

William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*: A Review Article¹

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Introduction

Sometimes I wonder if egalitarians hope to triumph in the debate on the role of women by publishing book after book on the subject. Each work propounds a new thesis that explains why the traditional interpretation is flawed. Complementarians could easily give in from sheer exhaustion, thinking that so many books written by such a diversity of authors could scarcely be wrong. Furthermore, it is difficult to keep writing books promoting the complementarian view. Our view of the biblical text has not changed dramatically in the last twenty five years. Should we continue to write books that essentially promote traditional interpretations? Is the goal of publishing to write what is true or what is new? One of the dangers of evangelical publishing is the desire to say something novel. Our evangelical publishing houses could end up like the Athenians in Paul's time: "Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21, NASB).

Nevertheless, we should be willing to consider new interpretations. As complementarians we do not want to become unthinking and hardened conservatives. Perhaps we have misread the scriptures for many years. Still, some of the books promoting egalitarian interpretations are "fantastic" in the original sense of the word. One thinks here of the work of the Kroegers on 1 Timothy 2. Their interpretations were certainly new, but they lacked

credibility and were frankly a scholarly embarrassment. William Webb's work, fortunately, is of a much higher quality than the work of the Kroegers. He investigates the whole matter of the role of women hermeneutically, suggesting a method by which we can determine whether a command or practice in the scriptures is normative today. Since Webb's book is a significant argument supporting egalitarianism and is a serious work of scholarship, I will devote the first half of my review to describing his position, so that the reader will have a grasp of Webb's thesis before I critique his position. While Webb's hermeneutical principles on slavery and homosexuality will be noted, I will concentrate on his contribution on the role of women since he attempts to break new ground on this issue in particular.

A Summary of the Book

Webb opens the book in an interesting fashion, listing a variety of passages that represent a hermeneutical challenge today. Is the mandate to fill and multiply the earth still in force (Gen 1:28)? What about tithing and the holy kiss? Is the command to refrain from sexual relations during menstruation normative (Lev 18:19)? If a woman commits adultery today, should she face the water purification ritual of Numbers 5? What should we think of a man wearing long hair or a person getting tattoos? Issues like these and many more present a hermeneutical challenge for believers. I have often read letters to the editor in our local paper that

assert that if homosexuality is wrong then we should follow all the OT laws, such as the law that forbids the wearing of two different kinds of material (Lev 19:19). Webb rightly reminds us that hermeneutical issues are fundamental in assessing the normative status of commands and practices in the scriptures.

Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic

The crucial question for interpretation is this: how can we discern what is transcultural or what is restricted to the culture of the Bible? Webb answers this question by proposing what he calls a “redemptive-movement hermeneutic.” He looks for the redemptive spirit of the text to discern what still applies today. Other words that overlap in meaning with “spirit” are “progressive,” “developmental,” or “trajectory.” He contrasts his hermeneutic to a “static” hermeneutic that does not recognize the movement of the biblical text. A static hermeneutic focuses on the isolated words of the text and does not recognize the direction in which the scriptures are moving. Hence, a static hermeneutic can even justify slavery, provided it is the kind of slavery endorsed by the scriptures. Those who read the text according to its redemptive spirit recognize that we are not limited to the isolated words of the biblical text. God moves his people step by step towards what is more righteous and just.

Some interpreters read the scriptures on a flat level, not comprehending how we should apply them today. For instance, the permission to divorce in the Mosaic legislation (Deut 24:1-4) does not represent God’s ideal for today (Matt 19:3-12). Nor would anyone in contemporary society recommend that a woman suspected

of adultery undergo the water purification rite of Numbers 5. The ritual actually functioned as protection from arbitrary charges in a patriarchal society, but today we would contend that men and women are equally responsible for adultery. We would reject any notion that women are to be specially singled out and punished for adultery. Still, compared to the culture of the day the scriptural regulations *improved* the lot of women. One of the crucial themes of Webb’s work surfaces here. It is a massive mistake to restrict the application of the biblical text so that it only coheres with the cultural world addressed in the scriptures. Rather, we must note the redemptive movement of the text so that the application suits the twenty first century. For example, none of us today would accept the notion that slaves are less valuable than other human beings (Exod 21:28-32), nor would we believe that wives are the property of their husbands (Exod 20:17). The redemptive movement of the text, argues Webb, leads us to the truth that all human beings are equal, and that husbands are not worth more than their wives. We must not restrict our application of the text so that it is enclosed within the cultural world of the Bible. As Webb says, “Relative to when and where the words of Scripture were first read, they spoke redemptively to their given communities” (p. 50). We would err, therefore, in limiting our application to the social world of the scriptures.

One example that Webb gives relates to slavery. Some interpreters draw the principle from Ephesians 6:5-9 that employees should submit to employers. Webb argues that such a principle misfires in applying the text to contemporary society, for employees are not required to submit to employers but to fulfill the

terms of their contracts. They are to do what their job requires in a way that glorifies God and in a way that functions as a witness to others.

Another example used by Webb comes from 1 Corinthians 7 where Paul addresses ascetics in the Corinthian congregation. The ascetic Corinthians, according to Webb, were simply not ready for the message of the Song of Solomon where sexual relations are celebrated. Paul speaks to the particular situation facing the Corinthians and moves them in the right direction, taking them as far as possible. It would be a mistake to read off an entire sexual ethic from these chapters, for we must recognize that we have specifically targeted pastoral words here. Similarly, Webb argues that the texts that say women are barren are culturally limited. Only now do we realize that men can be infertile as well as women. Here we have an example of accommodation in scripture.

Criteria for Determining what is Transcultural

Most of the remaining chapters of the book contain eighteen criteria by which we can determine if a practice is cultural or transcultural. Sixteen of these criteria are intrascriptural and two are extra-scriptural. The intrascriptural criteria are categorized into three groups in relation to the two issues of women in ministry and homosexuality: 1) persuasive; 2) moderately persuasive; and 3) inconclusive. Both of the extra-scriptural criteria are seen to be persuasive. In most cases the criteria fall into the same category for the women's issue and homosexuality, though in some cases Webb sees a criterion to be persuasive relative to homosexuality but not on the women's issue.

