



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.14 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Giving of Offense

In the English language the word “offense” has several different meanings and uses. The word “offense” in the Bible has a special meaning that is often misunderstood. In the Bible sense of the word, giving offense means doing something to lead someone else into sin and possibly even eternal damnation. This of course is a serious matter. One may give offense by false teaching, by giving bad advice, or even by leading a weak Christian to sin against his conscience. It is sometimes spoken of as putting a stumbling block in someone’s way, or even of setting a death trap for a person.

Jesus warned against giving offense when He told His disciples: **“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!”** (Matthew 18:6-7).

The apostle Paul warned against giving offense through false teaching. He wrote to the Christians in Rome: **“Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them... By smooth words and flattering speech”** they **“deceive the hearts of the simple”** (Romans 16:17-18).

A strong Christian gives offense when he or she urges a weak Christian to do something that is not wrong in itself but is contrary to the weak Christian’s conscience. This was a serious problem in the early church because there were so many Christians who had been brought up to believe that certain foods should not be eaten and that certain religious rituals and festivals had to be observed. The apostle Paul wrote extensively about this problem in his letters to Christians in Rome and in Corinth. For example, he wrote: **“Let us...resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way. I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died”** (Romans 14:13-15).

On the other hand, when someone insists that you are sinning by eating certain foods or by not observing certain festivals, it becomes necessary for you to express your Christian liberty to eat such food and to refrain from observing laws that others insist are necessary. When certain Christians insisted that all Gentile Christians must be circumcised and obey Jewish laws in order to be saved, Paul refused to have his Gentile assistant Titus be circumcised. Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia: **“Not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you”** (Galatians 2:3-5). In such cases we must follow Paul’s instruction: **“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage”** (Galatians 5:1).

When no one was insisting that circumcision was necessary for salvation, Paul freely chose to have his assistant Timothy circumcised in order that it would help him serve as a missionary among Jewish people. Timothy himself had a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father. **“Paul wanted to have him (Timothy) go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek”** (Acts 16:3).

Questions

1. What does “giving offense” mean, as the phrase is used in the New Testament?
2. What are some of the ways in which one can give offense?
3. Why is the giving of offense such a serious matter?
4. How can a strong Christian give offense to a weak Christian?
5. When does it become necessary for a Christian to exercise his or her liberty?
6. Why did Paul have Timothy circumcised, but not Titus?
7. What can we expect when we tell unbelievers about Christ?
8. What can he expect even after such persons have been brought to faith?
9. What must a Christian always remember in order to avoid giving offense?