

Giving and Taking Offense and the Pastor's Conduct

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A clear understanding of the term "offense" is fundamental to a proper discussion of the theme "Giving and Taking Offense and the Pastor's Conduct". The popular definition of the word "offend" is to cause dislike, displeasure or anger. The term "offend" was first used in the sense of causing one to stumble. We find the term used in several places in the New Testament and it is properly understood to mean "cause to stumble." The term is used in three: different situations.

1.) The Cross - An Offense Every Christian will offend the unbeliever when he confesses Jesus Christ to be his personal Savior. The unbeliever is offended because his sinful nature does not want salvation by the merits of Christ nor will he tolerate the idea of justification by grace. Thus the Cross of Christ becomes an offense to the unbeliever. St. Paul cites two offenses of the Cross. (Gal. 5:11, Rom. 9:33)

2.) Our Sins - An Offense The words of Jesus are clear: "But woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." (Matt. 18:7) If one by his sinful life leads a person into unbelief, misbelief or sin, or encourages them to remain or continue in a sin, he is guilty of giving offense.

3.) Christian Liberty - An Offense While on the one hand it is not sinful to exercise our Christian liberty, on the other hand the inconsiderate exercise of Christian liberty may become an offense to the weak in faith. (Col. 2, 16; 1 Cor. 3, 13)

The Pastor's conduct covers every aspect of his life. For the sake of discussion we will divide the Pastor's conduct into three areas - in the home, in the congregation, and in public.

One would assume that the members of a Pastor's household are Christian. There would be no need to speak of "The Offense of the Cross" in this division.

The pastor at home must offer his personal life as an example to the entire household. Every word and every deed become lessons for each member of the family. If the Pastor will use the name of God in vain the family will most likely follow and continue in this sin. When the Pastor leads his family into sin or leads them in the continuances of a sin his conduct is an offense to his family. In the exercise of Christian Liberty the pastor must be sure that his household is correctly educated. The member of the family who does not understand may be offended by the inconsiderate exercise of Christian liberty.

Within the frame of the local congregation the "Cross of Christ" should not be the: "Cross of Offense." Should it be, that one weak in faith be offended by the proper preaching of the law and gospel, the congregation certainly prays with their pastor that this wound to their pride will allow them to see the truth.

As in the home, the conduct of the pastor must not lead the lambs of the flock into sin nor encourage or allow the congregation to continue in sin. If the Pastor betrays the confidence of one of his members and makes private information public information he has sinned against the eighth commandment, Many a time a Pastor has carried private information out of his study into his home and suddenly finds that his wife or another member of his family has made the information public. On occasion the parsonage has become the starting point for malicious gossip. As the members carry the gossip through the congregation and out into the public they are guilty of sinning against the eighth commandment and the Pastor's conduct has become an offense.

Every Pastor will exercise his Christian liberty. The effect of this exercise must be carefully considered and observed. While God's Word gives the Pastor the privilege to exercise his Christian liberty, yet if he is inconsiderate in the use of this privilege and causes one weak in faith to act against his erring conscience, his conduct is an offense.

One area in which many offenses have been given is in the congregational service. We divide the service into two parts, the one is the preaching of God's Word and the other is ceremonial. We have many traditions in our congregations regarding the ceremonial part of the service which we do not want to give up. A change in the tradition, the dropping of a tradition or the starting of a new tradition may be an offense. The use of a guitar, violin, flute or many other instruments in a solo would bring a great deal of criticism in most of our congregations. The use of pageantry when personage of the Bible story are represented has been carefully avoided and in some cases condemned as a desecration of the house of worship. In addition to the worship service we have traditions which govern weddings and funerals. Our Christian liberty is exercised in the congregation as we establish the offices and the respective responsibilities; and when we designate the purpose and function of men's', ladies', and young peoples' organizations; and as we find solutions to the many problems associated with Sunday Schools and Christian Day Schools.

The Pastor should not lead the congregation into divisions, splitting the congregation into factions which are using their energy opposing each other rather than promoting the work of the congregation. The pastor should conduct himself in such a manner so that the members of the congregation do not act against their erring conscience.

Quite often during the course of this internal unrest we hear the demand made that one side should yield because the other feels offended. The offended party may feel they have been offended but it is possible that they have taken offense when no true cause for offense has been given. The Pastor must also be careful lest in an effort not to offend he yields to a member's demands and thus finds himself in the untenable position of supporting the erroneous views of the member.

Every member must grow in their sanctification. One aspect of the pastor's call is to lead his members in this growth. To assume a passive position regarding a sin by individuals or groups of members may appear to be approval to the wrongdoers, with the attendant result that they will continue in their error. The Pastor's conduct has encouraged them to continue in their sin and thus his conduct becomes an offense for them.

Some Pastors have demanded that specific rules be followed in the exercise of Christian liberty. Compliance to their rules have become the criteria for friendship and fellowship. Some pastors claim to be offended because of the conduct of pastors who do not share their feelings regarding the exercise of Christian liberty. On occasion the charge has been made that they are disloyal to the Lutheran principles. To yield to their personal feelings may lead to a denial of Christian liberty. St. Paul did not yield to the false brethren when they demanded that Titus be circumcised. We practice the custom of baptizing by sprinkling rather than immersion to confirm the truths that the validity of the sacrament is not dependent upon the manner in which the water is applied. Edward W. A. Koelher writes in his book A Summary of Christian Doctrine:

"For the sake of charity to a weak brother we should be ready to refrain from the use of our liberty, Rom. 14, 15; I Cor. 8, 9 but if a confession of the truth is involved, then we must stand in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and not be again entangled

with the yoke of bondage, Gal. 5, 1, nor let our Liberty be judged by another man's conscience, I Cor. 10, 29."

