4. *Webb fails to show that the only purpose for the wife's submission to her husband is evangelism, or that this purpose is no longer valid (Criterion 4).* In dealing with his criterion (4), "Purpose/intent statements," Webb says that Peter "tells wives to obey their husbands so that unbelieving husbands 'may be won over without words' (1 Pet 3:1)," but that today the kind of "unilateral, patriarchy-type submission" that Peter advocates "may actually repulse him and prevent him from being won to Christ." Webb concludes that "the stated evangelistic purpose of the text is not likely to be fulfilled in our contemporary setting" (pp. 107–8).

We should be very clear what Webb is saying here. He is saying that wives with unbelieving husbands today do not need to obey 1 Pet 3:1–2, which says,

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives—when they see your respectful and pure conduct.

One problem with Webb's assertion is that it trivializes the testimony of thousands of Christian women whose unbelieving husbands *have* been won by the submissive behavior of their believing wives.

¹⁸ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991) 87–88.

A second problem with Webb's claim is that it makes first-century Christian evangelism into the ultimate "bait and switch" sales technique. Webb claims that Peter's command aimed to attract non-Christian husbands by the submissive behavior of their wives, but once these men became Christians and began to grow toward maturity, they would discover the "seed ideas" for equality and "mutual submission" in texts such as Gal 3:28, and then (according to Webb) they would learn that *this command for submission of their wives is a morally deficient pattern* that has to be abandoned in favor of an egalitarian position. Therefore, according to the logic of Webb's position, first-century evangelism was a deceptive maneuver, in which the Word of God told people to use a morally deficient pattern of behavior simply to win unbelievers.

The third problem with Webb's explanation is that it opens the door for people to disobey many other NT commands if they think that the reason given for the command will no longer be fulfilled in our culture. For example, the command to be subject to human government is also based on an expected good outcome:

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, *that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people* (1 Pet 2:13–15).

But people today could say that being subject to government might not "put to silence the ignorance of foolish people," because some governments are just so hardened against the gospel that it will make no difference to them. Therefore (according to Webb's reasoning) we do not have to obey that command either.¹⁹

A fourth problem with Webb's approach is that it fails completely to consider the *other reasons* given in the NT for a wife's submission to her husband. Paul says, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church" (Eph 5:22–23).

Similarly, when Paul talks about being subject to "the governing authorities," he does not give evangelism as the reason, but rather says that the agent of the government "is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience" (Rom 13:4–5).

It is better to reject Webb's redemptive-movement hermeneutic and see the NT as the words of God for us today, words that contain God's morally pure standards for us to obey, and to obey *all* of the NT 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 her unbelieving husband according to

¹⁹ Webb says that we should be subject to the law today, not to political leaders (p. 107), but Peter's admonition to be subject to "every human institution" would surely include both the law and the government officials. The fact is that we are subject not just to the law, but to the people who enforce the law and who are representatives of the government and bear its authority today.

1 Pet 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.

5. *Webb fails to show that Adam's naming of Eve in Genesis 2 indicates only equality (discussed under Criterion 5).* Webb claims that when Adam calls the woman (*'ishshah*) in Gen 2:23, because this word for "woman" sounds like the Hebrew word for man (*'ish*) that shows that "Adam pronounces an affinity between the woman and himself. This act of naming places man and woman as partners in the dominion over the animal/plant kingdom" (p. 116).

This argument is not convincing because the names for "man" and "woman" (*'ish* and *'ishshah*) are somewhat the same and somewhat different. The words mean different things: *'ish* means "man" or "husband" (BDB 35), and *'ishshah* means "woman, wife, female" (BDB 61), and though the words look similar, they are related to different roots (the BDB lexicon speaks of "the impossibility of deriving *'ish* and *'ishshah* from the same root," p. 35). For Webb to say that this name *only* indicates equality is simply reductionistic—it is taking part of the truth and making it the whole truth. The names are similar and different and they signify *both* similarity *and* difference.

Second, Webb fails to consider the strongest reason that this process shows male headship, and that is that throughout the OT the one giving a name to someone else has authority over the one receiving that name. Therefore, just as Adam's prior activity of naming the animals indicated that he had the right to name them because he had authority over them, so Adam's giving a name to the woman is an indication that God had granted to Adam an authority or leadership role with respect to his wife.

6. *Webb fails to show that there are culturally relative components in the pre-fall garden of Eden (Criterion 6).* First, Webb attempts to minimize the significance of the fact that God called Adam to account first after Adam and Eve had sinned (Gen 3:9). Webb admits that this might qualify as "a quiet whisper of patriarchy" (p. 130), but this is minimizing what is there in Scripture. If this is *God's* action and *God's* call to Adam, it is anything but a whisper! This is the action of the sovereign God of the universe calling the man to account first for what had happened in his family (even though Eve had sinned first). It is an indication that God held Adam primarily responsible for what had happened (and this is confirmed by Paul's explanation that it was *Adam's* sin—not *Eve's*—that led to sin spreading to all people; see Rom 5:12–19 and 1 Cor 15:22: "As *in Adam* all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive").

With regard to the pre-fall narrative itself, Webb claims to find some culturally relative elements within the account, such as "farming as an occupation" and "ground transportation" and a "vegetarian diet" (pp. 124–25). But this is hardly a persuasive list of examples, because Webb fails to take account of the nature of the items he lists. Surely nothing in the text suggests, and no responsible interpreter claims, that these events are presented as the *only* activities human beings can do. So it is unclear why Webb thinks these can be counted as examples of "culturally relative" principles.

The point Webb overlooks is that everything in the garden is *good* because it has been created by God and it was declared by him to be “very good” (Gen 1:31). Therefore farming and gaining food from the earth are good. Walking through the garden is good. Vegetables are good. Bearing children is good. None of these things is later superseded by a “superior ethic” that would declare the goodness of these things to be culturally relative, so that farming or walking on the earth or bearing children would no longer be good!

Similarly, we have in the garden male-female equality together with male headship in the marriage. That also is *good* and it is *created by God*, and we should not follow Webb in thinking that we can one day create a “superior ethic” that declares male headship to be *not good* or *not approved* by God.²⁰

7. *Webb fails to show that 1 Tim 2:13, “For Adam was formed first, then Eve,” is culturally relative (Criterion 7).* The reason egalitarians find 1 Tim 2:13 particularly difficult is that Paul uses the order of creation as the basis for saying, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet” (1 Tim 2:12). If God’s original creation of Adam and Eve was very good and free from sin (which it was), and if Paul sees in Adam’s creation prior to Eve an indication that some teaching and governing roles in the NT church should be reserved for men (which Webb agrees is Paul’s reasoning), then it is hard to escape the conclusion that the creation of Adam before Eve indicates a permanent, transcultural principle that supports some exclusively male teaching and governing roles in the church for all generations.

