

Faith Pulpit

Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic

Faith Baptist Theological Seminary adheres to a literal, grammatical, historical interpretation of Scripture. That approach to hermeneutics has guided the school since its inception. Over the years, however, some new approaches to hermeneutics have emerged. In this article, Dr. Douglas Brown, professor of New Testament at FBTS, evaluates the Redemptive-Movement model of interpretation, a recent aberration in Biblical hermeneutics.

In the summer of 2007 I had the privilege of leading a group of teens from my church on a missions trip to France. A few weeks before the trip, one of the French missionaries we would be visiting (Denise Nelsen, a 1989 FBBC grad), was stateside and was able to come to our youth group to meet the missions team. Before the meeting, I asked her to greet the teens like she would greet French teens at her church-with a kiss! One by one the teens filed into youth group and were greeted by this strange woman with a holy kiss on each cheek. The shocked and surprised faces of the teens were truly a sight to behold!

Whether this humorous exercise helped prepare the teens for France or not may be debated, but it certainly awakened their understanding of the cultural differences between France and Iowa. In many respects this anecdote represents something at the heart of Biblical hermeneutics-the contextualization of Biblical truth. Contextualization is applying or appropriating Biblical truth into a contemporary setting and culture.[1](#)

Each time we modern believers apply the Bible, we consciously or unconsciously contextualize its meaning. For example, the command to greet fellow believers with a holy kiss is found five times in the New Testament.[2](#) These five passages all contain the same direct imperative (aspasasthe), yet I know of no Bible-believing church in the United States that greets people with a kiss at the front door. Are American Christians living in disobedience? Are French Christians applying the Bible more

accurately? The answer to both of these questions is “No,” because we intuitively understand that greetings change from culture to culture. The Biblical principle at stake is loving hospitality, not the cultural custom of kissing. While this example of contextualization is fairly straight forward, a multitude of controversial issues faces today’s church.

Two Important Perspectives

Two hermeneutical perspectives related to contextualization need to be addressed. First, believers have to discern what elements in Scripture are cultural, or time-bound, and what elements are supracultural, or eternal. For example, in 2 Timothy 4 Paul commanded Timothy in verse 2 to “preach the word” and in verse 13 to “bring the cloak.” Obviously preaching the Word is a timeless command that we carry on today, whereas bringing Paul his cloak was a time-bound, situational directive. Second, believers have to determine how to apply the Bible to contemporary issues that the Bible does not speak to directly. For example, how do we apply the Bible to ethical questions such as cloning and genetic engineering?

A growing number of evangelical scholars have attempted to answer these contextualization issues with an innovative and sophisticated approach called a redemptive-movement hermeneutic (RMH).³ Perhaps the most outspoken advocate of RMH is William J. Webb, Professor of New Testament Studies at Heritage Seminary in Ontario, Canada. His 2001 book, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (IVP), sparked the attention of evangelical scholars, drawing both support and criticism.⁴

Over the last decade, a flurry of articles and books has been written on RMH, and authors are treating it in standard texts on hermeneutics.⁵ More recently, Zondervan published *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* (2009), in which Webb presents the “Redemptive-Movement Model.”

Understanding the Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic

RMH is an attempt to find the redemptive-movement, or redemptive-spirit, underlying the Biblical text. Advocates propose that the redemptive-spirit moves beyond the historical meaning and original application of a given passage toward an ultimate ethic. Webb writes, “Scripture seems to give us an ethic that needs in some ways to be developed and worked out over time. It would appear that many biblical texts were written within a cultural framework with limited or incremental movement toward an ultimate ethic.”⁶

Once a person discerns this redemptive trajectory, or logical extension, of Scripture, he then can correctly appropriate it into today’s culture. Essential to RMH is the assumption that the Biblical ethic is less-than-ultimate since it is relative to ancient Biblical cultures and to canonical development. Webb writes,

The idea of a RM hermeneutic is not that God himself had somehow “moved” in his thinking or that Scripture is in any way less than God’s Word. Rather, it means that God in a pastoral sense accommodates himself to meeting people and society where they are in their existing social ethic, and (from there) he gently moves them with incremental steps toward something better. . . . Incremental movement within Scripture reveals a God who is willing to live with the tension between an absolute ethic in theory and the reality of guiding real people in practice toward such a goal.⁷

Advocates of RMH are not against the grammatical-historical hermeneutic, but they contend that the grammatical-historical method alone is deficient. Webb describes interpreters employing traditional hermeneutics like someone doing an archaeological dig. He uses phrases such as “concrete specificity,” “time-restricted elements,” “isolated or static understanding of the text,” and “frozen-in-time aspects of Biblical ethics” to express the Bible’s historic meaning as uncovered through the exegetical process (i.e., the uncovered bones of the dig).

By contrast, Webb advocates adding RMH to grammatical-historical exegesis. He argues that we must go beyond the static, historic meaning of the Bible to properly apply Scripture to our contemporary culture. He explains the redemptive movement as “crucial meaning within the Biblical text.” “This RM meaning or redemptive-spirit meaning must profoundly shape the course of our contemporary appropriation of the Bible in a way that often carries us beyond the bound-in-time components of meaning within the Biblical text.”⁷

A New Model

To help explain RMH, Webb uses an X-Y-Z model. “X” represents someone interpreting the Bible from the perspective of the Ancient Near Eastern, Greco-Roman, and/or Second Temple Jewish cultures. “Y” represents the Bible—that is, the isolated words of the text and its frozen-in-time ethic. “Z” represents the ultimate ethic a contemporary interpreter can discern from Scripture when filtered through his or her own relatively “better” culture. Basically Webb argues that contemporary readers cannot properly understand the Bible when it is read from today’s perspective, especially when one’s present day cultural “ethic happens to have advanced beyond the static forms of the biblical text to something better.”⁸ Only when the interpreter looks at the Bible within its historical and cultural contexts will the “frozen-in-time” ethic of the Bible make sense.

