

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).

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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 the questions of 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 as well.

The book provides an extensive and rather complex system of cultural analysis which Webb calls a “redemptive-movement hermeneutic.” I expect that most readers will find Webb’s explanation of why the Bible regulated but did not prohibit slavery to be a helpful analysis. Readers will also find helpful at least parts of Webb’s explanation of why the Bible’s prohibitions against homosexual conduct should not be to be culturally relative, but rather transcultural. Webb has read widely in literature that explains historical material concerning slavery and homosexuality in the cultural backgrounds that surrounded the writers of the Old Testament and the New Testament, and his book provides a helpful resource in those areas.

In addition, 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 New Testament 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 New Testament 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 New Testament *does* teach these things *for the culture in which the New Testament 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 Old and New Testaments 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 a system in which there is 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 are culturally relative. Nor do I believe that the book provides a system for analyzing cultural relativity that is ultimately helpful for Christians to use today.

1. Webb’s trajectory hermeneutic nullifies in principle the moral authority of the entire New Testament.

At first glance, it may not seem as though Webb “nullifies” the moral authority of the entire New Testament, because he agrees, for example that homosexual conduct is morally wrong, and that the New Testament condemnations of homosexual conduct are transcultural (pp. 39-41, 250-252, and many other places in the book). He also affirms that the New Testament admonitions for children to be subject to their parents are transcultural (p. 212). Is Webb not then affirming that some aspects of New Testament ethics are transcultural?

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

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

But for Webb, *the process is entirely different*, and the basis of authority is different. The commands concerning children and homosexuals are not binding on us today *because we are part of the new covenant age*, for which the New Testament was written (I could not find such a consideration anywhere in Webb’s book), but rather *because these commands have passed through the filtering system of Webb’s eighteen criteria* and have survived. As a matter of fact, the command concerning children has not entirely survived his filtering process, because Webb

believes that the New Testament commands that tell children to obey their parents actually teach that *adult children* should continue to be obedient to their own parents throughout their adult lives, but that this aspect of the command as Paul wrote it was culturally relative and need not be followed by us today (see p. 212).

In this way, I believe it is fair to say that Webb's system invalidates the moral authority of the entire New Testament, 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. (Webb does not consider the far simpler possibility that 1st 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 Ephesians 6:1 applies to modern believers in just the same way that it applied to 1st century believers, and no "cultural filters" need to be applied to that command.)

Someone may object at this point, "Doesn't everyone have to use some kind of cultural filter like this? 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?"

I would respond to that question by saying that there is a significant difference in approach. Most evangelicals (including me) would say that we *are* under the moral authority of the New Testament, and we are morally obligated to obey its commands when we are in the same situation as that addressed in the New Testament 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 Peter 2:17), then we 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 New Testament. Therefore, "honor the emperor" would be 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 Peter 2:13-14, which mentions being subject to "every human institution" including the "emperor" and "governors" as specific examples). (For the small handful of slightly more difficult cases, such as a "holy kiss" and "foot washing," see section 10 below.)

But with Webb the situation is entirely different. He does not consider the moral commands of the New Testament 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 letter Y) toward the development of a final or ultimate ethic (Z). Webb says,

The X \diamond Y \diamond 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. While most evangelical interpreters today would say that the New Testament 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; Philem. 16, 21), Webb does not take this approach. Instead, Webb believes that the Bible actually endorses slavery, however it is a kind of slavery with “better conditions and fewer abuses” (p. 37).

Webb’s redemptive-movement hermeneutic approaches the slavery question by saying that the original culture (X) approved of “slavery with many abuses” (p. 37). Second, 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 who believes our culture is much closer to an “ultimate ethic” (Z) in which we will see “wages maximized for all” (p. 37).

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 New Testament* 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 the institution of slavery, the Bible starts us along a trajectory which would lead to the ultimate abolition of slavery, though the New Testament 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 and 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 New Testament, begin to read the moral commands in one of Paul's epistles, and believe 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 New Testament 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, then, is that the moral authority of the New Testament is completely nullified *at least in principle*. There may in fact be some New Testament commands which Webb concludes actually do represent an ultimate ethic, but even then we should obey them *not because they are taught in the New Testament*, but because Webb's system has found that what the New Testament teaches is also the moral standard that is 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 own 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 texts 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 probably ever be able 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 New Testament. 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 New Testament toward an even higher emphasis on sovereignty of God than we find in any current New Testament texts.

