

An Analysis of the Redemptive Movement

As Presented in the Book *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals* *Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*

Author William J. Webb

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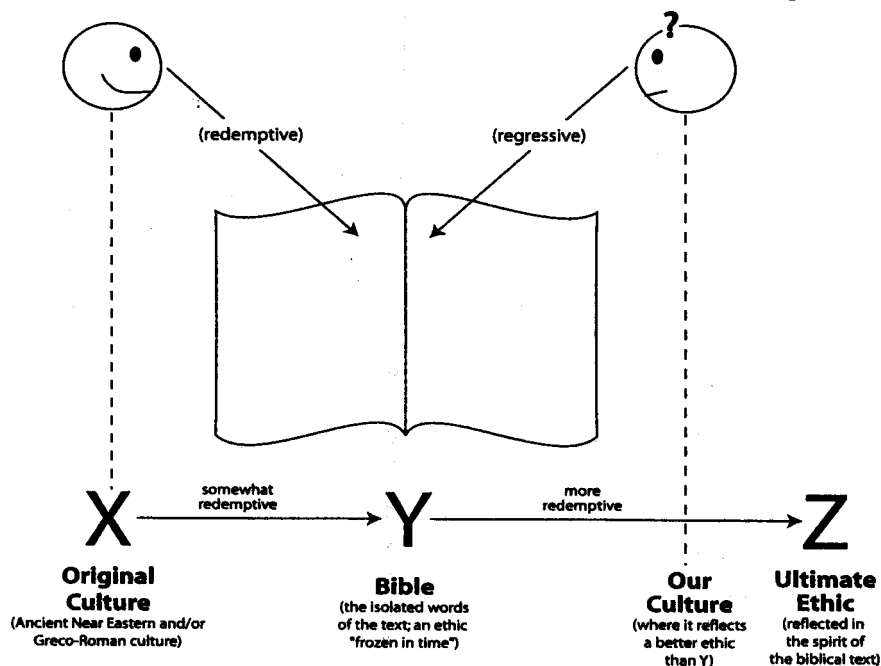
Introduction

On June 4, 2003, I presented a paper at the request of some concerned members and founders of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan entitled “The Redemptive Movement in Mars Hill Church in Grandville, Michigan.” That paper/presentation was strictly an analysis of what was taught at that church (specifically during what they called their Areopagus meetings). But the source of their redemptive-movement hermeneutic comes from a professor of New Testament at Heritage Theological Seminary, Cambridge, Ontario, Canada, named William Webb in the above-named book. This paper is an analysis of that book.

William Webb’s Position

First, let’s read Webb’s own introduction to what he calls “a redemptive-movement hermeneutic.”

Before submerging ourselves in the details of a redemptive-movement hermeneutic, a broad picture or model provides a practical platform from which to work. For the sake of simplicity, I like to refer to the model as “The X → Y → Z Principle.” Any letters of the alphabet would do, as long as they indicate progression. The point of the model is to show how perspective and a redemptive spirit work together in the application of Scripture. Within the model below, the *central position* (Y) stands for where the isolated words of the Bible are in their development of a subject. Then, on either side of the biblical text, one must ask the question of perspective: What is my understanding of the biblical text, if I am looking from the perspective of the *original culture* (X)? Also, what does the biblical text look like from our contemporary culture, 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]



[p. 32]

What we should live out in our modern culture, however, is not the isolated words of the text but the *redemptive spirit* that the text reflects as read against its original culture. In applying the text to our era, we do not want to stay static with the text (Y). Rather, we need to move on, beyond the text, and take the redemptive dimension of those words further to a more redemptive level (toward an ultimate ethic, Z). ... As Christians we should be very careful not to become gridlocked with the isolated words of the text so that we miss reapplying the redemptive spirit that produced the text in the first place. Applications of the Bible in successive generations and different cultures must permit the redemptive spirit of the text to carry forward the unrealized or frozen-in-time aspects of a biblical ethic. Otherwise, we fail to properly apply the text within our own generation. [p. 33]

First, understand that what Webb means by a redemptive movement is not God redeeming lost man but God redeeming a lost culture. It's cultural redemption that Webb is proposing.

