

Doctrine Of Offense

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In all my years of attending conferences and hearing and discussing essays, I do not recall a single assignment on the doctrine of offense, of giving and taking offense. I do recall an essay on adiaphora. In that connection the matter of offense, offending a weak brother, was also part of the discussion. But it was a matter of offense in connection with another subject, not a discussion of offense as such. Our dogmatic notes at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary do not have a section, even a page or part of a page on offense. This does not mean that the doctrine of offense is not taught. It is discussed in connection with adiaphora and any of those passages that speak of *skandalon* as they apply to other doctrines. In his Christian Dogmatics, Franz Pieper devotes less than two pages to the doctrine. He does this in his discussion of actual sin.

The doctrine of offense, certainly not one of the fundamental doctrines of Scripture, is hardly an obscure doctrine. The key word is *skandalon*. The word occurs frequently in the Scriptures. Though not limited to the Gospels, it occurs most frequently there. Of the thirty plus places it occurs as a noun or verb, two thirds are found in the discourses of our Lord. It has its Old Testament equivalent in the word *Mikhshol*, from the root *Kashal*, to stumble.

Looking first at the Hebrew equivalent, *Mikhshol* is that which causes one to trip or to stumble. It occurs in the literal sense in Leviticus 19:14: “Do not curse the deaf or put a *stumbling block* in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the Lord.” It occurs in the figurative sense in Jeremiah 6:21: “Therefore this is what the Lord says: ‘I will put *obstacles* before this people. Fathers and sons alike *will stumble* over them: neighbors and friends will perish.’ “ Also to be noted is Isaiah 8:14 which is quoted both by Paul (Romans 9:33) and Peter (1 Peter 2:8). “And he will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that *makes them fall*. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare.”

The commoner term is the *skandalon*. It is a shorter form of the old Greek word *skandalathron*, the trap stick, the crooked movable stick, (instrument) to which bait was affixed and by which a trap was sprung. The *skandalon* then is the trigger on a trap and in New Testament usage mean the trap itself, an impediment, a pitfall, a stumbling block. The stumbling which is inherent in the word is not just any kind of tripping or stumbling, from which one might easily and quickly rise. It is the death trap a stumbling or falling to destruction, to total ruin. In its Biblical use it is always used in the figurative sense and is anything which causes the Christian to fall from faith or hinder him in his faith, or an obstacle that prevents a sinner from coming to faith. The *KJV* consistently translates the *skandalon* as an offense or a stumbling block or stone. The *NIV* is somewhat more flexible. In addition to offense and stumbling block, it also translates obstacle, that which causes sin, that which causes one to fall.

In speaking of offense, a stumbling block, Scripture cites both giving offense and taking offense. The two are quite different even though the same term is used. Offense is taken when an unregenerate person uses the words or acts of another as an excuse to sin—without any fault on the part of that other person. Such is the use in Isa 14:8 quoted by Paul and Peter. Quoting Hosea and Isaiah at some length to underscore God’s sovereign choice among both Jew and Gentile Paul concludes the ninth chapter of his epistle with a comment on Israel’s unbelief as foretold by Isaiah: “What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not obtained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. As it is written: ‘See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame’ “ (Ro 9:30-33). Calling Christ the living stone Peter speaks of him as a precious stone to those who believe. As for those who do not believe Peter quotes Ps 118:22 and Isa 14:8: “ ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone and a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.’ “ (1Pe 2:7-8) Thus Christ is called a *skandalon*, an offense, a stumbling block whenever men take exception to the “foolishness of the cross”, recoil from the doctrine of righteousness by grace through the vicarious atonement of Christ. Paul again makes this use of the term, the taking of offense, in his opening remarks to the Corinthians: “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” 1 Co 1:20-24. We should hasten to add, however, that such taking offense does not have to be limited to Israel of old or c4-the scoffer of the present age. It may apply to Christians as well whenever they fall away because they are not willing to follow Christ for one reason or another. We recall Jesus word of warning on more than one occasion. Speaking of the signs of the end of the world Jesus says it will happen—even to Christians: “At that time many will. turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other.” Mt 24:10. To the disciples of John the Baptist he said:

“Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me” Matt 11:6. Skandalon is also the word Jesus used in the parable of the Sower and the Seed applying the word sown on rocky places to those who believe for a short time but in times of trouble or persecution because of the word quickly fallen away.

But especially Scripture warns against giving offense. Men give offense whenever they cause others to sin. This may involve false teaching, it may have to do with sinful living. In either case, men are led astray. In a few cases one or the other may be indicated. In Ro 16:17 the apostle Paul speaks quite specifically of false teaching. “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.” In the latter part of the opening chapter of his Sermon on the Mount the Savior warns against ungodly living, specifically sins against the 6th commandment. “If your right eye *causes you to sin*, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. Matt 5:29-30.

At another time either kind of giving offense may be understood. Such is the case in his warning against offending one of his little ones that believe in him. It is out of concern for the little ones that Jesus issues the severest warning against the doctrine of offense. “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come; but woe to that person through whom they will come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck, than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him” (Lk 17:1-3).

