

Theological Extrapolation

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Introduction

“Theological extrapolation” is one way of describing a new hermeneutic or principle of interpretation that promises to help Bible readers more accurately apply the Scriptures in their lives today. This *interpretative/applicational approach* has also been called a *“progressive”* or *“developmental”* or *“trajectory”* hermeneutic. William Webb, the author whose book I want to survey in this paper, prefers the label *“redemptive-movement”* or *“redemptive-spirit”* hermeneutic because he believes these better emphasize his conviction that his conclusions reflect those of the Scriptures.¹ So in this paper I will use *“redemptive-movement hermeneutic”* (or something similar) to describe what I mean by *“theological extrapolation.”*

I have chosen to focus on Webb’s work because it is being widely read and favourably reviewed by many evangelicals and he is professor of New Testament at Heritage Theological Seminary right here in our own province of Ontario, Canada. By his own admission Webb is an *egalitarian* regarding to the roles of men and women and his exploration of hermeneutics is closely tied to his belief that egalitarianism is biblical when all the relevant facts have been taken into consideration.

I will begin my analysis of Webb’s book by quoting his conclusion and then I will start at the beginning of the book and trace out his arguments before offering some

¹ William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2001), p.31

thoughts of my own on his work and the challenges it presents to us as Christian students, preachers and teachers of the Bible.

“In sum, the case studies developed in this book support a redemptive-movement hermeneutic. If the original readers of Scripture lived out its isolated words, by virtue of their cultural context, they lived out the redemptive spirit of the text for that generation. For us, however, it is a different story. For us the redemptive spirit does not always come automatically because the applicational context has changed. We must journey beyond any surface-level appropriation to application of the text that captures its meaning in cultural and canonical context—an application that honors its underlying spirit. Our task is not to lock into an ethic that has been frozen in time, but to pursue an ultimate ethic, one reflected in the redemptive spirit of Scripture. As a community born to the twenty-first century, we must not be limited to a mere enactment of the text’s isolated words. It is our sacred calling to champion its spirit.”²

While Webb’s words sound inspiring any call to move beyond the “*text of Scripture*” in pursuit of the “*spirit of the text*” is one that needs to be undertaken with great caution. It is one thing to allow the God-breathed text of Scripture to teach, rebuke, correct and train us in righteousness (2 Tim.3:16); it is quite another to leave the “*isolated words*” of the text behind in the name of truth and faithfulness to the Scriptures. We need to ask whether this is legitimate. Is it really our *sacred calling to champion its spirit*?

Webb’s Argument

Webb begins with a series of biblical quotations from the Old and New Testaments that demonstrate the difficulty of applying the Bible in the culture in which we live.³ He believes our main difficulty in this regard is knowing what is *transcultural*

² Webb, p.256.

³ Cf. Gen.1:28; Deut.6:5; Deut.26:12; 1 Cor.16:20; 1 Cor.14:34; 1 Tim.5:23; Deut.15:19; Deut.22:28-29; Lev.18:19, 22, 23; Mt.28:19; 1 Tim.4:13; Lev.19:19; 2 Pet.1:10; Gen.9:6; Jn.13:14;

and therefore applicable today, versus what is *cultural* and therefore not binding in our present situation. This dilemma or tension can be expressed in many different ways: “Cultural/transcultural, cultural/kingdom, culturally confined/beyond cultural limits, time-bound truth/timeless truth, culturally relative application/transcultural principle, temporal/supratemporal, non-transferable form/transferable function, local/universal, momentary husk/enduring kernel, peripheral meaning/core meaning, wineskins/wine.”⁴

Making the transition from the theoretical to the practical, Webb argues that there are two contemporary issues facing the church that highlight the difficulty of applying the Scriptures in our modern world: the role of women, and homosexuality. Do we move with the culture or do we stand against it? How do we apply the teaching of the Bible today in a way that makes sense to modern sensibilities? He believes these two issues are forcing the church to wrestle once again with principles of interpretation and application.

Against this backdrop Webb introduces his *redemptive-movement hermeneutic*. This is a hermeneutic that examines the Scriptures in light of the cultural context in which they were originally written and read. It reads the text looking for movement relative to the ideas and cultural norms of the day. It asks questions like: is the text moving *against the culture* in its affirmation of truth or is the text moving *with the culture* in a way that is progressive and enlightened? At the same time, the *redemptive-movement hermeneutic* is tracking the development of the text and the ideas being articulated relative to the canon of Scripture. It is taking note of how the truth is being fleshed out as the biblical revelation unfolds. In particular it is looking to see if there is a

Mt.10:5-6, 8; Lk.12:33; Ex.20:9-10; 1 Cor.11:6-7; 1 Cor.11:14; 1 Cor.7:27; Gen.17:10; Prov.23:14; Mt.5:42; Rom.12:14, 20; Prov.31:6-7; Lev.19:28; Ps.150:4-5; Lev.19:32; Acts 15:29; 1 Pet.2:18; Deut.22:5; Num.5:12, 17, 26; 1 Tim.2:8-9; Lev.25:36; Jas.5:14.