Basically, Webb is saying that what God has been doing since the fall of Adam and Eve is redeeming human culture, moving it along from a primitive "Ancient Near Eastern and/or Greco-Roman culture" [ANE/GR] to what will one day become an "Ultimate Ethic" [p. 32]

According to Webb, the Bible, though inerrant, is not God's final word. The Bible is just one step along the way to that ultimate-ethic culture. So just because the Bible says elders are to be husbands (Titus 1:5-6; 1 Timothy 3:1-2), and wives are to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22ff), and women should not teach or be in authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12), that was just what God was saying back then. It may not be what God is saying today. Actually, Webb claims that the redemptive movement of God in our culture "reflects a better ethic" than the words of the Bible [notice the model on page 1 from page 32 of his book]. That's because today God, according to Webb, has brought the culture along to a higher ethic, on its way toward an ultimate ethic.

Webb claims that although this redemptive cultural movement can be seen in the Bible, God has not moved the culture in every area. He claims that God has moved the culture beyond the Bible in the areas of slavery and the roles of women but not in the area of homosexuality—hence the title of the book.

Besides slavery and the roles of women, Webb lists other examples where he sees movement in the Bible. He calls those "neutral examples," and he uses those to "establish the criterion" for other areas—namely, the roles of women [p. 68]. These areas of movement, he says, include the priority of being right-handed, greeting one another with a holy kiss, the length of hair, eating meat sacrificed to idols, and the priority of the firstborn (primogeniture) [pp. 92-94]. These give Webb the notion that there is a redemptive spirit behind the text. To ignore that and apply the Bible as is, he calls a "static hermeneutic" [p. 35]. So, "If we obey the text, we may violate the purpose of making people within the Christian community feel a warm welcome and a special bond" [p. 105].

To demonstrate this cultural movement within and beyond the text of Scripture, Webb has (to say the least) a complex system of hermeneutics, including 18 criteria which he takes 168 pages of his 301 page book to explain. I will not be exhaustive in dealing with every passage and point he makes. I will, however, attempt to be complete in dealing with Webb's basic idea and the ways he goes about substantiating that idea.

My Analysis

(1) The Redemptive Movement Challenges the Sufficiency of Scripture

Leaders of the church have disagreed on issues for 2,000 years. We have disagreed on the security of salvation, predestination vs. free will, future prophecy, spiritual gifts, the nature of the church, etc.

These issues are significant, and we should continue to discuss them. But they are isolated in their impact on other areas. I can have fellowship with people who disagree with me in those areas because we both are basing our belief on the sufficiency of Scripture.

But some beliefs have come along over the years which call for a separation of fellowship because they attack the very foundation of our belief—the sufficiency of the Bible. Luther ran into that when he disagreed with the pope over the sufficiency of Scripture vs. Roman Catholic sacred tradition. The conservatives separated from the liberals of Europe over the issue of Higher Criticism because the European liberals denied the sufficiency of Scripture.

This is such an issue.

I talked with a pastor holding Webb's view who claimed he believed in the sufficiency of Scripture. But he also believed women could be elders and pastors. Here is essentially our conversation.

Me: You believe in the sufficiency of Scripture!?!

Him: Yes, I do.

Me: Then could you tell me what it means in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 when it says an elder must be a husband?

Him: Well, that was just for that culture back then. Paul was addressing a specific situation of dominating women.

Me: How do you know that?

Him: Well [he named a particular teacher] taught us that.

Me: How does he know that?

Him: Through a study of archaeology and ancient history and Jewish rabbinical teaching and Hellenistic culture.

Me: So, the Bible says elders are to be husbands, and you say elders do not have to be husbands. But you cannot get that from the Bible. You need something else. So the Bible is not sufficient to give you your conclusion. That's what I mean when I say you do not believe in the sufficiency of Scripture.