My focus in the review is on the women's issue and so I will list the criteria assessed by Webb and categorize them as they relate to the question of the role of women (see pp. 69-70). I begin with his intra-scriptural criteria.

Persuasive

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

Moderately Persuasive

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

Inconclusive

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

Finally, he has two extra-scriptural criteria, both of which he thinks are persuasive.

17. Pragmatics Between Two Cultures
18. Scientific Evidence

Persuasive Criteria

There is insufficient space to discuss all eighteen criteria, but I will comment and explain some of them, skipping those that I do not think are as important for his overall argument. The first criterion is preliminary movement. This criterion was alluded to above. In these examples biblical authors modified the original culture, pushing it in a new direction so that there is movement towards justice. Webb cites a number of examples of slavery in which the mistreatment of slaves is ameliorated

by biblical authors. Similarly, the OT improves the rights for female slaves and concubines compared to the practices of the ancient Near East. Assyrian rape laws punished the woman who was raped. By contrast, the biblical laws that speak to the issue of rape treat women with much more dignity and respect. The direction of the text, then, points us towards what is fitting for us in our social context.

Seed ideas are also identified as an important criterion. A “seed idea” describes a principle or practice that is present in kernel form but has not yet developed fully in the biblical culture. For example, some verses in the NT suggest that the ideal would be complete equality between slaves and masters, males and females (cf. Acts 2:17-18; 1 Cor 7:21; 12:13; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11; Phlm 15-16), but such equality could not be implemented in the social world of the NT. Seed texts point us to the application for today’s world, showing that slavery should be abolished and that women were limited from certain functions because of the patriarchal culture of the ancient world. Conversely, the scriptures do not give us any warrant to think that homosexual practice was restricted for cultural reasons.

The third criterion is called “breakouts.” Webb notes examples in which cultural norms are reversed or overturned. For instance, left-handed people were used by God in the OT, even though the imagery of the right hand suggests God’s favor and honor. The injunction that men should wear short hair is not a transcendent word (1 Cor 11:14) since Nazirites wore long hair and Samuel had long hair. Primogeniture should not be assessed as transcultural, for God sometimes chooses the younger instead of the older, such as Jacob over Esau and

Ephraim over Manasseh. Breakouts in the case of women include Deborah, Huldah, Priscilla, and Junia who served as leaders, prophets, teachers, and apostles. The call for mutuality in the sexual realm in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, according to Webb, calls into question the hierarchical structure of complementarians, suggesting a new pattern of equality between men and women. These breakout texts, Webb maintains, cannot be seen as mere exceptions. When combined with the first two criteria, they are a strong argument supporting egalitarianism.

The fourth criterion relates to purpose. A text is culturally bound if when we fulfill the command in contemporary society we do not carry out the original intention. For example, greeting one another with a holy kiss in our culture would make people feel uncomfortable instead of making them feel welcome. Similarly, Webb argues that submission in the ancient world had a missionary purpose. The missionary function of these admonitions no longer apply, for submissive slaves would repel rather than attract unbelievers today. Nor should we support monarchy simply because it is found in the Bible, and hence there is no expectation today that we would submit to a president or prime minister. We pray for leaders, according to Webb, but we do not obey them. In the same way, in our modern culture if women submit to men, such a practice may alienate people from the gospel. In the case of homosexuality no mission statement can be cited to demonstrate that it was banned merely for the purpose of evangelism. Indeed, the biblical prohibition regarding homosexuality was counter-cultural since some in the Greco-Roman world embraced homosexuality. Webb acknowledges that this

fourth criterion is not determinative since a biblical injunction may have more than one purpose.

The fifth criterion relates to the fall or the curse. Webb rightly points out that we are not commanded to perpetuate the curse. For example, sin brought weeds into the world and pain in childbirth, but no one would argue that we should not eliminate weeds or ameliorate pain in childbirth. Some complementarians have cited 1 Timothy 2:14, defending the notion that women are prone to deception. But there is no indication that women are more liable to deception than men, says Webb, nor is there any clear indication in the text of role reversal between Adam and Eve. The verse emphasizes instead that Eve was deceived rather than Adam. Webb concludes from this that women during the biblical era were prone to deception because of lack of education, the young age of their marriages, and their limited social experience. He rejects any notion of male headship in Adam's naming of woman in Genesis 2, arguing that naming of animals is an indication of Adam's dominion over the created world, but in the case of woman the name given points to equality and partnership—not subordination.

Moderately Persuasive

Webb maintains that the five criteria listed above are persuasive, but criteria six through thirteen he thinks are only moderately persuasive. Criterion six is one of the most crucial for the issue of women in ministry. Webb argues that an injunction in the text *may be transcultural* if rooted in the creation order. Some creation mandates are transcultural, such as Jesus' words on divorce. Other creational commands are not binding. For instance, it is

not wrong to be single even though the creation narrative says it is not good for man to be alone. Nor would we conclude that all people should be employed in agricultural work or travel only by walking, even though these two elements are present in the creation narrative. Few today would argue from Genesis 1:28 that we must have as many children as possible, and virtually no one claims that we should ban the eating of meat. Many would agree that the sabbath command has changed, though the sabbath rest is rooted in the seventh day of creation. The creation order addresses the relationship of men and women, for it is clear that both are made in God's image and they are to rule the world together for God's glory. There are overtones of patriarchy in the garden, but they do not, avers Webb, sustain the thesis that patriarchy is transcultural.