⁴ Webb, pp.24-25.

trajectory that can be discerned and if so it tries to discover where it is headed and how it should be realized in our lives today.

To help us understand what he is saying Webb sets the “*redemptive-movement hermeneutic*” over against a “*static hermeneutic*” that understands and then tries to apply the words of the biblical text as they would have been applied in their original setting. It is *static* in the sense that it does so without an adequate appreciation of the underlying dynamic textual spirit and the implications of that spirit when it comes to living out the truth today.

The difference between the two hermeneutical approaches can be seen in how they handle the issue of slavery. Throughout his book Webb uses slavery as a *neutral example* (paradigm) of his hermeneutic before he moves on to more controversial areas. According to Webb, those who employ a “*static hermeneutic*” would not be opposed to the institution of slavery because it is found in the Bible, and if it were to reappear today, they would merely seek to regulate it as is done in both the Old and New Testaments. On the other hand, those utilizing a “*redemptive approach*” would understand that although slavery is found in the Bible, the same Scriptures also contain ideas and principles which if developed and taken to their logical conclusion would bring about its abolition. Webb believes that a “*redemptive hermeneutic*” should not only be applied to the issue of slavery but to women and homosexuality as well. He believes that when the cultural has been separated from the transcultural, and the Scriptures are followed to their logical conclusion, an *egalitarianism or ultra-soft patriarchy* will replace biblical patriarchy in connection with the roles of men and women. While in the case of homosexuality, his

hermeneutic will reveal that it has always been something that is contrary to God's purpose for human beings.

Webb's Criteria

To help us determine what has *ongoing applicational significance* as opposed to *limited applicational significance* Webb sets forth 18 criteria. These are further subdivided into *16 intrascriptural criteria* and *2 extrabiblical criteria*. The intrascriptural criteria are then further divided into 3 groups: 1) persuasive, 2) moderately persuasive, and 3) inconclusive criteria. Both extrabiblical criteria are viewed as persuasive because they represent material drawn from God's general revelation in the world. While Webb is prepared to give "a certain measure of methodological deference" to the criteria derived more directly from the Bible, he considers the extrabiblical criteria just as "weighty" and tells us that they "contribute significantly to the ultimate conclusion of this book."⁵

Webb's list⁶ looks like this:

INTRASCRIPPTURAL CRITERIA

Persuasive

1. Preliminary Movement
2. Seed Ideas
3. Breakouts
4. Purpose/Intent Statements
5. Basis in Fall and/or Curse

⁵ Webb, p.17.

⁶ Webb pp.69-70.

Moderately Persuasive

6. Original Creation (Patterns)
7. Original Creation (Primogeniture)
8. New Creation
9. Competing Options
10. Opposition to Original Culture
11. Closely Related Issues
12. Penal Code
13. Specific Versus General

Inconclusive

14. Basis in Theological Analogy
15. Contextual Comparisons
16. Appeal to Old Testament

EXTRA-SCRIPTURAL CRITERIA

Persuasive

17. Pragmatic Relevance Between Two Cultures
18. Scientific Evidence

I do not have time or space in this paper to interact with all of Webb's material as it applies to both women and homosexuals. I am going to bypass much of what he has said about homosexuality and focus instead on his attempt to separate the cultural from the transcultural when it comes to the roles of men and women. Even here my treatment will be superficial because I am more interested in getting at his basic hermeneutic than I

am in discussing all the fine points of the complementarian versus egalitarian debate. I am not only concerned with how he has applied his redemptive hermeneutic to the women's issue and homosexuality, but how others might apply it to other areas of biblical interpretation and application.

INTRASCRIPITURAL CRITERIA

Persuasive Criteria

Webb's *persuasive criteria* begin with *preliminary movement*. He believes that a text is more likely to be culturally bound if Scripture modifies the original culture in a way that suggests further movement is possible and advantageous in a subsequent culture.⁷ He sees examples of this kind of movement in the case of slavery and women. Relative to the culture of the day, the Bible in both Old and New Testaments is very concerned about the fair treatment of slaves and women. The instruction of the Bible is pushing cultural norms in the direction of greater justice. For example: slaves were given time off work and allowed to participate in worship, there were release provisions and limits placed on discipline; female slaves and concubines were protected from abuse, they were given greater rights in cases of divorce, there were rape laws protecting women from this kind of brutality etc. Relative to the original culture these provisions reflect *redemptive movement* and this movement having begun strongly suggests that there may still be a significant way to go before we reach the ultimate ethic that God desires.

Joined to preliminary movement are *seed ideas*.⁸ These are ideas found in texts of Scripture that are capable of being developed beyond the application understood by the

⁷ Webb, p.73.

⁸ Webb, p.83.

original audience. In the case of slaves, texts of Scripture like 1 Cor.7:21; 12:13; Gal.3:28; Col.3:11; Phm 15-16 introduce and encourage future generations of Christians to move beyond what is actually written in the Bible regarding slaves. In a similar way, Webb thinks that texts like Gal.3:28; 1 Cor.12:13; Eph.2:15; Col.3:11 and 1 Cor.11:11-12 indicate that the patriarchy of the Bible is not the final word on male/female relationships. These texts contain radical seeds of thought that need to be developed. They point to a better way, even beyond what was understood in the first century, if we are willing to follow the spirit within these texts to their ultimate and loving conclusion.

