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THE FRONT PAGE

- From the Editors -

Thoughts On Censorship In Cyberspace

"The most stringent protection of free speech would protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic ... The question in every case is whether the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about the substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent."

- From *Schenck v. United States*, 1919 Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841-1935).

Censorship is the act of examining, estimating and (if deemed necessary), excluding or limiting material (literature, video, audio and electronic data) from public consumption, or from the view/use of minors. A "censor" (person) is an authorized examiner of literature, plays, or other material, who may prohibit what he considers morally or otherwise objectionable, based on some instituted standard.

Any discussion of this issue must take into account that censorship always implies some standard! The problem is, if I demand the power of censorship on the basis of my standard (values, beliefs), some other citizen can claim the same right, on the basis of entirely divergent standards. This will always be the problem with government or institutional censorship, until everybody in the government obeys the gospel and remains faithful to the teachings of Scripture! And this problem needs to be kept in mind as the current discussion continues regarding censorship in cyberspace.

"[The 'Communications Decency Act,'](#) now before Congress, would penalize anyone using electronic telecommunication to harass, defame, or to spread obscenities. So-called cyberporn continues to worry Christian leaders (see CT, Sept. 12, 1994, p. 42). And many Christian networks limit access to the Internet to protect children from exposure to online pornography." 1995 Christianity Today, Inc./CHRISTIANITY TODAY Magazines, COVER: Cyber Shock, Part 2.

The editors of Expository Files share this concern, but we have no absolutely just and perfect solution to this problem. We would like to provoke some thought about the concept of censorship in cyberspace. Is it possible, the power of censorship might be used to curtail more than obscenity? We are not suggesting that cyberspace should be wide open and no censorship or law should prevail on the Internet. But before we jump onto a bandwagon and make impulsive demands of limiting materials, we would do well to consider how broad or deep any new law might be applied.

The Potential Problem For EF

Since the inception of Expository Files in January of 1994, monthly downloads have grown steadily. But what may be more significant, we enjoy a wide variety of locations we never imagined. SYSOPS of religious bulletin boards at several major universities have contacted us, asking if they can make EF available in their electronic library. A number of "ministries" operated by people with religious interests make the magazine available. And, of course, we are located on commercial online services like AOL and CompuServe. There are links to EF locations now on several homepage sites on the WWW. Mark Copeland has helped to distribute EF from the first issue. So, not only have actual downloads on AOL and CompuServe increased, we are located out on the Internet at various places. That means, when we count two or three hundred monthly downloads we know about, there may be four or five times that figure we are unable to tabulate.

Our concern is, if the power of censorship is given into the hands of the government, to control objectionable literature, religious publications like EF may also suffer. Though it may seem strange and distasteful to us, just as bold homosexuality is objectionable to us, teaching from the Bible is objectionable to others. This doesn't mean we would like to dismiss all talk of censorship laws in the electronic world. But we must exercise care that the solution doesn't become worse than the problem.

Discernment at the first level of contact

Is there some way we can promote the concept of DISCERNMENT OR CENSORSHIP AT THE FIRST LEVEL OF CONTACT? As parents, instead of depending upon the government to censor and filter material for us, shouldn't we assume that responsibility and encourage others to do the same?

Share your thoughts about this issue with us for further discussion in the EF Mail Bag.

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