We ought to note again that the falling, stumbling, in the word skandalon is a complete fall, utter destruction, spiritual ruin. For each and every sin, unrepented, separates the sinner from God. Thus the Savior’s solemn warning and firm command. In the entire context Jesus generates a great concern for offended and offender. Concern for the offended is couched in the judgment spoken against any that give offense. “It would be better for him to be thrown etc.” “Watch yourselves” voices concern for offender. Yes, the world freely scandalizes. It harbors no reservations in the matter of causing offense. Deliberately, eagerly, it seeks to harm, to lead others into sin. At the time this essay was being written a small article appeared in the Milwaukee Sentinel stating that Hugh Hefner is planning an autobiography to appear in 1987. He explained the reason for a biography at this time: “My life and Playboy are truly an American phenomenon.” Enough said. But sometimes it happens that the Christian is the cause of offense. Therefore Jesus cautions: “watch yourselves.” And if a Christian should cause offense, his fellow Christians must be ready to deal with him in a firm and evangelical manner. Sin must be rebuked, but not for mere rebuking sake. Rebuke him that he might see the fact and seriousness of his sin in order that he may be led to repentance. And when he does repent, forgive him.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, this does not conclude our study of the doctrine of offense. Offense is not limited to leading others astray by false teaching and a sinful life. Scripture also speaks of causing offense in matters which in themselves are neither right nor wrong (*adiaphora*), but done inconsiderately may cause a weak brother to sin. “Be careful, however that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Co 8:9). Here the Greek word for causing offense is not *skandalon*, but *prolskomma*. It is a word, however, which is used alongside *skandalon* both here and in Romans 14 where Paul also warns at length against offending the weak brother.

Adiaphora or “middle things” fall within the realm of Christian liberty. In matters that Scripture has neither commanded nor forbidden a Christian is free to act one way or another. Scripture does not even begin to make a list of adiaphora. This would be a virtually impossible and an unnecessary task. Scripture does give some examples. In Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 the apostle Paul mentions eating meat and drinking wine. For the New Testament Christian God has not forbidden or commanded the eating of any particular food or drink. Eating and drinking fall into the realm of Christian liberty. “All food is clean...” (Ro 14:20). Of course, this is not freedom in the sense that the Christian can do anything for selfish or even thoughtless reason, much less to excess. Eating and drinking and all adiaphora have but a single reason and purpose. “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (1Co 10:31).

However all Christians are not equally clear on what things are true adiaphora. In this connection Scripture speaks of strong and weak Christians. A weak Christian is one whose conscience troubles him in a matter of adiaphora. This may be the result of an erring or a doubting conscience. The erring conscience is one that is quite certain that what the strong Christian rightly recognizes as an adiaphoron ought not be considered such. A doubting conscience is one that just isn’t sure. That Christian is still weak in this matter. To act, to do something his conscience tells him is wrong or, he is not sure about, is a sin against his conscience. “But the man who has doubt is condemned if he eats because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin” (Ro 14: 23).

It is for such weak Christians in any and all matters of adiaphora that the apostle expresses great concern and pleads with strong Christians to be considerate of them. In Ro 15: 1-3 Paul writes: “We who are strong ought to bear with the failing of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but as it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’” In the opening verse of the previous chapter Paul had said: “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man’s faith allows him to eat everything,

but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables” (Ro 14: 1-2). The Corinthian congregation also had a mix of weak and strong Christians. As we already noted Paul expressed a special concern for the weak: “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Co 8:9). The same concern for the weak can be found in Paul’s writing to the Christians at Thessalonica. “And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (1 Thess 5:14). A strong Christian’s exercise of his Christian liberty in any given matter might cause a weak Christian to follow his example, and thereby act against his conscience. This would be an unfortunate matter of offense. Bear with the weak, accept them, and help them. But how far should, must, the strong Christian go so that he does not offend the weak Christian. He will be ready to forego his Christian liberty. He will be ready not to do something which Scriptures and his own conscience allows him to do. “All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall” (Ro 14: 20-21). The Christian will forego his own liberty in a matter for the sake of another, a weaker Christian. “To the weak I become weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the gospel, that I might share in its blessings” (1Co 9:22-23). Paul’s love in Christ and for the Gospel could allow him to do no less. He urged the Roman Christians to be guided by that same love. “If your brother is distressed because of what you do, you are no longer acting in love”(Ro 14: 15).

Our discussion of causing offense in matters of adiaphora is not complete unless we hasten to add that a Christian will forego his Christian liberty only as long as the truth of the Gospel is not at stake. If at any time a weak Christian should insist that his incorrect position is the right one and passes judgment on the strong Christian for his correct position, then the matter can no longer be treated as any other adiaphoron. In such a case the weak Christian becomes an erring brother. Consciously or unconsciously he has set out to rob a Christian of his liberty, to place him back under the law. Then the words of Paul apply: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1). If the truth of the Gospel is at stake and one must be certain that. This is the case then he will insist upon exercising his Christian liberty, even when the danger exists that weak Christians might be offended. In such cases offense is not the fault of the strong Christian, but the one who has threatened the truth of the Gospel. It is much the same as that offense which is caused by faithful Christian witness to the Gospel in word and deed. The world will always take offense. Paul says of his own faithful witness to the Gospel: “Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished” (Gal 5:11). Paul’s preaching of Christ to the Jews who insisted upon observing the law as a means of salvation was bound to cause offense. But Paul would have been unfaithful if he had done otherwise.

Aside from the thoughts of the previous paragraph the rule is that it is better, far better, to forego my Christian liberty in a particular matter than even risk causing offense, a stumbling and being the cause of spiritual harm to any Christian. And this is not to say that weakness is to be encouraged. Weakness is never a virtue. The church will always seek to inform and strengthen. But as long as there is a church militant we will be faced with weaknesses in one matter of adiaphora or another. There will be Christians who are not as strong, still very weak. Scripture urges us to tolerate them, be considerate of them, lest we become guilty of offense and they become trapped again in the dungeon of sin and death.

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