If I'd had this conversation with William Webb, it would change in one way. Webb would say he concludes that elders do not have to be husbands because he sees that women elders are "widely accepted by the church" [p. 68], and he can see a redemptive movement of culture in the Bible with respect to the roles of women. But Webb does not restrict this to the roles of women. He says God is moving the whole culture to an ultimate ethic. He claims that does not include homosexuality, which, I suspect, is one reason his book is so accepted today (because that's where our modern western Church is—we have accepted divorce, remarriage, and women elders and pastors, but not homosexuals yet—although we are working at it).

But this same cultural redemptive reasoning could be applied to virtually any area which is "widely accepted by the Church" [p. 68]. The truth is, the only reason this cultural movement is restricted to the areas Webb restricts it to is because Webb is the one doing the restricting. We are dependent on Webb to tell us where the biblical text is static and where it is a moving culture. If we take his system, what would/could that imply about other significant parts of Scripture?

For example, let's suppose we accept Webb's redemptive-movement hermeneutic and it becomes "widely accepted by the Church" that the gospel message taught by Luther, Calvin, and the Reformers is not true. Suppose it's widely accepted that salvation is not by grace through faith, based in the blood of Christ alone, but is on the basis of works (as is already "widely accepted by the Church" of Rome). Well, works are a big part of the Mosaic Law. This could be a "seed idea" for works' salvation or a "breakout", like Deborah was for the roles of women. Sure, they had to bring sacrifices, but animal sacrifices were culturally accepted by most of the ancient civilizations. So maybe the use of a blood sacrifice was just God accommodating Himself to their culture. Jesus died on the cross, but that could be just because the Romans killed people that way, and His shedding of blood was part of a cultural practice. Maybe Christ's blood was just God relating to what the Greco-Roman world would understand, since nearly everyone witnessed cross crucifixions.

Paul preached salvation by grace through faith, but Paul's whole Christian life was spent separating the Church from the Law of Moses. Paul's emphasis on grace, not works, may have just been because he was moving the culture along one more step as he released it from the blood sacrifices of the Mosaic Law.

Jesus' parable of separating the sheep from the goats in Matthew 25 is based on works. This would be a "breakout" showing that the idea of salvation by grace through faith is "culturally configured" (p. 91). The New Testament is filled with warnings, and it ends saying, *and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book* (Revelation 22:19). That sounds like works to me.

So maybe this blood atonement for sins and salvation by grace through faith was just a cultural leftover in the culture of Scripture where God was accommodating Himself to the customs of primitive Ancient Near East/Greco-Roman people, moving them on toward a better culture, one oriented around a works' salvation. Today we know a faith gospel won't work because if you tell people they're saved by grace through faith in the blood of Christ alone, not of works lest anyone should boast, they will go out and live in sin, thinking they have a free ticket to heaven. So today, in our culture, a "static application" of the "isolated words" of the text leads to a Gospel that is inappropriate for the modern church. Webb says, "One must ask, what change/improvement is the text making in the lives of people in the covenant community?" [p. 53]. So if I apply Webb's hermeneutic to salvation, I can conclude that salvation is not by grace through faith in the blood of Christ alone as payment for my sin because that's not an "improvement" for "the covenant community."

"But!" you will hopefully object. "The Bible expressly says, *For by grace you have been saved through faith; ... not as a result of works* (Ephesians 2:8-9), and *But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God ...* (John 1:12)."

"So what!" I can argue. "It also says elders are to be husbands (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1), women are not to teach men or be in authority over men (1 Timothy 2), and wives are to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5; 1 Corinthians 11; 1 Peter 3). The redemptive-movement hermeneutic denies all those things are true today, using exactly the same arguments I just used to 'prove' the Gospel is not true for today!"

But, of course, the Gospel is true. Why? Because there is no such thing as a redemptive-movement hermeneutic in the Bible. God is not developing an ultimate culture. He's building a Church who will be with Him in the heavenlies, not in the earthlies. Culture is a thing of the world (1 Corinthians 2) and the devil (2 Corinthians 4:4), and the Bible is true as stated and can be taken as the plain inerrant culturally-insensitive truth from God.