The issue of creation continues in the seventh criterion where Webb focuses on primogeniture since Paul's prohibition of women teaching and exercising authority in 1 Timothy 2:12-13 is rooted in primogeniture. Appealing to primogeniture does not demonstrate that the prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:12 is transcultural. Webb says that there are many examples where primogeniture is superseded, e.g., the choosing of Isaac instead of Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and Ephraim over Manasseh, of David over against his older brothers, etc. These "breakouts" suggest that primogeniture is culturally relative. Furthermore, primogeniture worked well in an agricultural society but does not comport well with our culture. In the social world of the Bible it fostered care for elderly parents and probably lessened sibling rivalry. Still, we do not follow the practice of primogeniture today. Hence, we should not

limit women today simply because in some places Paul appeals to creation to prohibit women from certain activities. The intimations of patriarchy in the garden may, suggests Webb, foreshadow the impending curse. Perhaps the patriarchal echoes in Eden are an example of accommodation in which the past is described through the spectacles of the present. Hence, the patriarchal character of the garden may anticipate the agricultural context to which Adam and Eve were headed. One principle we can derive from the argument from creation is that we should give honor to whom honor is due. The principle from 1 Timothy 2 is that we should “choose teachers/leaders who are worthy of high honor within the congregation” (p. 145).

The priority of man in creation, asserts Webb, only supports woman being the glory of man, not his authority over her (1 Cor 11:7). Some might object that woman is said to derive from man, suggesting a permanent role differentiation. Webb counters that Paul qualifies this argument in 1 Corinthians 11:12, stressing the interdependence of men and women. What we see in vv. 11-12 is actually Paul’s seed idea, while in the previous verses he was influenced by the culture of his day. In addition, Webb thinks Paul’s argument is cultural here, reflecting the view that women are merely “reproductive gardens” (p. 275). Scientific developments since Paul have shown that the notion that women contribute nothing more than being a fertile environment in conception and childbirth is flawed. Paul says that woman was made for man, but Webb says that it does not make sense to deny that men were also made for women. Modern scientific research shows us that we need both the egg and the

sperm for children to be born. Hence, in Webb’s view Paul’s point here should be classified as hyperbole. The transcultural principles of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 are that the genders must remain distinct and that modesty is required in dress. Webb argues that the notion that men own women, that women are subordinate to men, and that women must wear head coverings are all cultural.

I skip now to criterion ten, which says that a matter is transcultural if it stands against the culture of the day. For example, to say that refuge should be given to runaway slaves intimates that slavery is not God’s ideal since other cultures did not provide a haven for fugitives. Webb also thinks that the prohibitions against bestiality and transvestism fall into this category, though his argument here seems weak since it unlikely that either practice was ever common. The softening of patriarchy in texts like Ephesians 5 where husbands are to exercise a nurturing love for their wives is countercultural and hence instructive.

Inconclusive Criteria

Criteria fourteen through sixteen are deemed inconclusive. An element of the text is not, according to criteria fourteen, transcultural simply because it is supported by theological analogy. God is portrayed as Lord in the biblical text, but it does not follow from this that earthly masters *should* lord it over slaves. Similarly, God is portrayed as king in the Bible, but we do not conclude from this that monarchy is required. Similarly, Webb argues that Christ functioning as head of the church does not lead to the conclusion that husbands should function as the authority over their wives. Paul simply uses an analogy accepted in the culture of

his day to motivate his readers to godly behavior. If we accept such an analogy as transcultural, says Webb, then we should also argue that a husband can strip his wife in public as Hosea stripped Gomer (Hosea 2)! If the analogy is literal (love, forgiveness, and holiness are mandated), then the command is still in force today. We should not, however, force analogies when applying the scriptures to today's world.

Skipping criterion fifteen, we come to the sixteenth. An appeal to the OT does not necessarily indicate that a practice is transcultural. Discontinuity between the testaments may show that a practice or command is no longer in force. For example, animal sacrifices, food laws, and circumcision are no longer required for believers as the NT demonstrates. Webb notes that a number of OT texts are cited when discussing slavery, and yet no one would conclude from this that slavery is endorsed. The lifting of holy hands is rooted in the OT, but most would agree that the inner attitude is what matters, not bodily posture.

Extrabiblical Criteria

The last two criteria listed are extrabiblical, and in both instances Webb thinks they are persuasive. First, an element of the text is culturally limited if it cannot be implemented practically into a new cultural setting. For example, gleaning fields is not a practical way to help the poor in an industrial society. Similarly, washing feet made sense in a society where people wore sandals and walked dusty roads, but following such a practice literally today would not make much sense. Conversely, children obeying parents translates well into today's world since children lack knowledge, maturity, strength, and eco-

conomic viability. Citizens are not required to obey leaders today, for we have a democratic society, not a government in which the word of the leader is law. Yet, believers should still submit to elders since church leaders usually have more education and experience, and are typically highly qualified for their job. Webb maintains that women are not required to submit to men, for in the cultural world of the Bible women lacked knowledge and education, social experience, and physical strength. The first two factors are no longer true today, and the third is hardly a rational basis upon which to maintain role differences between the sexes. When we think of homosexuality the pragmatic test rules out homosexuality, for it is clear that men are practically designed for women and vice-versa.

The last criterion is that an element of the text may be limited to the social world of the Bible if it is contrary to social-scientific evidence. For instance, we see clearly from science that the sun rather than the earth is the center of the solar system. Nor would we argue from the Bible today that the earth is flat rather than round. Similarly, says Webb we do not believe that women are like the soil in which the seed of the man is planted to produce children. Nor do we argue that infertility is always the fault of the woman. In Isaiah 3:12 we are told that women make poor leaders, but such a judgment has to be limited to Isaiah's day, for we know women function as leaders in a large number of areas today and succeed remarkably.