Webb attempts to avoid this by claiming there are some culturally relative things in the original creation account. But, as I indicated in the previous section, Webb fails to take into account that everything in the original creation is morally *good* and free from sin, and that includes Adam’s headship in the marriage. In addition to that, if Webb’s reasoning were correct, then Paul could not have appealed to the creation account in the first century either, because people in the first century were not limited to “farming as an occupation” (Paul was a tentmaker), and people in the first century were not limited to “ground transportation” (Paul traveled by sea), and people in the first century were not all married (both Jesus and Paul were single), and there was no requirement for everyone to have children (neither Jesus nor Paul did), and there was no limitation to being a vegetarian (Paul approved the eating of meat, Rom 14:2–4; 1 Cor 10:25–27). Therefore the apostle Paul himself did not think that any of Webb’s supposedly “culturally relative” factors claimed by Webb were found in the creation account itself, or could be used to prove that it was invalid to appeal to the creation of Adam before Eve for transcultural principles that apply to conduct within the NT church. In short, Paul was not persuaded by any of the factors that Webb claims to

²⁰ Some things that Webb claims are in the garden, such as keeping the Sabbath, or a six-day work week (pp. 125–26) are doubtful interpretations, and it is not evident that they were present in the garden. Therefore they do not form a persuasive argument that some things in the garden are culturally relative.

show cultural relativity in the creation account. Paul knew that all those factors were there, yet he still believed that “Adam was formed first, then Eve” was a valid reason for affirming an abiding, transcultural principle.

Webb’s argument that the author of Genesis projected later circumstances back into the account of the garden of Eden and thereby placed primogeniture in the Genesis 2 account (see discussion above) is also unpersuasive, because it denies the historical truthfulness of extended sections of the narrative in Genesis 2.

Finally, Webb objects that if complementarians take Paul’s argument seriously in 1 Tim 2:13, then, to be consistent, we should argue that primogeniture should be practiced today as well. He says, “It is interesting that those who appeal to primogeniture in affirming the transcultural status of 1 Tim 2:13 say very little about the sustained application of other primogeniture texts for our lives” (p. 142).

But here Webb is simply confusing the issue. The Bible never says, “All families should give a double portion of inheritance to the first-born son, because Adam was formed first, then Eve.” The Bible never commands any such thing, and Webb himself shows how the Bible frequently overturns such a practice (see pp. 136–39). Webb has imported into the discussion an idea of “consistency” that is foreign to the Bible itself. Webb is basically arguing as follows:

(1) The Bible makes one application from Adam’s prior creation.

(2) If you affirm that the Bible is correct in that first application, then you have to say that the Bible makes other applications from Adam’s prior creation.

But that reasoning does not follow. We are not free to say that the Bible *should* make applications that it does not make! That decision belongs to God, not us.

Consistency in this matter is simply affirming what the Bible says, and not denying the validity of any of the reasoning processes in Scripture (as Webb attempts to do with 1 Tim 2:13), as well as not adding to the commands of Scripture (as Webb tries to push complementarians to do with this text). Consistency does not require that we make all sorts of applications of a biblical principle even when the Bible does not make those applications. Rather, consistency says that the application Paul made from Genesis 2 is a valid and good one, and Scripture requires us also to affirm it as a transcultural principle today.

Paul is saying in 1 Tim 2:12–13 that Adam’s prior creation proves at least one thing: in the assembled church a woman should not “teach” or “exercise authority over a man” (1 Tim 2:12). We are not free to adopt an interpretation that leads to the conclusion that Paul’s reasoning process was incorrect even for his day.

8. *Webb fails to show that Gal 3:28 is a “new creation” pattern that overthrows the “old creation” patterns of male leadership in the home and church*

(*Criterion 8*). Webb says there are several “in Christ” statements like Gal 3:28, which tells us that “there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” These “in Christ” statements, he claims, “should be given prominence over the old-creation patterns” that include what Webb sees as “patriarchy” within the “old-creation” patterns. He says, “New-creation theology transforms the status of all its participants . . . into one of equality. . . . It . . . heavily favors an egalitarian position” (p. 152).

In this case again, Webb fails adequately to take into account that the male headship in marriage that was found in the garden was itself “very good” in God’s sight, and we should not look for some morally superior ethic to replace it. Moreover, Webb fails to take into account other “new-creation” statements that affirm male headship in marriage, such as Col 3:18, “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting *in the Lord*.” This command is part of the new “in Christ” or “in the Lord” creation, just as “Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*, for this is right” (Eph 6:1) is part of the new creation in Christ. In fact, Paul’s commands as an apostle for the NT church *are* part of the “new-creation” in Christ, and therefore “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man” *is also part of that new creation*, because it is part of the teaching of the NT for the church.

9. *Webb fails to show that the Bible adopted male leadership because there were no competing options (Criterion 9)*. Webb says, “It is reasonably safe to assume, therefore, that the social reality of the biblical writers was the world of patriarchy. . . . This consideration increases the likelihood of patriarchy being a cultural component within Scripture” (pp. 154–55). Webb explains that this is because an egalitarian position regarding marriage or the church was simply not an option, given the surrounding culture.

But this criterion is not persuasive. The NT teaches many things that were not found in the surrounding culture. No people in the surrounding culture believed in Jesus as the Messiah before he came. Even Webb admits that the idea that husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the church was revolutionary for the culture. The idea that there could be a church made up of Jews and Gentiles fellowshipping together was not an option in the surrounding culture.

Scripture often challenges and transforms the societies and cultures into which it speaks. Therefore, if a truly egalitarian model for marriage had been what God wanted for his people, he surely could have proclaimed it clearly through the pages of the NT and through the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. But (as Webb admits) the NT does not teach an egalitarian position. (According to Webb, we have to move beyond the ethic of the NT to reach full egalitarianism.)

10. *Webb fails to show that the general principle of “justice” nullifies specific NT commands regarding male leadership (Criterion 13)*. Webb asks, “Does the power inequality [*sic*] between men and women violate a theology of justice? Is there a hint of inequity or unfairness about the treatment of women in the Bible?” (p. 181). Webb’s answer is that “the general or broad

principles of Scripture appear to favor movement from soft patriarchy to an egalitarian position" (p. 184).²¹

The problem with Webb's analysis in this case is that it pits Scripture against Scripture. We are not free to take general principles like "justice" or "love" and say that they take priority over specific teachings of Scripture. Are we to say that the commands of the Bible in Ephesians 5 or 1 Timothy 2 were "unjust"?

Another problem with Webb's entire Criterion 13 (on specific vs. general principles) is that it allows an interpreter to select any "general principle" he wants, and so drive the discussion in one direction or another. Webb chooses the general principles of "justice" and "equality," but why should these be the driving considerations? Why not choose the general principle of "the imitation of Christ" in his subjection to rightful authority and in his submission to the will of his Father? Why not choose the general principle of "submission to rightful authority," which is found in many levels of the Bible, and which is even found in the relationship of the Son to the Father in the Trinity? Of course, Webb does not select that general principle, for it would lead to a complementarian position.