(2) Cultural Movement Is an Assumption without Evidence

Webb makes the unproven, unestablished assumption that God is relating the Bible through a developing culture. His whole argument stands on the assumption that culture is vital to hermeneutics. Like an evolutionist, an atheist, or a cultist, he assumes his position and then uses it to find

things to substantiate it. You can find evidence for any cockamamie idea if you don't have to prove it but just call it a theory. People find evidence to prove the world is flat, the Holocaust never happened, and we never went to the moon. The reality is, there is not one shred of proof for Webb's assumption that the Bible is God moving along a developing culture.

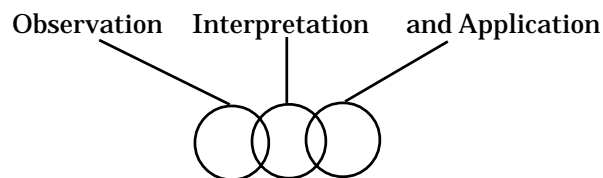
The word "culture" never occurs in the Bible. It's not in the *New American Standard* translation, it's not in the *King James Bible*, and it's not in the *New International Version*. The reality is, nobody in the Bible itself ever saw the culture as having anything whatsoever to do with determining the truth or application of what God was revealing through His patriarchs, prophets, His Messiah, or apostles. In 2,000 years of Church history, nobody has ever seen in Scripture what Webb theorizes. Why didn't Augustine see cultural movement as a basis for understanding the Bible? Why didn't Wyclif or Hus or Luther or Calvin or Knox or the Wesleys or Whitefield see it? Jonathan Edwards spent over 12 hours a day studying the Scripture most of his life, and he never noticed a cultural redemptive-movement hermeneutic. Why did it escape the notice of men like Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Dwight L. Moody, Charles Finney, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham? You'd think somebody would have noticed it or some biblical author would have at least hinted at it. The reality is—it's not there.

There is also a fundamental error in the logic Webb uses with his cultural assumption. It's called circular reasoning. He assumes God is developing the culture to an ultimate ethic and the Bible reflects that development. Then he uses that to conclude that God is developing the culture to an ultimate ethic and the Bible reflects that development. He assumes his conclusion, then he concludes his assumption. That's circular reasoning, and circular reasoning is a basis for rejection of any argument based on it.

(3) Application Requires Interpretation

There is a much more significant foundational failure in Webb's thinking. Webb is in error in the fundamental way he understands and applies a text. This cannot be overstated because he uses this error to prove nearly all of his points. It's on nearly every page of his book. "Static hermeneutic" is the only alternative he offers for a cultural redemptive-movement hermeneutic. But his static hermeneutic **never interprets a passage**. He goes from observation to application without any interpretation. Then he uses this as a straw man and belittles it as a static application of the isolated words of a text, as if anybody does that. If that's how he has been using Scripture, I sure hope he changes. But the alternative is not to develop an extra-biblical elaborate cultural movement theory in a 301-page book. The alternative is to simply **interpret the passage before you apply it**—like everybody else does.

Webb sets us back on our heels a bit since most evangelicals do very little teaching in the area of application. We talk a lot about how important it is but very little about how to do it from the Scripture. One basic application principle is—application must apply an **interpretation** of a passage (or an interpretation of what someone says). There is—



We do some interpreting as we observe and some applying as we interpret, but there is no overlap between observation and application. All observations must be interpreted before they can be applied.

Observation is noticing what the author said/wrote.

Interpretation is determining the author's intended meaning from the context.

Application is putting that meaning to use in my situation. It's bringing the author to the table today to get his directions for our situation. [By the way, application is to our personal or individual situation, not to our culture.]

This is not some method I'm imposing on the Scripture, which I conjured up (as Webb's is), but rather a general fact of life recognized for thousands of years. It is how any message is applied, whether biblical or secular.

