

FAITH AND OFFENCE

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The possibility of offence is ever present in the life of the believing Christian. The New Testament has a word for such offence. It is the word *skandalon*. It means a stumbling block, an occasion for stumbling. It is an easy step from this literal meaning of a trap, something that causes you to trip up, to its meaning as a cause for offence, something that draws you into error or sin. Paul uses the term to speak of the Jews response to the preaching of the Gospel. They expected a very different kind of Messiah. The call for faith in Jesus the crucified caused grievous offence. He did not fulfil the expectations of the Jews. So they rejected him. Paul; also used it of the false teachers who opposed his teaching of the free grace with their insistence on the need to keep the law as a precondition for salvation. These teachers had an influence on the congregations he had raised up and he has nothing but disdain and condemnation for them,, and disappointment and regret that his converts should be led astray from the gospel of grace he had taught them.

These two meanings of offence are clear in the following passages:

We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock (*skandalon*), and unto the Greeks foolishness. I Corinthians 1:23;

And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I suffer persecution? then is the offence (*skandalon*) of the cross ceased. Galatians 5:11.

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offence (*skandalon*) contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. Romans 16:17.

There was a constant threat to the faith of the early believers from false teachers. So Christians had to be on their guard constantly. Only by always being vigilant could the Christian maintain true faith. For Paul it is not only clear but very emphatic that a true Christian must believe aright, must maintain true belief and not be led astray by false doctrine. There were false teachers ready to ensnare and entrap the believer, ready to cause offence. The Christian must be aware and resist such

For the Christian life is one of continuing demands. It is not only at the beginning of the Christian life, when faith is being called into being, that the occasion for offence is present. It is an ever-present possibility, just as it is an ever present possibility to fall when one knows how to walk. But it; is quite easy to think that the occasion for offence is over and done with. It never is. When we least expect it, such an occasion may present itself. For every occasion for spiritual growth is an occasion for stagnation. Pass by the call for nourishment, and to that extent you are unfed. Pass by the occasion for deepened faith, and increase in the nurture of the word, and the possibility of offence becomes real. Faced with the opportunity for new service that requires effort and sacrifice and there comes the possibility of offence. That we have not fallen away from faith is not enough. That we shall have grown in the faith is the guarantee against indifference, and the surety that we shall not oppose the occasion for increase of faith, or simply pass it by. For offence at the

demands of the Lord Jesus Christ may express itself in indifference. Such indifference by-passes such demands as well as open opposition.

Offence at the demand of Jesus Christ may express itself in resistance to new opportunities for spiritual growth; indifference to progress in the understanding of the will and the ways of God; resistance to new forms of expression, a stubborn hanging on to the past for the sake of security. To grow is to move. to love is to hear. To obey is to be ready for the strange ways of a providence who gives the most unexpected thing — a new beginning. To hear is to be open to expression of that will and that providence. To progress is to listen to the new, and to move from the past into the renewal of faith and understanding in the present.

For, it is of the very nature of faith that it is open to the new. Faith in God involves a commitment to truth, an ultimate commitment. We are to believe because of the truth. But the living demand of such commitment while opening up the possibility of renewed faith, brings with it the occasion for offence. And it is so easy to be offended with the unfamiliar, as if the unfamiliar were liable to be wrong. Thus we are easily led to the position that what is old is good, and what is new is apt to be dangerous. With the scent of danger goes the odour of offence. Let me quote:

Could he (the Christian) wish that if his belief were false he should never find out? This would be believing for the sake of believing or for the sake of whatever consequences -- other than truth -- belief may bring. Should we not, on the contrary, believe only because of the truth? Of course, if one's religious experience is predominantly composed of anxiety about going to heaven and if it is suffused with that spiritual hedonism which is above all concerned with the safety of one's immortal soul, the answer to this question may not seem obvious. It may not seem particularly important. Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief*, pp. 73~74. For genuine faith is fidelity rather than conformity. 'Conformity obligates from the outside. Fidelity, like nobility, obligates from within.' *Op. cit.*, p. 96.

Such fidelity is not offended at the occasion, or the person, or the style, or the implications of new truth. To be offended at the fact that the demand of Jesus Christ could come through a certain kind of literature, that it might come through one not of one's religious community, or even through one of that community not official, that it may be couched in an unfamiliar vocabulary or a strange manner, piquant or questioning, that it may demand the alteration of patterns of understanding and ways of life so cherished that they are practically sacred: all this, and more, would be to be offended at faith, to become closed to the call of renewal, the demand for renewed discipleship. Truth is no less truth because it comes in unexpected ways and in unaccustomed form. To insist that truth must only come in one form is to make our demand the criterion for God's act. It is to deny the freedom of God's activity. For God has a thousand ways to operate of which we may know but few.

