

The Defense Against Offense

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Forerunner, "Personal," January 1995

Everybody, every single person who has ever lived on earth, has been offended. Not once, but many times. In some cases, many, many times.

Sometimes we may view an offense as being slight. At other times we may be offended and carry a resentment against another for the rest of our lives. Some people hardly seem to notice an offense, maybe because they do not understand its ramifications. Others seem to be able to bear the meanest of personal attacks. Though undoubtedly very hurt, they quickly recover and can continue without resentment toward the offender.

"Offense," "offenses," "offend," "offended" and "offender" appear a total of seventy-three times in the Bible. Several writers, as well as Jesus, give the subject of offense close scrutiny.

So serious is the subject that Jesus pronounces a solemn "woe" against those "by whom the offense comes" (Matthew 18:7). "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (verse 6).

The apostles also weigh in on the subject. Paul writes about how he strives to avoid giving offense: "If food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble" (I Corinthians 8:13). Offense can lead to bitterness and hatred. John states in I John 3:15, "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." If we allow it to go this far without repentance, offense can have eternal consequences. It is serious business!

We tend to use the word "offense" in the sense of feeling displeasure. Our displeasure may range from merely being piqued all the way to feeling deep resentment and indignation.

Offenses usually occur when someone says something to us too harshly—or at least we interpret it that way. It can and does occur when we perceive that we have been ignored, overlooked or given a responsibility we do not want. Or we become offended when we are blamed for something we did not do, or on the other hand, when we do not receive credit for what we did do. We may be offended when someone has been inconsiderate or thoughtless or has used us for their own purposes. The ways to become offended are myriad.

While all of these things may indeed be contained within the scope of the biblical "offense," they fall far short of the much stronger usage expressed by Jesus and the apostles. In most cases, their usage of the term implies that a person's *salvation* may be at stake. Most of the slights that we interpret as "offenses" are far from putting our salvation at stake! An offense most certainly can endanger our salvation, though, depending on how we react to the perceived offense.

Interestingly, the five English forms of "offense" given above are translated from a total of twenty-four different words in both testaments. Twelve are from Hebrew and twelve from Greek. However, most of these are merely different forms of the same words. They are either different parts of speech or of a different gender.

A common thread runs through these usages. They all refer either to the cause or stimulus of evil conduct or to the evil action itself.

Triggering the Trap

Perhaps the most descriptive and easily understood of the Greek words are *skandalon*, a noun, and its future tense verb form, *skandalizo*. Our words "scandal" and "scandalize" come directly from these Greek words.

Skandalon is used by Jesus three times in Matthew 18:7: "Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!" *Skandalon* was the trigger of a trap on which bait is placed. When an animal touches the trigger to eat the bait, the trap springs shut, and the animal is caught. When used in a moral context, *skandalon* indicates the enticement to conduct which will ruin the person in question.

Obviously, the context in Matthew 18:7 is moral. Jesus' concern is the sin of being the temptation or enticement that causes others to sin. He does not stipulate whether one is the direct cause through persuasion or flaunted worldliness, or indirectly through one's manner of life. Hypocrisy may very well tempt others to sin more than outright atheism!

Skandalizo is used in two senses in the Bible. The first usage compares to how we use "offense" most commonly today, that is, as a slight, an annoyance. The second is used in exactly the same way as *skandalon* is.

Matthew 17:27 states, "Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you." Here, *skandalizo* ("offend") is used in the sense of "vex," "annoy" or "trouble."

However, in Matthew 5:29-30; 18:6, 8-9 and Romans 14:21, *skandalizo* is not used in this way, but as "a cause of stumbling, leading one astray" or even "an occasion of sinning." In other words, it can mean the stumbling block itself.

A number of times, the apostle Paul uses two other words, which mean basically the same as the above. The first is *proskomma*, meaning "a cause of falling" (stumbling block) or "an occasion of sinning." The second word, *proskope*, means "an offense" or "the act of offending."

At this point we can clearly see that when the Bible speaks of offense, it refers primarily to some act or series of acts which lead another into sin. By themselves, offenses are generally not hurt feelings, resentment and anger that begin as minor irritations or annoyances. We ought to be able to deal easily with these. However, irritations and annoyances have the unfortunate inclination to build into far worse bitterness and grudges, which are sins that a person has allowed himself to be led into—in many cases by his own devious mind.

Love "Is Not Provoked"

It is interesting to note in the "Love Chapter" that the *Revised Standard Version* translates I Corinthians 13:5 as, "It is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful."

The Revised English Bible translates the same verse, "Never rude; love is never selfish, never quick to take offense. Love keeps no score of wrongs."

The Amplified Bible renders it, "It is not conceited (arrogant and inflated with pride); it is not rude (unmannerly) and does not act unbecomingly. Love (God's love in us) does not insist on its own rights or its own way, for it is not self-seeking; it is not touchy or fretful or resentful; it takes no account of the evil done to it [it pays no attention to a suffered wrong]."

Each of these translations clearly catches the essence of why so many are so easily moved from mere irritation to resentment and bitter anger, which in turn leads to retaliation. This progression can divide blood brothers (Proverbs 18:19).

I Corinthians 13:5 does not deny the fact that offenses will come, just as Jesus said. They will range from hurt feelings, giving rise to a mild animosity, to direct powerful temptations to sin through a flaming temper bent on getting even. Yet we can overcome all of them because love "is not provoked" or exasperated.