This procedure of arguing that some broad principle overrides specific texts of Scripture is not a new idea with Webb. It is remarkably similar to the procedure used by liberals in the early part of the twentieth century when they appealed to the general principle of "the love of God" to override the specific teachings of the Bible about God's wrath, and particularly about God's wrath being poured out on his Son on the cross for our sins. In this way liberals commonly denied the heart of the atonement, that is, the doctrine of Christ's death as a substitute sacrifice in which he bore God's wrath against sin in our place (the penal substitutionary doctrine of the atonement).

Therefore this criterion (Webb's Criterion 13, "specific instructions versus general principles") is among the most dangerous of Webb's criteria, because it potentially can give legitimacy for people to find some "general principle" that will override texts of Scripture they find uncomfortable on any subject. The "love of God" principle could override the doctrine of hell, or could override the idea that not everyone will be saved. The "grace of God" principle could override the need for church elders to measure up to specific character traits. The "grace and forgiveness of God" principle could be used to override the specific teachings of the NT on divorce and remarriage. And so forth.

Webb himself says that this criterion is "susceptible to misuse" (p. 183), to which I certainly agree. But then he says it is still "extremely helpful" (p. 183), a statement with which I strongly disagree. Scripture does not contradict Scripture.

11. *Webb fails to show that a wife's submission may be culturally relative because it is based on an analogy with Christ or with God (Criterion 14).*

²¹ What Webb calls "soft patriarchy" seems to be the position he thinks the NT taught for its time, because he thinks it is the position we should move "from." It is also essentially the position held by me and by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, the position I have called a "complementarian" position (see Webb, pp. 26–27).

Webb argues that there are a number of culturally relative standards in the Bible, such as “slavery” or “monarchy” or “right-handedness” (pp. 186–87) that are based on an analogy with Christ or with God, and therefore it is not valid to say that NT teachings on male headship are transcultural because they are based on an analogy with Christ or with God. Specifically, Webb says that Eph 5:22–33 and 1 Cor 11:3 should not be seen as transcultural just because they depend on a “theological analogy” (pp. 188–89).

But once again Webb has mixed together things that are not parallel. 1 Cor 11:3 draws a parallel between the headship of the Father with respect to the Son and the headship of a husband with respect to his wife: “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.”

But the Bible never makes statements like this regarding the other categories that Webb mentions. We do not find anywhere in Scripture statements like these: “I want you to understand that right-handed people are superior to left-handed people, because Christ sits at the right hand of God.” “But I want you to understand that slavery is the best economic system, because God is the supreme slaveholder and you are all his slaves.” “I want you to understand that monarchy is the form of government that all nations should adopt, because God is the supreme king over the universe and you are all his subjects.”

These are all ridiculous statements that Scripture would never make. Of course God *is* king over the universe and of course Jesus *does* sit at God’s right hand, but the Bible never reasons from these things to the kinds of foolish statements it would have to make in order for Webb’s argument to work.

Another problem with Webb’s argument here is that it is once again based on his underlying assumption that it is possible to move to a “better ethic” (p. 32) than the ethic of the NT. But consider 1 Cor 11:3 once again: “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of the wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.”

Are we to understand that “the head of Christ is God” is only true for certain cultures at certain times? Are we to understand that “the head of every man is Christ” is true only for certain cultures and certain times? Certainly not (unless Webb also thinks these statements are culturally relative). But if the first and third sentences in this verse are transcultural, then must we not also consider the second sentence to be transcultural, “the head of a wife is her husband”? Paul says there is a parallel between the eternal relationship of the Son to the Father and the relationship of a wife to her husband. And if Paul is correct that there is such a parallel, then the headship of a husband with respect to his wife is surely transcultural. Webb has shown no passages in the NT where such an argument is culturally relative.

The same considerations apply to Eph 5:22–23, where Paul says, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife *even as Christ is the head of the church*.” Paul bases his command on the fact that the relationship between a husband and wife is analogous

to the relationship between Christ and the church. That is also a transcultural truth. Would Webb say that the statement “Christ is the head of the church” is culturally relative? *Webb has produced no examples from the NT where a culturally relative command is similarly based on an appeal to the conduct of Christ or his relationship to the church.*

Contrary to Webb’s claim on page 186, 1 Pet 2:18–25 does not endorse slavery based on Christ’s submission to suffering! First Peter 2 tells Christians *how to suffer* based on an imitation of Christ’s example, but it does not thereby encourage persecution of Christians or say that such persecution or mistreatment is right. Similarly, it does not argue, “Slavery is a morally good institution because Christ submitted to mistreatment.” The NT never makes any such claim.

Webb’s other response to Ephesians 5 and 1 Corinthians 11 is to say that if Paul had been addressing a different culture he would have commanded something different:

If Paul had been addressing an egalitarian culture, he may have used the very same christological analogy (with its transcultural component) and reapplied it to an egalitarian relationship between husband and wife. He would simply have encouraged both the husband and the wife to sacrificially love one another (pp. 188–89).

This amazing statement reveals how deeply committed Webb is to finding an egalitarian ethic that is “better than” the ethic taught in the NT. Even though he admits that *Paul did not teach an egalitarian view of marriage*, he says that *Paul would have taught an egalitarian view of marriage* had he been addressing a different culture, such as our egalitarian culture today! Webb is not at all bound by what Paul taught, but here as elsewhere feels free to use his speculation on what Paul “might have” taught in a different situation as a higher moral authority than what Paul actually did teach.

As I mentioned earlier, Webb also claims that the Bible in Hosea 2 endorses the idea of a husband physically disciplining his wife after the analogy of God who disciplines the people of Israel (pp. 189–90). But here Webb is assuming a very unlikely view of Hosea 2, and he is surely assuming a morally offensive view of God and the Bible, because he is claiming that Hosea 2 could have rightly been used by husbands within Israel as a justification for stripping their wives naked and confining them physically as discipline for wrongdoing! This is something the Bible nowhere teaches, and certainly it is not taught in Hosea 2, but Webb claims it is taught there in order to find another “theological analogy” text that he can claim as transcultural. This one is a long stretch, and it is anything but persuasive.

12. *Webb fails to show that NT submission lists have some culturally relative commands and some transcultural commands (Criterion 15).* Webb says that when he looks at the “submission lists” within the NT, two of the items are “culture bound” (monarchy and slavery), while two are “transcultural” (children/parents and congregation/elders) (p. 196). Therefore he says it is uncertain whether the wife/husband submission command is cultural or transcultural, based on this criterion alone.

The problem with Webb's analysis here is the way he dismisses two of the commands in the NT as culturally relative. According to Webb, the command, "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good" (1 Pet 2:13–14), is "culturally relative" and we need to move to a better ethic than that of the NT, an ethic where we no longer have to submit to government leaders. But a better approach, and the one used by evangelicals who do not believe that we can move to a "better ethic" than that of the NT, is to say that we are still to *obey* that command, but we are to *apply it* to the closest parallel in our situation today, which is to be subject to government authorities. In fact, Peter allows for this when he talks about "every human institution," and Paul makes the same kind of general statement, not even mentioning an "emperor," but simply saying, "Let every person be subject *to the governing authorities*" (Rom 13:1). I see no reason why we should try to move beyond this NT teaching or see it as culturally relative.