For example, suppose I told my 3-year-old daughter, "Don't cross the street without your mother. Cars often go too fast and streets are dangerous, so always have your mother with you when you cross the street." Now let's suppose my daughter is 23 years old and in college, many miles from home, and she (being convicted by the Scripture) decides she should honor her parents. She then recalls that one of the things her father taught her—actually, commanded her—was to not cross the street without her mother. How should she apply that command to her current life situation? It's a clear observation that I said not to cross the street without her mother. Would she, therefore, conclude that she must go home and get her mother and bring her back to college so that my daughter could cross the street to go to class without disobeying her father?

Well, of course not. Why? Because she intuitively knows you cannot apply observations without first interpreting them. What she would do is think (without all this formality, of course), "What was my father's intended meaning in the context and then how can I bring that to my situation here today?" She would easily intuitively understand that my intended meaning was for her to not cross the street at 3 years of age without her mother because, as I said in the context, cars often go too fast and streets are dangerous. If I were with her today at college, I'd expect her to practice all the safety she can when crossing streets, or driving in traffic for that matter, because cars and streets are dangerous.

Examples are not necessarily commands. If they were, we should all be celibate, wear sandals, and eat locusts and wild honey. But sometimes examples **are** commands. Whenever the interpretation (of the observation) of what the biblical author said is intended as a command for **us**—in our case, the Church age after the cross. If my daughter is 3 years old, the observation is to be applied as is, not because she is not to interpret it but because the interpretation describes my intended meaning for her situation as a 3-year-old.

My point is, this observation-interpretation-application process is not just my theory of hermeneutics. Rather, it's just the way it is. It's a description of the way every sane person applies anything.

Would it not be absurd to suppose that my 23-year-old daughter would conclude she should go home from college and get her mother in order to cross the street to go to class? "Of course," you'd say. "That's silly. Why would you even suggest such a thing?" Because, my friend, that is exactly what William Webb is suggesting as the only alternative for his cultural redemptive-movement hermeneutic. Where the real solution for the application dilemmas he proposes is clear—simply interpret the passage. Examples are on nearly every page of his book.

For instance, to illustrate his XYZ model, Webb talks primarily about women and slavery. First he goes to Deuteronomy 21:10-14 and observes that this deals with *taking female virgins as spoils of war* and that it is "openly permitted" [p. 32]. Then he writes, "Surely there is a more humane and just treatment of women POWs than what is reflected in the biblical text. We would not dare take the isolated words of these texts to our modern legislators and ask them to draft a policy from these words on the treatment of women captives in war. We would likely find a more redemptive policy is already in place in our contemporary culture, at least in Canada, the United States, Europe, and so on" [p. 33]. So the only alternative, Webb suggests, to his redemptive-movement hermeneutic is to skip the interpretation process altogether, that is, never ask the author's intended meaning from the context, and apply the observation, which he calls "the isolated words of these texts."

Then he concludes that our modern culture is better than the Bible's words, that is, it's "more redemptive." That's like saying the only alternative for my daughter's going home to get her mother to cross the street is to discover "a more redemptive policy is already in place." What is "in place" in her culture might be the practice of jaywalking, crossing even though the crosswalk stop hand is red, and speeding as long as you stay 9 miles below the speed limit so you don't get stopped or get points against your license. To do those things would be to look at her culture instead of looking at her situation.

What has happened with Webb's hermeneutic is that the application is no longer connected to the author's intention

Since the passage is never interpreted, the intention of the author is left behind in favor of a new modern one taken from what's going on today. Webb would, of course, claim the redemptive-movement ethic would never include sin. But the reality is, there is no real way to know that, since sin is no longer defined by the mind of God via the mind of the human author but by: what is "more humane" [p. 33], what has "already been more widely accepted by the Church" [p. 68], or "what change/improvement is the text making in the lives of people in the covenant community" [p. 53].