Next Webb contends that the interpreter needs to look for redemptive movement from ancient culture to the Bible (comparing X to Y). The Bible often demonstrates “a kinder and gentler administration of justice that underscores the dignity” of people in comparison to its ancient cultural setting.⁹ This is the “redemptive spirit” that Webb claims underlies the text. Further, Webb proposes that the interpreter look within the Bible itself for canonical redemptive-movement between the Testaments (within Y). Finally the interpreter is to follow the redemptive-movement, or trajectory, to his or her own culture to

appropriate it into the current context. This step might represent an ultimate ethic or at least further incremental movement toward it (Y to Z).

Applying the RMH Model to Ethical Topics

Webb employs RMH with a number of ethical topics.¹⁰ As the title of his 2001 book suggests, he deals with slaves, women, and homosexuals together as disadvantaged groups within society. Concerning slavery, Webb demonstrates how cruel and inhumane ancient cultures treated slaves. Next he builds a case that the Biblical ethic concerning slavery is much more humane and fair, but it is not complete since it fails to abolish the institution outright. Finally he argues that using RMH Christians can now adopt abolitionism as the ultimate ethic based on the redemptive-spirit of the Bible.

Concerning homosexuality, Webb argues that even though ancient and contemporary cultures variously accept homosexuality, the Bible consistently forbids the practice and therefore perceives no redemptive trajectory. Concerning women, Webb contends that the patriarchal societies of Bible times treated women as second class citizens, marginally better than cattle. Then he argues that the Bible tempers the treatment of women and incrementally improves their place in society, though it does not overturn patriarchy. Finally, at the heart of his argument, Webb makes the case cautiously for “complementary egalitarianism” as the ultimate ethic for society and the church.

Evaluating the Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic

Webb’s proposal deserves a book-length response. While he is to be commended for tackling the important issue of contextualization, I fear that RMH raises more questions than it answers. Good exegetes need Biblical discernment to sift through RMH. For this article I offer three basic critiques.

Trajectory and the Sufficiency of Scripture Webb admits that in order to discover the redemptive-spirit of the Bible, we must compare the Bible to ancient cultures and then follow the redemptive trajectory to contemporary culture. Two points of critique are offered. First, without this trajectory through culture RMH is certainly crippled and perhaps even untenable. Is it wise to adopt a hermeneutic that is so dependent on cultural contexts? This critical dependence on culture cuts against the sufficiency of the Scriptures. Webb’s proposal would mean that Christians without access to these cultural contexts (both ancient and contemporary) are essentially incapable of properly interpreting the Scriptures.

Second, interpreting the Bible within its historical and cultural backgrounds is simply doing good exegesis and not RMH. Webb’s claims that the historical-grammatical method produces only “static” and “isolated meaning” are misguided. Interpretations that neglect the historical and cultural background are simply examples of bad exegesis.

Theology and the Unfolding of Scripture Webb contends that RMH is meant to complement and not replace systems of discontinuity and continuity. Many of his exegetical examples, however, reveal

little or no consideration of the distinction between national Israel and the church. Even an elemental understanding of dispensationalism would resolve many of the ethical tensions Webb tackles.

In addition, seeing canonical development between the Testaments need not be part of a “redemptive-spirit” but rather a dimension of sound Biblical theology. Trajectories between the Testaments and different dispensations are normal when we understand the progressive nature of revelation.

Culture and the Authority of Scripture My greatest criticism of RMH is how it potentially undermines the authority of Scripture. Webb's contention that the Bible's ethic is in some way deficient combined with his attempt to develop an ultimate ethic outside the bounds of Scripture is alarming. His assertion that today's cultural ethics are better than the Bible's “frozen-in-time” ethic is dangerous. Is today's culture really better than the Biblical ethic? Would it not be better to attribute positive cultural developments directly to the Bible's influence in society? In addition, his embrace of culture and “persuasive” scientific data can easily strip Scripture of its authority. Ultimately, RMH appears to be too subjective in its application and should be rejected as a hermeneutical tool.

Works Cited

1. See e.g., G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 410–33.
2. Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26, and 1 Peter 5:14. 1 Peter 5:14 says, “kiss of love” (philemati agapes) instead of “holy kiss” (philemati hagioi).
3. William J. Webb includes the following scholars: Darrell Bock, Craig Blomberg, Mark Strauss, I. Howard Marshall, Craig Keener, Linda Belleville, R. T. France, Glen Scorgie, John Stackhouse and, of course, Webb himself (“A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: Encouraging Dialogue among Four Evangelical Views,” *JETS* 44 [2005]: 345–49).
4. Two notable critics of RMH are Wayne Grudem, “Should We Move beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic? An Analysis of William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*,” *JETS* 47 (2004): 299–346, and Thomas R. Schreiner, “William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: A Review Article*,” *SBJT* 6 (2002): 46–64.
5. See e.g., W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 497–98; H. A. Virkler and K. Gerber Ayayo, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 202–04.
6. William J. Webb, “A Redemptive-Movement Model,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 217.
7. Webb, 226.
8. Webb, 218.
9. Webb, 240.
10. Webb has forthcoming books on war and on corporal punishment in which he argues against spanking.

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