

# **THE DOCTRINE OF OFFENCE**

## **CONTENTS**

### **1. GIVING AND TAKING OFFENCE**

**by Pastor W. H. Paech**

### **2. THE EVIL EFFECTS OF GIVING OFFENCE**

**by Pastor G. O. Minge**

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# GIVING OFFENCE AND TAKING OFFENCE

## (Pastor W.H. Paech)

"See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil." These words were written by the apostle Paul to the members of the congregation at Ephesus (ch.5:15,16). They apply with equal force to the Christians of today. It behoves the Christians, who have been regenerated from a state of sin and spiritual death into a state of grace and spiritual life, to walk in the Spirit. They should walk "circumspectly," warily, with caution and exactness. They should avoid all that which might prove a hindrance to their faith and Christian life. They should ascertain the will of God and act according to it. God's Word must be the sole rule and standard of the Christian's faith and life. Also then, when the Christian experiences difficulty in determining between right and wrong, he should carefully judge according to the rule of Holy Scripture and should abide by the will of God.

Christians are responsible to God for their own spiritual welfare, as well as that of their fellow-men to the extent to which it is possible for them to promote that welfare. They must do and must leave undone whatever is a hindrance to their own spiritual well-being and that of others. In this connection they should heed the instruction of the Holy Scriptures also with reference to giving offence and taking offence.

What is the meaning of the words "offence" and "offend"? In ordinary, everyday speech the word "offend" is used in the sense of causing someone mental distress, of wounding or injuring his feelings, of causing him annoyance, of vexing or insulting him. We say, for instance, that a person is "too quick or too swift to take offence," meaning that without reason he feels that he has been slighted and injured. When exception is taken or might be taken to something we have said or done, we say, "No offence was meant," meaning that we had no intention whatever of wounding or injuring the neighbour's feelings, of insulting or annoying him.

The Bible, however, uses the term "offence" in a different sense. It is, in the New Testament, the translation of several Greek words which mean a stumbling-block, a trap, or snare. In the moral or figurative sense these words denote something by which a person is or might be caused to stumble and fall spiritually, by which he is or might be led from truth into error, from godliness into sin, by which his faith and Christian life are or might be injured or even destroyed altogether. To offend a person then, briefly stated, means to give occasion to a person whereby he is or might be "made worse" as far as his faith and spiritual life are concerned. The question of offence enters prominently into the life of the Christian. He should take heed lest he give or take offence which is detrimental to his own spiritual welfare and that of others. We shall, in the light of Holy Scripture, consider the subject:

## GIVING OFFENCE AND TAKING OFFENCE

### (a) Giving Offence

1. Offence is or may be given to oneself or others by the transgression of the holy will of God, including the inconsiderate and indiscriminate exercise of Christian liberty.

When offence is given, an obstacle is placed in the way of Christian faith and life. Occasion is thereby given either to the person who gives offence or to someone else to err and to suffer spiritual harm, to be misled into error and sin or to be confirmed and strengthened therein.

Offence is or may be given to oneself by the transgression of the holy will of God. The Lord Jesus earnestly warns against this sin of giving offence to oneself. He says, "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee. For it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole

body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee. For it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell" (Matt.5:29,30). The Lord is here self-evidently not referring to a mutilation of the body. He does not mean to say that, if the eye or hand would give a person occasion to sin, he should pluck out the eye or cut off the hand in the literal sense of the words, in order thus to resist and avoid certain sins. Such mutilation would perhaps prevent the outward deed, but would not kill the evil desire. No, the meaning is that the Christian must, with the help of God, keep his members in subjection, lest they do that which the sinful heart intends. Luther: "This, then, is the meaning: If you feel that you look upon a woman with evil lust, then pluck that eye or vision out as being contrary to God's commandment, not of the body, but of the heart from which the burning and desire proceeds; then have you torn it out rightly. For when the evil lust is out of the heart, then the eye will also not sin nor offend you, and you will look upon the same woman with the same eyes of your body, without desire, and it will be as though you had not seen her. For no longer is that eye there which was there before, which is called an eye of burning or desire, although the eye of the body remains uninjured" (VII., 448).

A person gives offence to himself when, by evil desires, thoughts, words, or deeds, he is occasioned to fall further into sin. The heart of man, also that of the Christian, is by nature inclined to that which is evil. Evil desires arise in his heart; evil thoughts enter his mind. While he cannot prevent such evil desires and thoughts from arising in his heart and mind, he must not nurture or cultivate them. He must rather resist and subdue them. "They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts," St. Paul writes (Gal.5:24). If the Christian does not crucify his flesh, his old Adam, if he does not resist and subdue the evil desires and thoughts, but entertains and encourages them, he is thereby giving offence to himself; he is placing a stumbling-block, an obstacle, in the way of his Christian life, which may cause him to stumble and to fall into other sins. The evil desires and thoughts, if not checked, will in the end gain the upper hand, his conscience will become blunted or dulled, his spiritual powers will be weakened and perhaps impaired to such an extent that he becomes a transgressor in word or deed. "When lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin" (James 1:15).

A man who is covetous gives offence to himself. St. Paul writes, "They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition" (1 Tim. 6:9). The acquisition of the riches and goods of this world is the chief aim and object of the covetous and avaricious; his heart is filled with the longing and craving for money and goods. Other things are crowded out. There is no room in his heart for God, for spiritual and eternal things. He is an idolater; he has erred from the faith and falls into the snares of sin and vice, of intemperance, dissipation, or other vices. His covetousness and avarice was to him an offence, a stumbling block.

Of the generations that lived prior to the deluge we read, "The sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose" (Gen.6:2). The "sons of God" were the descendants of Seth and constituted the church. The "daughters of men" were the daughters of the descendants of Cain, who were unbelievers and led abandoned and corrupt lives. The young men who grew up in the church, following the lusts of their naturally evil hearts, married the wicked daughters of the unbelieving worldlings. By doing so they gave offence to themselves. They fell further away from God. They lost their faith and became guilty of the same sinful practices which were in vogue among the unbelieving descendants of Cain. Thus a wicked generation grew up. "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them, and behold, I will destroy them with the earth" (Gen. 6:5,13). Alas, how many a member of the church has since then followed the example of those descendants of Seth and has, in the selection of a spouse, been guided and determined by his sinful flesh and, by so doing, has placed a stumbling-block in the way of his faith and Christian life, which finally caused him to deny his faith and to walk on the broad way which leads to destruction!

By the transgression of the holy will of God offence is or may be given also to others. Aaron gave offence to the children of Israel, when he yielded to their demand and made the golden calf. Gideon gave offence to the Israelites: he made an ephod of the earrings and other valuables taken from the Midianites and set it up in Ophrah. This became "a snare unto Gideon and to his house," for all Israel went "a-whoring unto it," committing the sin of idolatry (Judges 8:27). David gave offence to Bathsheba by occasioning her to

commit the sin of adultery; he gave offence to Joab by occasioning him to have Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, slain in battle; he gave offence also to the enemies of the Lord by giving them occasion to blaspheme. Jeroboam, king of Israel, erected golden calves, one at Bethel and one at Dan, and then invited the Israelites to worship them, saying, "Behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt!" (1 Kings 12:28). By doing so he gave offence to the Israelites. At Antioch the apostle Peter gave offence to Barnabas and the Jewish Christians. Having come from Jerusalem to Antioch, Peter had there eaten with the Gentile Christians. But when certain Jewish Christians, who still observed the outward customs of the Jewish religion, had come from Jerusalem to Antioch, Peter withdrew from associating with the Gentile Christians, in order to give the Jewish Christians the impression that he did not wish to defile himself by eating with Gentiles. This was an act of hypocrisy on the part of Peter, by which he gave offence to Barnabas and the Jewish Christians, for we read, "And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him, insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation" (Gal. 2:13).

In addition to these and other examples of such as gave offence to others, the Bible mentions also the false prophets and earnestly warns us against being misled by their false teaching. Indeed, there is no offence more grievous than that given by false doctrine. False doctrine is a stumbling-block which has caused great numbers of people to err from the faith.

Rebuking the priests in the days of the prophet Malachi, God said, "The priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts" (Mal.2:7,8). These priests had given offence to the people by departing from the precepts of the Lord.

As a messenger of God a preacher should proclaim the message of God. He must beware of corrupting this message. If he does so, if he preaches a gospel other than that revealed by God in the Holy Scriptures, he is guilty of giving offence to others. He is placing a hindrance, an obstruction, in their way, which might cause them to fall and perhaps to forfeit their soul's eternal salvation.

Members of the congregations in Galatia had been led astray from the true doctrine by false Judaizing teachers. "I marvel," St. Paul wrote to them, "that ye are so soon removed from Him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel, which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal.1:6,7). The false teachers held that the observance of the forms and ceremonies of the ceremonial law was obligatory also under the new dispensation; they demanded circumcision and the keeping of the Sabbath and of the holy days. The offence given by them had caused many of the Galatian Christians to err from the doctrine as it had been proclaimed to them by Paul. The apostle wrote to them, "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace" (Gal.5:4).

What a grievous offence it is, by the preaching of false doctrine, to give occasion to Christians to fall from grace! Think of the offence given in our time by the many false prophets who disseminate their pernicious doctrines to the harm of great numbers of immortal souls! Think of the offence given by those who profess to be Christians, but who deny the very heart and soul of the Gospel, who reject the Bible doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ, who frivolously refer to the doctrine of the atonement as "the blood-theology of the dark age" and reject it, who teach salvation by character, by man's own virtues, merits, and achievements, and so lead many thousands astray! Think of the many sects and "isms" which have arisen and which, by their false teachings, give offence, place obstacles in the path of faith and Christian life and cause many a one to stumble! Think of the offence given by many professors and teachers of colleges and seminaries who are entrusted with the training of the future clergy of their respective churches, but who in this training depart from sound doctrine and teach "another gospel"! Think of the offence given by those who write and publish articles in church papers and religious books which are a veritable poison to the spiritual life of men! Luther: "The greatest and most pernicious offence in the church is to cause disruptions and divisions in doctrine, and this, indeed, more than anything else, is carried on by the devil."