And on and on it will go. Baptists will “begin to sense the redemptive spirit” of believer’s baptism as the New Testament 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 New Testament 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 more 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 like this and make a case for almost anything they desire, through skillful manipulation of the variable factors involved in the criteria. But whether or not these are the result of a proper use of Webb’s criteria, the point remains: *the standard is no longer what the New Testament says, but rather the point toward which some biblical scholar thinks the Bible was moving.* And that is why I believe it is correct to say that Webb’s redemptive-movement hermeneutic nullifies in principle the moral authority of the entire New Testament.

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 Testament and the New Testament) as a means of determining moral obligations for Christians today.

It is remarkable that in section after section, Webb does not distinguish between the teachings of the Old Testament and the teachings of the New Testament. He flattens them all in to one large category that he calls “the Bible.” Thus, in dealing with slavery, he combines New Testament and Old Testament passages in the same list, without noticing any distinction between them (pp. 44, 74-76, 163-164, and elsewhere). He does the same thing with regard to texts referring to women (pp. 46-47, 76-81, 160, 165-167), and primogeniture (94-95, 136-142), and with respect to other elements of the Mosaic law code.

Although Webb occasionally gives limited attention to what he calls “canonical movement” from the Old Testament to the New Testament (see pp. 77-78 for example), for him these are just two steps along the way in the direction of further redemptive-movement in ethical development beyond the New Testament. *He never considers the possibility that the development from Old*

Testament to New Testament is the end, and that the New Testament 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 New Testament! Webb carries it beyond the New Testament.

Yes, the New Testament 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 New Testament*, and the commands given to Christians in the New Testament say nothing about excluding Gentiles from the church! We do not have to progress on a “trajectory” beyond the New Testament to discover that.

Christians living in the time of Paul's epistles were living under the New Covenant. And we Christians living in the year 2003 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 Christians today 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 the New Testament and see it applying directly to ourselves today.

To attempt to go *beyond* the New Testament 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.

When Webb does touch on the subject of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, he says that he is not going to decide how the Old Testament relates to the New Testament. 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 New Testament does not *expressly abrogate*,” then 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 Old Testament 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 on pp. 165-167, 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.

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 Old Testament, and all the implications that he draws from those examples, we would be left not with a book by Webb 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 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 Old Testament and New Testament verses together) supports things such as slavery (see pp. 33, 36-37, 84, 106, 186, 202-203). 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 fact that millions of Christians since the time of the apostle Paul 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 New Testament. 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 than 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.

With regard to slavery, the fact of the matter is that 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 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 New Testament to a better ethic. They taught the abolition of slavery from the New Testament itself.

The New Testament 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), and that he should “*receive him as you would receive me*” (vs. 17), and that he should forgive anything that Onesimus owed him, or at least that Paul would pay it himself (vss. 18-19), and finally he says, “*Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say*” (vs. 21). This is a strong and not very subtle hint that Philemon should grant freedom to Onesimus.

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 Gal. 3:28), we then see that the Bible, and especially the New Testament, contain powerful principles which would lead to an abolition of slavery. The New Testament 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.

4. 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 is eighteen criteria are necessary and valid to determine cultural relativity.

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 of Scripture today would claim that the Bible teaches any of these things as ideas or ethical standards that should be followed by Christians today. When Webb assumes that "the Bible" teaches them apart from interpreting it with his redemptive-movement hermeneutic, he assumes interpretations contrary to the biblical texts themselves.

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

1. *People should pursue farming as an occupation* (p. 124-125). 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 *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 would be 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 patterns 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.

Once again in this case Webb has taken an event (Adam and Eve walking) and has mistakenly viewed it as a requirement that then 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 marriage is the only acceptable option, 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*, 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 Exodus 20:17:

Exodus 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. 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 in this case 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. 136-139), 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.

6. *We should establish and support slavery* (pp. 33, 36-37, 84, 106, 186, 202-203).

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).

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. 221-222).

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. 213-216).

13. *Husbands should be allowed to physically discipline their wives* (p. 167, 189-190): 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 own 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 Old Testament 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.