Nor can we accept the notion that women are by nature more apt to be deceived than men. Webb criticizes the view proposed by Doriani and me that women are more susceptible to deception than men, noting that such a view

employs social-scientific research to understand the text, when we as complementarians claim that we are merely interpreting the biblical text. Further, he thinks it is unfair for complementarians to object that nothing is said about women lacking education in 1 Timothy 2:14, for neither does Paul say women are more vulnerable to being deceived than men. The latter statement is an interpretation of the text, just as the former. Finally, the view espoused by Doriani and me is guilty of stereotyping and cannot be supported biblically. Webb suggests that 1 Timothy 2:14 should be interpreted along the same lines as Isaiah's statement that women make poor leaders. When Paul refers to women being deceived, he assumes the cultural position of women in the Greco-Roman world in which they were generally uneducated and lacked the necessary experience and social exposure to function as teachers. Indeed, if Paul were prohibiting women from teaching because they are more relational than men, as some complementarians allege, it would make more sense to exclude both women and men who are relational from teaching, since scientific research does not support the idea that women are more easily deceived than men. Hence, Webb concurs that Paul teaches here that women are more easily deceived than men, but we should not infer from this that Paul makes an ontological statement about women. He addresses a cultural situation in which women were prone to deception because of lack of education, social limitations, and early marriage. The principle from the text, then, is that we should appoint teachers who are not apt to be deceived.

Webb then raises another interesting question. How could such cultural factors

influence Eve in the garden, for Paul appeals to Eve in speaking of the deception of women? Webb maintains that it is quite possible that cultural factors were present in the text. Even the opening chapters of Genesis contain accommodation to the culture of the readers. They "may tell us more about the audience to whom the story is being told than about the original event itself" (p. 249). Furthermore, it is not the case that NT writers always use grammatical historical exegesis in interpreting the OT. What we have here is an analogy that relates Eve to the women at Ephesus.

How does this social science criterion relate to homosexuality, especially since some appeal to the social sciences to justify homosexual practice? Webb argues that biological and environmental predispositions to homosexuality do not prove that homosexual activity is morally right, for some could appeal to the same factors to support bestiality, pornography, sex with young children, etc.

Conclusion

The book concludes with a chapter in which the author raises the possibility that he is wrong. Still, he asserts with confidence that the reference to deception in 1 Timothy 2:14 is almost certainly cultural. Webb believes that there are some biological differences between the sexes, suggesting that women should play a greater role in the raising of young children. Those who are convinced by patriarchy should practice what he calls "ultra-soft patriarchy." The patriarchy found in the Piper and Grudem book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, should be rejected since it falls prey to a static hermeneutic. Following his conclusion, there are four appendices, two relate to the issue of women and deception. Webb concludes

that the direction of the scripture and its underlying spirit support abolishing slavery and favor the egalitarian view concerning women. In the case of homosexuality there is no movement in the text, and hence the prohibitions against homosexuality are transcultural. Those who try to establish a parallel between the women's issue and homosexuality make a serious mistake, for the two issues are dramatically different.

Evaluation of Webb's Arguments *An Inadequate Grasp of Redemptive History*

Probably the most important argument in Webb's book is his claim that we must interpret the scriptures with a view to their redemptive movement, so that we do not restrict ourselves to the isolated words of the text but discern the "spirit" to which redemptive movement points. Webb rightly directs our attention to the importance of redemptive movement, but unfortunately he does not grasp or explain well the centrality of redemptive history. It is interesting that Webb employs the term "spirit" or "trajectory" of the text, but does not use the term "redemptive history." He does not clearly explain the salvation historical character of the scriptures in which the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the climax and fulfillment of all of redemptive history. I suspect Webb would say that he agrees with such a paradigm, but his failure to explain clearly that his hermeneutic is founded upon such a premise is telling. For instance, many of the cultural examples cited by Webb can be solved rather easily once we have a grasp of redemptive history. He rightly concludes, for instance, that circumcision, sacrifices, and food laws are no longer in force be-

cause of the epochal shift between the testaments. It is not apparent, however, that he understands fully how this affects one's entire understanding of the OT. Most of the other examples cited could be explained from the same perspective, including the water purification ritual in Numbers 5, the regulations for slaves in Israel, and many regulations for women in the OT. Any book that purports to explain how to apply the scriptures today must feature prominently the redemptive historical character of the scriptures, but Webb fails to do this and instead introduces eighteen criteria that make applying the Bible today more difficult than necessary.

We should follow the pathway of Jesus and the apostles in teaching that the OT scriptures point to Christ and are fulfilled in him. The NT is the fulfillment of the OT. We have the final and definitive word that God has spoken to his people in the last days (Heb 1:2). In the NT we have the faith that has been transmitted to the saints once for all (Jude 3). We expect no further revelation until the coming of Jesus Christ when we will meet God face to face. Webb never clearly states that in the NT we have the final and definitive word that speaks to every practical issue for all time. The culmination of the fullness of time in Christ (Gal 4:4) means that we need no further word or instruction to understand how to apply the scriptures. Again, Webb may believe this, but he does not clearly state such an idea and instead emphasizes how the "spirit" of the text leads us beyond the wording of the biblical text. I am not denying that many difficult issues of application arise, and that Webb provides some help in assessing these issues. Still, redemptive history is not given pride of place in the entire

discussion. When we discuss tithing, sabbath, circumcision, food laws, menstruation laws in the OT, whether we can wear clothing composed of two different kinds of material, and divorce, we must always discern how the text should be interpreted in light of the fulfillment of all of scripture in Jesus Christ. We do not merely apply this principle to obvious issues like circumcision and food laws. All of the scriptures must be rightly related to Christ. Webb does not convey that this is the central question. In fact, he scarcely speaks at all of all the scriptures being fulfilled in Christ. Hence, he tends to raise issues of application in an abstract fashion, instead of integrating them sufficiently with the story line of the Bible.

Still, Webb has some helpful insights. He rightly warns against applying the isolated words of a biblical text. He does see the redemptive movement of the text, even though he does not emphasize sufficiently fulfillment in Christ. His failure to emphasize that in the NT we have the final and definitive revelation leads to some interesting consequences. He does not clearly relay the idea that in the NT itself we have all the information we need to pronounce on the question of slavery, the role of women, and homosexuals. Again, it is likely that Webb would agree with me, but what an author fails to emphasize is itself illuminating and can signal a trajectory that is slightly off course. Webb emphasizes instead that we may move *beyond* the words of the biblical text in applying it to today, and that we are not required to reproduce the culture of the Bible in today's world. I agree. But he does not explain clearly that in the completed revelation of the scriptures we have the final and definitive revelation by which to address all these issues.