Breakouts, or what amount to exceptions to the rules, are also indicators of cultural relativity, particularly if they continue to advance the direction of the preliminary movement and represent an actualizing of the seed ideas.⁹ So, for instance, God sometimes uses left-handed people, sets aside Nazarites with long hair, allows people to eat meat offered to idols, chooses the younger instead of the older sibling who had the right of the primogeniture, and actually works to release slaves from their captivity in spite of statements which would lead us to expect something else. Women like Deborah, Huldah, Priscilla, Junia function as judges, prophets, counsellors and apostles contrary to the norms of biblical culture. Job's daughters are granted an inheritance along with their brothers (42:15), and passages like 1 Cor.7:3-5 encourage a mutuality and equality in at least one area of marriage that surely has implications for marriage as a whole.

Purpose or intent statements can tip us off to the cultural nature of a biblical text if what is being commanded no longer fulfills the original purpose or intent of the command.¹⁰ For example, Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor.16:20; 2 Cor.13:12; 1 Thes.5:26 and 1

⁹ Webb. p.91.

¹⁰ Webb, p.105.

Pet.5:14 instruct Christian believers to greet one another with a “holy kiss”. Such a kiss in the Hellenistic-Roman world was intended to show love and community among the brothers and sisters in Christ. This is no longer the case in our part of the world where a firm handshake and warm greeting are much more appropriate. Likewise, Webb thinks that the NT submission lists that require slaves to submit to their masters, and subjects to their king, and wives to their husbands no longer fulfill their intended purpose.

Originally this kind of submission was mandated to make the gospel attractive to outsiders (Titus 2:9-10; 1 Tim.6:1; 1 Pet.2:13-15; Titus 2:4-5; 1 Pet.3:1; 2:12). In today’s world with employees/employers instead of slaves/masters, and democracy instead of a monarchy, and wives/husbands who prize mutuality and equality, first century type submission will turn people off and make Christianity look archaic and regressive.

Therefore, this kind of submission is quite likely cultural versus transcultural in nature.

Webb’s last criteria in the persuasive category has to do with components of the biblical text that are *rooted in the curse or the Fall*.¹¹ Since the effects of the curse and the Fall continue to impact our world, components that are linked to them may be transcultural. Pain in childbirth (Gen.3:16), weed infested ground (Gen.3:17) and death (Gen.3:19) are a part of our present existence and will continue till Jesus comes again.

When it comes to the women’s issue, Webb favors the idea that male/female hierarchy had its origin in the Fall. He does not see any explicit evidence of male/female hierarchy in the creation account. As he sees it, there is no explicit statement of hierarchy prior to the Fall, the naming of Eve by Adam is not determinative, and the blessing and cursing formulas seem to establish hierarchy rather than modify an existing pre-fall hierarchical arrangement. However, although it appears that this criteria establishes the transcultural

¹¹ Webb, p.110.

nature of hierarchy subsequent to the Fall there are other factors that must be taken into consideration. Are not Christians to alleviate the effects of the fall? If hierarchy is one such effect should not we be doing all we can to remedy this sad state of affairs? Webb believes that arguments (1 Tim.2:14-15) based on the order of the Fall (Eve fell before Adam) and the nature of the Fall (the woman being deceived, not the man) are inconclusive and are certainly not a sufficient base on which to maintain hierarchy today.

Moderately Persuasive

Heading this list are components of the text which seem to be *based in the original creation*.¹² Webb finds this criteria only moderately persuasive because he sees many things that were part of the original creation that do not carry with them transcultural implications. For example, what is said about marriage in the beginning does not rule out divorce or polygamy until the implications of life-long marriage union are spelled out in the New Testament. Singleness is later permitted although it is not mentioned in the creation narrative which speaks about a man leaving his father and mother and being united to his wife. Farming seems to be the assumed occupation of man and ground transportation the means of travel. Married human couples were to have as many children as they could as they fulfilled God's command to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. Men and women were to eat a vegetarian diet. The Sabbath is mentioned and even the length of the workweek stipulated. Webb's point is that just because something is mentioned in the original creation account does not mean that it is binding on all people for all time. Some things were clearly limited in their application. If this is true, then we must be careful when it comes to assessing the transcultural value of what is said about women in the creation record. She is said to be

¹² Webb, p.123.

made in God's image, addressed as part of the creation mandate, described as a helpmate, made from Adam's rib, named by man, made and addressed second by God after he has made and spoken to the man. These facts may have transcultural significance but that will have to be determined by other factors, their location in the creation account is not decisive.