It appears the focus has changed from what is pleasing to God to what is good for people. Whether it has or not, it certainly has changed from the intention of the original author to what is best for today, derived from what is going on today. The mind of God through the Scripture is left behind.

In the very next paragraph, Webb discusses Deuteronomy 23:15-16 and does the same thing. He observes, "The Israelites were instructed to provide safety and refuge to slaves fleeing harsh treatment from a foreign country" [p. 33]. Then he concludes, "a static hermeneutic would apply this slavery-refuge text by permitting the ownership of slaves today." You see, once again he goes from observation to application without interpretation. In so doing, he leaves out the author's intended meaning and with it the meaning of God who inspired the author. In both these Deuteronomy texts, if Webb would just interpret the text, he would find an intended meaning very applicable to many of our situations today.

Webb's error is clearly seen in a statement he makes on page 23 of his first chapter. He says, "With every change in our culture we have to reevaluate our interpretation of Scripture to determine what our perspective should be." We would tend to say, "What? That's absurd. The author's intended meaning changes with every change in **our** culture? How could that be?" But, you see, Webb is using the word "interpretation" as the rest of us use the word "application." He really means we should reevaluate our application. So why does he say what he says? Because he makes no interpretation at all. For Webb, it is just another word for application. Being unable to interpret the text, he has to do something, so he imposes on the text a cultural redemptive-movement hermeneutic.

(4) Western Culture Is Not Moving toward an Ultimate Ethic

Webb's hermeneutic assumes the positive evolution of Western society as the link between the Bible and some future ultimate ethic. He says, "We would likely find that a more redemptive policy is already in place in our own contemporary culture, at least in Canada, the United States, Europe, and so on" (p. 33). This idea has two problems with it. First, why assume the culture God is evolving is the Western capitalistic one? Why not, for example, the societies of Russia, Poland, or Romania? These are cultures which have been Christian far longer than ours. Christianity has been in Russia for over a thousand years (since A.D. 988), and it is an extremely patriarchal culture, where women probably have less freedom and are more in submission than in the Bible. How does Webb know that's not the real path toward an ultimate ethic?

Second is the problem of the western cultural evolution itself. Western culture has progressed only in the areas of economics and technology but not morally or ethically—if the Bible is our standard. We murder a human baby at the rate of one every 20 seconds. The last century was the bloodiest in all of history. Never before has divorce been considered a solution rather than a problem. Never before has

it been socially unacceptable to criticize homosexuality. Today lying is assumed in nearly all social relationships and a “date” is not a “date” unless it concludes with sexual intercourse. And all these issues are common in the churches of the Western society. In what sense does that reflect “a better ethic” on the way toward an “ultimate ethic.”

(5) Movements in the Text of Scripture Do Not Always Lead Where Webb Wants to Go

Consider the differences Jesus gave us between what He said and the Mosaic Law in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). He said, *You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery [in Exodus 20:14];” but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart* (Matthew 5:27-28). What do we get if we extend that line 2000 years to today? One would expect no adultery ..., no lust ..., to what today? Maybe we should all be monks and nuns.

Next Jesus said, *It was said, “Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce;” but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery* (Matthew 5:31-32). What happens if you extend that line 2000 years into modern times? From a certificate of divorce to no divorce except for unchastity ... to what today? Certainly anyone following Webb’s system must conclude there is absolutely no divorce today for any reason whatsoever, since the movement of the text leads in an increasingly strict direction.

Jesus does this six times in the Sermon on the Mount and all the changes would lead to strange conclusions today if, instead of seeing them as timeless truths for the church, we see them as indicating a cultural movement through the text.

What about celibacy? The Old Testament doesn’t command it, but both Jesus and Paul were single celibates, and Paul says it’s better than marriage (1 Corinthians 7). At the end of the Bible, the 144,000 sealed by God are celibate bachelors (Revelation 14:3-4). What if you extend that trend for 2000 years to today? For sure, all believers should be single and celibate if we follow Webb’s redemptive-movement hermeneutic.