Offence is or may be given by unscriptural practice. A Christian pastor who, while he publicly proclaims the pure doctrine of the Holy Scriptures, yet is guilty of unscriptural practice who, for instance, practises religious unionism, dispenses the Sacrament to the heterodox or the manifestly ungodly and impenitent, officiates at the burial of unbelievers, etc., gives offence to true Christian souls. A congregation, which neglects or definitely refuses to exercise discipline, which suffers its members to belong to ungodly societies, or which in any other way is guilty of unscriptural practice, is thereby giving offence. The member who should be disciplined or who belongs to an ungodly society is occasioned to be strengthened and confirmed in his sin. And also others are given occasion to sin and to indulge in the sinful practices which such a congregation tolerates and by its indifference and lack of action actually condones.

Offence is or may be given also by an ungodly life. When a person says or does something which is sinful, he is or may be giving others occasion to follow his evil example, to be strengthened in their sins, or to become familiar with and to practise certain forms of wickedness which previously were unknown to them. By sins of the tongue, by using the name of God in vain in curses and oaths, by making light of sin, by jesting frivolously, or by engaging in vile and filthy talk, offence is given to the hearers, and they are occasioned to stumble and to become guilty of committing similar sins. St. Paul writes, "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners" (1 Cor. 15:33). How many Christian young people have suffered bodily, mental, moral, or spiritual harm and have even totally erred from the faith through having heard indecent, corrupt, and immoral language! How many have been offended or occasioned to fall through having heard frivolous and blasphemous utterances regarding matters of faith and Christian life and have finally turned their backs upon the Church! How many children have been given offence by the careless and frivolous words of their parents and have been misled into sin and vice! And to how many children has the evil example of the parents in many other directions given occasion to sin! Parents who neglect their family devotions, or who seldom attend the public church services or who are addicted to strong drink, or who lead a contentious, quarrelsome life, or who in any other way show their children that they are guilty of practices which are incompatible with the holy Word and will of God, are placing a stumbling-block in the way of their children's spiritual well-being.

The Holy Scriptures in many places earnestly warn the Christians against becoming contaminated with the corrupt things of this world. St. Paul writes, "Be not conformed to this world" (Rom.12:2), and St. John, "Love not the world neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). Under no circumstances should Christians accommodate themselves to the sinful customs and practices of the unbelieving world. They must take heed lest they become partakers of the unfruitful works of darkness, being ever mindful of the fact that "whosoever will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4).

By transgressing the holy will of God in respect of the attitude which should be adopted over against the sinful world the Christian gives offence to himself and others. If he participates in the sinful practices of the children of this world, he will suffer spiritual harm, will become lukewarm and indifferent, and finally may make total shipwreck concerning faith. Does not experience amply verify this? Has not many a one given offence to himself, e.g., by indulging in the sinful present-day dance? While he perhaps at first erroneously regarded the dance as an innocent, perfectly harmless pastime, his naturally evil heart subsequently reacted to the lure of the dance, sinful lusts and passions arose in his heart, were nurtured and cultivated by him, and in the end he perhaps became guilty of grossly transgressing the sixth commandment. The present-day dance, in itself a sinful practice, became to him a stumbling-block and occasioned him to fall yet deeper into sin and vice. But he has given also others occasion to sin. His fellow-Christians will, or at least may be tempted to follow his evil example, while the unbelievers are confirmed in their sins and vices and are induced to decry Christianity as nothing but hypocrisy. Such a church-member and professing Christian is an offence to himself and others.

All those who by their evil words or example tempt or occasion others to commit sins of unchastity, or who encourage others to bear anger or hatred against the neighbour in their hearts and not to become reconciled to him, or who provoke or entice others to drink to excess, or who seek to persuade others not to attend church services, or who ridicule the doctrines of Scripture and thereby endeavour to create doubt and mistrust in the hearts of others, or who cynically and scornfully scoff and rail at the godly life of the Christians, or who, when

a brother has fallen into some grievous sin, do not fraternally admonish him with the view to bringing him to repentance, or who, when a sinning brother is being admonished by someone else, encourage him in his sin and so render all admonition vain and ineffective - all these are guilty of giving offence, of giving others occasion to stumble, to fall into sin or to be strengthened therein and so to err from the faith. The writers and publishers of books and periodicals which ridicule the truths of Scripture, which deride and mock all Christian doctrine and virtues, and which extol and praise unbelief, ungodliness, and wickedness, the writers and publishers of salacious literature, of indecent, filthy novels, the editors of certain newspapers, who make it a point to publish articles which are grossly indecent and which are eagerly and with great pleasure read by so many people, alas, how grievously do all these give offence to untold numbers of people!

Offence is or may be given also by the inconsiderate and indiscriminate exercise of Christian liberty.

There are things which God has neither commanded nor forbidden. These are called *adiaphora* or things indifferent and are within the sphere of Christian liberty. Both in doctrine and practice Christians should not permit provisions and regulations made by man to usurp the place of Scripture. St. Paul exhorted the Galatian Christians, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Gal.5:1). Christians should not tolerate the imposition of man-made ordinances in spiritual matters as binding on their conscience. Luther: "It is not a small thing to prohibit where God does not prohibit; to destroy that Christian liberty for which Christ paid His blood; to burden the conscience with sin where there is no sin. Whoever does this denies God, His doctrine, and His church altogether. Let us confess Christian liberty and not permit the devil to make a law or prohibition and declare things sinful where God has not done so." In a lecture to his students on "The Evangelical Lutheran Church, the True Visible Church of God on Earth," Dr. F. Pieper said, "God has reserved to Himself the right to command to Christians anything that is to be binding on conscience. 'One is your Master, Christ.' A church-body which restricts evangelical liberty by laws of its own misleads its people into idolatry, for inasmuch as a Christian in ecclesiastical, spiritual matters accepts any command from men, he apostatizes from God. Such a church commits grant larceny on her members, who have all received Christian liberty from their Lord, freedom from human commandments. Indeed, a church body of that kind would subvert the entire order which was to be characteristic of the Church, by making a kingdom of this world out of the Christian Church. The kingdoms of this world have the right to issue laws which transcend God's Word (if not in contradiction to it). But the Church has no such right, has no power to legislate beyond the Word of God. It can command only where God has commanded in His Word. You intend to become Evangelical Lutheran preachers. I charge you therefore to adhere to the principles of our dear Church also in this matter - under no conditions to allow liberty where Scripture commands and, on the other hand, never to command anything where Scripture is silent."

Things which God has neither commanded nor forbidden and which therefore are within the sphere of the Christian's liberty are in themselves harmless. Under certain circumstances, however, they may and actually do become sinful to the doer. Provided that the things indifferent concern the individual Christian only and serve his spiritual well-being, provided also that he does not violate his conscience, he has the right to act as he sees fit and right. But all things indifferent which are harmful to his soul's welfare, if performed by him, would constitute an offence, a stumbling-block. And again, if he would indulge in a thing indifferent, regarding the right or wrong of which he is in doubt, he would be giving offence to himself. "He that doubteth is damned, if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; for whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom.14:23).

In the congregation at Rome there were members who were strong in regard to the effect which the use of things indifferent had on their conscience, while others were in this respect weak. The strong realized and also exercised their Christian liberty and believed among other things that they might eat all food, including meat. The weak, on the other hand, ate no meat, but only herbs, vegetable food, and also drank no wine, believing that, as far as they themselves were concerned, they were better qualified for the worship and service of God by practising such abstinence. The apostle Paul urged both the strong and the weak to be fully persuaded in their own mind that their attitude was best suited to their individual needs. Both should preserve a good conscience. If the weak, prompted perhaps by the tactless use of Christian liberty on the part of the strong, were induced to eat meat and drink wine, while they still regarded this as not being in the best interest of their spiritual welfare or even were in doubt about it, they would thereby violate their conscience and so give

offence to themselves. "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin," that is, whatever a person does with a conscience which is in doubt about the right or wrong of his actions is to him sinful. And by violating his doubting conscience he would give offence to himself.

There are many people who have an erring conscience. They regard certain things as sinful which, in reality, are things indifferent. Their conscience is at fault, errs. If, however, they acted against their conviction and did that which their erring conscience condemns as sinful, they would, by not heeding the dictates of conscience, sin and so give offence to themselves. The strict and devout Roman Catholic, e.g., by eating meat on Fridays or by failing to confess his sins to the priest, gives offence to himself, because he is violating the dictates of an erring conscience.

While the Christian should for his own person be careful and discriminate in regard to the use of things indifferent, he should be so especially also as far as others are concerned. By an inconsiderate and indiscriminate use of his Christian liberty offence is or may be given to others.

If, by the inconsiderate and indiscriminate exercise of his liberty, a person would cause or occasion others to do a thing indifferent which their conscience condemns as wrong or in regard to the right or wrong of which they are in doubt, he would be guilty of giving offence to them. There is perhaps a fellow-Christian who holds that the playing of games on Sunday is, in itself, wrong and sinful. His conscience is in this respect erring. Yet, if through our urging he is caused or occasioned to violate his conscience and to play, we would thereby give offence to him. There are many people, who condemn the use of alcoholic drinks as sinful, and therefore are conscientious abstainers. By causing or urging these to drink against the dictates of their conscience, offence would be given to them; they would be occasioned to disregard and to act against the warning voice of conscience, albeit an erring conscience.