Many of Webb's insights are useful. He rightly notes that some of the laws given to Israel modify the harsh treatment of slaves and women in their day, and yet such laws do not represent the final and definitive word on such matters. We should simply note (as Webb does) that such an approach to OT regulations comes from Jesus himself (Matt 19:3-12). Obviously, we need to read the whole canon carefully to discern where to apply such a principle, but we can agree that OT laws do not function as the *summon bonum*. Again, a salvation historical approach might have led Webb to discuss the law as it is related to Israel. A case can be made that the law was given to distinguish Israel from the Gentiles, but now that Christ has come the era of separation between Jews and Gentiles is over (Eph 2:11-3:13). Webb's book does not set the discussion of application onto the larger canvas of biblical theology, and hence the danger of abstraction (what are those eighteen criteria again?!) surfaces.

If Webb had been more helpful in setting forth his view of redemptive history, it would have been clear that the most important texts for his entire discussion are found in the NT. I do not want to be simplistic here. Christians today still argue over issues like tithing and the sabbath, but I would suggest that both of them must be addressed from the perspective of redemptive history, from the standpoint that all the promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 1:20).

Webb does remind us of some important principles in the NT. For instance, we must remember that NT letters are addressed to particular situations in the churches. Hence, 1 Corinthians 7 should not be interpreted as the complete and last word on marriage and the single state. The

biblical interpreter, however, must still integrate what Paul says here into a theology of marriage, divorce, and being single. I suppose Webb is not to be blamed for failing to accomplish this when he compares 1 Corinthians 7 to the Song of Solomon. He does not adequately explain, however, the contribution 1 Corinthians 7 makes to the canon. Hence, his explanation of the NT in this instance falls short of providing a hermeneutical paradigm for readers.

Webb rightly reminds us of the cultural context in which the scriptures were written. We are not required to return to the world of the Bible. Greeting one another with holy kisses in the U.S. would make most people feel quite awkward, and most would agree that we are not required to drink wine when we have indigestion. Nor would we argue that we must reinstitute the system of slavery or the monarchy. The application of the biblical text today will not necessarily mirror the first century context. Hence the importance of doing biblical theology and understanding redemptive history!

Even though Webb does not emphasize enough that in the scriptures we have definitive and final revelation, he is correct in saying that contemporary application will extend beyond the wording of the biblical text, that we cannot confine ourselves to the isolated words of the text. Again, the importance of doing biblical theology before applying the text should be emphasized more than Webb does. We do have to think hard about how to apply texts that speak of slavery, women, and homosexuals today. We are required to see how they fit into the redemptive historical framework before applying them woodenly to today's world.

The Five "Persuasive" Criteria

Given what I have said above about the importance of understanding redemptive history and biblical theology, I do not think Webb's eighteen criteria are a convincing resolution to the problem he raises. Many good insights are contained in these principles, but his approach to solving the questions raised falls prey to abstraction and overlooks the rich texture of redemptive history. Despite some good insights, the book tends towards an artificial workbook approach to solving the issues raised. In other words, the book fails because it is not clearly founded on biblical theology.

When we look at the scriptural criteria that Webb thinks are persuasive, it can just as easily be argued that his evidence is ambiguous. He rightly sees preliminary movement in some texts, but such movement is not definitive enough to establish final boundaries. The endpoint or goal of such movement must be determined by the entire canon, and so this criterion is only as persuasive as the exegesis of all the other texts relating to the issue debated. Similarly, "seed texts," and "breakouts" do not in and of themselves clearly indicate the line of demarcation. Both exegetically and logically it can be argued that seed texts and breakouts do not contradict complementarian conclusions. Trumpeting equality in Galatians 3:28 does not rule out differences of roles in Ephesians 5:22-33. Webb thinks seed texts and breakouts are persuasive, but he does not establish exegetically that they necessarily support his egalitarian conclusions. The criteria he thinks are persuasive only work if one assumes his exegetical conclusions. For instance, women functioning as prophets does not necessarily establish the view that women

can teach and exercise authority over men, for it can be argued that the gift of prophecy should be distinguished from teaching. Similarly, he appeals to Junia in Romans 16:7 to say that women served as apostles, but the text is debated and does not clearly lead to egalitarian conclusions.

Approaching the issue “hermeneutically” may mislead readers into thinking that Webb has solved long standing debates on issues, but his “hermeneutical boxes” are actually premised on exegetical conclusions, or even more radically he assumes that the breakout or seed texts establish his view. Webb uses the “seed texts” and “breakouts” and his movement metaphor to modify the texts that restrict women. How new is this argument? Egalitarians have often argued that “clear” texts (at least those they think are clear) should determine how we apply “unclear” texts (such as 1 Tim 2:11-15).

One or two concrete examples will illustrate my point. Webb appeals to the mutuality in marriage emphasized in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 to suggest that different roles in marriage are cultural. The “breakout” helps us see that the advice to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:22-33 was not intended to establish permanent roles. But Webb actually begs the question in his argument, for he assumes that mutuality and hierarchy are mutually exclusive. But the biblical pattern of marriage includes both. That this is Paul’s worldview is suggested by 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 where there is both hierarchy (1 Cor 11:3-10, 13-16) and mutuality (11:11-12). Notice how Webb handles this latter text. He sees the “seed idea” in vv. 11-12 and a temporary cultural accommodation in vv. 3-10. His hermeneutical boxes determine his conclusions, but it can just as easily be argued that Paul thought that the

relationship between men and women had elements of hierarchy and mutuality. He put them together in the same passage! Let me note again that what Webb says here is nothing new. Egalitarians often say that vv. 3-10 are transcended by vv. 11-12. Old conclusions with new hermeneutical names should not dazzle us.