For that matter, in the two areas Webb considers most frequently (slavery and the roles of women), Paul seems to be more restrictive than Jesus. Paul gave specific commands: (1) about elders being husbands (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1), (2) about male headship over wives (Ephesians 5), and (3) about women not teaching or being in authority over men (1 Timothy 2), whereas Jesus does not specifically comment on these issues. It would, therefore, seem that the trend Webb suggests leads to an increasingly patriarchal male-led society where women are increasingly in submission (like, say, in Russia). Actually, secular and liberal feminists deny the inspiration of Paul’s writing for that very reason.

(6) Jesus Christ Is the Ultimate Ethic, Not Just a Culturally Sensitive Step Along the Way

Paul said we are *predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son* (Romans 8:29) and to *be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ* (1 Corinthians 11:1). The author of Hebrews told us we should be *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith ...* (Hebrews 12:2). (See also 2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 4:19; Philippians 3:7-21; and 1 Thessalonians 1:6.) Jesus Christ is never presented in the Bible as simply an improvement on Ancient Near East/Greco-Roman culture, taking it one more step along the way, being careful not to offend the culture beyond what it could stand. Quite the opposite. His teaching pushed people way beyond what they could stand or understand (John 6:32-66). That’s why they rejected Him and He said it would be the same for His disciples (John 15:18-19).

(7) The Biblical Authors Were Not Being “Pastoral” as Webb Understands Pastoring

Webb describes what he sees as a “pastoral component” in the text of Scripture (pp. 58-59). He writes, “Biblical texts often represent pastoral letters, written with the tenderness of a pastor’s heart. Their words are designed to ‘stretch’ the covenant people as far as they could go, like an elastic band, but not to cause them to ‘snap’” (p. 58). His illustration is 1 Corinthians 7, which he considers only “for couples who have a negative view of sex” (p. 59). Webb says, “Rather than bringing them to a completely central, healthy sexual ethic, he simply coaxes them back from the edge of this danger. ... His words for motivating sex within marriage are hardly appropriate for couples that enjoy having sex as a celebration of God’s creative goodness and their covenant partnership!” (p. 59).

This attitude about Scripture seems to run contrary to that of the biblical authors. Jesus said, *For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished* (Matthew 5:18). Paul wrote, *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness* (2 Timothy 3:16). Peter said, *As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy”* (1 Peter 1:14-16). He went on to say, *like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation* (1 Peter 2:2). The author of Hebrews said, *For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart* (Hebrews 4:12).

Does that sound to you like the authors of Scripture are **not** trying to bring their readers to a completely central, health ethic? What does this do to our use of Scripture as a sufficient guide for life if we say the Bible is compromising ethically so as to not offend people? The reality is, our Christian communities have followed a godless culture steered by secular psychology, being success-oriented, and pursuing human autonomy. Having compromised the biblical picture, it’s easier to say, “Well, biblical commands were just a step along the cultural way.”

If we buy Webb’s system, the sufficiency of Scripture is gone as a perfect standard by which to live.

(8) Biblically Speaking, the Future Culture Gets Worse, Not Better, before Christ’s Return

Jesus described the times before His Second Coming this way. *And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold* (Matthew 24:10-12). He said, *For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah* (Matthew 24:37). That’s the times about which it says, *Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually* (Genesis 6:5). In the book of Revelation, John described these times as dominated by an antichrist and a false prophet. Now, all this does not sound like the culture is moving on toward an ultimate ethic.

Paul described the future like this, *But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron* (1 Timothy 4:1-2) and like this, *But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of God, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these* (2 Timothy 3:1-5) and *For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires* (2 Timothy 4:3).

It is hard to conclude from the Bible that God is going to move either the general culture or the Christian community culture on toward some ultimate ethic.