In the same way, Christians today can obey the command, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters" (Eph 6:5) by *applying it* to the nearest parallel situation in our modern culture, namely, employees being subject to and obedient to their employers. The institution of "slave" (Greek *doulos*) was, in general, significantly different from the horrible abuses found in American slavery in the nineteenth century, and it was in fact the most common employment in the ancient world. To make a parallel application to employees in their relationship to their employers is still to be subject to the ethic of the NT and obedient to it, and it is far different from Webb's system, in which we are no longer to obey this ethic but move toward a "better ethic" in which employees simply have to "fulfill the terms of their contract to the best of their ability" (p. 38) in the hope that we will move toward Webb's "ultimate ethic" which has "wages maximized for all" (p. 37; he nowhere explains this utopian platitude).

13. *Webb fails to show that wives were to be subject to their husbands only because they were younger and less educated (Criterion 17).* Webb says that it made sense for wives to submit to their husbands in an ancient culture because they had less education, less social exposure, less physical strength, and they were significantly younger than their husbands (pp. 213–14). But these reasons, says Webb, no longer apply today, and therefore the command for wives to be subject to their husbands should be seen as culturally relative. A wife today should just give some kind of "honor" and "respect" to her husband (p. 215).

Webb's argument here is not persuasive, however, because these are not the reasons the Bible gives for wives to be subject to their husbands. The reasons the Bible gives are the parallel with Christ's relationship to the church (Eph 5:22–24) and the parallel with the relationship between the Father and Son in the Trinity (1 Cor 11:3). Another reason that Paul gives is that this is what "is fitting in the Lord" (Col 3:18). Yet another reason is that it is part of "what is good" (Titus 2:3–4), and another reason is that unbelieving husbands may be "won without a word by the conduct of their wives" (1 Pet 3:1).

Webb's reasons here are merely speculative, and there is no indication that the biblical authors are taking these factors into account when they give these commands. Moreover, these NT commands apply to *all* wives, even those who were more intelligent than their husbands, or the same age as their husbands, or physically as strong as their husbands, or had as much social exposure and social rank as their husbands, or as much wealth as their husbands. Webb's reasons are simply not the reasons the Bible uses.

In short, Webb says that the Bible teaches a wife's submission because of Webb's own invented reasons. Then he removes these invented reasons for today's culture and concludes that we can count the command as culturally relative. It is far better to heed the reasons the Bible actually gives, and to believe that these are the reasons that the Bible commands wives to be subject to husbands.

14. *Webb fails to show that 1 Tim 2:14, "And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor," is culturally relative (Criterion 18, "Scientific and Social-Scientific Evidence").* Webb argues that women were more easily deceived in the ancient world because they were not as well-educated as men, were younger, and had less social exposure and less knowledge (p. 229). But Webb goes to great lengths to demonstrate that these factors are not true of women today (he even has an appendix on research showing that gender plays a very small role in differences in ability to detect deception, pp. 269–73). Therefore he says 1 Tim 2:14 is culturally relative and does not apply to women today.

This argument is not persuasive because Paul makes no reference to his current culture or to women being susceptible to deception in the first century. Paul is talking again about Adam and Eve, and he says that another reason why women should not "teach" or "exercise authority over a man" is that "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (1 Tim 2:12–14). However we understand that passage, it is evident that Paul is saying that something is true of Eve in relationship to Adam *that has transcultural significance for women and men generally in the NT church*. Paul is not basing his argument on education or age or social exposure or knowledge (for no doubt there were many older and wiser women in the large church at Ephesus when Paul was writing to Timothy), but he is basing his argument on something that he sees to be a transcultural principle that has application to men and women generally. Some complementarians understand this verse to refer to Eve wrongfully taking leadership in the family and making the decision to eat the forbidden fruit on her own, and other complementarians understand this to refer to a woman's "kinder, gentler nature" and that she is therefore less likely to draw a hard line when close friends are teaching doctrinal error and relationships need to be broken.²² Whatever interpretation we take, Paul is arguing from Eve's action at the Fall to a general truth about men and women teaching and

²² For discussion of this verse, see Thomas Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9–15: A Dialogue with Scholarship," in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15* (ed. Andreas Köstenberger, Thomas Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 140–46.

governing the church; he is not explicitly arguing from any statement about women in his culture or any other culture.

15. *Webb fails to ask, "What if I am wrong?" about his entire system, but asks it only about one inconsequential point.* When readers see the title of Webb's last chapter, "What If I Am Wrong?" (p. 236), they will likely expect, from the placement of this chapter at the end of the book, that Webb is raising the question, "What if I am wrong about my entire system?" But when we read this chapter carefully we find that is not at all what Webb is asking. *He does not even raise the possibility that his entire system about moving to a "better ethic" than the NT might be wrong.* He asks, "What if I am wrong?" about only one very small point, and that is whether Paul's appeal to primogeniture in 1 Tim 2:13 should be viewed as transcultural rather than cultural. He says, "I am prepared to ask this chapter's reflective question about one aspect of my findings, namely, my assessment of 1 Timothy 2:13" (p. 236). But he concludes that it does not really make much difference in the end, for even if one sees primogeniture as a transcultural factor, it is "light (not heavy) value in Scripture" (p. 238), and it is significantly modified by other "culture-based factors" (p. 238), and Gal 3:28 still has "sociological implications that will modify the application even further" (p. 240).

Therefore, even if Webb finds himself to be "wrong" on primogeniture in 1 Tim 2:13, he says it will make very little difference. If he is right on 1 Tim 2:13 being culturally relative, then he will end up with a "complementary egalitarianism" in which there is no "power differential based solely on gender" and no "role differentiation related to that power differential" (p. 231). The only difference between the genders would be "based upon biological differences between men and women" and would include, for instance, "a greater participation of women in the early stages of child rearing" because of "the benefits of breast-feeding during early infant formation" (p. 241).

But if Webb is wrong on 1 Tim 2:13, then he thinks it would lead to an "ultra-soft patriarchy" in which there is "an equal power differential" between men and women in the home and in the church (p. 243), but in which men would be granted "a certain level of *symbolic* honor for their first born status within the human family" (p. 243).

Is there any difference, then, between Webb's two models, whether he is "right" or "wrong" on 1 Tim 2:13? Webb himself says there is very little, because in either case,

The application of 1 Timothy 2 is going to be very similar for both complementary egalitarians and ultra-soft patriarchalists. The only difference is whether there should be a dimension of *symbolic honor* granted to one gender over the other (p. 241).