Closely related to *creation patterns* is the *primogeniture* (rights of the firstborn).¹³ Texts that are rooted in the original-creation material, and more specifically the creative order, may be transcultural. This seems to be the point that Paul is making in 1 Tim.2:13 when he speaks about Adam being formed before Eve. Webb, however, warns us that we must not be too quick to jump to a conclusion at this point because there is a strong cultural component to the *primogeniture*. In the Bible primogeniture values are frequently overturned (e.g., Jacob is chosen rather than Esau) and they seem to be closely related to survival and success in an agricultural environment. Furthermore, Christians today no longer apply the primogeniture in any kind of sustained or consistent way. All these factors, in combination with the possibility that the Genesis account is being written against the background of the world into which Adam and Eve were about to enter, or the world of Israel years later in the time of Moses, and the primogeniture criteria is not as strong or as universal an argument as it at first appears. This in turns opens the door to the possibility that Paul's argument in 1 Tim.2:13 has a strong cultural component that in some way or other no longer applies today.

Also in the moderately persuasive category are texts which are *rooted in new-creation material*.¹⁴ Webb sees the Bible as basically divided into two parts: old creation

¹³ Webb, p.134.

¹⁴ Webb, p.145.

and new creation. The new creation, or new humanity, which God began to build with the call of Abraham and the formation of Israel¹⁵ is now being realized in the church, the present “*in Christ community.*” Texts like Gal.3:28; 1 Cor.12:13; Eph.2:15; 4:22-24; Col.3:11 all represent “*new-creation material.*” As this age unfolds and we get ever closer to the eschaton we should expect that the radical sociological implications of these texts will be worked out in the life of the church. Regarding men and women these verses point in the direction of an equality that goes beyond mere spiritual equality in Christ. If that is true, we should expect that the earlier structures of cultural patriarchy, which still a part of the biblical writings, will be eliminated or severely modified.

Competing options is the idea that a text is more likely to be transcultural if it is presented over against other options in that day.¹⁶ A text is much more likely to be cultural if alternatives could not have been conceived by the original author or audience. Since the people in biblical times could not imagine abolition, slavery is most likely cultural. The same is true with a geocentric versus a heliocentric view of the universe, and monarchy versus democracy. Since patriarchy was a universal phenomena in the biblical world and the kind of equality being championed today unimaginable, it is most likely cultural too.

Opposition to the original culture is similar to competing options.¹⁷ Where the Bible runs contrary to the original culture it is more likely to be dealing in universal truth. Its direct opposition to slavery, to a man-centered view of the world, to the worship of idols, to bestiality and transvestite activities show that these are always wrong. Its strong emphasis on non-retaliation and love, even loving enemies, transcend cultural

¹⁵ Webb, p.148.

¹⁶ Webb, p.152.

¹⁷ Webb, p.157.

boundaries. When applied to the women's issue it means that where the Bible parallels the culture of the day it is cultural, but where it challenges the culture it is universal.

The criteria of *closely related issues* means that a component of a text may be cultural if *closely related issues* are also cultural.¹⁸ Because many issues surrounding both slaves and women are cultural there is the strong possibility that the more basic issues are cultural as well. When it comes to women Webb mentions: attitudes of ownership/property, father-to-husband transfer, inheritance/ownership of property rights, virginity expectations, adultery/extramarital sex legislation, divorce legislation and other features related to the practice of patriarchy.¹⁹

Penal code criteria is based on the observation that transcultural laws and legislation is much more seriously punished than that which is cultural.²⁰ In the case of women Webb notes that there is no death penalty for insubordination.

The last moderately persuasive criteria is the *specific versus general* criteria. A component of a text may be culturally relative if specific instructions appear to contradict general principles of Scripture.²¹ This latter category would include statements like "love your neighbour as yourself." Where specific legislation regarding slaves or women appears to run contrary to broad over-arching biblical principles then we are probably dealing with instructions that were redemptive in their original context but may need to be modified so as to continue to be redemptive in other cultural settings.

¹⁸ Webb, p.162.

¹⁹ Webb, pp.164-167.

²⁰ Webb, p.172.

²¹ Webb, p.179.

Inconclusive Criteria

Just because a component of a text is *rooted in the character of God or Christ through theological analogy* does not mean that it is necessarily transcultural.²² To establish this criteria, Webb selects seven neutral examples of theological analogy some of which are transcultural while others are cultural. In the Bible, Christians are told to love as God loves (1 Jn.4:11), to be holy as he is holy (1 Pet.1:16) and to forgive as he forgives (Eph.4:32). These are transcultural injunctions and values even though we recognize that we are not able to do any of these things to the degree God does. But there are other theological analogies that have cultural components bound up with them. For example, God is portrayed as the “Master in heaven” (Eph.6:5-9; Col.3:22-4:1) even though slavery is principally undermined in other Scriptures; God is “King” even though a monarchy is not the only form of government (1 Tim.6:15; Rev.17:14; 19:16); Christ is described as the “firstborn” (Col.1:15-18) even though the primogeniture is culturally relative; and Christ is said to sit at the “right-hand of God” even though the value and superiority of right-handedness has strong cultural overtones. Moving from these, Webb comments on two more biblical analogies in which Christ is described as a husband who loves his wife (Eph.5:22-33), and God is portrayed as a husband who disciplines his wife (Hos.1:1-3:5). Webb maintains that both analogies contain transcultural and cultural truths that must be carefully separated from one another before they can be properly applied in a modern setting. Just because a theological analogy is used does not mean that a command can be directly applied without cultural reflection and adaptation.

