

Do Not Give Offence

The key term Scripture uses for offence is the Greek term *skandalon*. *Skandalon* was the crooked movable stick to which bait was fastened and by which a trap was sprung. In New Testament usage, it meant the trap itself, an impediment, a stumbling block. In biblical usage, it is always used in the figurative sense. It refers to whatever causes a Christian to fall from faith or whatever hinders him in his faith.

Scripture speaks of both taking offence and giving offence. Taking offence is when an unbeliever uses the words or actions of another as an excuse to sin without any fault on the part of the other person. Paul (Romans 9:30-33) and Peter (1 Peter 2:7-8) cite Isaiah 8:14 to describe people taking offence because they take exception to the “foolishness of the cross.” In today’s Second Reading, Paul described how Christ crucified was “*to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness* (1 Cor. 1:23). Taking offence can also occur when people fall away because they are not willing to follow Christ for one reason or another. Jesus said to the disciples of John the Baptist, “*Blessed is anyone who is not offended because of Me*” (Matt. 11:6). Speaking of the signs of the end of the world, Jesus said, “*Then many will be offended and will betray one another and hate one another*” (Matt. 24:10).

Giving offence is causing people to stumble in their faith or to lose their faith. People can give offence by teaching false doctrine. False doctrine leads people away from Christ. It either weakens or destroys faith. People can also give offence by sinful living. The actions of a person who lives in sin can encourage others to commit the same sin. Paul wrote, “*Bad company corrupts good habits*” (1 Cor. 15:33). Jesus warned against giving offence to little children. Bad examples can lead children to sin and can destroy their faith. Jesus said, “*if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him that a large millstone were hung around his neck and that he were drowned in the deepest part of the sea*” (Matt. 18:6).

People can also give offence by an inconsiderate use of Christian liberty. If someone believes something is sinful, it is a sin for that person. Even though the action may not be sinful in itself, if people do what they believe to be a sin, they are sinning. Paul discussed this in his letter to the Romans. There he wrote, “*However, the person who has doubts has been condemned if he eats, because he has not done it out of conviction. Anything that does not come from conviction is sin*” (14:23). Here Paul is not referring to saving faith or trust in

Christ as the Saviour. He is using the word faith in the sense of a conviction that one's actions are in accord with God's will. Thus a person who believes something is contrary to God's will but still does it is sinning, even if the action is not sinful in itself.

In 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, Paul addressed the matter of eating meat that had been part of a sacrifice to idols. Paul explained that it was not wrong to eat such meat. Yet Paul indicated that if a fellow Christian felt it was wrong to eat the meat that had been part of a sacrifice to an idol, then one should exercise concern for the other believer's conscience. If your brother disregards his qualms of conscience to eat the meat, he has sinned, and your actions have led him to sin. Paul stated, "*Therefore, if food causes my fellow-Christian to stumble, I shall certainly never eat meat, that I may not cause my fellow-Christian to stumble*" (1 Cor. 8:13).

Christians will show concern for the consciences of others. They will also try to educate weak Christians so that they know about their freedom in Christ. Education takes time. People do not instantly understand the liberty they have in Christ. It takes a while for education to become a conviction of the heart. It took early Christians a while to understand that they were free from the Law of Moses. Even Peter regressed in his understanding and had to be rebuked by Paul for the offence he had given (Gal. 2:11-14).