

Islands And Offenses

by Staff

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***"Give no offense neither to the Jew or to the Greeks or to the church of God." —I
Corinthians 10:32***

I am fascinated by islands! Recently, I was sitting at a local beach on a beautiful day, and as I sat there in the early winter sunshine, I gazed at all the different islands in the waters of the Georgia Strait, which separates Vancouver Island from the Canadian mainland.

Straight ahead to the north, I could see the beautiful, green Lasqueti Island, with the vast bulk of Texada Island towering behind it. To the northwest, I could see the relatively flat Denman Island, twinned with the lovely escarpment of Hornby Island. To the southwest, the tip of Gabriola Island and a few other small islands were visible off the port city of Nanaimo. As well as all these inhabited islands, lots of smaller, uninhabited islands and rocks dot our local coastline. Of course, I was viewing all of these islands from another island—the one on which we live—Vancouver Island, which is a decent-sized island, 290 miles long by about 50 miles wide at its widest point.

The globe features some huge islands: Australia and Greenland come to mind. My wife and I were born and raised on one of the British Isles. In the spring of 2007, we visited the stunningly beautiful, verdant, volcanic island of Sao Miguel in the Azores in the Atlantic Ocean, 1,000 miles from its home country of Portugal. Earlier this year, we visited another lovely Portuguese island, Madeira, which is actually closer to West Africa than it is to its mother country. In recent years we have also been blessed with opportunities to visit two Bahamian islands and two in the Caribbean group.

But enough of reverie! Just what *is* an island? It is, as we all know, a body of land surrounded by water. What benefit does an island give, if any? It gives home and refuge to many species of birds and animals. It is always amazing to find bear, deer, and smaller mammals on remote Canadian Pacific islands. How did they or their ancestors get there? How far did they have to swim to reach them?

Islands give homes and safe haven to human beings too. Although we frequently complain about ferry prices and services, most island dwellers love the relative peace and seclusion of island life. Men who declined to fight in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and '70s took refuge on some hard-to-get-to islands, and many of them enjoyed the life there so much that they stayed after the conflict ended.

As I sat and gazed at those lovely islands basking in the winter sunshine, surrounded by billions of gallons of saltwater, my mind began to think of them symbolically. To my mind, these islands represented church of God congregations. The smaller islands and rocks represented individual church members or small family groups meeting on their own each Sabbath day. The ocean surrounding them represented Satan's world that encircles God's oh-so-vulnerable people.

In the same way as a physical island gives some refuge and protection to birds, animals, and people, our church congregations do something similar for church members. We should feel a certain level of safety in our church of God congregations. In many—if not most—things, we should have a certain

level of unity of opinion. Further, because of the teachings of God's Word, we should feel safe from gossip, criticism, and offense.

Let us home in on the subject of offense. We will explore a couple of scriptures warning us against it, as well as a couple that give us instructions for what to do when faced with it.

Give No Offense!

We will start with what is perhaps the best-known scripture on this topic: "Give no offense neither to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God" (I Corinthians 10:32). Notice that the apostle Paul is writing to church members, advising them not to offend fellow church members!

And what did Jesus say on the subject?

Then [in the end time] they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. (Matthew 24:9-10)

He tells us of a future time when people will offend each other—to the point of betrayal! What else does our Savior tell us about offenses?

Then He said to the disciples, "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones." (Luke 17:1-2)

Who are "these little ones"? Usually, this term would refer to children and to the newer members and attendees of God's church. But the term might also refer to those who perhaps tend to be a little more sensitive than most.

Handling Offenses

So, if Jesus says that it is impossible that no offenses should come, then how should we handle those offenses when they *do* come?

First, please keep in mind that, no matter which side of the fence we are on—whether we are the offended or the offender—it will not be easy. Solomon writes in Proverbs 18:19, "A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a castle."

What should we do if a fellow church member offends us? Should we immediately go running to the local minister and demand that the offender be disfellowshipped? Of course not! Here is what we are to do. We are to use Jesus Christ's four-step plan, which He gives us in Matthew 18:15-17!

Certainly, this may not be the most pleasant way of resolving the problem. It would be much easier to just give it to the minister and let him resolve it. But this is the method that Jesus commands His brothers and sisters to use. We will run through this procedure in some detail and break it down verse-by-verse.

Step One: Speak Privately to the Offender

Jesus advises: "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother" (Matthew 18:15). Mark well that Jesus says, "If your brother *sins* against you." The Greek word for "sins" is *hamartano*, which can also be translated as "trespass," "commit a fault," or "offend."

Hamartano can also imply the making of a mistake, and this is important to note. The offense might be the result of an innocent mistake by the offender—or the offended person might be mistaken in feeling offended. The discovery of a mistake or misunderstanding by either party can come out in Step Number One, the private communication between the offending and the offended parties.