Webb calls the purpose criterion persuasive, but when it comes to the women’s issue, he admits that the texts in question may have a purpose besides the missionary purpose he adduces. Many of the texts relating to the role of men and women do not refer to missions at all (e.g., Eph 5:22-33; 1 Tim 2:9-15). Hence, the criterion is hardly persuasive or clear when it comes to the women’s issue. The fifth criterion relates to the curse, and Webb rightly says that transcultural arguments cannot be established from the curse. Complementarians differ from Webb on some of the interpretations proposed here. Nevertheless, we can still accept his basic argument, for it does not clearly lead to egalitarian conclusions. The complementarian view does not depend upon arguments from the curse for their foundation. So, I look back over the five allegedly persuasive criteria, and see some good observations and some helpful cultural analysis. Still, the criteria presented are ambiguous and debatable. They depend upon exegetical conclusions and logical assumptions that are not adequately defended. The first three criteria are the most important, but not one of them, even taken on their own terms, necessarily establishes egalitarianism. They could all be interpreted to deny a heavy handed and one sided hierarchicalism but to fit with complementarianism; yes, even the complementarianism of Piper and Grudem in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.

Arguments from the Creation Order

The next set of criteria are introduced as moderately persuasive. I will continue to investigate those that especially relate to the role of women. The two criteria that are most important here relate to creation, and hence we will concentrate on these. Webb, as noted, does not see arguments from creation as conclusive since we do not practice many things in the creation narrative. Webb's failure to understand the redemptive historical flow of scripture surfaces here, especially since he speaks of redemptive movement. Complementarians, rightly understood, have never argued that every element of the creation narrative should be reproduced today. We have a canonical view of the scriptures in which we see scripture as the interpreter of scripture, and the redemptive historical flow of the Bible is crucial. For example, we even know from reading Genesis that it was not God's intention for every person to walk or become a farmer! We also know from Genesis that God permits human beings to eat meat. The scriptures themselves clarify what is still binding relative to creation. It is not my purpose to arbitrate the issue of the sabbath here, but surely one must correlate the creation narratives with what is said in the NT to come to a conclusion. When we come to the issue of women in ministry, and this point cannot be stressed enough, the NT itself argues from the created order for differences in role (1 Cor 11:8-9; 1 Tim 2:13). Amazingly enough, Webb fails to see this distinction and appears to lump what the NT says here with whether all should be farmers. Hence, contrary to Webb, Jesus' appeal to creation in the matter of divorce and

remarriage (Matt 19:3-12) functions as the best parallel to the texts about women in ministry. We see in the NT, the definitive revelation of the last days, an appeal to God's good creation supporting a different role for men and women. Two of Webb's weaknesses coalesce together here: 1) his failure to understand redemptive history; and 2) his failure to see the implications of the view that in the NT we have the definitive and final word of God.

At this point a comment about homosexuality should be made. Webb's book is useful because he shows that the scriptures consistently speak against homosexuality and that there is no opening in the text for its legitimacy (though see below for some possible logical weaknesses in his position). And yet there is a striking weakness in the book. Webb actually does very little with the fundamental text in Romans 1:26-27. Here Paul argues from nature, i.e., what God intended for human beings at creation. That one can write a book on the issue of hermeneutics and homosexuality, and refer to this text on only three pages (according to the index) and provide very little exposition of its meaning is nothing short of astonishing. Again, I think Webb is correct in thinking the OT texts on homosexuality are normative, but for someone who emphasizes the redemptive movement of the text, it is strange that he does not see that the climax of revelation (the NT) confirms the OT and argues from the created order. Surely, Romans 1:26-27 is the most important text in the NT on homosexuality (and in the entire canon of scripture!), and yet Webb skates over it quickly. Furthermore, it might explain why Webb does not see a *principal* connection between homosexuality and the women's issue. He is correct in saying that

the former is much clearer than the latter. Still, Webb misses a major point: when it comes to divorce, homosexuality, and the women's issue, the NT argues from the created order. Hence, this criterion is much stronger than the five Webb suggests, for the NT interprets the OT for us and bases its argument on the created order.

One could argue that when the NT appeals to the OT, the command enjoined is not necessarily normative for us today. We do not wear headcoverings today, but Paul alludes to the OT in requiring headcoverings (1 Cor 11:2-16). The use of the OT in the NT is too large of an issue to resolve in a review. It seems that in the majority of cases the commands of the NT rooted in the OT are still normative today. Webb appeals to slavery in discussing this issue (p. 202), noting that some have defended slavery with citations from Isaiah 53 in 1 Peter 2:22-25. He also says that some have appealed to Job 31:13 and Leviticus 25:43 and 25:53 to support slavery. But his examples are hardly convincing and not parallel to the woman's issue. Nowhere does Paul justify slavery by referring to a particular OT text or the created order, as he does the relationship between men and women. Moreover, any reference to Job 31:13 and Leviticus 25:43; 25:53 in Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 4:1 would only be an allusion. No clear reference exists. Even if Paul does allude to these OT texts, they emphasize treating slaves fairly. They do not justify the institution of slavery. The citations of Isaiah 53 in 1 Peter 2:22-25 do not support the practice of slavery from the OT. Isaiah 53 in context is not even about slavery, and it is misleading to suggest that Peter somehow supports slavery theologically by citing this text. Webb, of course, does not

promote slavery, but he leaves the impression that the NT appeals to the OT texts on slavery in a comparable way to its appeal to the OT in relation to women. The case is weak, for when Peter cites Isaiah 53 his focus is on Christ as an example and as an atonement for sin. No justification of slavery exists at all. Webb's failure to perceive the differences between the slavery and women texts damages his case. We can say again that his hermeneutical categories may look convincing at first glance, but they suffer from lack of exegetical support.