²² Webb, p.185.

Another inconclusive criteria is *contextual comparisons*.²³ Here Webb examines various lists of ethical demands in the Bible. He notes that *mixture texts* like Deut.22:9-11 contain mostly cultural demands. *Vice and virtue lists* like Prov.6:16-19; Jer.7:9; Ezk.18:5-17; 22:6-12; Mt.5:3-10; Rom.1:24-32; 13:13-14; 1 Cor.6:9-10; Gal.5:22-23 largely catalogue transcultural values. *New Testament codes/submission lists* like Eph.5:21-6:9; Col.3:18-4:1; 1 Tim.2:8-6:2; Titus 2:1-10; 1 Pet.2:11-3:7; 5:1-5 contain elements that are transcultural (children submit to parents and congregations to elders) as well as elements that are cultural (people/subjects submit to the king/emperor; slaves to their masters; and wives to their husbands). And *sexual taboo lists* like Lev.18:1-20:27 reflect transcultural values. His point is that just because something appears in a list does not mean it is universally binding. There has to be a closer examination of the other components of the list before a determination can be made. This is especially true of women's submission since that command falls in a list that he thinks contains both cultural and transcultural items.

His last inconclusive criteria is *appeal to the Old Testament*.²⁴ Just because a practice is found in both the Old and New Testaments does not mean that it is transcultural. On the other hand, if a Old Testament practice is abrogated in the New Testament that is a fairly reliable indicator that it is cultural in nature. As Webb puts it, "Continuity between the Testaments provides inconclusive results whereas discontinuity offers reasonably conclusive results."²⁵ As examples of discontinuity Webb offers Old Testament sacrifices, food laws and the practice of circumcision. There is continuity between the Testaments when it comes to slaves and masters, subjects and kings, lifting

²³ Webb, p.192.

²⁴ Webb, p.201.

²⁵ Webb, p.208.

up holy hands, holy kissing, and foot-washing. Because the patriarchy of the Old Testament is continued in the New Testament (i.e. there is a continuity), it is impossible on this basis alone to make a decision about the transcultural nature of biblical patriarchy.

EXTRA-SCRIPTURAL CRITERIA

Persuasive Criteria

A component of a biblical imperative is more likely to be either cultural or transcultural depending on whether the *pragmatic basis of the imperative is the same between cultures*.²⁶ If the pragmatic reason for doing something changes from culture to culture then the imperative is most likely cultural, if not, then it is transcultural.

Something like foot washing made perfect sense in the agrarian world of the Bible but little sense in our day and part of the world. Children's submission to their parents makes good sense no matter what the culture because children are vulnerable and need parental protection and instruction. However, it is wrong to insist that citizens in a democracy obey and submit to the government of the day as if they were living in a monarchy and the head of government were an emperor or king. But this is not true in the church.

Congregational submission to the elders still makes sense because presumably the elders have more biblical knowledge and experience than the average person in the pew. When it comes to the roles of men/women Webb thinks that the pragmatic basis for patriarchy has changed. In biblical times women were at a clear disadvantage compared to men.

They were not as educated, nor did they have the social exposure and experience of their male counterparts, nor did they have the same physical strength, they were not financially independent and they were often married at a much younger age. Today, with the

²⁶ Webb, p.209.

exception of the physical strength, this has largely changed. Since the pragmatic underpinnings of patriarchy no longer make sense in today's world what we find in the Bible is more cultural than transcultural.

Webb's eighteenth and final criteria is that of the *scientific and social-scientific evidence*.²⁷ Simply put this means that a component of a text may be culturally confined if it is contrary to present-day scientific evidence. At this point he distinguishes between "*absolute scientific/social-scientific data and relative scientific/social-scientific data.*" "*Absolute data*" is true in any culture and time period, whereas "*relative data*" is only true in a particular time and culture. Unfortunately, absolute and relative data are mixed up in the Bible. For instance, the Bible speaks in terms of a geocentric view of the world when scientifically speaking we know this is incorrect. But even when the Bible speaks in this way it still conveys transcultural truths about God as the Creator and about his care of the world. To the degree that biblical cosmology is geocentric rather than heliocentric we need to see cultural accommodation and let it go while holding on to the larger more transcendent truths it teaches. Another example of cultural accommodation is the Bible's view that the earth is flat versus the round earth which we can see from the space shuttle. When it comes to women Webb believes that the Bible reflects a number of culturally limited perspectives. For instance, the ideas that they are "reproductive gardens" or "poor leaders" or "more easily deceived than men," represent time bound perspectives. Today we know that none of these things are as universally true as the Bible seems to indicate. A text like 1 Tim.2:14 made perfect sense in its original cultural setting, given the assumptions of that day, but today what is said about the woman should be applied to

²⁷ Webb, p.221.

both men and women so that when we go looking for leaders, we look for people who are not easily deceived regardless of their gender.