Please notice that Jesus wants us to resolve such problems at the simplest possible level, if at all possible, before taking it to other people and definitely before taking it to the ministry. It should almost go without saying that we must pray about it in advance. If it is a major problem, we might also want to fast about it in order to draw close to God.

But what if the offender will not discuss the problem in a reasonable manner? What if he will not admit that he has done anything offensive? And worst case, what if he "blows a gasket" and yells at us for even bringing it to him—even in this proper, Christ-sanctioned way?

Then we must go on to the next step.

Step Two: Get a Second Opinion!

Jesus continues, "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established'" (Matthew 18:16). Jesus quotes this principle of appropriate judgment from Deuteronomy 19:15.

How do we go about this? We find another church member, or two if necessary, and we ask them to become involved. They should be members who are not gossip-mongers and whose word is reliable. An unbiased person is best in many ways. However, on the other hand, it is wise to have a person who to some extent agrees about the offense. Perhaps he has been offended in a similar way by the same offender in the past.

This is where it can become tricky. Be very careful! Do not be hasty! It should not be our intention to start a war over this. Nor do we want to split the "protective island" of our congregation into two opposing camps. Neither do we want to be accused of gossip.

At the very beginning of the first step, we should have advised the offender that we were bringing this to him in accordance with Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18. If Step Number One does not work, then we should tell him again that, according to Jesus' command, we need to take it to Step Number Two, and that we wish to involve another person or persons. Be gentle! Be diplomatic!

Now, what if the offender refuses to resolve the problem even when we, the offended, are backed by our "two witnesses"? That is when we must involve "the church."

Step Three: Tell It to the Church

In Matthew 18:17, Jesus counsels, "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church." Does this mean that we are then free to go to all the other church members and tell them all of the offender's

infraction? No, of course not! Doing such a thing would likely precipitate an unpleasant and unnecessary split in the congregation.

It is interesting to note that, at the time that Jesus gave these instructions to the disciples, the church per se did not yet exist! His disciples were, of course, the nucleus of His future church. Yet, even they sometimes had jealousies and disagreements between themselves—yes, even after the coming of the Holy Spirit. We see a few examples of these disagreements in the gospel accounts and the epistles.

The idea that Jesus was getting at here anticipated the establishment of His church and its leadership. It is to that leadership—the church ministry—that the offended person is to go in the event of the failure of Step Number Two.

So Step Number Three is the appropriate time for the ministry to become involved. Again, we must avoid the temptation to jump the gun by trying to involve the ministry before we have completed the first two steps.

Moreover, we should not use the involvement of the ministry as a threat! Doing so will almost certainly inflame the problem. It is vital that we also understand that there are no absolute guarantees that the involvement of the ministry will definitely resolve the problem. Jesus' words in the second half of verse 17 show this possibility clearly. The offending member might not recognize the authority or experience of the minister who is brought in to intervene, or he may adamantly refuse to admit that he did anything wrong. Whatever the reason, there is still the possibility that Step Number Three might also fail. If it does, then we go on to Step Number Four.

Step Four: The Dreaded "Heathen or Tax Collector" Phase

Continuing in verse 17, Jesus says finally, "But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."

If the problem gets this far, and assuming from the beginning that our case is a fair and valid one, we are within our rights at this point to treat the offender as the Jews of Jesus' time would have treated the most despised people, both of their own people (the tax collectors) and of the Gentiles (the heathen).

Jesus implies that, if negotiations fail even after the involvement of "the church" (the ministry), then the offender's unwillingness might cause him to be officially treated henceforth by the church and its leadership as a non-member—maybe even to the point of disfellowshipment or even *marking*. The apostle Paul comments on this in Romans 16:17-18:

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

Paul says here that the church leadership is to "note" those who cause offenses. In the King James Version, the term "note those" is given as "mark those." Paul is telling church leaders to mark, or name before the church, those who cause division or offense.

"Marking" is the extreme form of disfellowshipment from the church. If a person is disfellowshipped, it is done privately. But if he is "marked," he has done something so serious that it must be announced to the entire congregation. This illustrates what a serious sin the giving of offense can be if not properly resolved.

Fellowship in Love

Many branches of the church of God are small in the number of members. Most of our individual congregations are quite small too. There were positive and negative aspects of the large congregations of our former fellowship. Because of the much greater numbers of people in our old congregations, there were more opportunities for friends and companionship, but there were also more opportunities for offenses. This fact also allowed the offenders and the offended to "resolve" their differences by merely ignoring one another and gravitating to another set of church friends. We do not have that luxury in our tiny congregations today! We have very limited opportunities for friendship and fellowship within our tiny congregations on our little "church islands."

Remember that our little church congregations are small islands of truth and righteousness, isolated and surrounded by the vast ocean of Satan's world. We need to stick together. We should not be giving offense to our beloved brethren, and neither should we be so touchy and sensitive that we are too easily offended.

Let us strive to get along together and to love one another with the godly love that is unique to the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.