Veneration for the old is a form of appealing to authority -- the authority of what is time worn. This is often confused' this appeal to what is old with the appeal to what is reliable. For what is old is not in and of itself more or less reliable' and so more or less to be relied upon than that which is new. For what is old may not indeed have been time-tested. For there is an important difference between that which has stood the test of' time and proved itself through such testing and that which is merely old. It is disastrous to confuse the two: and be led to the conclusion

that that which is old is likely to be more trustworthy than the new. The question should be not. 'How old is it?' but rather 'How is it old?') For often what is inferior or worthless survives. Mere survival is quite different from trial and proving through time'.

As time passes and people and institutions get older, memory and custom weave a web of sentiment and reverence around the past. An old institution differs from a new institution in that the old has a history which the new does not. But the ideas and sentiments which have been associated traditionally with an old institution are not guaranteed to be true simply because they are old any more than there should be an a priori prejudice against ideas and sentiments because they cannot claim such a heritage. There must be some other way of arriving at the truth-value of ideas and forms than merely numbering the years from the date of establishment. I quote:

Any institution which has been used by many generations of human beings becomes enriched with a multitude of tender and beautiful associations which the new institution however excellent must be without. A very old church calls to mind the hopes, fears, sorrows and consolations which have been connected with it. It is, as it were a treasure-house of spiritual experiences and he who can contemplate it without a thrill has a dull and meagre soul. It is natural but quite illegitimate that this feeling for the past should transform itself into an acceptance of the truth of the doctrines which such an institution has taught. The richness of historic interest which a creed may possess has in itself nothing whatever to do with its truth. To be convinced of this we need only visit a shrine of some religion hostile to our own and associated with conflicts with it. The historic interest and sentiment will be there but quite dissociated from the conviction of the truth of its dogmas. W.P.Montague, *The Ways of Knowing*, pp. 43-44.

This reverence for the old is sometimes expressed in a hostile attitude to the new. For if the old is good on principle, then the new is bad likewise on principle. Or, if the attitude is not so blatant as this then if the old is taken to be better and more secure the new is approached with uncertainty, insecurity and even fear. It is easy to pass from such attitudes to hostility and opposition simply because something is new. Moreover for many people there is a real desire not to face up to anything that is new, anything that appears to be different from that to which they have become used. We naturally seek to avoid the situation which we cannot assure ourselves we shall be able to handle, to beliefs that we find difficult to reconcile with what we already believe. And what better guarantee is there that we can handle a situation than to look back to past experience and find that adequate because the new situation is parallel or identical with one we have managed well in the past. But the unfamiliar may fill us with dismay and may easily lead us to opposition. This is a psychological phenomenon very familiar to us all. We cannot guarantee to ourselves that we shall always be able to manage the new situation, accommodate the new beliefs, entirely from the resources we bring from the past.

When it is a matter of refusing to examine new forms of expression, of refusing to be open to truth from whatever source it may come then for a Christian who claims to be open to hear the Word of God, it becomes a matter of real seriousness.

Reverence for truth revealed in the past should never lead us to the place where we repudiate truth which may be revealed to us in the present. As Christian

believers we should be constantly aware that God's grace opens for us, and will continually open for us, new light, provided that we have the maturity to recognise it in the forms in which it becomes available. And the good Lord has many ways of making truth available to us. It is for us to be mature, to be open. Truth is available where there is a receptivity for it, and where this receptivity comes to characterise the life of the believer.

'New occasions teach new duties.
Time makes ancient good uncouth.
They must upward still and onward
Who would keep abreast of truth.'

It is easy to confess that we are open to the new. But it is not guaranteed to us that the new we may come to learn will not lead to offence. There is always that possibility.

To be open for the new does not mean that we have nothing to stand for from the past. There is no reason to set indebtedness to the past in opposition to openness for the future. There is no reason to set assurance of truth that we have known in opposition to assurance of truth that we may yet come to know. Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we shall have to admit that we have not brought from the past as rich a heritage as we might into the present. We have not entered into the riches of truth that might have been ours from the past which has been ours. This recognition, in humility, that we could have arrived at a greater spiritual maturity and also a wider and more adequate grasp of truth should express itself in the present in an attitude of patient willingness to be led, to be open, to hear what yet is to become available to us.

We might contemplate a further circumstance. Those for whom the knowledge of the church's past is a closed book may find frustration and puzzlement in the present because there lacks discernment to understand that the ways to truth are often unsuspected, even surprising. One of the fruitful lessons a believer may learn from the past is that an openness to truth wherever it may be found is rewarded by progress in spiritual development and in increased understanding. We are ready to hear before we condemn and are reticent to acknowledge the condemnation made by another of what we do not know. We may be led to pass by an avenue to truth and to spiritual development because we have rejected out of hand a word against which we have caught the contagion of prejudice. On the other hand, we may become enamoured with an untruth presented attractively simply because our resources are not adequate enough to recognise it for what it is. It is in this way that the church has been open to the unconstructive heresy. Yet, it has often been the case that consideration of heresy has led to the development of truth.