There will be temptations to sin, and all of us will offend others from time to time, even unintentionally. But God expects His children to have the love to override the offenses when they come.

Pride

Allowing irritation to develop into resentful anger has its roots in a dangerous duo: not enough love and too much pride. We become irritated when our vanity is hurt. We say, "You can't do that to me." When we react to rudeness or thoughtlessness, vanity and pride are almost certain to be involved.

Matthew 20:20-26 records the occasion when the mother of James and John asked Jesus for special consideration for her sons. When the others heard of it they were indignant, angry. Why? From Jesus' reply we can infer that their vanity was pricked—they had been "beaten to the punch"! They had been thinking of the same request because in their vanity they thought they deserved special consideration too.

Their proud minds had pictured themselves as worthy of being served, and they were offended because they thought that chance might be slipping away. Jesus reminded them that *even to be in the Kingdom*, one has to have a humble attitude of a servant.

Unlike love, pride is "touchy and fretful." When pride feels threatened, it broods against what it perceives to be hurting it or lessening its chances of "being on top," "coming out ahead" of another, "looking good" or "getting even." And so it competes against others. It looks for ways to elevate itself or put another down. It counts all the offenses, real or imagined, and puts them into a mental account book to justify its position until it finds an opportune moment to break out in "vindication" of itself.

Love does not do any of those things. The verse says it as simply as it can possibly be put. Love does not insist on its own way—it will not even become provoked in the first place. And it makes no accounting of the evil done against it! We all have a long way to go in this regard!

When love dominates a person's life, becoming offended either through hurt feelings or a strong temptation to sin is remote. When pride dominates, hurt feelings or strong temptations to sin seem to lie behind every bush.

The Best Defense

What is the solution?

Psalms 119:165 in the KJV reads, "Great peace have they which love Thy law; and nothing shall offend them." Some modern translations will replace the last phrase with something akin to "nothing can make them stumble." Nothing can entice them to sin, nor can the sins of others cause them to fall.

The Hebrew word translated "love" in verse 165 is *ahab*. Frequently used in the Old Testament, it is found in a wide range of contexts. Additionally, it has strong emotional overtones. It can signify "delight," "lover" (even in a negative sense), "friend," "very lovely," and "love between the sexes," among others.

Notice what this verse says. As a fruit, the love of God's instruction—paying attention to and keeping His law—produces peace, which is a wonderful, strong sense of well-being, stability and confident assurance in what we already have. Thus, the enticement to go another way holds no attraction. Why exchange something we have proven to be eternally good for something else of very nebulous and doubtful short-term value?

The psalmist writes in verse 49, "Remember the word to your servant, upon which You have caused me to hope." Why turn aside from a way that gives hope? "This is my comfort in my affliction, for Your word has given me life. . . . I am a companion of all those who fear You, and of those who keep Your precepts" (verses 50, 63). Peace, hope, comfort in affliction, fellowship with wonderful, like-minded people also submitting to God and *life* all come as a result of loving God's law. In other verses he adds delight, understanding and wisdom.

These blessings flow to those who love God's law. It is reminiscent of II Thessalonians 2:10 where Paul prophesies that at the end love for the truth will separate those who are saved from those who perish.

If a man loves a woman, he is devoted to her. He spends time paying attention to her, doing things for her, protecting her and striving in every way to impress her favorably. He would in no way ignore her or do anything to destroy or tarnish the relationship he so desires to build and tighten with the object of his affection.

Herein lies the defense against offense. When we strive to lavish our affections upon God, we show it by submitting to Him. We show our affection by obeying Him, talking to Him and meditating on what He says to us through His Word. We will strive to discover ways of using His advice in our lives.

We will not do these things to "get" blessings from Him, even though blessings will come. We do them because we admire, respect and desire to honor Him (I John 4:19). We do this to improve the relationship so that we are closer to Him than ever before.

How Does God React?

God's response to our love is plainly stated in His Word. Peter says in Acts 5:32, "And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit [which] God has given to those who obey Him." Romans 5:5 makes the answer even easier to see: "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit [which] was given to us."

Our relationship with God, made possible by Jesus Christ, enables Him to bless us by giving us of His Spirit. God humbles us and gives us His love through the Spirit, giving us the power to override the desires of the flesh to exalt itself.

He teaches us, again by His Spirit, of the Kingdom of God. He shows us how to prioritize what is important in relation to His Kingdom. He works to build our patience and generosity of spirit. With these qualities, we take delight in the things of God and have confidence in Him and His Word rather than allowing ourselves to become overly influenced and thus pressured by the present conditions of our lives.

The best defense against offense is a healthy and growing relationship with God . We must nurture this relationship on a daily basis, and not allow it to degenerate through a lack of care. And then, when the pressure is on because offense has come, we can cry out in our anguish and desperation for help and receive the help we need (Hebrews 4:16).

A good relationship with God does not insure that offenses will always be easy to deal with. In fact, they may even get more difficult! More frequent opportunities both to offend and be offended may spring up. God rewards those who are growing with greater responsibility (Luke 12:48).

But know this: If we are devoting our lives to God, we will be able to meet offenses with the loving, confident, hopeful, peaceful and yes, even the *joyful* attitude of the poet who wrote Psalm 119. When we have grown to this point, we will see our offenders through the eyes, as it were, of the One who so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son.