Assessment

1. Webb's eighteen criteria fly in the face of the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture.

Reading the book is tedious and trying to work through 16 intrascriptural and 2 extrascriptural criteria of either persuasive, moderately persuasive and inconclusive value is a daunting task for anyone let alone a simple sinner saved by grace who wants to know God's will. I realize that this may sound very non-academic and scholarly, but this thought hit me over and over again as I tried to understand what he is saying. Although the Bible is a profound book that no one can fully fathom or master it is nonetheless a book that can be understood by those who read it with the help of the Holy Spirit. The Bible itself insists on that in passages like Deut.6:6-7 where God tells the children of Israel that his words are to be on their hearts, they are to impress them on their children, they are to talk about them when they sit at home, walk along the road, lie down and get up. Psm.1:1-3 pronounces a blessing on the man, any man, who delights in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night. Psm.19:7 and 119:130 both speak of the power of the statutes/word of the Lord to make wise the simple. Even though *simple* is more of a moral/spiritual description than an intellectual one, it still speaks of the Bible's ability to instruct those who lack judgment and are easily led astray by the counsel and example of others. In the New Testament Jesus never excuses anyone's ignorance or conduct because of the complexity of the Hebrew Scriptures, even though they were written over many hundreds of years and the people of his day were separated from some

of the leading biblical figures by thousands of years. New Testament letters were written to congregations of regular everyday people not to church leaders only, or to scholars, or even seminary students. In some of these congregations there were significant numbers of Gentile converts who were not familiar with the *culture* of Israel. These were expected to read a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures and be able to understand it (Rom.4:1-25; 15:4; 1 Cor.10:1-11; 2 Tim.3:16-17).²⁸ There is something intuitively wrong with an approach to the Bible that makes things so difficult, and when all is said and done, is still not able to say with certainty what is right and wrong today. If understanding and applying Scriptures today is so difficult why do the Gideons bother to hand out Bibles to grade five students (among others) and why do the Wycliffe Bible Translators work to translate the Scriptures into the languages of the world? There is also something fundamentally wrong with an approach to the Bible that admittedly finds two extrabiblical criteria more persuasive than eleven others that are apparently derived from the Bible itself. This brings me to the heart of the issue: Webb's hermeneutical grid.

2. Webb's criteria impose a foreign "grid" on the Scriptures.

While Webb's criteria are sometimes helpful when it comes to making us think about how the biblical text applies today, they are *foreign* in the sense that they are not derived from the Scriptures themselves. From the very beginning of the book where he lists a series of texts that demonstrate the difficulty of the interpretative and applicatory process he seems to treat the Bible *a-historically*, as though there were no *redemptive-historical* development within the canon of Scripture that guides us as to what the text

²⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994), pp.106-107.

means as well as how it applies in the time in which we live. Webb talks about *redemptive-movement* but that is quite different from *redemptive-historical development*.²⁹ Redemptive-movement is too subjective a category because it is not established exegetically from the text of Scripture and it fails to follow the biblical storyline. We must remember that the Bible not only provides us with raw textual data but it gives us a framework in which that data is to be understood and applied. In sweeping terms, the Bible proceeds along the lines of creation, fall and redemption. Central to the unfolding purposes of God is the Lord Jesus Christ who is the fulfillment of all the Scriptures (Mt.5:17-20; Lk.24:25-27; 2 Cor.1:20). A *redemptive-historical* approach takes these crucial factors into consideration and they serve as a control on our interpretation and application of the text. Texts must be read in light of where they are located and where we are located in the biblical story; what is the epoch, and how is the text related to and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The answers to these questions guide us as to what is cultural as opposed to transcultural and they do so in keeping with the framework or grid that the Bible itself supplies. This is simply another way of saying that we must *let Scripture interpret Scripture*. If we use an interpretive grid that is not derived from the Bible itself there is no telling where we will end up. We are left to make rather subjective decisions about what texts will control the meaning and direction of others, and although we may be well intentioned, an unacceptable degree of arbitrariness is introduced and we become susceptible to the latest fads and trends of the day including those that seem to have the legitimacy of scientific and social-scientific collaboration.

²⁹ Thomas Schreiner, *William Webb's Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: A Review Article*. Published in the *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6:1 (Spring 2002) 46-64.

3. A closer look at Webb's criteria in light of redemptive-history.

I do not have time to review each criteria and I am not going to take them in the order in which he has presented them. Instead I am going to make some comments based on the biblical storyline and the need to read the Scriptures guided by the epochal and canonical horizons that find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

As I see it, one of the major problems with Webb's criteria is that he does not start where the Bible starts. By placing material relating to the original creation in the *moderately persuasive* category he has lured us away from the biblical starting-point. By starting with the items in his *persuasive* category (preliminary movement, seed ideas, breakouts, purpose/intent statements, basis in Fall/curse), he has not started where the Bible starts and consequently his reading of many texts is skewed. For instance, if we start in the first chapter of Genesis and read through the Bible from Old to New Testament we will quickly see that the text itself teaches us that not everything associated with Adam and Eve in the garden (criteria 6), or the primogeniture (criteria 7), was intended for universal application. The unfolding biblical story quickly reveals that not every male was to be a farmer, or that human beings should only get around by walking, or that everyone should be married and have as many children as they could, or that mankind was to be vegetarian. Even issues surrounding things like divorce, polygamy, the Sabbath, and the length of the workweek are subsequently explained as book after book is added to the canon of Scripture. If we read the Bible canonically there is no suggestion that the primogeniture was to be applied in all of its details down through the ages. But the same reading of the Scriptures will also reveal arguments based on the *firstborn* (1 Tim.2:11-13) made by inspired writers that indicate that some aspects of the

primogeniture still apply even in our culture. When biblical writers make an argument based on the original creation we need to pay attention and not try to wiggle out of their teaching because there are some things in the original creation that do not apply to everyone. The Bible itself tells us what applies and what does not.