What Webb is telling us, then, is that the only two options his system will allow are *both thoroughgoing egalitarian options*. In both cases, all teaching and governing roles in the church are open to women as well as men. In both situations, marriage is based on "neutral submission" and there is no unique leadership role or authority for the husband in the marriage. *The only difference is no real difference at all*, a mere question of whether some kind of "symbolic honor" should be given to men, a kind of honor that Webb

does not further specify. I think it would be hard for anyone to see that “symbolic honor” as anything other than meaningless tokenism.

16. *Webb proposes a misleading “forum for harmony” (p. 243) which requires the abandonment of all gender-based leadership for men and asks that both sides begin to dialogue on the basis of a 99 percent capitulation to egalitarian claims.* At the end of his book, Webb says, “Complementary egalitarianism and ultra-soft patriarchy provide a forum for harmony and healing within the church” (p. 243). He says that his reflections in this final chapter have been included because, “I hope they will awaken a spirit of reconciliation between egalitarians and partriarchalists” (p. 243).

What is the basis on which Webb proposes this “forum for harmony”? It is a forum to discuss whether we should adopt choice 1, “complementary egalitarianism” (which is Webb’s title for a thoroughgoing egalitarian position), or whether we should adopt choice 2, “ultra-soft patriarchy” (which is Webb’s other egalitarian option that gives a token “symbolic honor” to men).

Quite honestly, I find this somewhat insulting. I fail to understand how Webb expects his invitation to be taken seriously when the only two options offered in his “forum” are to capitulate 99 percent to egalitarian claims or to capitulate 100 percent to egalitarian claims. And even the 99 percent capitulation in what he calls “ultra-soft patriarchy” in the end is demeaning because it expects men to give up all male leadership roles in the home and the church and accept in return a token “symbolic honor.”

In addition, complementarians will consider Webb’s terminology offensive and confusing. As a co-founder of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood in 1987, and as a co-author of the complementarian book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), I wish to lodge a protest against Webb’s use of two terms. His phrase “complementary egalitarianism,” which he uses to describe a thoroughgoing egalitarian position, simply confuses the issues by using *complementary* for a position totally antithetical to what complementarians hold. In 1991, in the preface to *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, John Piper and I wrote,

If one word must be used to describe our position, we prefer the term *complementarian*, since it suggests both equality and beneficial differences between men and women. We are uncomfortable with the term “traditionalist” because it implies an unwillingness to let Scripture challenge traditional patterns of behavior, and we certainly reject the term “hierarchicalist” because it over-emphasizes structured authority while giving no suggestion of equality or the beauty of mutual interdependence (p. xiv).

Since that time, “complementarian” has been the term we have consistently used to describe our position, and it has been widely (and courteously) used by others (though not all) to describe our position as well. For Webb to apply it to an egalitarian position is to needlessly confuse the issues.²³

²³ Webb’s objection that complementarians should not be able to use the term “complementarian” to describe their position because egalitarians also believe that men and women are “complementary”

For similar reasons, I find it objectionable that Webb consistently characterizes our position as “patriarchy.” That term (which literally means “father-rule”) almost uniformly has a pejorative connotation in modern society, and it carries nuances of an authoritarian father ruling over several generations of adults and children in an extended family in an ancient culture, none of which we are advocating today. The term by itself says nothing about the equal value that the Bible and our position attribute to men and women alike, nor does it say anything about a leadership role for the *husband* within the marriage (since it focuses on the role of the “father” or *pater* in the relationship). So it is an inappropriate, pejorative, and misleading term to refer to the position that we represent. It would seem more appropriate in academic debate, and indeed a simple matter of common courtesy, to refer to positions by the terms that the representatives of those positions choose for themselves rather than by pejorative terms that they reject.

VI. CONCLUSION REGARDING WEBB’S REDEMPTIVE-MOVEMENT
HERMENEUTIC: MOST OF WEBB’S EIGHTEEN CRITERIA
FOR DETERMINING CULTURAL RELATIVITY ARE
UNRELIABLE GUIDES FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY

Webb’s entire system is based on an assumption that the moral commands of the NT represent only a temporary ethical system for that time, and that we should use Webb’s “redemptive-movement hermeneutic” to move beyond those ethical teachings to a “better ethic” (p. 32) that is closer to the “ultimate ethic” God wants us to adopt. Since all of Webb’s criteria are based on that assumption, the entire system is unpersuasive and inconsistent with a belief in the absolute moral authority of the teachings of the NT.

But at this point it is appropriate to comment specifically on each of the eighteen criteria that Webb produces, because in some cases his analysis produces helpful insight even though it is based on an underlying assumption with which I disagree.

In the following material, I offer only brief observations on each of the eighteen criteria.

shows a failure to understand how specific words that indicate a special emphasis are commonly used as a convenient way to name different viewpoints and movements. Using Webb’s logic, Presbyterians could say, “We should also be called Baptists because we too believe in baptism; therefore Baptists should not be the only ones called Baptists.” Complementarians could say, “We should also be called egalitarians because we too believe that men and women are equal in many ways; therefore egalitarians should not be the only ones called egalitarians.” In politics, Republicans could say, “We should also be called Democrats because we too believe in democracy; therefore Democrats should not be the only ones called Democrats.” This procedure would introduce hopeless confusion into all conversation and make meaningful interaction almost impossible. CBMW chose the term “complementarian” as the single word that best represents our position in 1988 and we explained that decision in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* in 1991. We are not going to stop using “complementarian” to name our position, nor are we going to use it to refer to an egalitarian position. Confusion in terminology helps no one think clearly.

1. *Preliminary Movement* (p. 73): I find this criterion unhelpful because it assumes that there can be “further movement” beyond the ethical teachings of the NT to a higher or better ethic. However, Webb’s discussion is helpful as it applies to a number of OT moral commands, which all interpreters I think would admit are a “preliminary” set of standards and not God’s final moral standards for his people today. (All Christians, of course, see the OT as preliminary to the NT, but that is far different from seeing the NT also as preliminary to further ethical development.) Another way of saying this is that all Christians agree there is “redemptive movement” from the OT to the NT, but evangelicals have held that the movement stops with the NT. Prior to Webb, only Roman Catholics and liberal Protestants, not evangelicals, have taken developments beyond the NT as part or all of their ultimate authority.

2. *Seed Ideas* (p. 83): I find this category unhelpful and unpersuasive because it assumes that some ideas in the NT (such as Gal 3:28) are contradictory to other NT commands, and these “seed ideas” show us the direction we should look for a superior ethic to the NT.

3. *Breakouts* (p. 91): I also find this category unhelpful and unpersuasive because it assumes that certain people in the Bible (such as Deborah or Junia) engage in activities that are contrary to the moral teachings in the biblical text, but that anticipate a movement to a higher ethic superior to that found in the Bible.