To the members of the congregation at Rome who were inconsiderate and indiscriminate in the use of their Christian liberty the apostle Paul addressed the earnest admonition, "Let us not therefore judge one another any more; but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling-block, or an occasion to fall, in his brother's way. I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat for whom Christ died" (Rom.14:13-15). Here the apostle warns the strong Christians against abusing their Christian liberty or exercising it in a manner that thereby offence would be given to the weak. Just also in regard to the use of the things indifferent Christians should take heed lest they walk uncharitably, lest they put a stumbling-block in the way of their weak brother. The exercise of Christian liberty must ever be directed and governed by love. Every inconsiderate and indiscriminate use of this liberty violates the law of love; by it the weak brother is grieved and occasioned to sin and so his spiritual welfare is jeopardized. While the Christian in respect of things indifferent may say with St. Paul, "All things are lawful for me," he must add with the apostle, "All things are not expedient; all things edify not" (1 Cor.10:23).

In the Corinthian congregation there was a difference of opinion regarding the eating of meat taken from animals which had been offered as sacrifices to idols and which could be purchased at the meat market. Some members had conscientious scruples about partaking of such meat, but ate it nevertheless; others held that such meat was permissible and ate it in the presence of those who had scruples or even offered it to them. The apostle Paul cautioned the latter and rebuked them for their attitude. "Take heed," he wrote, "lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling-block to them that are weak. For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; and through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ" (1 Cor.8:9-12). These Christians were convinced that the eating of the sacrificial meat was a thing indifferent and so they exercised their Christian liberty and ate. But they were inconsiderate and indiscriminate in the use of this liberty: they ate the meat in the presence of members, who had conscientious scruples, or even offered it to them, and thus tempted them to do likewise and so to sin against their conscience. They placed an obstacle in the way of the weak and gave them occasion to stumble.

A thing indifferent is no longer within the realm of Christian liberty, but becomes a grievous sin, when, by indulging in it, a stumbling-block is placed in the way of a weak brother and he is thereby occasioned to sin. Dr. Walther writes, "Many people, when they know that a certain thing is a thing indifferent and not sinful in itself, imagine that therefore they may do it without scruple and under all circumstances . . . But they do not consider what a great difference there is between regarding something as an indifferent thing in itself and the propriety of using one's liberty under certain circumstances. Luther has written a book on the liberty of a Christian and has divided it into two parts. His theme in the first part is: 'A Christian is a free lord over all things and subject to no one.' In the second part, however, he enlarges on the sentence, 'A Christian is a servant of all things and subject to all.' Though they may seem to contradict each other, these two sentences are in perfect agreement. Luther wishes to say this, According to faith, his conscience, and in the sight of God it is within the Christian's liberty either to do or not to do what God has neither commanded nor forbidden; but according to charity, in his life, and among his fellow-men he must be guided and regulated by his neighbour." The attitude of his fellow-Christian should, generally speaking, determine the Christian in the use of things indifferent.

It may, under certain circumstances, become imperative for the Christian to exercise his Christian liberty in spite of the objections of a brother to a thing indifferent. Should the brother, in spite of all instruction from God's Word, uphold his erroneous objections and demand of us acceptance of his erroneous position, then, indeed, would it be tantamount to a denial of the truth, if one yielded to the brother's demands. By yielding, offence would be given both to ourselves and to the brother: we would be occasioned to deny the truth, and the brother would be confirmed in his wrong view and his spiritual welfare hindered and perhaps endangered. Not the conscience of a brother, but the Word of God alone is the norm and standard of Christian faith and life.

By using one's Christian liberty inconsiderately and indiscriminately offence may be given to unbelievers and to members of other church denominations. If the Christian uses his liberty in such a manner as thereby to give either unbelievers or heterodox the impression that he is not sincere in his Christianity, he is giving offence to them. They are given occasion to stumble; in the case of unbelievers, to blaspheme and ridicule the Christian religion; in the case of the heterodox, to follow the example of such a Christian and to indulge in something which they regard as wrong or concerning which they have conscientious scruples. Let the Christian exercise the greatest care and discretion and, just also in reference to the use of his liberty, seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so that, on the one hand, he does not deny the truth and, on the other hand, does not give offence to the unbelievers and heterodox. "Be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is" (Eph.5:17). "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without" (Col.4:5). The life and conduct of the Christian should ever be tactful and should serve favourably to advertise the Church among the non-members, to promote the glory of God and the acceptance by men of the Gospel of Christ.

2. Christians should earnestly refrain from giving offence by which either they or others are or may be occasioned to stumble and suffer spiritual harm and, when such offence has been given by them, they should remove it.

There is an offence which Christians must give: the "offence of the Cross." St. Paul writes, "We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block and unto the Greeks foolishness" (1 Cor.1:23). Aged Simeon, holding the Child Jesus in his arms, said to His mother Mary, "Behold, this Child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel: and for a sign which shall be spoken against" (Luke 2:34). To the disobedient, the unbelievers, Jesus Christ is a "stone of stumbling and rock of offence" (1 Pet.2:18).

As the royal priesthood of God, Christians must proclaim the praises of their God and Saviour. Although they know that many stumble at the Word, harden their hearts, stubbornly refuse and reject the salvation of Christ and so perish in destruction, Christians dare not refrain from giving this offence. If they did so, they would be unfaithful to their Lord and Master, who has given them the commission, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

Every other kind of offence, offence by which either the Christian himself or others are given occasion to sin and so to suffer spiritual harm, must be carefully avoided. To give such offence is a very grievous transgression of the holy will of God. St. Paul writes, "Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God" (1 Cor.10:32). It was necessary to warn the members of the Corinthian congregation against giving offence to members of the church as well as to those outside the church. Offence had been given to weak brethren, as has been shown, by the inconsiderate and indiscriminate use of Christian liberty in reference to the eating of meat which had been sacrificed to idols. Offence had been given both to members and non-members also by the neglect of church discipline in the case of the incestuous brother, who had lived in the sin of fornication with his stepmother. The apostle pointed out to them the seriousness of these and other offences and urged them to refrain from giving offence and to become followers of him and of Christ.

Also the Christians of today must be warned against the sin of giving offence. How easily and how grievously may offence be given even by the best of Christians! Remember David! Remember Peter! Christians must earnestly refrain from placing obstacles in their own way and in the way of others. They must, by the help and grace of God, subdue their sinful passions and emotions, their evil thoughts and desires. They must beware of sins of the tongue, of false teachers, of all ungodliness and worldliness, and of the inconsiderate and indiscriminate use of things indifferent. They must be ever watchful, lest they think or say or do something, by which either they themselves or others may be given occasion to stumble, to suffer spiritual harm and perhaps even to lose faith altogether.

The Lord Jesus says, "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in Me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" (Matt.18:6,7). These are solemn words from which we should gauge the gravity of the sin of giving offence. Though the Lord has in mind particularly the offence given to little children, yet is He here referring to the offence which is given also to those who are "little ones" in the spiritual sense, who are lowly, humble, unassuming Christians. He who offends such, who misleads them, who occasions them to stumble and sin, commits an offence so grievous that "it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea." Undoubtedly the Lord means to say that such a punishment which He speaks of in Matt.13:41,42, saying, "The Son of man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

The Bible records instances of the punishment of God meted out already here on earth to such as give offence. The two sons of Eli, who frivolously and grievously transgressed the law of God regarding sacrifices and so occasioned the people to despise and blaspheme the offering of the Lord, were slain in battle against the Philistines. And of Eli himself, who, by not restraining his sons, gave offence both to them and to the people, God said, "In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end. For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever" (1 Sam.3:12-14). Jeroboam, who misled Israel into the sin of idolatry, was rejected by the Lord, and his descendants, down to the very lowest, were exterminated. These and other examples show that evil pursues the sinner just also in respect of the grievous sin of giving offence, of giving others occasion to sin.

In view of the fact, therefore, that the giving of offence to oneself or others is sinful, a very grievous transgression of the holy will of God, provoking the wrath of God and incurring his dire punishments, Christians should earnestly refrain from committing this sin. Not the fear of punishment, however, but their love for God and the neighbour it is, which should induce them to beware of giving offence, by which either they or others are given occasion to stumble and to suffer spiritual harm.

But if the Christian has given offence, what then? He should remove it. How is this done? In no other way than by repentance and faith. He should contritely acknowledge and confess his sin to God and ask Him for forgiveness. He should follow the example of King Manasseh, who "besought the Lord his God, and

humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the Lord, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city. And he repaired the altar of the Lord, and sacrificed thereon peace offerings and thank offerings, and commanded Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel" (2 Chron.33:12,15,16). He should follow the example of David, who, after the prophet Nathan had reproved him for his sin of adultery and for the offence which he had given to Bathsheba, to Joab, and to the people, acknowledged his sins and implored the mercy and forgiveness of the Lord (Ps.51).

And more than that. If the Christian has given offence, he should confess his sin to him also whom he has offended, to whom he has given occasion to sin. "Confess your faults one to another" (James 5:16). He should ask the brother for forgiveness and earnestly implore him not to take offence, not to stumble or sin because of the offence which had been given. And if a number of Christians or a whole congregation has been given offence, he should also not hesitate to remove it. He should make a frank and sincere confession of his sin and earnestly implore his fellow-Christians not to stumble or sin through his bad example. Oh, would that we always bore in mind the gravity of the sin of giving offence and therefore beware of it, and, if we have become guilty of it, make confession to God and man and ask for forgiveness.