Preliminary movement (criteria 1), seed ideas (criteria 2), breakouts (criteria 3), purpose/intent statements (criteria 4), basis in Fall/curse (criteria 5), cannot be used as a justification to overturn other passages of Scripture for the simple reason that they are too ambiguous and undefined if isolated from the overall text of Scripture. The direction of all these criteria in their abstract form is not self-evident and there is no way of knowing what their final/ultimate incarnation should look like if do not listen to all that biblical writers have to say as they trace out the unfolding plan of redemption. More to the point than these artificial categories is where a text is located in the Old and New Testaments. Many of the cultural/transcultural issues that Webb raises in his book are solved by noting where we are in the Bible. We know from the Bible itself that the legislation of the Old Covenant no longer applies today in its ancient form but only as it is fulfilled and applied in Jesus Christ. But we must remember that as Christians living on the fulfillment side of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are living in the same *redemptive epoch as the New Testament writers*. In spite of many cultural differences between their day and ours it is the same redemptive epoch. The next great event in redemptive history is the glorious return of the our Lord Jesus. This means that the New Testament Scriptures define for us what is binding and normative in this period of redemptive history. This is not another dispensation of grace. These days in which we live are the same *redemptive-historically* as the days in which Paul and Peter wrote. We

have no business taking some NT texts like the “*in Christ*” passages (Gal.3:28; 1 Cor.12:13; Eph.2:15; Col.3:11) and setting them over against other NT texts that speak about submission (Eph.5:22-33; 6:1; 6:5). It is not a matter of either/or but of both/and. Our interpretation and application of these passages must integrate both sets of texts. The truth lies in the appreciation of our standing and equality in Christ while at the same time understanding that there are ongoing role distinctions that God himself, through his inspired apostles, says are built into the created structure of the universe and ought to properly express themselves in Christian marriage and the Christian church until Jesus comes again. We must listen to Paul when he tells husbands to love their wives and wives to submit to their husbands, not on the basis of some culturally conceived analogy, but because the husband/wife relationship is supposed to reflect the marvellous mystery and transcultural reality of Christ’s relationship with his church.

In this regard the slavery issue is a bit of a red herring. Slavery, unlike the roles of men and women, is not something that was a part of the original creation. Slavery is the result of human sin and depravity and although it was initially regulated there is nothing in Scripture that says it must endure as a permanent fixture in human relationships. The roles of men and women are in a different category. There is a hierarchy established from the beginning, and even if that is not clear in the initial account, subsequent revelation makes it clear (1 Cor.11:3-12). This hierarchy has nothing to do with cultural factors. It existed prior to the Fall. It has been damaged by sin as has everything else. Jesus Christ has come to redeem us, but not in some undefined way, or in a way defined by the cultural agenda of politically correct Canada at the beginning of the 21 century. His redemption is spelled out for us in the New

Testament along with what he expects of us as his redeemed people. To suggest otherwise is to come perilously close to impugning the integrity and sufficiency of the Scriptures to tell us everything we need to know about life and godliness (2 Tim.3:16-17; 2 Pet.1:1-3) till Jesus comes again. That redemption involves husbands loving their wives and wives submitting to their husbands. It involves children obeying their parents and Christian congregations their leaders. It also involves workers submitting to their bosses, no matter what the cultural structure of the working relationship. It involves Christian citizens praying for and obeying their political leaders whether they are part of a democracy or some other form of human government. Webb exaggerates the cultural differences between our time and the time of the New Testament. He also exaggerates the rigidity of the biblical text. I believe it is a mistake to talk about the Bible accommodating itself to the errors of the day with regard to cosmology or the reproductive role of women or anything else. There are other explanations and other verses that indicate that the biblical writers were often more sophisticated than some want to admit. We must not make too much of cultural distinctives. Yes, there are differences, sometimes striking and profound differences. But when allowances have been made for all the differences, human beings are human beings, made in the image of God, fallen into sin, and in need of the same Savior no matter who they are or where they live. The Bible, properly interpreted, is sufficient to guide us today as it was in days gone by provided we start where it starts and follow it through redemptive-history to its grand fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

4. Concerns about the broader application of Webb's hermeneutic.

Leaving slaves, women and homosexuals for a moment, I want to conclude by coming back to something that was mentioned at the beginning: Webb's belief that twenty-first century Christians must, "*not be limited to a mere enactment of the text's isolated words. It is our sacred calling to champion its spirit.*"³⁰ In a footnote on the same page he explains that by "*the text's isolated words*" he means "*words understood in isolation from their cultural-movement and canonical movement context.*" But be that as it may, as I understand him, he is still calling us to move beyond the actual written words of the biblical text and pursue the spirit of the text. This is not just rhetoric at the end of a long book but it accurately sums up a major underlying theme. Much earlier in the second chapter Webb explains what he means.