14. *People should greet one another with a holy kiss* (pp. 203-204).

15. *Women are simply “reproductive gardens” and husbands provide 100% 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. 223-224).

16. *The Bible approves obedience to many details of the Old Testament narrative and the Old Testament 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. 166-167).

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

But the fact is that 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 which 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 that is found within the Bible itself.

5. 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 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 of these eighteen 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 pro-*

fessors 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 regard to one narrow subject such as laws concerning marriage and divorce, or property rights, or education and training of children, and so forth. 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 Old Testament or New Testament* will be able to use Webb's system and tell us what moral standards we should follow today, for many of them do not have specialized and extensive knowledge in the cultures surrounding God's people at the time the Bible was written. 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 New Testament and Old Testament 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 18 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 for over twenty-five years: *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 New Testament.

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 New Testament! 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 simply 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 some kind of elaborate hermeneutical system, before they can be sure that these are the things that God requires of his children.

6. 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 own treatment of several subjects, particularly in 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 New Testament. These categories therefore allow him to say that the New Testament teachings on women are only “preliminary,” and that the exceptions he finds in Galatians 3:28 and in Deborah and Junia are the truly “persuasive” criteria that point to the “ultimate ethic” which is far better than the New Testament, the ethic toward which the New Testament 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), of course the difficulty for egalitarians is going to be the fact that Paul makes an analogy between the relationship of a husband and wife and the relationship between Christ and the church in Ephesians 5:22-33. 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. 186-187). 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, it seems to me, 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 Old Testament quotations concerning 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 Peter 2:22-25) are simply used by the New Testament 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 Peter 2:13-17 and Romans 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 Old Testament 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 Old Testament (pp. 203-204), though no Old Testament verses are ever quoted to support them.

Once Webb has claimed that all these things are supported from the Old Testament but are not transcultural, it is the basis on which he claims that the New Testament teachings on the role of women are not transcultural just because they are supported by quotations from the Old Testament – he mentions 1 Corinthians 14:34, 1 Timothy 2:14-15 [sic], and 1 Peter 3:5-6 (p. 204). But because his other “cultural” examples are not parallel, 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.

7. Webb tellingly 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.

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 (p. 142-143).

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 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 Genesis 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 Genesis 3:1. Because of this rebellion in the angelic world (see 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6), Satan himself was somehow speaking through the serpent. So Webb’s claim that there must be “artistic foreshadowing of events to come” is not persuasive with respect to the serpent in Genesis 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. 142-143). In this statement Webb is saying that patriarchy did not exist in the garden *in actual fact*, but hints of it were placed in the story by the author as a way of anticipating the situation that would come about after there was sin in the world. This then 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).

This is another way in which Webb denies the historicity of the Genesis 2 account. He is saying that Moses in the time he wrote was using “present categories” such as patriarchy to describe the past, and this was simply an “accommodation” by God “in order not to confuse the main point.” All that is to say that patriarchy did not actually exist in the garden of Eden, but Moses inserted it there in Genesis 2 just the same, so as not to confuse his audience at a later time. 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 lifestyle... 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* that is found 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 Timothy 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 of primogeniture in Genesis 2 as a literary device, the entire narrative of God placing the man in the garden (Gen. 2:8) and putting the man in the garden “to work it and keep it” (2:15) 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.

8. Webb fails to demonstrate that New Testament teachings on men and women in the home and in the church are culturally relative.

Throughout Webb's book he attempts to dismantle most of the complementarian arguments for male leadership in the home and the church by claiming that the biblical texts on such male leadership are culturally relative, for various reasons. Yet in each case, his attempts to demonstrate cultural relativity for these texts do not turn out to be persuasive. In the following section, I consider each of Webb's claims for cultural relativity in the order in which they occur in his book.

a. Webb fails to show that New Testament commands regarding male headship are only a "preliminary movement" and that the New Testament ethic needs further improvement (Criterion 1). Webb claims that the commands regarding wives submitting to their husbands in Ephesians 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 New Testament are not God's ultimate ethical standards for us, but are simply one step along the way toward a kind of "ultimate ethic" that we should adopt today (pp. 36-39).