In the matter of removing a given offence, a further duty devolves upon the Christian. If a fellow-Christian has sinned and thereby given offence, it is the solemn duty of every Christian to bend all his efforts toward the removal of the offence. This he should do by brotherly admonition. He should seek to bring the brother to the knowledge of his sin and to repent of it. And in the wider sphere, when an offence against a whole congregation is involved, it is the duty, not merely of the pastor or the elders, but of each and every member, fraternally to admonish the offending brother with the view to bringing him to the knowledge of his sin and removing the offence. By exercising church discipline in the right, divinely-commanded way, Christians should earnestly seek to remove all offences, by which the sinning brother or others suffer spiritual harm and their soul's welfare is endangered.

May God in His grace and mercy preserve us from giving either ourselves or others occasion to sin through any transgression of the holy will of God, and, where this has been done, may He lead us to remove the offence by repentance and faith!

## **(b) Taking Offence**

1. Offence is or may be taken at the Gospel of Christ, at violations of the holy will of God, and at things which have been neither commanded nor forbidden by God.

Offence is taken by a person, when he either through the lawful or unlawful words or actions of someone else takes occasion to stumble, to commit sin, or to fall into error of doctrine. When offence is taken at the lawful words or actions of another, that is, at words or actions which are in conformity with the law and will of God, the person who takes offence is occasioned to stumble through his own fault; either through malice or because of an error of judgement he places an obstacle in his way, over which he falls. In the case where offence is taken at the unlawful words or actions of someone else, that is, at violations of the holy law and will of God, the person who takes offence is occasioned to stumble through the fault of him who violated the will of God, but, at the same time, he himself cannot be excused for taking offence.

The unbelieving Jews, particularly their spiritual leaders, took offence at Jesus and His doctrine. Jesus had reproved the Pharisees, because, while they insisted on the observance of the traditions of the elders, they transgressed the law of God and had denounced them as hypocrites. His disciples came to Him and said, "Knowest Thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying?" (Matt.15:12). They stumbled at Jesus and His doctrine, and hardened themselves in their unbelief and self-righteousness. When Jesus said to the man sick of the palsy, "Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee," the scribes took offence and said within themselves, "This man blasphemeth" (Matt.9:23). When Jesus testified to the fact that He was the true God and the promised Messiah, the unbelieving Jews took offence and cried, "Say we not well that Thou art a

Samaritan and hast a devil?" (John 8:48). Because Jesus ate and drank and associated with the publicans and sinners, the Jews took offence and said, "Behold, a man gluttonous, a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners" (Matt.11:19). By taking offence at Jesus and His doctrine and life they maliciously placed an obstacle in their way and were so occasioned to be still more hardened in their unbelief.

After Jesus had declared that He was the Bread of Life and that those who ate His flesh and drank His blood had eternal life, some of those who followed Him took offence at His doctrine. We read, "Many, therefore, of His disciples, when they heard this said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples murmured at it, He said unto them, Doth this offend you?" (John 6:60,61). The reason for their offence did not lie in Christ, but in themselves: the wrong attitude which they adopted toward the words of Christ was an offence to them and occasioned them to walk no more with Him (v.66).

Christ gave offence to none. His doctrine was true; His life was without fault. Men, however, took offence; because they were self-righteous and carnally-minded, they rejected Christ and His doctrine and so remained in their unbelief, hardened their hearts, and thus brought about their spiritual and final eternal ruin.

Unbelievers to this day take offence at the Gospel of Christ. "The preaching of the Cross is to them that perish foolishness" (1 Cor.1:18). The wise and prudent of this world take offence at the message of redemption in Christ. In their spiritual pride and self-righteousness they despise and reject the righteousness of Christ. The Gospel of the Cross is folly to them, is repulsive to their perverted reason and wisdom. And by rejecting the wisdom of God and following their own reason they place an obstacle in their way, over which they stumble, are strengthened in the great sin of unbelief, and finally are eternally lost. God is patient and long-suffering. He "is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet.3:9). Many, however, take offence by abusing this precious truth and so take occasion to continue in their life of wantonness and carnal security.

Not only outspoken unbelievers, but also such as claim to be Christians, take offence at the Word and Gospel of Christ. The doctrine of Scripture that man is a sinner, that he is depraved by nature, of himself wholly incapable to please God and quite incompetent to gain the favour and goodwill of God by anything in him or done by him, is offensive to many a church-member. Many a professing Christian takes offence at declarations such as these, "We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags (Isa.64:6). "By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight" (Rom.3:20). "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph.2:8,9). Many a one holds that he, at least in some measure, contributes to his soul's salvation and so takes offence at the teaching of Scripture, places an obstacle in the way of Christian life.

There is many a one who takes offence at tribulation. He is like the seed that fell on stony places. He receives the Word with joy, "yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while; for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the Word, by and by he is offended" (Matt.13:21).

Others take offence at the right, Scriptural practice of the Church. The heterodox, for instance, take offence, when Lutheran pastors refrain from having religious fellowship with them. Even members of the Lutheran Church at times take offence at the Scriptural practice of their church. They take offence at the condemnation of false doctrine and of sinful practices, such as drunkenness, gambling, dancing, and other sins. They stumble at the testimony of the truth, in some cases to such an extent that they finally turn their backs upon the church.

However, offence is or may be taken also at violations of the holy law of God. Many stumble at the teachings of false prophets. The Galatians took offence at the false doctrines proclaimed by the Judaizing teachers. These teachers violated the holy will of God by insisting on the observance of the ordinances of the ceremonial law and so gave offence. But the Galatians took offence, permitted themselves to be misled into error. "O foolish Galatians," St. Paul wrote to them, "who hath bewitched you that ye should not obey the truth?" (Gal.3:1). There have, since then, been many who have erred from the pure doctrines of Holy Scripture, who have taken offence and fallen over the stumbling-block placed in their way by false teachers.

Offence is or may be taken at ungodly life. Unbelievers will take offence, when they see that such as would be Christians live a life which is inconsistent with their Christian profession. Also Christians may, and often do, take offence at the sinful practices of some fellow-Christians. Those who indulge in sinful practices give offence, but those who, through their evil example, allow themselves to be misled into sin, take offence. A man who drinks excessively gives offence; he who takes occasion therefrom to do likewise, and does so, takes offence. He who takes offence cannot urge as an excuse the fact that he has been given offence. The fact that he took offence and stumbled is to him an inexcusable sin. The serpent deceived Eve, gave offence to her, and occasioned her to sin; but Eve took offence, and therewith sinned and was punished. The same applies to Adam, when he took offence and fell over the stumbling-block placed in his way by Eve. Neither Adam nor Eve could be excused; neither could justify their sinful conduct simply because they had been tempted and given occasion to sin.

In this connection it might be pointed out that offence is not always taken where it is given. The wife of Potiphar gave offence, but Joseph did not take offence. The thief, who tempts others to steal, gives offence, but not everyone, who sees the theft and is tempted, takes offence.

Offence is or may be taken at things which have been neither commanded nor forbidden by God. The heterodox take offence at many things which are free, within the realm of Christian liberty. They make laws where God has not made them. These man-made laws they regard as binding on the conscience of men. And in what respect do they take offence at the use of things indifferent? In this respect: either they judge and condemn those who exercise their Christian liberty as being insincere Christians or they are induced to follow the example of others and to do things which they erroneously regard as sinful and so sin against their conscience.

Also fellow-Christians sometimes take offence at things indifferent. They are never justified in doing so. No one should take offence; no one should take occasion to "become worse" as far as his spiritual life is concerned. Yet it does happen.

The weak members of the congregation at Corinth took offence, because the strong ate meat which had been sacrificed to idols. They were clearly at fault. They permitted a thing indifferent to become to them a stumbling-block, either because they judged and condemned the strong as such, as had fallen from faith and hence withdrew from fellowship with them, or because they took occasion to eat against the dictates of their conscience (1 Cor.8:7). In either case they were doing something which was sinful and injurious to their spiritual life.

The fact that many Christians take offence at things which are within the sphere of Christian liberty is due to their weakness in Christian knowledge. They hold that certain things which are indifferent are either commanded or forbidden by God. Their conscience is falsely informed. It bears witness faithfully and infallibly, but it does so according to a wrong norm. The wrong norm must be removed and the right norm substituted, namely, God's Word, correctly interpreted. Christians who take offence at things indifferent should therefore receive instruction from God's Word, should by the help of the Holy Spirit come to the right understanding of the will of God just also in respect of the use of things indifferent, and should then also judge and act accordingly.

2. Christians should take heed lest they take offence and so be caused to err from the faith or the path of Christian duty.

To remain steadfast in the Christian faith unto his end and thus to obtain the crown of life eternal should be the earnest desire and the holy ambition of every Christian. He should faithfully continue in the Word of Jesus, should grow in grace and in the knowledge of his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and should lead a sanctified life. Christians have by faith accepted Him who died for them and for all men, and so they should "not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again" (2 Cor.5:15). They should "walk worthy of God" (1 Thes.2:12). They should fashion their life according to the teachings of Scripture, should do that which is commanded and which, therefore, is in the interest of their temporal, spiritual, and eternal welfare, and should avoid all that is contrary to the will of God and, therefore, harmful to

their well-being in this life and that which is to come. In this connection they should take heed lest they take offence, lest they take occasion to stumble and fall into sin.

To take offence is in every instance wrong, sinful. It is manifestly contrary to the holy will of God, when Christians permit themselves, through any offence given to them, or supposedly given to them, to suffer spiritual harm, to err from faith or the path of Christian duty.