There is another side to our question, however. For there are those who have found neither comfort, assurance nor truth from the past, and who would be willing to drop what they consider to be an empty past from their religious thinking. There are those who have been well instructed in the Christian teachings of the church who have serious and persistent questions about their significance and their appropriateness. Their attitude is one of wistfulness. They do not find that their memory of the past is filled with sentiment. Rather they find that it is filled with unanswered questions, questions which have persisted and continue to persist. Where shall they look but to the future? Many of these people remain Christian,

because they feel that the future may hold truth for them that the past has not revealed. Theirs is a questing, rather than a having found. They look hopefully toward the new that will be. They, and you may number yourself among them, wish for truth, and assurance, and clarity of explanation which they have not yet found. For such, patience is indeed one of the great Christian virtues, and in waiting for truth and light they are exercising one of the fruits of the Spirit. But there are those who do not wait with such patience, but who find it easier to abandon the form of Christian faith which they have known, because, as they have looked to the past and found it confusing and unsatisfactory, they project this attitude toward the future and are ready to jettison the faith on this account. It may very well be that the various attitudes we have mentioned are found represented in any particular congregation. The call to faith is a call for renewal, a call to a new beginning.

There is another and more artificial situation that might be mentioned. It is one in which a past experience which was living and vital has become stereotyped in the forms of words and of worship in which it has been so often expressed. Familiarity with particular words and particular ways of approach to exposition and to liturgy lead one to identify the repetition of such words and formalities with the experience which they should represent. Thus there takes place a repetition of the words and the actions without (what Kierkegaard calls 'repetition' of) the experience. And opposition to the new comes often very vociferously from those for whom form of expression is more important than the experience from which it initially sprang. The letter has become more important than the spirit.

For those who in humility confess the name of Jesus Christ there is, with the demand for renewed faith, the possibility of offence. But there is another kind of offence, which amounts to hostility. It is the offence that has its source in disagreement in the expressions of belief and may be called prejudicial response. There will always be arguments about beliefs.

It is a feature of genuine Christian living that one is sensitive to the personality and needs of the other person. Those who do not see eye to eye with me may need the encouragement which my patience and encouragement may bring to them. Those whose emotions are aroused as they think of my expressions of faith and belief may need the patience by which I may represent that faith and belief.

A harsh creed and a harsh adherence to that creed will mean that I shall never be the instrument of the genuine offence of the gospel, and that I shall never be the means therefore of calling the other through that possibility of genuine faith to the reality of faith. I shall be for her a skandalon -- simply a stumbling block. These are Paul's words. I may ensure myself against this only by being open to the continuing life of faith, as I experience the growth of the maturing believer whose ear is open and whose heart is warm.

There is a proper balance for the Christian to maintain between holding fast the faith and being open to truth. For there are appropriate ways of holding the faith and being open to truth which do not give offence either because the way of keeping the faith does not lead to fanaticism, narrowness or prejudice, and the way of being open to truth does not lead to a readiness to consider uncritically any teacher or teaching which make their appeal. A sympathetic hearing does not mean an uncritical hearing. Certainly to consider sympathetically and critically is a commendable virtue. Unfortunately, since not always exercised by the sincere and

devoted Christian, or even the leaders within the community, of Christians their absence can provide real cause for offence.

The circle of restricted judgment

We have talked of the Christian avoiding offence. But there is the complementary angle to this. It is that the Christian may sometimes give offence, either to his fellow believers or to the non-believer. Paul; has addressed words to this problem. Here they are:

Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block (*skandalon*) or an occasion to fall in his brother's way. *Romans 14 13*.

Then there are other such notices:

Woe unto the world because of offences!. . . but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh. *Matthew 18:7*.

Take a particular case; To treat someone unfairly in making judgments about her, or even worse simply by accepting someone else's judgment concerning her acceptability, whether she is within the circle of worthiness or not.

You can offend your fellow believer, who is asking questions that you have not yourself thought about, because they want to be honest and arrive at positions they can honestly accept and affirm You may offend such inquiring people when in the name of truth you insist that they are moving outside the circle. For the circle not only defines beliefs and sources of belief. It also can easily serve as a standard by which you can judge the person's standing, the person's standing within the community. The term 'heresy' can easily be applied to what seems not to be included within the circle.

It is very easy to assess such a believer's understanding in error It is here that we need to take seriously the New Testament admonition to show love and consideration. For it is often the case the at the more simple minded do not understand the things that other believers are wrestling with.

It is quite unfair to refuse to consider a writer because you have made a previous judgment which sets him or her beyond the limits of your interest. Whether you do it or not intentionally, it is still prejudice, in the basic sense of that word: 'making up your mind , making a judgment, before due consideration of all you should consider.'