b. Webb fails to show that Galatians 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 New Testament (Criterion 2). Once again, Webb's conception of a "seed idea" is based on his claim that some New Testament 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 New Testament in order to argue for the abolition of slavery, for the New Testament never condones or approves of slavery as an institution, and never says it was created by God (as marriage was), and the New Testament itself provides statements which would eventually lead to the abolition of slavery *based on the New Testament ethic itself*, not based on some "higher ethic" that would later be discovered. Similarly, Galatians 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 New Testament authors wrote about the relationships between men and women. If we take the entire New Testament as the very words of God for us in the new covenant today, then any claim that Galatians 3:28 should overrule other texts such as Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2 should be seen as a claim that Paul the apostle contradicts himself, and therefore that the word of God contradicts itself.

c. Webb fails to show that 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 establishes an egalitarian model within marriage (Criterion 3). In 1 Corinthians 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*, 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, John Piper and I agree that 1 Corinthians 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.

d. 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 Peter 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" (p. 107-108).

We should be very clear what Webb is saying here. He is saying that wives with unbelieving husbands today should not obey 1 Peter 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 even today whose unbelieving husbands *have* been won by the submissive behavior of their believing wives.

A second problem with Webb's claim is that it makes 1st 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 Galatians 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, 1st 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 New Testament commands if they think that the reason given for the command will no longer be fulfilled in our modern 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 Peter 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 in some societies today 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.

A fourth problem with Webb's approach is that it fails completely to consider the *other reasons* given in the New Testament 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 New Testament as the words of God for us today, words which contain God's morally pure standards for us to obey, and to obey *all* of the New Testament commands *simply because they are the words of God* who holds us responsible for obeying them. We do not have the right to take it upon ourselves to say, as Webb's position implies, "If a wife today submits to her unbelieving husband according to 1 Peter 3:1, I don't think that will help evangelism in our modern culture, so women should not follow that text today." That is simply setting up our own moral judgment as a higher standard than God's word.

e. 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 Genesis 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" are similar but they are not identical ('*ish* and '*ishshah*'), so they are somewhat the same and somewhat different. 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 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 Old Testament 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 action of giving a name to the woman is an indication of the fact that God had granted to Adam an authority or leadership role with respect to his wife.

f. 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.

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. 124-125). But this is hardly a persuasive list of examples, because Webb fails to take account of the nature of the items that 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 are later superceded by “superior ethic” that would declare the goodness of these things to be culturally relative, so that farming would no longer be good, or walking on the earth would no longer be good, or vegetables would no longer be good, 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 would declare male headship to be something that is *not* good or *not* approved by God.

g. Webb fails to show that 1 Timothy 2:13, “For Adam was formed first, then Eve,” is culturally relative (Criterion 7). The reason egalitarians find 1 Timothy 2:13 particularly difficult is that Paul uses the original creation account in which “Adam was formed first, then Eve” 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 New Testament 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 kinds of exclusively male teaching and governing roles in the church for all generations.

Webb attempts to avoid this by claiming that 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 the fact that all the things that are there in the original creation are 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 1st century either, because people in the 1st century were not limited to “farming as an occupation” (Paul was a tentmaker!), and people in the 1st century were not limited to “ground transportation” (Paul traveled by sea!), and people in the 1st century were not all married (both Jesus and Paul were single!), and there was no requirement for everyone to have children (both Jesus and Paul were single!), 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 were actually 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 New Testament church. In short, Paul was not persuaded by any of the factors that Webb claims to 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” gave a valid ground for affirming and 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, thought it did not in fact happen that way (pp. 142-145; 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 Timothy 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 Timothy 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 anything like, "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. 136-139). 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 which it does not in fact make! That decision belongs in the hands of 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 regards to this text). "Consistency" does not imply that we must make all sorts of applications of a biblical principle even when the Bible does not make those applications; rather, consistency is saying 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 Timothy 2:12-13 that Adam's prior creation does prove at least one thing, and that is that in the assembled church a woman should not "teach" or "exercise authority over a man" (1 Tim. 2:12). Are we to say that Paul was wrong?

h. Webb fails to show that Galatians 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 that there are several "in Christ" statements like Galatians 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 the fact 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 kind of 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 Colossians 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 New Testament 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 New Testament for the church after Pentecost.

i. 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. 154-155). Webb explains that this 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 New Testament teaches many things that were not found in the surrounding culture. There were no people in the surrounding culture who believed in Jesus as the Messiah before he came. Even Webb admits that the idea that husbands should love their wives as Christ loved church was revolutionary in terms of the surrounding culture. The idea that there could be a church made up of Jews and Gentiles fellowshiping together on an equal basis was not an option in the surrounding culture.