The apostle Paul writes, "Now, I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them" (Rom.16:27). In these words Christians are warned against taking offence at false doctrine, against taking occasion to fall over the stumbling-block placed in their way by false teachers. They should not suffer themselves to be misled into accepting any teaching which is contrary to the doctrine of Holy Scripture.

Melanchthon gave offence by accepting and teaching the doctrine of Zwingli regarding the Lord's Supper. Many took offence by following him. But there were also many thousands who, though they greatly loved and honoured their highly cultured teacher, refused to accept his false teachings, who remained faithful to the truth and clung to the doctrine of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, as it had been taught and declared by Luther. It was by continuing in the Word of Jesus that they were preserved from taking offence and being misled into error.

There is, in our time, great danger of taking offence at false doctrine. The world is full of false prophets who, as St. Paul writes, "are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved forever. For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption" (2 Pet.2:17-19). Christians should earnestly beware of such false prophets, of embracing their teachings and so taking offence. They should avoid them; total separation is the only safe course. They should examine and judge all teaching according to the only rule and norm of doctrine, the Bible. St. John writes, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God" (1 John 4:1-3). It is by continuing in the Word of Christ, by clinging firmly to the doctrines of Holy Scripture, that Christians will, by the help and grace of God, be preserved from accepting false doctrine and so taking offence.

A hundred years ago the founders of our Lutheran Church in this country left their native land and came to Australia. They emigrated for no other reason than that they refused to take offence. An obstacle had been placed in their way by the King of Prussia, Frederick William III. He decreed the union of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches and prepared a new liturgy, which was to be used in the united Church. The faithful Lutherans refused to obey the king's decrees, which demanded from them an obedience which was contrary to the Word of God. Rather than take offence by subscribing to something which was against their religious convictions they suffered persecution and finally emigrated. May God grant that the members of our church, present and future, follow their example of faith, that they, at all times and under all circumstances, take heed lest they take offence and stumble by subscribing to any practice in the church which is in conflict with the holy Word and will of God!

Christians should be on their guard lest they be misled also by the ungodly life of others. They should not consent, when others entice them to sin. They should regulate their life according to the Word of God, of which the Psalmist writes, "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105). They should pray, "Teach me to do Thy will; for Thou art my God; Thy spirit is good; lead me into the land of uprightness" (Ps.143:10). They should follow the example of their Lord and Saviour. When Peter sought to keep Him from suffering and dying, Jesus said to him, "Get thee behind Me, Satan; thou art an offence to Me; for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men" (Matt.16:23). Like their Lord and Master, Christians should recognize the offence and should not permit themselves to stumble. When tempted to

sin, they should say with pious Joseph, "How, then, can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen.39:9).

Christians should not take offence at things which are within the realm of Christian liberty. They should not endanger their spiritual welfare by taking occasion to stumble at that which God has left free, within the sphere of Christian liberty. They should not be so presumptuous as to seek to deprive a fellow-Christian of the right and proper use of things indifferent and so bind his conscience by making laws where God has not made any. St. Paul writes, "Let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. He that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it" (Rom. 14:3,6). The "strong" Christians, who ate meat and who made no distinction between various days, were "received" or accepted by God; they acted with a good conscience and in full accord with the will of God. Hence the "weak" should not judge or condemn them, because they did something which the "weak," according to the dictates of their erring conscience, regarded as not being in the interest of their spiritual well-being. Either by judging and condemning the "strong" or by taking occasion to eat meat and to make no distinction between days, while they had conscientious scruples about such practices, the "weak" would be guilty of taking offence. A person, therefore, who regards a thing indifferent as wrong or as harmful to his spiritual life, which others, however, do not so regard and therefore indulge in, should take heed lest he indulge in that thing. And again, he should not take offence by judging and condemning the brother who, without scruple, legitimately exercises his Christian liberty.

To take offence at anything, be it at the truth, at false doctrine, at the ungodly life of others, or at things indifferent is sinful. By doing so, a person would, through his own fault, harm and even endanger his spiritual well-being. This every Christian must earnestly avoid, and therefore he should take heed lest he take offence and so be caused to err from the faith or the path of Christian duty.

3. Christians should respect the conscientious scruples of those who are weak and who take offence at things which are within the realm of Christian liberty, provided, however, that thereby the truth is not denied nor other weak Christians are occasioned to take offence.

There are Christians who are "weak," weak in faith, in assurance regarding certain moral questions. They are weak in regard to the effect which the use of things indifferent has on their conscience. They are either not certain about the propriety of certain moral questions, in which case their conscience is a doubting one, or they are in their conscience convinced that certain things indifferent must not be so regarded, in which case their conscience is an erring one. "Weak" Christians, who either are in doubt about the right or wrong of certain things or who err in their judgement regarding things indifferent, are to be regarded as members of a congregation no less than those who are "strong," who have no scruples of conscience in regard to the use of things indifferent. Indeed, the "strong" should not only receive and regard the "weak" as members, but should be particularly solicitous about their welfare.

Weak, truly weak Christians for conscience' sake take offence at the use of certain things which are within the realm of Christian liberty. As has been shown they are at fault in doing so. They should be instructed. The scruples of their doubting conscience should be overcome and their erring conscience corrected by instruction from the Word of God. They should not remain weak, but should grow in spiritual knowledge and assurance. Nevertheless, while such a one is a truly weak Christian, his scruples of conscience must be respected by those who are strong. The strong Christians at Rome who ate meat were not to despise the weak who ate only herbs. The strong Christians at Corinth were warned by the apostle not to wound the conscience of the weak by eating of the meat which had been sacrificed to idols. Paul himself would respect the scruples of the weak. "Wherefore," he writes, "if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend" (1 Cor.8:13). A Christian, who does not respect the genuine and sincere scruples of the weak, walks most uncharitably and may endanger both his own and a fellow-Christian's spiritual welfare. In those things, which are neither commanded nor forbidden by God, love for the neighbour must determine the conduct of the Christian.

Christians should respect the conscientious scruples of the weak not only by refraining from doing or indulging in things which are free, but also by doing things which the weak erroneously regard as necessary.

To overcome the prejudices of the Jews at Derbe and Lystra the apostle Paul agreed to the circumcision of Timothy. In the New Testament circumcision is, in itself, a thing indifferent. The apostle, however, respected the scruples of the weak Jewish Christians, so that they might not take offence at his ministry and perhaps refuse to listen to his preaching. To respect their scruples and to circumcise Timothy was not merely a favour shown by Paul to the weak Jews, but was a sacred duty.

Scruples of conscience in things indifferent are at times urged by such as claim to be weak, but in reality are not so. Solely with the view to curtailing a fellow-Christian's exercise of Christian liberty they will say, "I am a weak Christian; you must do or refrain from doing certain things which, although they are things indifferent, give offence to me!" But they are not sincere; their scruples are not genuine. The attitude of such is not in keeping with true charity, but is, in the last analysis, due to self-righteousness. They are imbued with the "God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are" spirit. Their false plea, "I am a weak Christian, therefore you must not offend me," is either an admission on their part that the matter in regard to which they claim consideration has no Scriptural foundation or it is a claim of the right to make laws as binding on the conscience of the neighbour which God has not made. They arrogantly claim a prerogative which belongs to God alone. The alleged scruples of such a professedly weak, but actually uncharitable and self-righteous person must not be respected. To do so would be tantamount to obeying men rather than God and thereby committing the sin of idolatry. "A Christian should not permit any man to lay commands upon him in spiritual things. Anyone who gives up his Christian liberty apostatizes from God, becomes idolatrous" (F. Pieper).

It has been shown that Christians should respect the conscientious scruples of the weak, who take offence at things which are within the realm of Christian liberty. To this the following conditions must be attached: provided that thereby the truth is not denied nor other weak Christians are occasioned to take offence.

The apostle Paul did not always respect the conscientious scruples of men. While he consented to the circumcision of Timothy, he did not have Titus circumcised. In the case of Timothy, Paul respected the scruples of the Jewish Christians and also yielded to the prejudices of the Jews in general at Derbe and Lystra, who had not yet accepted the Gospel and who would not have listened to him, if he maintained religious fellowship with an uncircumcised Gentile. In the case of Titus, however, circumcision was demanded by "false brethren," who insisted on the observance of the rites and ordinances of the Mosaic law. Here the apostle did not yield. He writes: "But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised; and that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: to whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you" (Gal.2:3-5). These "false brethren," who demanded circumcision as being necessary for salvation, had come from Jerusalem to Antioch in Syria as spies, under the guise of seekers of the truth, but for no other purpose than to deprive the members of the congregation at Antioch of the liberty from the former bondage of the law which they had in Christ. The apostle at once realized that, while circumcision was in the New Testament a thing indifferent, it was, in the existing circumstances, not indifferent, but forbidden. The very heart and soul of Christian doctrine was at stake. To have yielded to the demand of the false teachers would have been a denial of the truth. Offence would have been given, inasmuch as the false teachers would have been strengthened and confirmed in their false doctrine and the members of the congregation given occasion to fall away from the truth. Paul resisted the false teachers. He testified to the truth by word and by deed. He did not consent to the circumcision of Titus nor to that of other Gentile Christians.

Christians should, after the manner of St. Paul, not respect the conscientious scruples of others, if the truth is thereby denied. If, for instance, it is demanded that they refrain from playing games on Sunday because it is sinful to do so, then the Christians should testify to the truth not only by word, but also by deed. Our conscience must be bound in God's Word alone. We must not depart from the truth, no matter what offence might result. Obedience to the Word of God must be our first and foremost consideration.