It is quite unfair is to dismiss a position before rejecting it on considered grounds. Reject it by all means! But be prepared to give satisfactory reasons for your rejection. It will not be enough to say, 'That writing, that writer falls without the circle. So there is not need to read or listen to him. We already know that what he

proposes is not acceptable, even if we do not actually know precisely what it is. Well we do not need to listen to or read what so-and-so says or writes. All we need to know is that we classify the writings in a certain way. Then we are certain that we need take no notice of them.' Set up the category and put someone in it. But how do you know that it is unacceptable. unless you hear or read it and then give it consideration. Bigoted people do not give due consideration, even a minimum, to what they should consider. They simply say. 'No thank you. We have our own writings, and they are quite enough for us. Moreover we know that yours do not come from the accepted channels nor do they have the approval of the proper approvers.'

Someone should say to such objectors, 'What weakness is this that you have to have someone else's consent, approval, or recommendation before you even begin to consider whether to read or listen to quite worthy sources. You can think for yourself, you know. Try it!. You might end up making up your own mind!'

It is easy for one to reject the person with whose positions one does not agree. You may not agree with her positions but that is no reason why you should exclude her from the circle of your love.

It is not only the Catholics who had their inquisitors and who have their censors, who state their approval of certain writings. with their *nihil obstat*, which roughly means 'acceptable!'. 'no objection'. So nothing stands in your way of considering it and accepting its points of view.

Think of a circle. You will not find it hard to draw one and fill it with a content I am going to suggest. This circle represents the approved content of belief.

The faithful will, first of all, learn what is included within this circle. For some it will be very simple, a kind of postcard set of beliefs. The faithful can rest secure if they remain with these beliefs.

The circle in addition to a specification of beliefs provides also a specification of the approved sources of truth, the avenues of acceptable teaching. It indicates what you can read or listen to, giving priority to particular writings. Since this specification is inclusive, the circle is also exclusive. You may not go outside what is thus approved

The faithful can rest secure if they remain with these sources, or with even one of them. They will be assured that then they will in no way be led astray. We are looking for assurance. We are looking for statements of what 'we' believe. I may be uncertain but I am glad to be assured by having a definition of these sources at my disposal that I can hear again or even find out the acceptable teaching. I shall then know what 'we' believe and be satisfied. If I want to know what 'we' believe, I am directed firmly and assuredly. They will be assured that they will in no way be led astray. They are looking for assurance. They are looking for statements of what 'we' believe. I may be uncertain but I am glad to be assured by having these sources at

my disposal that I can hear again or even find out the acceptable teaching. I shall then know what 'we' believe and be satisfied.

But surely it cannot be the case that I shall be restricted to these sources only? After all, not a week goes by but some new volume, some new article, some new book comes into being, some new speech gets reported. Why must I restrict myself to the circle of approved sources? Or, worse still, since I have come to rely on being told what I may believe, or what I may read, I shall be puzzled even confused until I consult my authority. And there is always the possibility that my authority will not provide an answer to the very specific questions which are now puzzling me.

I understand only too well how stultifying such restrictive demands can be. When I was younger, I was often told, Don't go outside the circle, young man. The phrase 'young man' was used to hint at my inexperience, often by older people who had I now realise, little of the requisite experience to be showing themselves to be superior in knowledge and wisdom! An interesting phenomenon. When I was long out of the category of 'young man' some older people persisted in using the term. One was quite upset when I said that it seems in certain circles if you are just a few years older you think you can use the term of your addressee!

Sometimes the ban can be made quite explicit. It seems that it is not enough to insist, 'These are the acceptable sources within the circle'. It has, indeed often, seemed necessary to specify the sources outside the pale. 'These are the non-approved sources! These are the forbidden sources!' The list of sources *verboten* is not always published. It is often simply understood. That does not mean that it is not effective.

But the circle has a wider circumference. It consists in the principle that acceptable teachings must be in harmony with what is contained within the circle. The goal of a community with a rigidly defined creed and set of teachings is to ensure that each position shall be in harmony with the contents of the circle. But that leaves scope for differing interpretations, until the approved interpretations get included within the circle.

This would seem to produce a rigid orthodoxy. It often does. But since Christian sources are varied and prolific, disagreement emerges, even about fundamental matters. For to produce a rigid orthodoxy, the great variety of teachings in the Bible has to be interpreted so that a system of doctrine appears. When that system has been produced, and that may take a long time, it is then defined as the standard for belief. A certain rigidity is inevitable. Then there emerge different attitudes to the system that states the accepted beliefs, ranging from narrow and restrictive insistence to generous and liberal interpretation. The circle has shown itself to be both tight and expansible as the same Christian community develops.

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996 words
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4230 words