4. *Purpose/Intent Statements* (p. 105): I find this category unpersuasive and troubling because it implies that we can disobey NT commands (such as the command for wives to be subject to their husbands) if we decide that the purpose specified in the command will no longer be fulfilled (for example, if we decide that wives being subject to their husbands will no longer help evangelism). This again assumes that we can move to a higher ethical level than that of the teachings of the NT. However, if Webb’s analysis did not have the assumption that we could move to a higher ethical system than the NT, his explanation of the specific details of application today, such as his explanation of why we need not give a “holy kiss” (because it may not make people feel welcomed at all!), but should instead give some other kind of warm greeting, is a helpful explanation.²⁴

5. *Basis in Fall or Curse* (p. 110): I agree with Webb’s argument that moral commands based on the curse that God imposed in Genesis 3 are not valid as a standard for us to obey today. I also agree that the results of the curse continue in the present time, so that we are still subject to death, the ground still brings forth weeds, and women still experience pain in childbirth. I also agree with Webb that we should attempt to overcome these effects of the curse because I believe that has been the purpose of God in the history of redemption ever since he in justice imposed the curse.

6. *Basis in Original Creation, Section 1: Patterns* (p. 123): I am not persuaded by Webb’s argument that a component of a text only “may” be trans-

²⁴ See section VII below for a discussion of the “holy kiss” and similar actions with symbolic purpose.

cultural if it is rooted in the original creation material (p. 123), because I do not think he has discovered anything in the garden before the fall that is not morally good or that we should not see as morally good today. His attempts to find culturally relative components in the Genesis narrative are all based on a misreading of the purpose and intent of that narrative.

7. *Basis in Original Creation, Section 2: Primogeniture* (p. 134): I find Webb's analysis here to be unpersuasive, both because his position is based on a denial of the historicity of Adam being created before Eve in Genesis 2, and because he thinks that the principle of primogeniture found in Adam's being created before Eve should not be taken as a transcultural principle unless people are willing to apply primogeniture in other aspects of society today. As I explained above, this assumes that Paul cannot properly make one application of a pattern found in Genesis 2 unless he also makes many other applications of a principle found in Genesis 2. I believe, in contrast to Webb, that it is up to God, not us, to decide what commands to give us based on principles in Genesis, and that we should simply follow the ones he gives.

8. *Basis in New Creation* (p. 145): I find this criterion unpersuasive and unhelpful, not because I think that "new creation patterns" in the NT are wrong, but because Webb wrongly assumes that these patterns are in conflict with the pattern of male leadership found in God's original creation of Adam and Eve, and because Webb fails to consider other "new creation" commands that encourage wives to be subject to their husbands "in the Lord" (Col 3:18), and because Webb again assumes that the "new creation" statements in the NT are simply an indicator that leads us along the path to a higher ethical standard than that found in the commands of the NT itself.

9. *Competing Options* (p. 152): I find this criterion helpful in Webb's discussion of why God did not immediately give commands to outlaw slavery (it would have caused massive and destructive economic upheaval), but rather gave principles that would lead to its abolition. But I find this criterion unhelpful in its assumption that the NT actually commanded or endorsed slavery, and also I find it unpersuasive in its claim that the NT could not have taught an egalitarian position at the time it was written (something Webb has failed to prove, and something that cannot be proven in light of the NT's willingness to challenge culture at many points).

10. *Opposition to Original Culture* (p. 157): I find this criterion to be generally helpful, especially as it indicates the ways in which both OT and NT oppose many current cultural attitudes and practices regarding slavery. I am not as sure that it is helpful for Webb's argument that the commands against homosexuality are transcultural because homosexuality was widely accepted in the ancient world, since I think that Webb underestimates the widespread moral disapproval of homosexual conduct in many sections of ancient society. And I think in this section Webb has not adequately considered the way the NT does oppose some cultural values regarding marriage when it strongly emphasizes the need for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church. But this shows that the NT was willing to stand against cultural views on marriage when it was something that was morally right.

11. *Closely Related Issues* (p. 162): I find this category to be unhelpful and unpersuasive because Webb deals almost entirely with Mosaic laws regarding women while failing to take into account that Christians are no longer under the Mosaic covenant, and these laws are not what “the Bible” teaches for NT Christians in any case. Webb seems in this section to be on a fishing expedition to find deficient elements in Scripture, especially about the treatment of women, so that he can argue that we need to move to a higher ethic than that taught in the commands of the biblical text.

12. *Penal Code* (p. 179): I found this section to be helpful in its observation that most actions that received the death penalty in the OT still receive divine disapproval today (though there are a couple of exceptions regarding Sabbath breaking and cultic violations, so the analysis is not entirely convincing). This criterion does not have much application to the relationship between husbands and wives, as Webb himself admits (p. 179).

13. *Specific Instructions Versus General Principles* (p. 179): I found this section to be unpersuasive and actually quite dangerous for Christians today, because it could easily give legitimacy to disobedience to Scripture on any uncomfortable subject, simply by enabling people to find a “general principle” of Scripture that could be used to override a specific teaching.

14. *Basis in Theological Analogy* (p. 185): I found this section to be deeply flawed, because it wrongly assumes that the Bible taught and approved slavery, monarchy, and even right-handedness! Then it argues that not all of these theological analogies are transcultural, and therefore the teachings on marriage in Ephesians 5 and 1 Cor 11:3 are not necessarily transcultural.

By use of this procedure Webb potentially nullifies all “imitation of Christ” passages in the NT. Webb’s claim that a command based in theological analogy need not be transcultural is based on his claim that some culturally relative commands are based on similar theological analogies, but in fact he has produced no examples that are actually parallel to Ephesians 5 or 1 Cor 11:3.

15. *Contextual Comparisons* (p. 192): I found this category to be unhelpful because Webb incorrectly assumes that the NT approves and endorses slavery and monarchy.

16. *Appeal to the Old Testament* (p. 201): I found this analysis to be unpersuasive and unhelpful because Webb incorrectly brings in a number of texts that do not appeal to the OT to prove the validity of slavery or monarchy, and also because he brings in a number of texts that do not appeal to the OT at all but simply have parallels in the OT (such as foot washing or the “holy kiss”). Therefore Webb wrongly dismisses texts regarding women that appeal to the OT (such as 1 Cor 14:33, 36; 1 Tim 2:11–15; 1 Pet 3:1–7).

In addition, Webb rightly sees that if the NT discontinues a practice, it is not required for Christians to obey (p. 201). But he wrongly sees this as an evidence of cultural change rather than an evidence of a change from the old covenant to the new covenant.

17. *Pragmatic Basis Between Two Cultures* (p. 209): I found this criterion to be unpersuasive because in a number of cases (particularly with respect to husbands and wives) Webb assumed that he knew the reason for

a command, then he used his assumed reasons (such as that wives were younger or less educated) to replace the actual reasons the Bible gave for a command. However, in the obvious example of why we do not wash other people's feet today, Webb's observation that we do not travel on dirt roads with sandals did express what people instinctively understand about this difference between ancient and modern culture.

18. *Scientific and Social-Scientific Evidence* (p. 221): I found this entire section unpersuasive because Webb claims that the Bible teaches many things that it does not actually teach (such as a flat earth and a geocentric model of the universe). He then uses these examples to show that we have to abandon the teaching of the Bible because in a number of cases it goes contrary to present-day scientific evidence. Moreover, if Webb really believes that the Bible teaches these incorrect things, this indicates that he does not believe the Bible is inerrant in everything it affirms (and this is similar to his denial of the historicity of the creation of Adam prior to Eve in Genesis 2).