In Galatians, ch.2:11-14, we are told that the apostle Paul rebuked Peter because he had not exercised his Christian liberty and eaten with the Gentile Christians. To eat with Gentiles was within the liberty of Christians. Peter had at first used this liberty, but, when certain Jewish Christians had come from Jerusalem to

Antioch, he "withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision." Paul reproved Peter, because by respecting the scruples of those Jewish Christians he had given them the impression that he supported their false teaching regarding the observance of the injunctions of the Mosaic law. By refraining from using his Christian liberty Peter had here denied the truth. To eat with the Gentile Christians was, in such circumstances, no longer a thing indifferent, but a thing commanded by God. The confession of the truth of God must at all times and in all circumstances be the great and earnest concern of all Christians.

It is, in itself, a thing indifferent whether the bread in the Lord's Supper is broken into pieces and then distributed or whether it is distributed in the form of wafers. In the Lutheran Church wafers are used; the Reformed Churches, on the other hand, maintain that bread must be broken up into small pieces before it is distributed. What attitude, then, would have to be adopted, if a fellow-Lutheran, for conscientious reasons, insisted on the practice of the Reformed Churches and demanded the breaking of the bread? His scruples could not be respected. To do so would be a denial of the truth. And why? Because the breaking of bread in Holy Communion has become a characteristic of doctrinal error, being ever associated with the false doctrine which denies the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament, and for this reason is no longer a thing indifferent. And furthermore, the Reformed Churches, by insisting on the breaking of the bread as an essential and indispensable part of the celebration of the Lord's Supper, become guilty of making a law which God has not made. Asserting our Christian liberty and publicly testifying that we dissociate ourselves from the false teaching of the Reformed Churches, we use, and must continue to use, wafers in Holy Communion, in spite of the scruples of a brother. The thing indifferent has become a matter of confession of faith and is no longer a thing indifferent.

It might thus occur that the Christian, by respecting the conscientious scruples of a weak brother and so foregoing the use of his Christian liberty, would occasion other weak brethren to take offence. He is, as it were, between two fires. In both cases the conscientious scruples of brethren come into question: the one party takes offence, if the scruples of the other party are respected. The following case has been cited: Some members of a congregation for reasons of conscience neither eat nor drink before partaking of Holy Communion. After instruction, however, some of these overcome their scruples and therefore eat and drink. In addition to these there is a third class of members who have never had scruples of conscience in this matter and who might therefore be called strong Christians. If now such strong members, by abstaining from food and drink before Communion, respect the scruples of those who do not eat nor drink, the others who had previously overcome their scruples are perhaps again shaken in their convictions and take occasion to stumble at the fact that the strong have refrained from exercising their Christian liberty. What is a strong Christian to do in such a case? His first duty is patiently to instruct both parties. However, if his efforts are futile, if both parties uphold and maintain their conscientious objections, he should eat and drink, should use his Christian liberty and thereby show that he will not suffer himself nor others to be brought into bondage by any man-made laws.

The confessional writings of our Church state clearly what attitude should be adopted over against the conscientious scruples of others. In regard to church ceremonies and customs we read the following in the tenth Article of the Formula of Concord: "We believe, teach, and confess also that at the time of confession [when a confession of the heavenly truth is required], when the enemies of God's Word desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the holy Gospel, the entire congregation of God, yea, every Christian, but especially the ministers of the Word, as the leaders of the congregation of God [as those whom God has appointed to rule His Church], are bound by God's Word to confess freely and openly the [godly] doctrine, and what belongs to the whole of [pure] religion, not only in words, but also in works and with deeds; and that then, in this case, even in such [things truly and of themselves] adiaphora, they must not yield to the adversaries, or permit these [adiaphora] to be forced upon them by their enemies, whether by violence or cunning, to the detriment of the true worship of God and the introduction and sanction of idolatry. For it is written, Gal.5:1: Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again in the yoke of bondage. Also Gal.2:4f.: And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage; to whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour, that the truth of the Gospel might continue with you. [Now it is manifest that in that place Paul speaks concerning circumcision, which at that time had become an adiaphoron (1 Cor.7:18f.), and which at other occasions was observed by Paul (however, with Christian and spiritual freedom, Acts 16:3).

But when the false apostles urged circumcision for establishing their false doctrine (that the works of the Law were necessary for righteousness and salvation) and misused it for confirming their error in the minds of men, Paul says that he would not yield even for an hour, in order that the truth of the Gospel might continue unimpaired.]

Thus Paul yields and gives way to the weak as to food and [the observance of] times or days, Rom.14:6. But to the false apostles, who wished to impose these upon the conscience as necessary things, he will yield not even in such things as in themselves are adiaphora, Col.2:16: Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day. And when Peter and Barnabas yielded somewhat [more than they ought] in such an emergency, Paul openly reproveth them as those who in this matter were not walking aright, according to the truth of the Gospel, Gal.2:11ff.

For here it is no longer a question concerning external matters of indifference, which in their nature and essence are and remain of themselves free, and accordingly can admit of no command or prohibition that they be employed or omitted; but it is a question, in the first place, concerning the eminent article of our Christian faith, as the apostle testifies, that the truth of the Gospel might continue, which is obscured and perverted by such compulsion or command, because such adiaphora are then either publicly required for the sanction of false doctrine, superstition, and idolatry, and for the suppression of pure doctrine and Christian liberty, or at least are abused for this purpose by the adversaries, and are thus viewed [and are believed to be restored for this abuse and wicked end].

Likewise, the article concerning Christian liberty also is here at stake, which the Holy Ghost through the mouth of the holy apostle so earnestly charged His Church to preserve, as we have just heard. For as soon as this is weakened and the ordinances of men [human traditions] are forced upon the Church with coercion, as though it were wrong and a sin to omit them, the way is already prepared for idolatry, and by this means ordinances of men [human traditions] are afterwards multiplied and regarded as a divine worship, not only equal to the ordinances of God, but are even placed above them.

Moreover, by such [untimely] yielding and conformity in external things, where there has not been previously Christian union in doctrine, idolaters are confirmed in their idolatry; on the other hand, the true believers are grieved, offended, and weakened in their faith [their faith is grievously shaken, and made to totter as though by a battering-ram]; both of which every Christian for the sake of his soul's welfare and salvation is bound to avoid, as it is written: Woe unto the world because of offences! Also: Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in Me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt.18:6,7). Triglotta, pp.1055-1056.

May God grant us His grace and strength that we neither give nor take offence, by which either we or others might be occasioned to stumble and to err from the faith or the path of Christian duty! May we to this end diligently and devoutly use the Word of God and in faith obey and follow it, for "great peace have they which love Thy law: and nothing shall offend them" (Ps.119:165). "The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: to the end He may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints" (1 Thess.3:12,13).

# THE EVIL EFFECTS OF GIVING OFFENCE

(Pastor G.O. Minge)

We have seen from the previous essay what the Holy Scriptures teach concerning the sin of giving offence. From the many texts which speak of this subject, from the manner in which they speak of it, from the many examples cited by the essayist, as well as from his whole elaboration of the subject, it has surely become evident to us that giving offence is an exceedingly grievous and pernicious sin. Moreover, the gravity of this sin becomes still more evident when we take into account its effects or consequences.

It is to be feared that men in general pay too little attention to the probable consequences of whatever they do or say. And what about Christians? Do they, do we always consider what might be the end of our words and acts? Many a word is spoken, in jest or in earnest; many a deed is done, thoughtlessly or after little consideration, without the slightest regard as to what it might lead to. But the consequences are often so serious and so disastrous, for oneself and for one's fellow-men, as to cause years and years of regret and misery. How necessary, therefore, that we at all times also consider the end and ask: What might be the effects of what I am saying or doing?

The same applies to the sin of giving offence. It is undeniable that Christians are often not as careful as they should be in this matter partly because they do not realize the serious and far-reaching effects of giving offence. If they could always see the evil effects, the exceedingly harmful consequences of offending their neighbour, they would surely be much more cautious and circumspect in every detail of their conduct. In order, then, that this may, by God's grace, be accomplished in us and we be preserved from the condemnation, "Woe unto them," which God has pronounced upon them that give offence, we shall now deal with the subject:

## The Evil Effects of Giving Offence

and consider especially these evil effects:

- (1) On the glory of God's name;**
- (2) On our fellow-Christian;**
- (3) On the unbelievers;**
- (4) On ourselves.**

- I. What effect has the giving of offence on **the glory of God's name**? God's name is thereby dishonoured and blasphemed.

This is done when offence is given by adhering to and proclaiming false doctrine. Jesus said to the Jews (John 8:49): "I honour my Father, and ye do dishonour me." The whole discussion between Jesus and the Jews showed that they refused to accept Jesus as the Son of God and His doctrine as the truth. Jesus therefore emphatically declares that He by His words and works was honouring God His Father; they, by their rejection of the truth, on the other hand, dishonoured Him, and therefore dishonoured also God His Father. False doctrine, then, tends to detract from the glory of God's name, in fact dishonours His name. God's name is a holy name; His Word is divine and everlasting truth. To set up, adhere to, and proclaim any doctrine apart from or in opposition to the revealed truths of Scripture is blasphemy, a dishonouring of God's holy name, nay, a dishonouring of His Son and of God Himself. May God therefore preserve us from teaching otherwise than His Word teaches, so that His name be not profaned, but hallowed among and by us.

God's name is furthermore dishonoured and blasphemed when offence is given by an ungodly life, by living otherwise than God's Word teaches. St. Paul writes (Rom.2:23,24): "Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you." The Jews boasted of the favours they had received from God; the revelation of Himself and His law. But by neglecting to live according to this law, by transgressing it wilfully and habitually, they were not only showing lack of reverence toward God, but actually dishonouring Him. Besides, the Gentiles who witnessed these transgressions of God's law drew the conclusion that the God of the Jews was Himself more or less responsible for such acts of His people, and so they, too, were induced to blaspheme the God of Israel. An ungodly life, then, results in the dishonouring of God's holy name, both by those who lead the ungodly life and by those who witness such godlessness.

