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biblical commandments and guidelines that arise out of a particular culture or out of a particular situation.

I am always amazed at how people sometimes latch onto certain passages of the Bible, in order to condemn another person or another group of people. Often when this is done, there is very little integrity involved in taking care to interpret the biblical passages within the contexts in which they occur.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is a good example. The story is often used as a damning indictment against homosexuality. Yet, with a little research, one will readily discover that biblical scholars are far less clear about what happened there than are most contemporary evangelists and self-proclaimed newspaper prophets! The Sodom story says nothing at all about the homosexual CONDITION. The only real application in the story to homosexuals would have to be a UNIVERSAL one: homosexuals, like everybody else, should show hospitality to strangers and should deal justly with the poor and the vulnerable; and homosexuals, like everybody else, should not force their sexual attentions upon those unwilling to receive them. The story is an indictment against sexual violence and injustice and inhospitality--an indictment which is to be applied to gays and straights alike! When interpreting the Bible, it's important to be able to identify what is the MESSAGE, and what is the CULTURAL SETTING of the day. We have to also remember that the people of the Old Testament were a hard-pressed minority and, understandably, they were concerned that their future be insured. They didn't want their people to die out. So, for survival and political reasons, procreation was the main sexual emphasis in relationships. They then made it into a religious norm in order to assure its adherence among the people!

The Apostle Paul makes this point about misusing Scripture to condemn: "You, therefore, have no excuse," he said, "you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things!" Or to put in different words: CONDEMNATION IS A BOOMERANG! Fortunately, for us, though, so is loving acceptance a boomerang! Whatever we do to our neighbor, for good or evil, we do to ourselves.

But who is my neighbor? Jesus was once asked the same question. He answered it by telling a story. He said there was once a man who was beaten by thieves and left lying along the roadside. A priest saw the man's plight, and later a Levite. Both appeared sympathetic at first, but both chose, instead, to remain uninvolved. Finally, a Samaritan (an outcast in that culture!), took pity on the man and, at great personal inconvenience and expense, helped him to safety. Jesus put it to the questioner: "Which one of these was the neighbor to the unfortunate man?" The

questioner had no choice except to acknowledge that the Samaritan who had shown mercy was the REAL neighbor. Jesus' reply was simply: "Go, and do as the Samaritan did! Show mercy!"

I find it interesting that Jesus did not define the concept of neighbor by geographical closeness, nor by race, nor by religion, nor by nationality, nor by political philosophy, nor by sexual orientation--but only by need, and by response to need! Anyone who crosses my path and needs my help, my support, my affirmation, my acceptance--is my neighbor! And I am neighbor to anyone to whom I give assistance--to whom I show mercy and understanding, and to whom I respond in a positive way! And as Jesus said to the questioner: "Do that, and you will live!"

Psychologist George Weinberg says, before society will be able to recognize gay men and women as neighbors, it will first need to deal with its own HOMOPHOBIA, that is its own FEAR of homosexuality. He says, the most basic of these fears, is to accept homosexuality, more and more people will CHOOSE to become homosexual. But if sexual orientation is simply a matter of choice, why are there so many gays in a society that rejects, and makes fun of, and punishes homosexuality? Paul Gebhard, Director of Indiana University's Institute for Sex Research, states that in his studies he has never known of anyone who is homosexual by choice. The only choice, he says, is whether or not to accept one's sexual orientation. And that means, of course, the CONDITIONS of gay people is as morally neutral as the CONDITION of straight people! Given proper support and recognized opportunities for commitment relationships, homosexual persons can express their affections and their relationships as ethically, morally and responsibly as heterosexual persons! In determining human and ethical expressions of one's sexuality, it is not the laws of biology we need to consult...but the law of LOVE! And that, it seems to me, is THE fundamental biblical message!

I think it is up to straight church people to reach the same position regarding gays, that we reached regarding other people in our society. They're different--that's all! And if their difference bothers us--I guess that's OUR problem! What we've come to recognize is that just as THE BLACK PROBLEM turned out to be a problem of white racism, and just as THE WOMAN PROBLEM turned out to be a problem of male sexism, and just as THE PROBLEM OF LEFT-HANDEDNESS turned out to be a problem of THE RIGHT-HANDERS, so THE HOMOSEXUAL PROBLEM is really the homophobia of many of us heterosexuals!

Now I know that gays have hangups--so do straights! I'm aware that there is promiscuity among some gays, but I seriously doubt if it is any more than (see SERMON on page 14)