The fact of the matter is that 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 New Testament and through the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. But (as Webb admits) the New Testament itself does not teach such a fully egalitarian position. (According to Webb, we have to move “beyond” the ethic of the New Testament to reach full egalitarianism.)

j. Webb fails to show that the general principle of “justice” nullifies specific New Testament commands regarding male leadership (Criterion 13). Webb asks, “Does the power inequality 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).

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 then say that they take prior-

ity 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 20th 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 who 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 disobedience to the specific texts of Scripture on any uncomfortable subject for which people might find some “general principle” that will override it. 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 measuring up to specific character traits for church elders. The “grace and forgiveness of God” principle could be used to override the specific teachings of the New Testament 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 that it is still “extremely helpful” (p. 183), a statement with which I must strongly disagree. Scripture does not contradict Scripture.

k. 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). Webb argues that there are a number of culturally relative standards in the Bible, such as “slavery” or “monarchy” or “right-handedness” (pp. 186-187) that are based on an analogy with Christ or with God, and therefore it is not valid to say that New Testament teachings on male headship are transcultural because they are based on an analogy with Christ or with God. Specifically, Webb says that Ephesians 5:22-33 and 1 Corinthians 11:3 should not be seen as transcultural just because they depend on a “theological analogy” (pp. 188-189).

But once again Webb has mixed together things that are not parallel. 1 Corinthians 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 the 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 that Webb would have to have the Bible make, in order to make his argument work regarding the culturally relative nature of some theological parallels.

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 New Testament. But consider 1 Corinthians 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 to be 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's reasoning here says that there is a parallel between the eternal relationship of the Father to the Son and the Trinity 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 New Testament where such an argument is culturally relative.

The same considerations apply to Ephesians 5:22-33, 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 is basing 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 “Christ is the head of the church” is something that is culturally relative? *Webb has produced no examples from the New Testament 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 Peter 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 New Testament 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. 188-189).

This amazing statement reveals how deeply committed Webb is to finding an egalitarian ethic that is “better than” the ethic taught in the New Testament. 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 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. 189-190). 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 in its time, Hosea 2 could have rightly been used by husbands within Israel as a justification for stripping their wives naked and confining them physically, thus physically disciplining them 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.

1. Webb fails to show that New Testament 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 New Testament, two of the items are “culture bound” (monar-

chy 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 New Testament 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 Peter 2:13-14), is “culturally relative” and we need to move to a better ethic than that of the New Testament, an ethic where we no longer have to submit to government leaders. But a better approach, and the one used by evangelicals who don’t believe that we can move to a “better ethic” than that of the New Testament, would be 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 the authorities of the government in which we find ourselves. 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 New Testament 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, a situation of 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 19th century, and it was in fact the most common employment situation found 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 New Testament 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 do not have to obey the directives of their employers, but 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 – must everyone earn \$10,000,000?).

m. 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. 213-214). 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 that 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 be-

tween 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 Peter 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 New Testament 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 that 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 would be far better to heed the reasons that the Bible actually gives, and to believe that these are the reasons that the Bible commands wives to be subject to husbands.

n. Webb fails to show that 1 Timothy 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. 269-273). Therefore he says 1 Timothy 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 1st 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 New Testament 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 be referring to the fact that Eve wrongfully took leadership in the family and made the decision to eat the forbidden fruit on her own, and other complementarians understand this to refer to a women’s “kinder, gentler nature” and the fact that she is therefore less likely to draw a hard line when close friends are teaching doctrinal error and relationships need to be broken. Whatever interpretation we take, Paul is arguing from Eve’s action at the Fall to a general truth about men and women teaching and govern-

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

o. 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 New Testament might be wrong.* He only asks, "What if I am wrong?" with respect to one very small point, and that is whether Paul's appeal to primogeniture in 1 Timothy 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 Galatians 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 Timothy 2:13, he says it will make very little difference at all. If he is right on 1 Timothy 2:13 being entirely 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 Timothy 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 Timothy 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 differ-*

ence 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.

p. 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% 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, he says, “I hope they will awaken a spirit of reconciliation between egalitarians and patriarchalists” (p. 243).