In 1 Tim.6:1, St. Paul urges servants to count their masters worthy of all honour, "that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed." Insolence and disobedience over against their masters on the part of those who profess Christianity would result in others speaking evil of their God and His doctrine.

In 2 Cor.6:3, the same apostle states that in everything he had been most cautious, that he had endeavoured not to give offence in anything, "that the ministry be not blamed." Even an indiscretion on his part would have reacted unfavourably on his office, the office of the ministry, and would consequently have tended to dishonour the author of this office, God, and His holy name.

In his first Epistle (2:12) St. Peter urges Christians to conduct themselves in such manner that their whole behaviour might be an advertisement for the Gospel, so that, when the Gentiles would see their good works, they might be led to glorify God thereby. Their good works would redound to the glory of God; evil works, on the other hand, would have the effect of bringing disgrace on God and His holy name.

An example of such evil effects of giving offence is that of King David, when he had committed murder and adultery. God's prophet, Nathan, said to him, "By this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme" (2 Sam.12:14). As then, so also today, the enemies of the Lord still speak sneeringly of David and contemptuously of his God because of the offence given by him who is called a man after the heart of God.

This fact, that by giving offence the holy name of our God is dishonoured and blasphemed - should it not urge and compel us to exercise the utmost care in everything we say and do? God's name is a holy name, and is to be held sacred by us; whether we eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, everything is to be done to the glory of God (1 Cor.10:31); God is our kind and gracious God; His mercies are new upon us every morning; we enjoy His love and benevolence from day to day. Can we then be careless and callously indifferent as to the effects of our words and deeds on the glorious name of God? The Lord preserve us from giving offence, so that His name be not dishonoured nor blasphemed among us or by us through false doctrine or ungodly life, but rather that by everything we say and do His name be glorified and His glory magnified on earth.

## II. Let us, in the second place, see which are the evil effects of giving offence **on our fellow-Christians.**

St. Paul writes (Rom.16:17,18): "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." He is speaking of the offence which is given by the toleration or promulgation of false doctrine. Thereby, he says, the hearts of the simple are deceived. Unwary souls are impressed by the specious presentation of such doctrine, and without recognizing the error may be led away from the truth into soul-destroying and salvation-robbing delusions.

In his Epistle to the Galatians St. Paul speaks in a similar strain of the possible evil effects of giving offence by holding and teaching false doctrines. The congregations in Galatia were being visited by Judaizing

teachers who insisted that in order to be justified before God and eternally saved it was necessary not only to believe in Christ, but also to keep the ceremonial law of the Jews, to be circumcised, to observe the Jewish feasts and other ceremonies. This was false doctrine. And the effects of this? They "trouble you, and would pervert the Gospel of Christ" (Gal.1:7). They were perturbing the minds and consciences of the Galatian Christians, causing them to become doubtful as to which was really the true doctrine and saving Gospel. And in chapter 4, verse 11, the apostle writes: "I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain." He expresses the fear that all his preaching of the Gospel among them, all his endeavours to confirm them in the faith, had been in vain, that after all they might be eternally lost because of the false doctrines which were now being proclaimed among them.

These are the evil effects of giving offence by the teaching of false doctrine. Luther writes: "Experience teaches clearly enough what great harm and damage is done in the churches by divisions and dissensions in doctrine; for not only are people misled and quickly attracted to anything new they hear from proud spirits proclaimed by them with much show and excellent words, but many weak and otherwise well-meaning people also begin to doubt, not knowing what to believe; as a result of which the doctrine is treated with contempt and blasphemed by such as seek occasion to gainsay it. Therefore Christians are to be on their guard lest they cause divisions and dissensions, but they are to endeavour with utmost diligence and care to preserve unity." Yes, the Church is torn asunder; the members of the Church, the strong as well as the weak, are disturbed, troubled, and filled with uncertainty and doubt, and the salvation of many immortal souls is endangered and imperilled. How necessary, therefore, that we continue, steadfastly and unwaveringly, in His Word, the inerrant Word of our God and Saviour, that we preserve the unity of the Spirit, remain in the possession and confession of the saving truth for the eternal welfare of our souls and those of our fellow-men.

What are the evil effects of giving offence by an ungodly life?

Aaron gave offence by making the golden calf. Result: the people committed idolatry (Exod.32). The sons of Eli (1 Sam.2) profaned the offerings of the Lord, committed sacrilege in the temple. Result: "the men abhorred the offering of the Lord." They despised not only the sons of Eli, but also began to despise the sacrifices themselves. Jeroboam, King of Israel, built altars at Bethel and Dan, made two calves of gold which he set up at these places, offered sacrifices to them, and invited the people to do likewise. Thereby he himself sinned, and also became responsible for the sins of the people (1 Kings 12). Manasseh introduced idolatry, sorcery, divination into his kingdom, and encouraged these and other abominable practices, and thus "made Judah and the inhabitants to err, and to do worse than the heathen, whom the Lord had destroyed before the children of Israel" (2 Chron.33).

From these examples of Scripture it is evident that the giving of offence by godlessness of any kind tends to encourage others to follow the evil example and to commit the same sins. By giving offence we seduce those who see the offence, we entice them from the path of righteousness, we encourage them to live in the same or similar godlessness, we become responsible for their apostasy, and their blood will be required from our hands.

Grave may also be the effects of offence given by us through the unwise use of things indifferent. Whilst insisting on our Christian liberty in things neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word, it is not always wise nor charitable to use his Christian liberty. We should respect the consciences of such weak brethren as, for lack of better knowledge, consider certain things sinful. By using our Christian liberty we might be giving them occasion to stumble by causing them to follow our example against their conscience. And this would be for them a sin. Therefore, also in things indifferent we should heed the admonition of St. Paul (1 Cor.8:9): "Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling-block to them that are weak."

But if, on the other hand, we refrain from using our Christian liberty merely to please some who in spite of all instruction persist in their erroneous view of things indifferent, we might actually strengthen and harden them in their erroneous views and render it all the more difficult for them to appreciate and enjoy the glorious liberty of the Gospel. By refraining from using our Christian liberty when the use of such liberty would amount

to a much-needed confession we might become responsible for their continuing in error and the endangering of their soul's welfare. See Gal.2:3-5. Thus, in certain circumstances the use of our Christian liberty might have evil effects in others, whilst in certain other circumstances refraining from using our Christian liberty might have evil effects. Divine wisdom is necessary in every case.

Thus it behoves us in all our words and actions to have regard also for the welfare of our fellow-Christians. For by condoning or adhering to false doctrine, by living in ungodliness, and by unrestrainedly and inconsiderately using our Christian liberty, we would give offence to them, place a stumbling-block in their way, and possibly cause them to walk the way to eternal destruction. And when once a fellow-Christian has thus been offended, it is a most difficult matter to undo the damage. Solomon writes (Prov.18:19): "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city." All attempts to regain him will be viewed by him with suspicion, and unless the grace of God is manifested most powerfully he may be lost to righteousness and faith for all time. Think of Jacob and Esau. What a task was it for Jacob to regain the favour of his brother Esau! How necessary, therefore, that we exercise extreme caution in all our conduct towards our fellow-Christians!

Before closing this part something must be said concerning the evil effects of giving offence on children. Children are taught more easily by example than by precept. For them, even more so than for adults, actions speak louder than words. An adult who is firm in faith is perhaps able to continue in faith and righteousness in spite of the offences given by others. But children are much more easily led astray by such offences. Whatever they see and hear is likely to make such an impression on them that the effects of it are felt by them for the remainder of their life. An old pastor once said that throughout life he had had to fight against certain temptations which constantly assailed him because in his childhood he had been told a suggestive story by a foul-mouthed youth. Others have ended their days in prison because they had been influenced to a life of thieving by the dishonesty they had seen in their parents. Parents and teachers, therefore, should be especially careful lest they give offence to the little ones. For whatever they teach them by precept is undone by their wicked example; whatever they build up with one hand is torn down by the other. However, not only parents and teachers, but everyone should watch diligently and continually lest they offend the little ones, those little ones for whom also the Saviour shed His blood, concerning whom He commands that they be brought to Him, whom He does not wish to be prevented from coming to Him either by neglect or by evil example, whom God considers so important that He has even reserved certain angels to be of service to them. If God regards little children so highly, should we be indifferent about their spiritual welfare, or actually jeopardize it by carelessly or maliciously giving offence to them? It is just upon that person who gives offence to the little ones which believe in Him that Jesus has pronounced those solemn words, that "it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt.18:6). This judgement, because of its severity, is not only an indication of the gravity of the sin of giving offence to children, but at the same time an indication of the awful effects they may suffer as a result.

Let us therefore earnestly guard against giving offence to our fellow-Christians, whether they be children or adults. Our whole association with them should have the effect of assisting them along the path to eternal glory. By giving them offence, however, we would do the very opposite: we would be a hindrance to them on their heavenward way, and perhaps even prevent them from reaching this goal. From this preserve us, heavenly Father!

### III. In the third place, let us see which are the evil effects of giving offence on **the unbelievers**.

In the first portion of this essay it was already stated in passing that when we give offence to unbelievers they are moved to blaspheme the holy name of God. This point is to be somewhat amplified here.