"The final and most important characteristic of a redemptive-movement hermeneutic is its focus on the spirit of a text. As mentioned earlier, the coinage 'redemptive-movement hermeneutic' is derived from a concern that Christians apply the *redemptive spirit* with 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..."³¹

If this were just a matter of studying and understanding the text in its biblical setting, and seeking with the help of the Holy Spirit to apply its lessons and principles to our lives today, I would not quibble with what he has said. But Webb is careful to point out that this is not what he means. He distinguishes the *redemptive spirit* underlying a text from the *principle* underlying a text. The latter relates to "the degree of abstraction

³⁰ Webb, p.256.

³¹ Webb, p.53.

needed to cross between two worlds in the application process.”³² In other words, when we are looking for principles we are trying to discern from the text how it applies in other different but similar situations. Webb uses the example of the master/slave texts. The principle might be that we are to submit and obey those in authority within the workplace and in this way adorn the gospel. But according to Webb’s hermeneutic, this is not enough. If seeking to apply principles is compared to raising and lowering the sails on a boat, the redemptive-movement hermeneutic is “more like the wind that catches the sail to move the boat forward.”³³ If we understand the redemptive hermeneutic we will not so much submit to those in authority as we will fulfill our contractual agreements and we will go beyond anything imagined in the Scriptures and work for the abolition of the master/slave relationship as well as the reorganization of the workplace along the lines of a passionate trade-unionist.

Of course there is nothing to prevent this or something similar to it in the realm of slavery (if we follow salvation-history through creation, fall and redemption) and I do not believe we need Webb’s hermeneutic to move us in that direction. Where his methodology becomes more contentious and its implications more obvious is in the realm of male/female roles. Although Webb does not deal with it at this point in his book, in the end his hermeneutic would dismiss all biblical patriarchy as cultural (or almost all – he does allow for the possibility of “ultra-soft” patriarchy). Make no mistake about what he is doing and why. He is not dismissing biblical patriarchy because this is what the actual text says – he does so because he is following the spirit of the text – which he feels gives him the authority, even the sacred duty, to depart from clear biblical injunctions.

³² Webb, p.53.

³³ Webb, p.54.

He even admits that the *static hermeneutic* appears to be more faithful to the words of Scripture – due to its focus on its *isolated* words. But in the end he and others³⁴ argue that in spite of surface perceptions, his approach is more faithful to the Scriptures (i.e. *profoundly biblical*), even though they are not bound to the written words.

This is problematic and serious. Historically Christians have believed in verbal inspiration. All Scripture has been breathed out by God. The Scriptures do not become the word of God as God uses them to speak to us, they are God’s word. Now we are being told that the Scriptures merely point us in the right direction and instead of being bound to reverence and obey what they say we are to read between the lines, or catch the spirit of the text like wind in our sails, and allow it to carry us to a higher ethical plane than could have been imagined in the culture bound, time-locked world of the Bible.

This sounds to me like a new liberalism. Rev.22:18-19 warn us not to add to or subtract from the words of the prophecy of this book, referring in its immediate context to the book of Revelation, but in its canonical context to the Scriptures as a whole. It is one thing to apply the word of God to the issues of our day in a way that is consistent with what is actually written down, it is something else to do what the Scripture tells us we are not supposed to do, and then claim that our hermeneutic is somehow *profoundly biblical*.

I believe that if this hermeneutical approach catches on that two things will happen. First, there will be a time of chaos as different visions of the *spirit of the text* compete for acceptance within Christian church. Once we leave the objective reality of the text who is to say where the wind will blow us and whose version of “*the spirit*” is

³⁴ Stephen R. Spencer, professor of systematic theology. Dallas Theological Seminary, writes the following endorsement on the back cover of Webb’s book: “The book is well-focused, thoroughly researched, carefully argued, meticulously fair to differing views and *profoundly biblical*. I find it very persuasive.”

right. Second, I believe that we could well see the rise of a new authoritarianism because eventually someone, or some group of people, will have to arbitrate and make decisions, maybe even pronouncements, as to what we are supposed to do as Christians. The last thing we need is a new priesthood of clergy or scholars³⁵ who know who to apply the eighteen (and inevitably growing list of) intrascriptural and extrascriptural criteria so at last we can know God's will in the 21st century.

I believe that what was sufficient in days gone by to keep the people of God from being tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming, is all that is needed today. This anchor is found in the written word communicated by God himself through men as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet.1:19-21). That word not only gives us data but it shows us how to organize that data so that we might glorify our God on earth until Jesus comes again. Leaving the text behind in the name of following the spirit of the text is a quest that will end in disillusionment if not disaster. God still esteems those who tremble at his word (Is.66:2), no matter what their cultural situation.

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³⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Should We Move Beyond The New Testament To A Better Ethic? An Analysis of William J. Webb, Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), p.15.