What is the basis on which Webb proposes this “forum for harmony”? It is a forum to discuss 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, the one that gives a token amount of “symbolic honor” to men).

I personally find this somewhat insulting. I fail to understand how Webb expects that his invitation could ever be taken seriously when the only two options offered in his “forum” are to capitulate 99% to egalitarian claims or to capitulate 100% egalitarian claims. And even the 99% capitulation found 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 kind of “symbolic honor.”

In addition, complementarians will consider Webb’s terminology offensive and confusing. As a cofounder of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood in 1987, and as a coauthor of the complementarian book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), I wish to lodge a fairly strong 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 the word “complementary” for a position is 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 behavior, and we certainly reject the term “hierarchicalist” because it overemphasizes structured authority while giving no suggestion of equality or the beauty of mutual interdependence (p. xiv).

Since that time, the term “complementarian” has been the one we have consistently used to describe our position, and it has been widely (and courteously) used by others to describe our

position as well. For Webb to apply it to an egalitarian position is needlessly confusing the issues in the minds of readers.

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 to it 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 a singularly inappropriate, pejorative, and misleading term to refer to the position that we represent*. Is it not common courtesy in academic debate to refer to positions by the terms which the representatives of those positions would choose for themselves?

9. Most of Webb’s 18 criteria for determining cultural relativity, as he has constructed them, are unreliable guides for Christians today. As I have argued above, Webb’s entire system is based on an assumption that the moral commands we find in the pages of the New Testament 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” which God wants us ultimately to adopt. Since all of Webb’s criteria are based on that assumption, the entire system seems to me to be unpersuasive and inconsistent with a belief in the absolute moral authority of the teachings of the New Testament themselves.

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 in spite of the fact that it is based on an underlying assumption with which I find myself in disagreement.

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

(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 New Testament to a higher or better ethic. However, Webb’s discussion is helpful as it applies to a number of Old Testament 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 Old Testament as “preliminary” to the New Testament, but that is far different from seeing the New Testament also as “preliminary” to further ethical development. Another way of saying this is to say that all Christians agree there is “redemptive movement” from the Old Testament to the New Testament, but evangelicals have held that the movement stops with the New Testament! Prior to Webb, only Roman Catholics and liberal Protestants, not evangelicals, have taken developments beyond the New Testament 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 New Testament (such as Gal. 3:28) are in fact contradictory to other New

Testament commands, and these “seed ideas” show us the direction in which we should look for a superior ethic to the New Testament.

(3) Breakouts (p. 91): I also find this category unhelpful and unpersuasive because it assumes that there are certain people in the Bible (such as Deborah or Junia) who engage in activities that are contrary to the moral teachings found 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 in fact troubling because it implies that we can disobey New Testament 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 New Testament. However, if Webb’s analysis did not have the assumption that we could move to a higher ethical system than the New Testament, 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. (See the following section for a discussion of the “holy kiss” and similar physical actions with symbolic purpose.)

(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 today 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 in Genesis 3).

(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 transcultural 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 in its original context.

(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 the story 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 that he does in fact give.

(8) Basis in New Creation (p. 145): I find this criterion unpersuasive and unhelpful, not because I think that “new creation patterns” in the New Testament 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 found in the New Testament are simply an indicator that leads us along the path to a higher ethical standard than that found in the commands of the New Testament itself.

(9) Competing Options (p. 152): I find this criterion helpful with regard to 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 New Testament actually commanded or endorsed slavery, and also I find it unpersuasive in its claim that the New Testament could not have taught an egalitarian position at the time it was written (something that I think Webb has simply failed to prove, and something that I do not think can be proven in light of the clear New Testament 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 Old and New Testaments oppose many current cultural attitudes and practices regarding slavery. I am not quite as sure that it is helpful regarding Webb’s argument that the commands against homosexuality are transcultural because homosexuality was widely accepted in the ancient world, because I think that Webb underestimates the extent to which there was 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 New Testament 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 New Testament 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 New Testament Christians in any case. Webb seems in this section to be on a fishing expedition to find deficient elements in Scripture, especially regarding 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 severe punishment of the death penalty in the Old Testament still receive divine disapproval today (but 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 many specific texts of Scripture on any uncomfortable subject, simply by enabling people to find a “general principle” of Scripture that could be used to override that 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 Corinthians 11:3 are not necessarily transcultural.