Webb also rejects the transcultural status of primogeniture, but he does not make some crucial distinctions. The point is not that primogeniture is some inflexible pattern that must be enforced in every culture. We are all aware that God chose Jacob not Esau and that David was crowned instead of his older brothers. Webb fails to understand why Paul appeals to Adam as the first one created in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9 and 1 Timothy 2:13. The purpose is not to say that the cultural practice of primogeniture applies to every conceivable situation. I do not believe any complementarian would argue for such a conclusion. We have here, however, Paul's authoritative interpretation of the OT text. The inspired writer, Paul, informs us that the order of is significant, that it tells us something about how the relationship between men and women should be structured. In other words, each passage must be interpreted in context. We cannot and must not make sweeping conclusions about primogeniture regardless of the situation addressed. Paul himself is well aware that Jacob was chosen instead of Esau (Rom 9:10-13). What Webb does not explain successfully is Paul's appeal to the order of creation in

supporting a difference of role between men and women. In other words, Webb again fails to grasp the hermeneutical significance of the NT supporting a practice with an argument from creation. He can point to examples that seem to call the conclusion into question, but in doing so he fails to see that the NT itself answers the questions he poses and that it makes distinctions where he sees none.

Some of Webb's other arguments are also questionable. For example, he appears to suggest that the scriptures are incorrect in identifying some women as barren. It is unclear to me that this is analogous to texts that allegedly taught that the earth was the center of the world or that the earth was flat. Webb actually flattens out the teaching of the Bible too simplistically on this issue. Zechariah seems to recognize that the problem is with his old age too, not just Elizabeth's barrenness (Luke 1:18). Sarah seems to think that Abraham himself is too old to have children (Gen 17:17; so also Rom 4:19). Deuteronomy 7:14 specifically states that both males or females may be barren. All the blame is not laid on women. Webb says often that women are reproductive gardens in the scriptures and contributed nothing but a haven for the child, whereas we know a seed and egg must join together. But he never establishes his thesis clearly from the biblical text. His discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:8-9 is particularly striking where Paul says woman came from man. He says that scientific developments since Paul's day show the mutual contribution of men and women in the production of children. Hence, he finally says the argument here is hyperbolic. The conclusions drawn by Webb are unconvincing. Paul is thinking of creation, where the biblical text clearly teaches that the first woman, Eve, came

from the first man, Adam. As Webb acknowledges himself, Paul also sees that men come through women (1 Cor 11:11-12). Hence, there is no need to appeal to our scientific superiority, for Paul does not deny the contribution of women. But Webb's argument is remarkable for he seems to undercut what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9 by appealing to our scientific knowledge. Ultimately, Webb drives a wedge between 1 Corinthians 11:8-9 and 11:11-12. The latter is a "seed idea" and applies to today; the former is cultural and unscientific and hence is culturally limited. But Paul is not buying into the reproductive garden idea here, for he thinks of how Eve came from Adam's rib, not the conception of people in the womb. There is nothing that contradicts modern science here, unless one believes Genesis is not historical in what it says about the creation of Adam and Eve.

Webb rightly argues that a practice is not necessarily normative simply because a theological analogy is used. We do not think monarchy is established in the Bible, nor do we think slavery applies today, even though God is described as King and Lord. I think we should say that the analogies used are intentional and in God's sovereignty were intended to teach us about God. Webb maintains that the analogy between husband and wife and Christ and the church is not necessarily transcultural. He is correct in saying that it is not necessarily transcultural, but he fails to explain a crucial element of the text. Paul informs us that the institution of marriage is patterned after the relationship between Christ and the church. The "mystery" is not that God thought up marriage and then used that relationship to illustrate Christ's relation to the church (Eph 5:32). No, it is precisely the reverse. Christ's

relationship to the church has priority, and marriage was always intended to mirror how Christ and the church are related. Interestingly, Paul again argues from a creation text, citing Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:32 to justify his view of marriage. So, Webb is correct in concluding that monarchy and slavery are not intended to be in force today, but he fails to see that monarchy and slavery are not creation ordinances while marriage is! Paul makes that very point in Ephesians 5:22-33. Webb fails to discern how the final revelation, the NT scriptures, distinguish slavery from the women's question. He also thinks that if such a view of Ephesians 5:22-33 is accepted, then husbands can strip their wives in public as Hosea stripped Gomer in Hosea 2. The argument is bogus. First, it is unlikely that Hosea 2 literally describes what Hosea would do to Gomer. It should be interpreted as a description of Yahweh's relationship to Israel. Furthermore, Hosea is scarcely the place to establish the relationship between husbands and wives. No one would argue from Hosea that men should marry prostitutes. Clearly the situation was exceptional.

Extrabiblical Criteria

Because of space I turn to the extrabiblical criteria suggested by Webb. He rightly suggests that a pragmatic test can be of some use. A holy kiss is not welcomed by most people in the U.S. as a friendly greeting. Nor is washing feet particularly useful in our culture. Other examples mentioned by Webb are not as clear. He often says in the book that we are not required to literally obey our leaders today as people had to obey the Roman emperor during NT times or a king during the era of the OT. But is the

point of application so remarkably different? Even in the OT, we have examples where people appealed to kings or remonstrated with them when they did something wrong. Webb also says that using the slavery/master texts to say that we should obey employers is incorrect, since we are not required to obey employers but to fulfill our contract. Webb is partially right, for it is true that the relationship between employer and employee differs from the master/slave relationship. The two are not comparable at every point. Still, it seems that Webb overemphasizes the difference. There is still a sense in which most employees must do what their boss says or face the possibility of dismissal. Many people could tell stories of being fired by their bosses. Naturally matters are complex. Employees can sue, and bosses may be unjust. Nevertheless, it seems there is a line of continuity between the two situations that Webb overlooks.