(9) Much of What Webb Sees as Cultural Is Simply A Difference between Israel and the Church

Whether you hold to Dispensationalism or Covenant Theology, you see a difference between the church and Israel or the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Either way, there is no need to impose a moving redemptive culture idea on the text to explain it. Israel was a theocratic state, a religious/national entity confined to the land of Canaan. The church is a global entity, reaching out to the world. The church lives in many cultures, which develop in all kinds of ways. That change came when Christ died on the cross and the apostles began this age or New Covenant (Romans 10:4; Galatians 3 and 4; Ephesians 3:3-9). There is simply no need to impose a cultural dimension on the text to say we don't do the Old Testament commands today, as they were given to Israel.

(10) To Use Secular Ancient Near East/Greco-Roman Cultural [ANE/GR] Sources as Authoritative Is to Subject the Infallible Word of God to Fallible Sources

Everyone writes from a certain perspective or world view. The authors of the Bible did, too, but because of their infallible inspiration from God, they wrote from God's perspective. Historical authors wrote from their own perspective. And many perspectives were available within each segment of the ANE/GR culture. Suppose, for example, you are a right-wing conservative Republican. Would you agree with an analysis of our culture in America today written by a left-wing liberal Democrat? Unlikely! In his critique of Webb's book, Samra includes this example in a footnote.

In other words, when we read literature written by the first century Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo, how do we know that his writings accurately reflect the culture of the day? How do we know whether his writings reflect the culture in Alexandria or everywhere in the ancient world? Do his writings represent the cultural viewpoint of all socioeconomic classes or just the wealthy class of which he is part? How widely is Philo being read and to what extent are his writings being shaped by culture and to what extent are his writings shaping culture? This becomes even more convoluted and difficult when writings such as the Dead Sea Scrolls are considered. Do writings such as the Damascus Document and the Community Rule reveal culture mores of their day? If so, what do we do when they seem to contradict each other, for example, on their view of the value of celibacy? While it is true that on an issue like patriarchy there might be widespread agreement across the various cultures of the ANE/GR world, how many issues does this apply to? [James Samra, "A Review and Critique of William Webb's "Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic" as Presented in *Slaves, Women, & Homosexuals*, 2003, p. 6]

(11) The Spirit of the Text Is the Mind of God, Not a Changing Culture

Webb writes frequently about the spirit of the text. He then demonstrates how a static use of the text neglects the spirit of the text. For example, Jesus clearly reprimanded the Pharisees and Sadducees for neglecting the spirit of the text. But the Spirit Jesus taught was the Spirit of God, not the flow of culture. When the Sadducees, who didn't believe in the resurrection (Mark 12:18), challenged Jesus on this issue, we read, *Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures, or the power of God?"* (Mark 12:24). Jesus said they did not understand the Scripture or the power of God. Following Webb, we would expect Jesus to say they did not understand the Scripture or the culture. But the Spirit of the text is the mind of God, that is, the Spirit of God or the power of God. That Spirit is determined by interpreting the text. Interpretation (as mentioned above) is the author's intended meaning. That is the Spirit of the text. In the case of biblical authors, their intended meaning comes from the mind of God. So the Spirit of the biblical text is the author's intended meaning, which is God's intended meaning. None of this has anything to do with a cultural redemptive movement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this cultural redemptive movement seems to be another way to go about promoting egalitarian feminism. It is, however, different from other ways in that it defines a hermeneutic by which the whole Bible should be interpreted. It is, therefore, not an isolated error but a potentially widespread one that can include a large number of ethical issues. The issue here is the sufficiency of Scriptures. This view leans **away** from the sufficiency of Scripture in at least three ways:

- (1) The understanding of the Bible is often dependent on the understanding of culture outside of the Bible. This assumes the Holy Spirit did not give us all we need to understand the Bible.
- (2) If I'm to look to culture instead of the author's intended meaning to determine what God is doing/saying, then the work of God is not connected to the understanding of Scripture. It's seen in the ongoing culture.
- (3) If the work of God is seen in culture, then the absolute moral, ethical, and theological norms of the Bible are not able to direct our lives. These biblical norms could just be part of God moving the culture along to the next level. So to study and apply the morality of the Bible may be against what God is doing now. This would make the Bible insufficient.