By use of this procedure Webb potentially nullifies all “imitation of Christ” passages in the New Testament. Webb’s claim that a command that is 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 Corinthians 11:3.

(15) Contextual Comparisons (p. 192): I found this category to be unhelpful because Webb incorrectly assumes that the New Testament 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 Old Testament to prove the validity of slavery or monarchy, and also because he brings in a number of texts that do not appeal to the Old Testament at all but simply have parallels in the Old Testament (such as foot washing or the “holy kiss”). Therefore Webb wrongly dismisses texts regarding women that appeal to the Old Testament (such as 1 Cor. 14:33, 36; 1 Tim. 2:11-15; 1 Peter 3:1-7).

In addition, Webb rightly sees that if the New Testament 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 that the Bible gave for a command. However, in the rather obvious example of why we do not wash other people’s feet today, Webb’s discussion of the fact that we don’t travel on dirt roads with sandals did give ex-

pression to what people instinctively understand about the differences between ancient and modern culture in this regard.

(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, he seems to indicate 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).

10. The difficult passages for determining cultural relativity are few, and most evangelicals have already reached a satisfactory conclusion about them.

Since Webb's entire book was concerned with principles for determining when some part of Scripture is culturally relative, it is appropriate at the end of this discussion to say something about how most evangelicals have approached this question prior to Webb's book, and prior to his theory of a "redemptive-movement hermeneutic."

I believe that 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 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 New Testament. Are those commands to be obeyed by us today as well?

I am going to suggest here – and I will be interested to see if others find this suggestion helpful – that the question of which New Testament commands are culturally relative is really not a very complicated question. It is not nearly as complicated as Webb makes it out to be. I am suggesting that 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 New Testament, 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 Peter 5:14)

(2) Foot washing (John 13:14; compare 1 Tim. 5:10, which is not a command)

(3) Head covering 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 Peter 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 actions that carry symbolic meaning*. The holy kiss was a physical expression that conveyed the idea of a welcoming greeting. Foot washing (in the way that Jesus modeled it in John 13) was a physical action that symbolized taking a servant-like attitude toward one another. Head covering 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 was being symbolized by the head covering). As Paul understands long hair for a man in 1 Corinthians 11:14, it is a "disgrace for him," because it is something (in that culture at least) that was distinctive to women, 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), but they are rather outward, *surface-level manifestations* of the deeper realities that we should manifest 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 New Testament 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.

It is important to realize that 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 New Testament 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, have not seen these commands as part of a deficient moral system that is just a "pointer" to a higher ethic, but they have seen these commands as a part of the entire New Testament ethic which 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 rocket science. It is something that comes almost instinctively as people intuitively realize that there are of course differences in 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 more clear in 1 Peter 3:3. The very literal English Standard Version 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 Peter 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. Therefore I do not think that the statements about jewelry and braided hair for women, *when rightly understood*, are “culturally relative” commands, but they have direct application to women today as well.

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.) On the other hand, since this is an outward, physical action (and thus some may think that it falls in the 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 New Testament.

Is it really that simple? Are the only matters in dispute about cultural relativity just these simple physical 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.

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 which 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 New Testament 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.

(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 1st 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 Cor. 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 New Testament is left? Vast portions of the New Testament 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 New Testament 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" (James 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 Peter 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 eyeservice, 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 Old Testament 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, head covering, foot washing; 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 Old Testament show us what pleases God today). But the rest – especially the commands in the New Testament addressed to Christians in the new covenant – were written for our benefit, and they are not for us to "move beyond," but to obey.

11. Conclusion: Is Williams Webb's book then a helpful guide for Christians today? Although Webb raises many interesting and challenging questions regarding cultural relativity, in the final analysis I believe William Webb's *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals : Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* is a deeply flawed book which nullifies in principle the moral authority of the entire New Testament 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 that is entirely foreign to the way in which God intended the Bible to be read, understood, believed, and obeyed. Because a denial in principle of the moral authority of the New Testament 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 to hold today.