God wishes to be honoured and glorified not only by the believers, but by all men. This is one aim of all His works on earth: the Creation, His Preservation, and His Government in all its various manifestations. Ps.72:19: Let the whole earth be filled with his glory. Ps.96:7: Give unto the Lord, O ye kindreds of the people, give unto the Lord glory and strength; and Rev.14:7: Saying (to every nation and kindred and tongue and people) with a loud voice, Fear God and give glory to Him. And when admiring the works of creation, the wonders of nature, even unbelievers do actually, though unwittingly, give glory to Him.

This glory of God is to be enhanced on earth by His children, by the believers, by us. If however, we depart from the Word and will of God, will that induce the unbelievers all the more to glorify this God whom we profess to worship? When they see the divisions in the Church, brought about by false doctrine, will they not rather be inclined to despise that God whom the various church bodies profess to worship, to think of Him as a God of strife and dissension, and thus even to blaspheme Him? And if they see us who call ourselves God's children living in sin and iniquity, will that not have a detrimental effect on their esteem for that God whom we claim to follow? And that is the reason why St. Paul writes in Rom.2:24: "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you." This is one evil effect of our giving offence on the unbelievers.

Closely associated with this effect is the other: They are thereby kept out of the Christian Church, nay, even strengthened in their unbelief and sin. We Christians are to work for the eternal salvation of those who still live in sin and unbelief. By the preaching of the Gospel we are to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith. Having ourselves by faith been made members of God's Kingdom of grace, we are to be zealously engaged in bringing others into this kingdom. But is it not so that many refrain from joining the Church just because so many church bodies cannot walk and work together? The divisions in the visible Church, brought about by false doctrines of divers kinds, are an offence to the unbelievers because of which many prefer to remain outside. Let us therefore work and pray for unity among the Churches, true God-pleasing unity, so that this offence be removed.

Offence through ungodly life keeps many outside of the Church. The unbelievers judge our faith by our works, and our Church by its members. The life of the Christians is usually the only "Bible" the unbelievers ever read. If they now see that our life does not agree with the precepts of the Scriptures and the principles of our Church, they will condemn us as hypocrites and our church-going as hypocrisy. If they see that we who go to church are in our conduct toward our neighbour not actuated by love, but by jealousy, spite, bitterness, and hatred; that it is not possible to say, Behold, how those Christians love one another! but that it must be said, See, see how they fight and bite, quarrel and wrangle with one another! that members of the Christian Church habitually live in indecency and unchastity, drunkenness, that they commit theft and fraud, and practise other abominable vices; if the unbelievers see these things, can we expect them to be favourably inclined toward our Church? Will they heed our invitation to come to the services? Will they not think they are far better off by remaining outside? Will they not dismiss the plea of your pastor with a sneer when he speaks to them of the necessity and the blessings of church-going? Indeed, one of the greatest hindrances to successful mission work which pastors meet with again and again is the wickedness and godlessness of those who are church members. But those are the evil effects of giving offence by an ungodly life.

Neglect of church discipline has the same evil upon the unbelievers. If the unbelievers find out (and it seems that they usually do find out through the blabbing of some church members) that grievous sins are left unrebuked and no action is taken against manifest and impenitent sinners, they will despise the Church all the more and become absolutely averse to having anything to do with it. Neglect of church discipline also is an offence which cannot but have evil effects upon the unbelievers. And not only will they, because of such offence, become altogether disinclined to join the Church, but they may even become hardened in their sins and unbelief, and thus go from bad to worse. Instead of saving them, we would by our godless works and deeds in fact alienate them still further from the Kingdom of God and actually become the cause of their eternal perdition. We would cause the words of Christ (Matt.23:13) to apply to ourselves: "Ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in."

Yes, the effects of giving offence to the unbelievers may be of such a nature that their seriousness is hardly ever contemplated. Let us therefore never fail to ask: What will the effect of my word and deed be on those who are watching me? St. Paul was made all things to all men that he might by all means save some. Let us follow his example, so that whatever we say and do may not contribute to the damnation but to the salvation of others.

IV. And now, after having seen what evil effects the giving of offence has on the glory of God's name, on our fellow-Christians, and on the unbelievers, let us in the fourth part see what **the evil effects of giving offence are upon ourselves.**

From what has been said in the first three parts of this essay it will surely have become manifest that by giving offence in any way we not only commit most horrible sins against our God and our fellow-men, but we also heap upon ourselves the guilt of other people's sins and the blame for their eternal destruction. This, however, is a matter of such solemn consequence that it needs to be stressed a little more.

By giving offence to others we cause them to fall, to be or to remain alienated from the only God and Saviour, from the bliss of heaven, and to be cast into the damnation of hell. True, by taking offence, and thereby continuing in the way of destruction, they are not by any means guiltless. Eve was not excused from her sin because she had been deceived by the serpent; neither was Adam just because Eve had enticed him. Those who are led astray by the offence of others have to bear their guilt themselves. Nevertheless, they who have given the offence have the greater responsibility. Jesus said to Pilate (John 19:11): "He that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin." Pilate was not guiltless; he actually committed a great sin in condemning Christ to be crucified. But a greater sin was committed by those Jews who delivered Jesus into Pilate's hands. Their heart was more wicked than that of Pilate; they sinned maliciously, for they were determined to have Christ crucified in spite of their better knowledge; therefore they also carried the greater blame.

If we who give offence possess greater knowledge than they who take offence at us, then our guilt is greater than theirs. This is evident from the words of Christ in Luke 12:47,48. Many of those who take offence at our conduct may be weak in knowledge; self-evidently then we who possess greater knowledge and yet either frivolously or deliberately give offence to them have the greater sin and deserve the severer damnation. They who through taking offence enter damnation will have to endure wailing and gnashing of teeth; but if we by giving offence cause them to enter damnation, then our damnation will be more unendurable than theirs. Think of Dives in hell. What was it that made him plead with Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers lest they also come into that place of torment? Was he not afraid that they would forever blame him for their perdition? Oh, it will be awful, unutterably awful, if on Judgement Day and in hell we have to bear the accusing voices, the curses and imprecations of those who have been condemned because of our offences!

And what about the judgement of the righteous Judge in that great day? For our sins against our fellow-men have at the same time been sins against Him! St. Paul writes (1 Cor.8:12): "When ye sin so against the brethren and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ." Ye sin against Christ! Every offence to our fellow-men is an offence against Christ, against the only divinely-appointed Saviour, against Him who sought our salvation, and that of our fellow-men, even to the death on the cross. By giving offence we work directly against Him, we nullify the work He wishes to do in others, we cause His precious blood to be shed in vain for them. It is here that giving offence reaches its climax and its blackest guilt is seen; for the offender, by sinning against Christ, forfeits the grace which alone can save him. Verily, we cannot marvel that Christ uses such strong words when speaking of offences as He does in Matt.18:6,7: "It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" And in Matt.13:41,42: "The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

Giving offence is a fearfully serious, tremendously dangerous sin, and surely merits God's merciless judgement in all eternity. Well, then, Lord, who shall stand? Must we not all acknowledge, admit, and confess that we are not guiltless in this respect? that we, too, have frequently and grievously given offence, particularly by living otherwise than God's Word teaches, by godlessness, by evil words and deeds, by abusing our Christian liberty, and also by being silent or doing nothing when we should have spoken and acted? Have not also we then deserved God's wrath and punishment in time and in eternity? Have we not all reason to pray: Lord, enter not into judgement with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified? O let us repent, and beseech our God not to deal with us after our sins nor to reward us according to our iniquities, but to

deal with us according to His mercy and faithfulness, graciously to forgive us our many and grievous sins for the sake of Christ our Saviour, who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, and whose blood alone can cleanse us from all sin. And, having received forgiveness from our gracious God, let us put away the offences. Manasseh, having repented, took away the strange gods and the idol out of the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built, and repaired the altar of the Lord, and sacrificed thereon peace-offerings and thank-offerings, and commanded Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel (2 Chron. 33:14-17). Let us do likewise. True, we may never be able to remove all the evil effects of our past offences, but let us do it wherever we can, so that by God's grace they whom we have offended may not thereby be eternally lost; let us also by brotherly admonition seek to restrain others from giving offence; let particularly all pastors, teachers, parents, and all officials in the Church exercise extreme caution in all their words and deeds. Yes, let us all, by the grace and in the strength of our Lord, endeavour more and more to heed the admonition, and to follow the example of St. Paul, as he writes in 1 Cor.10:31-33: "Whether ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved." God grant this for the sake of Christ, our Saviour.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Pastor W. H. Paech**

Pastor W. H. Paech was born on 12th June, 1894, at Lobethal, South Australia. He attended Concordia College and seminary, Adelaide, from 1910 to 1918. He was ordained into the ministry on 16th Feb., 1919. He first served the Lord in the ministry at Katanning, Western Australia, from 1919 to 1923. He then spent 25 years of his life serving Hochkirch (Tarrington), Victoria until 1948. From 1949 he served as a missionary to migrants in Melbourne. He was President of the Victorian District, ELCA, for a number of years from 1940.

### **Pastor G.O. Minge**

Pastor G. O. Minge was a Pastor of the old ELSA/ELCA. Born in Sutherlands, South Australia, he studied at Concordia College and later Concordia Seminary of the ELSA, Adelaide, from 1916-1924. He was in the same class as Pastor Kleinig, who often spoke of his experiences with his classmate Oscar. Ordained on 28/12/1924, Pastor Minge first served at Ropely, Queensland, until 1935. Later he served congregations at Tabor, Victoria (1936-1942); Henty, Victoria (1943-1952); and Gawler, South Australia (1953-1965). From 1965 he served as South Australian District President of the ELCA, and later the LCA. From this he retired in 1970 and assisted with Pastoral work in his church. Pastor Minge died in 1988.