VII. THE DIFFICULT PASSAGES FOR DETERMINING CULTURAL RELATIVITY ARE FEW, AND MOST EVANGELICALS HAVE ALREADY REACHED A SATISFACTORY CONCLUSION ABOUT THEM

Webb has made the question of determining when something is "culturally relative" into a much bigger problem than it actually is. The main question is not whether the *historical* sections of the Bible report events that occurred in an ancient culture, because the Bible is a historical book and it reports thousands of events that occurred at a time and in a culture significantly different from our own. The question rather is how we should approach the *moral commands* found in the NT. Are those commands to be obeyed by us today as well?

Although my comments in this section are prompted by Webb's book, they are applicable more broadly to the general question of how we can know what parts of the NT are culturally relative and what parts are still binding on us today.

I am just concerned about the moral commands here. The question is not whether the historical sections of the Bible *report* events that occurred in an ancient culture, because the Bible is a historical book, and of course it reports thousands of events that occurred at an ancient time and in a culture significantly different from our own. The question rather is how we should approach the *moral commands* found in the NT. Are those commands to be obeyed by us today as well?

The question of which NT commands are culturally relative is really not a very complicated question. It is not nearly as complicated as Webb makes it out to be. The commands that are culturally relative are primarily—or exclusively—those that concern *physical actions that carry symbolic meaning*. When we look at the commands in the NT, I think there are only six main examples of texts about which people wonder if they are transcultural or if they are culturally relative:

- (1) Holy kiss (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Pet 5:14)
- (2) Footwashing (John 13:14; compare 1 Tim 5:10, which is not a command)
- (3) Headcovering for women or wives in worship (1 Cor 11:4–16)
- (4) Short hair for men (1 Cor 11:14)
- (5) No jewelry or braided hair for women (1 Tim 2:9; 1 Pet 3:3)
- (6) Lifting hands in prayer (1 Tim 2:8)

The first thing that we notice about this list is that *all of these examples refer to physical items or actions that carry symbolic meaning*. The holy kiss was a physical expression that conveyed the idea of a welcoming greeting. Footwashing (in the way that Jesus modeled it in John 13) was a physical action that symbolized taking a servant-like attitude toward one another. Headcovering was a physical piece of clothing that symbolized something about a woman's status or role (most likely that she was a married woman, or possibly that she was a woman and not a man; others have proposed other interpretations, but all of them are an attempt to explain what the headcovering symbolized). As Paul understands long hair for a man in 1 Cor 11:14, it is a "disgrace for him," because it is something that was distinctive to women (in that culture at least), and therefore it was a physical symbol of a man being like a woman rather than like a man.

For these first four examples, one can still find a few examples of Christians who argue that we should follow those commands literally today, and that they are still applicable to us. But the vast majority of evangelicals, at least in the United States (I cannot speak for the rest of the world), have not needed Webb's "redemptive-movement hermeneutic" to reach the conclusion that the Bible does not intend us to follow those commands literally today. That is because they are not in themselves *fundamental, deep-level actions* that have to do with essential components of our relationships to one another (such as loving one another, honesty with one another, submission to rightful authority, speaking the truth and not lying about others, not committing adultery or murder or theft, and so forth). Rather they are outward, *surface-level manifestations* of the deeper realities that we should demonstrate today (such as greeting one another in love, or serving one another, or avoiding dressing in such a way as to give a signal that a man is trying to be a woman, or that a woman is trying to be a man). Therefore the vast majority of evangelicals are not troubled by these four "culturally relative" commands in the NT because they have concluded that *only the physical, surface manifestation is culturally relative*, and the underlying intent of the command is *not culturally relative* but is still binding on us today.

In seeing these outward manifestations as culturally relative (long before Webb's book was written), evangelicals have not adopted Webb's viewpoint that we need to move to a "better ethic" than that found in the NT commands. Evangelicals who take the Bible as the very words of God, and who believe that God's moral commands for his people are good and just and perfect, do not see these commands as part of a deficient moral system that is just a "pointer" to a higher ethic. They see these commands as a part of the entire NT ethic that they even today must submit to and obey.

For most people in the evangelical world, deciding that a holy kiss is a greeting that could be manifested in another way is not a terribly difficult decision. It is something that comes almost intuitively as people realize that there are of course different forms of greetings among different cultures.

The last two items on the list need to be treated a bit differently. When we rightly interpret the texts about jewelry and braided hair for women, I do not think that they prohibited such things *even at the time they were written*. Paul says that “women should *adorn themselves* in respectable apparel, with modesty and self control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire” (1 Tim 2:9). Paul is not saying that women should never wear such things. He is saying that those things should not be the things that they consider the source of their beauty. That is not how they should “adorn themselves.”

This sense of the prohibition becomes even clearer in 1 Pet 3:3. The English Standard Version, which is very literal at this point, translates the passage as follows: “Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair, the wearing of gold, *or the putting on of clothing*—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious” (1 Pet 3:3–4). If this passage forbids braiding of hair and wearing of gold, then it must also forbid “the putting on of clothing”! But surely Peter was not telling women they should wear no clothes to church! He was rather saying that those external things should not be what they look to for their “adorning,” for their source of attractiveness and beauty to others. It should rather be the inner character qualities which he mentions.²⁵ Therefore I do not think that the statements about jewelry and braided hair for women, *rightly understood*, are “culturally relative” commands, but they have direct application to women today as well.²⁶

Finally, should men be “lifting holy hands” in prayer today? Personally, I lean toward thinking that this may be something that is transcultural and that we should consider restoring to our practice of prayer (and praise) in evangelical circles today. (I realize that many Christians already do this in worship.) What influences my thinking is a frequent OT pattern of lifting hands or stretching out hands to God in prayer (see e.g. Exod 9:29; 1 Kgs 8:38; Pss 28:2; 63:4; 134:2; 143:6; Lam 3:41). On the other hand, since this is an outward, physical action (and thus some may think that it falls in the

²⁵ Some translations of 1 Pet 3:3 say that women should not put on “fine clothes” (so NIV; similarly RSV, NRSV, NLT, NKJV), but there is no adjective modifying “clothing” (Greek *himation*), and the ESV, NASB, and KJV have translated it more accurately.

²⁶ I realize that others might argue that such braided hair and jewelry in the first century were recognized as an outward symbol of low moral character, and that was the reason that Paul and Peter prohibited it. I am not persuaded by this because Peter still prohibits the “wearing of clothing,” and I cannot think that only women of low moral character wore clothes in the first century. But if someone does take this position, it does not matter much for my argument, for this would then simply be one additional physical action that carries a symbolic meaning, and in this case also the prohibition would not be one that would apply absolutely to women who wanted to wear braided hair or jewelry today, since they would not convey that m

same category as a holy kiss or the washing of feet), I can understand that others would conclude that this is simply a variable cultural outward expression of a physical expression of an inward heart attitude toward God and dependence on him and focus on him in our prayers. It seems to me that there is room for Christians to differ on this question, but in any case it certainly is not a complicated enough question that it requires Webb's entire "redemptive-movement hermeneutic" to encourage us to move beyond the ethic of the commands that we find in the NT.