Webb's explanation and application of this criterion is not always clear. He says that church members should submit to elders today because church leaders are educated, experienced, and highly qualified. But it is simply not the case that the elders are always the best educated and most experienced members of the congregation. Nor are they invariably those who are most qualified. Hence, if we follow Webb's view, those members who are better educated and most experienced should not submit to church leaders, while those who are less educated and inexperienced should. Webb introduces factors into the reason for submission that are not clearly taught in the NT. The reason the congregation should follow their leaders is because God has appointed them to lead the congregation, not necessarily because they are at the top of the heap education-

ally and experientially. Webb makes a similar mistake when it comes to the relationship of men and women. The biblical text nowhere suggests that women are to submit to men because of lack of education or social inexperience.

The last criterion suggested by Webb, which he deems to be persuasive, is social-scientific evidence. It is interesting that Webb thinks that his extrascriptural criteria are persuasive. We have already seen that the pragmatic criterion noted above is applied in subjective ways by Webb, and hence it is hardly as persuasive as he alleges. That Webb thinks the social-scientific criterion is persuasive surprises me since it seems to exalt an extrabiblical norm above the scriptures. Moreover, as we shall see, his own use of the criterion is problematic.

Of course, all agree that the scriptures may be misinterpreted. Some did think the earth was the center of the universe, and science helped us see that this interpretation was incorrect. Still, we must be very careful about how we apply this criterion, for we can easily end up with a cultural subversion of the biblical message. For instance, could not Webb's suggestion that the biblical text is culturally bound in speaking of the barrenness of women be applied principally to the issue of homosexuality? Webb, of course, holds the line strongly here, insisting that homosexual practices are always wrong. It seems, however, that someone could use Webb's criterion and argue against him. The argument could run like this: Just as the scriptural writers were culturally bound in thinking infertility was all a woman's fault, so too they are culturally bound when they condemn homosexuality. The biblical writers, after all, did not know, indeed could not know, what we

know about homosexuality. We understand better than they the genetic and environmental factors that lead one to become a homosexual. We have come to realize that it is not a sin at all. Thankfully Webb forcefully rejects arguments like these, but his criterion appears to open the door for others to use such an argument.

The social-scientific criterion is brought to bear upon the issue of woman being deceived in 1 Timothy 2:14. Webb insists that there is no credible scientific evidence that women are more apt to be deceived than men. Hence, Paul uses a cultural argument that assumes that women lacked education and social experience in this verse. I want to say up front that this verse is difficult. I have changed my mind about its meaning more than once. One element has not changed, however, and that is the conviction that egalitarians do not explain this verse credibly. First, it is possible that the traditional view is correct and that women are more prone to deception than men and that is why they should not teach. Such a view is politically incorrect today, but if that is what the scriptures teach, that is where we should stand. Second, I acknowledge that I did depend on some social-scientific research in my own modified explanation of the verse. I believe with Doriani that there is a coherence between the world as it is and the biblical text. Nonetheless, the latter should always have priority, and hence my modified explication of the traditional view may be wrong. Third, I now incline to the view that the point of the verse is that Satan subverted male headship by tempting Eve rather than Adam. If this is the case, then both vv. 13-14 appeal to the same argument—the created order. Or, perhaps the point is that Eve sinned first, but sin is traced through Adam (Rom 5:12-

19), teaching male headship. I feel confident that one of the above interpretations is correct, but admit that I am unsure which one is persuasive.

I am quite sure that Webb's own view of the verse is unpersuasive. He turns susceptibility to deception into ignorance, lack of education, and inexperience, but this does not fit with the scriptures, for deception is a *moral* category. Webb actually reads the language of deception through the lenses of modern society, so that it would be akin to my knowledge of automobiles. Almost anyone could deceive me about how to fix my car when it is in disrepair, but such lack of knowledge on my part is not the same thing as sin, and hence does not comport with the biblical notion of deception. For Eve's being deceived is connected to her sinning (cf. Rom 7:11; 16:18; 1 Cor 3:18; 2 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:6; Jas 1:26), and hence cannot be chalked up merely to lack of education. The deception that leads to sin is not merely ignorance but a culpable state of affairs in which deception is rooted in a desire to displace God.

Webb also suggests that the intimations of patriarchy in the creation account are accommodations to the culture in which Genesis was written. This seems like a desperate expedient to sustain a preferred conclusion. Furthermore, the accommodation theory does not really make sense of *Paul's* use of the text, for it would be flat out wrong to say that Eve was deceived because she was uneducated. Surely Eve could understand the simple prohibition relayed by Adam! Otherwise she would be so unintelligent that she could not understand the most elementary command. Paul thinks her deception is sinful, just as deception is understood in all the other passages in the NT. Webb

has to posit an improbable scenario to interpret 1 Timothy 2:14. It would not be hard for Paul to say women were uneducated, but he fails to do so. All acknowledge 1 Timothy 2:14 is a difficult verse to interpret, but I would submit that egalitarians like Webb do not provide a plausible interpretation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can be grateful to Webb for raising important hermeneutical questions, and helping us see that we must think deeply about these matters. Applying the biblical text to today's world is not always easy, and we can profit from some of Webb's insights and principles when we engage in the hermeneutical task. Nevertheless, Webb's hermeneutic is flawed because he fails to grasp precisely the biblical theological concept of redemptive history, even though he appeals to it in presenting his own view. Nor does he relate well the OT to the NT, faltering because he does not correlate his view with the truth that Christ fulfills all of God's promises. The definitive and final character of the NT canon is not properly integrated into the whole issue of application by Webb. Hence, he introduces abstract criteria to discern what is cultural instead of interpreting the Bible in accord with its storyline. There are some good insights in his use of the criteria, but the criteria he judges to be persuasive are actually remarkably ambiguous and even questionable. They do not establish his conclusion regarding the role of women, and he fails to employ the argument from creation sufficiently in his explication of homosexuality. He does show that the canon excludes homosexuality. Webb rightly perceives that slavery is not God's ideal, but he could have drawn this con-

clusion from rightly assessing arguments from the created order and paying attention to the warrants (or lack thereof) found in the NT itself. To sum up, his defense of egalitarianism is found lacking, for he fails to establish his case exegetically or hermeneutically.

ENDNOTES

¹William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).