Every Christian congregation and its pastor have one primary responsibility, namely to present God's plan of salvation to all people. The "Cross of Christ" becomes the "Cross of Offense" to unbelievers and the effective presentation of the "Cross of Christ" becomes an offense. The offender, many times it is the Pastor, is not sinning when he gives this offense but is carrying out the command of the Lord.

The extent of a pastor's activity beyond the home and the congregation will be governed by the circumstances in the home, congregation and community. The conduct of the Pastor should not be an offense to any man. The world is full of sin but this is not an excuse for the Pastor to stumble in his faith and to fall into sin. The fact that he is tempted is no excuse to yield to the temptation. When a sin of a pastor becomes known to the public and some follow his sinful example, the conduct of the Pastor is an offense to those individuals.

Many Pastors are placed in the same class as doctor's and veterinarians and are called hard drivers. The speed laws are carelessly observed. If the Pastor's driving habits are such that he is breaking the law and his example is followed and others break the law his sinful careless example is an offense. Some Pastors are involved in protests against various conditions in this generation, while others are protesting changes. This may be casting his vote in an election; a letter writing campaign; a community meeting; a special leadership meeting; a sit-in; a march; etc.. The Pastor has the privilege to exercise his rights as a citizen of his community. Whenever a pastor becomes part of an action group which either accidentally or consciously perpetrates civil disobedience his conduct is an offense. There are many formal and casual action groups which are working for the benefit of the community as well as certain minority groups. The Pastor may lend his signature: and moral support to the campaign to secure humane treatment for the prisoners held in North Vietnam. The Pastor as a private citizen may be active in many of the community activities. He may assist with Little League Baseball programs, belong to the Parents and Teachers Association, Volunteer Fire Fighters, etc.. These are neither political or policy making groups but are service organizations. The pastor will be most careful about being a member of a governing body since people may feel he represents his church members. The proper separation of Church and State must be maintained. While on the one hand we must never deny truth nor jeopardize our position as the true Christian Church, we must not isolate ourselves to the extent that we become the church of the "closed door." The conduct of some pastors has become an offense to unchurched because of an aloof attitude. On one occasion a Pastor refused to bid people the time of day unless they were members of his congregation. This seemingly insignificant aspect of the Pastor's conduct caused some unchurched people to stay away from the church and remain in their unbelief. Thus the conduct of the Pastor became an offense. There are times when the pastor must exercise his Christian liberty. A man in one community decided that he would wait with joining a church until he found one in which the members were perfect. Perfect to him was a person who not only kept the Ten Commandments but who never used tobacco, intoxicating beverages, jewelry or makeup. He demanded compliance to his ideas as the basis for fellowship. If the pastor had yielded he would have become an advocate of the man's false teaching. Thus when the pastor continued to have an occasional glass of beer his conduct was not an offense to that individual, rather the individual was taking offense.

In the exercise of Christian liberty the pastor ought to be aware of the potential offense involved. There are times when the Pastor yields to a request to abstain. One notes the situation

in the early years of the Christian Church. The Jewish Christians had an aversion to eating the meat of animals offered in heathen sacrifice or which had been strangled. The Gentile Christians were asked to refrain from eating such meat in order to spare their feelings. The feelings of Jewish Christians were a weakness, a fault. While the Church must tolerate such a weakness and treat it tenderly, the church must not encourage it. The weak, in faith and the unbelievers who have an aversion to meats or drinks must not be allowed to obstruct the Gospel; nor lead others into their ignorance and error; nor be allowed to establish their personal ideas as a rival to the perfect law. A weak brother becomes a false brother when he demands that his position on adiaphora is the only tenable position.

One can take almost every invention of man and show by the use of it that someone may sin if they use it. If you are to eliminate everything which may cause someone to sin you will soon find yourself in a ridiculous position. Suppose a pastor decided to avoid anything which might become an offense. He would, of course, get rid of the automobile. Many people who drive fail to keep all the traffic laws. If they had no automobile they would not commit these sins. He would have seen that his family used no makeup or jewelry or wigs since jewelry, etc. has lured many a woman and man to their fall. He should also stop using electricity since electricity allows one to do more work in less time allowing one more leisure time. Too much leisure time can be an opportunity for the devil to lead one into sin. He will have a difficult time at the clothing store. If he buys a suit in one of the modern styles they may think he is going the way of the sinful generation and they should follow, but if he buys a black suit others may say he comes part of the legion of evil. If one were to carry this logic to a conclusion you find a man with nothing who is afraid to appear before anyone lest someone be offended. Such a ridiculous position is not advocated by God, the Church nor the common sense of men.

If the Pastor has the knowledge that a weak brother will be offended by his exercise of Christian liberty he will abstain. The Pastor is obliged to abstain from the exercise of Christian liberty not because of a vague danger but because of pretty definite knowledge. If the Pastor has no knowledge that his conduct will be an offense he will exercise his Christian liberty.

When the charge is made that there is an offense, the question arises, has offense been given or merely received? The charge is justified when it is proved that the offender has sinned against God's Word. The charge is not justified if it is based upon an arbitrary human definition of what is sinful. In every instance the Pastor is bound by his love for Christ and that will be manifest in his concern for the souls of his fellowman.

As the children of God and especially as the called Ministers of Christ we must be careful in our conduct, We must willingly and effectively offend the unbelievers with the Cross of Christ. The conduct of a Pastor dare not lead another into unbelief, misbelief, or sin, nor encourage one to continue in sin.

"Such offense is given by false teaching, a bad example or the inconsiderate use of our Christian liberty without due regard for the weak in faith." - E . Koehler.