Is it really that simple? Are the only matters in dispute about cultural relativity just these simple physical items or actions, all of which carry symbolic meaning? Perhaps I have missed one or two other examples, but I suspect it really is that simple. I believe God has given us a Bible that he intends believers generally to be able to understand (what has traditionally been called the clarity or the perspicuity of Scripture). Surely the question is not as complex and confusing as Webb's book portrays it. The general principle is this: *Some commands of Scripture concerning physical actions that carry symbolic meaning are rightly obeyed through different actions that would still convey a similar meaning in each culture.* (I say "some commands" because baptism and the Lord's Supper are exceptions: they involve physical actions that are tied in many ways to the central events of redemptive history, and these actions should not be changed.)

At this point someone may object, what about all those other passages that Webb lists at the beginning of his book (pp. 14–15), passages we found so difficult to classify regarding the question of cultural relativity?

My response to that is that there are other widely-accepted principles of biblical interpretation that explain why many other commands in the Bible are not binding today. These principles of interpretation, however, are far different from Webb's principles, because they argue that certain commands are not binding on Christians today because of *theological convictions about the nature of the Bible and its history*, not because of *cultural analysis* or because of convictions about *cultural relativity*, and surely not because of any conviction that the NT commands were simply representative of a transitional ethic beyond which we need to move as we find a better ethic in today's society.

The following list gives some kinds of commands in the Bible that Christians do not have to obey in any literal or direct sense today (a fact which is evident apart from Webb's "redemptive-movement hermeneutic"):

(1) The details of the Mosaic law code, which were written for people under the Mosaic covenant.²⁷

²⁷ I realize that many people, including me, would argue that many of the laws in the Mosaic law code give us guidance on the kinds of things that are pleasing and displeasing to God today. In some ways that question is one of the more difficult questions in biblical interpretation. But I know of no Christians who would say that Christians today are actually under the Mosaic covenant, and therefore bound to obey *all* of the commands in the Mosaic covenant, including the commands about sacrifices and clean and unclean foods, and so forth.

(2) Pre-Pentecost commands for situations unique to Jesus' earthly ministry (such as "go nowhere among the Gentiles" in Matt 10:5).

(3) Commands that apply only to people in the same life situation as the original command (such as "bring the cloak . . . and above all the parchments" in 2 Tim 4:13, and also "no longer drink only water" in 1 Tim 5:23). I would also put in this category Acts 15:29, which is a command for people in a situation of Jewish evangelism in the first century: "That you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled" (note that Paul himself explicitly allows the eating of foods sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 10).

(4) Everyone agrees that there are some passages, especially in Jesus' earthly teaching, that are difficult to understand in terms of how broadly we should apply them. Passages like, "Do not refuse the one who would borrow from you" (Matt 5:42) must be interpreted in the light of the whole of Scripture, including passages that command us to be wise and to be good stewards of what God has entrusted to us. But *these are not questions of cultural relativity*, nor do these difficult passages cause us to think that we must move beyond Jesus' teaching to some kind of higher and better ethic. We agree that we are to be subject to this teaching and to obey it, and we earnestly seek to know exactly how Jesus intends us to obey it.

(5) There are differences among Christians today on how much we should try to follow commands regarding the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit such as, "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons" (Matt 10:8). Some Christians think we should obey those commands directly, and they seek to do exactly what Jesus commanded. Other Christians believe that these commands were given only for that specific time in God's sovereign work in the history of redemption. But the important point here is that these differences are *theological*. This is not a dispute over whether certain commands are *culturally relative* because the point at issue is not one of ancient culture versus modern culture, but is rather a theological question about the teaching of the whole Bible concerning the work of miracles, and concerning God's purpose for miracles at various points in the history of redemption.

After we have made these qualifications, how much of the NT is left? Vast portions of the NT are still easily and directly applicable to our lives as Christians today, and many other passages are applicable with only minor changes to modern equivalents. As I was preparing to write this analysis of Webb's book, I read quickly through the NT epistles, and I was amazed how few of the commands found in the epistles raise any question at all about cultural relativity. (I encourage readers to try the same exercise for themselves.) Where it is necessary to transfer a command to a modern equivalent, this is generally not difficult because there are sufficient similarities between the ancient situation and the modern situation, and Christian readers generally see the connection quite readily. It is not difficult to move from "the wages of the *laborers who mowed your fields*, which you kept back by fraud" (Jas 5:4) to "the wages of the *employees who work in your factory*,

which you kept back by fraud." It is not difficult to move from "honor the emperor" (1 Pet 2:17) to "honor *government officials* who are set in authority over you." It is not difficult to move from "Masters, treat your *slaves* justly and fairly" to "Employers, treat your *employees* justly and fairly." It is not difficult to move from "*Slaves*, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord" to "*Employees*, obey your employers" (with the general biblical principle that we are never to obey those in authority over us when obedience would mean disobedience to God's laws). It is not difficult to move from "food offered to idols" (1 Cor 8:10) to other kinds of things that encourage Christians to violate their conscience. And, to take one OT example of a command that everyone believes tells us what God expects today, it is not difficult to move from "You shall not covet your neighbor's . . . ox" (Exod 20:17) to "You shall not covet you neighbor's car or boat."

My suggestion, then, about the question of culturally relative commands, is that it is not that difficult a question. There are perhaps three to five "culturally relative" commands concerning physical actions that carry symbolic meaning (at least holy kiss, headcovering, footwashing; perhaps short hair for men and lifting hands in prayer), but we still obey these by applying them in different forms today. There are other broad categories of commands (such as Mosaic laws) which are not binding on us because we are under the new covenant. There are some fine points that require mature reflection (such as to what extent the details of the OT show us what pleases God today). But the rest—especially the commands in the NT addressed to Christians in the new covenant—were written for our benefit, and they are not for us to "move beyond," but to obey.

VIII. IS WILLIAM WEBB'S BOOK A HELPFUL GUIDE FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY?

Although Webb raises many interesting and challenging questions regarding cultural relativity, I believe *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* is a deeply flawed book that fundamentally contradicts the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* because it nullifies in principle the moral authority of the entire NT and replaces it with the moral authority of a "better ethic," an ethic that Webb claims to be able to discover through a complex hermeneutical process entirely foreign to the way God intended the Bible to be read, understood, believed, and obeyed. Because a denial in principle of the moral authority of the NT commands is at the heart of the whole system, and because the system denies the historical accuracy of the creation account, I do not believe Webb's "redemptive-movement hermeneutic" should be accepted as a valid system for evangelicals today.