

מִדְקָשׁ
ΣΚΑΝΔΑΛΟΝ
OFFENCE
STUMBLING BLOCK
OFFENSE
TRAP
SNARE

Offense: A Word Study **The Development of the Word in Scripture** **And its Scriptural Use Today**

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When a pastor thinks about the word offense as used in Scripture, he probably recalls the Greek word σκανδαλον. This word brings a picture of a trap to mind, and that was a meaning of the word originally. But Scripture has a unique usage of the word σκανδαλον. The word offense, on the other hand, has various connotations.

To begin with, the word “offence” in the Authorized Version appears 4 times in the Old Testament and 19 times in the New Testament. It is used to translate the Hebrew words חַטָּא (sin) and מִכְשׁוֹל (stumbling) and the Greek words παραπτώμα (falling away), προσκομμα (stumbling) and προσκοπη (stumbling block), as well as σκανδαλον. The verb “offend” is used 13 times in the Old Testament and 31 times in the New Testament. Here it translates the Hebrew צָמַח (to be guilty), חָטָא (to sin), כָּגַד (to deal treacherously), and חָכַל (to act wickedly). The Greek word is usually σκανδαλον, with only three exceptions.

In comparison, the New International Version has the word “offense” 12 times in the Old Testament and only 3 times in the New Testament. The Old Testament words are חַטָּא (sin), פֶּשַׁע (transgression), עוֹן (wrong), and רָעָה (wickedness). The New Testament words are σκανδιλιζω and σκανδαλον. More amazingly, the verb “offend” appears only 3 times in the NIV, once in the Old Testament for חָכַל (to hurt) and twice in the New Testament, both times for σκανδιλιζω.

The purpose of these figures is to give some indication of a change in word usage. Even more striking is the use of the words stumbling block, snare, and trap. In order to understand the Scriptural use of these words, it is important to know something of the etymology of the original words used. The Hebrew has many different words for a snare, trap, or net. We will focus our attention on two main word families.

Origins in the Old Testament

“Fundamental to the further development of the meaning of σκανδαλον and σκανδιλιζω is the fact that they come into use in the LXX and that they did so as renderings of two different verbal stems קָשׁ (שָׁקַח) and כָּשַׁל and their noun derivatives מִקְשָׁא and מִכְשָׁל קָשׁ (שָׁקַח) originally means ‘to strike (slam)’ and then ‘to catch in a snare.’ The noun מִקְשָׁא originally means ‘stick,’ ‘throwing stick,’... then ‘trap.’ The other term כָּשַׁל

leads into a different world of ideas; it mean ‘to slip,’ ‘to stumble,’ ... מכשול is thus ‘an obstacle on the path over which one falls’”¹

When the Lord God commanded the Israelites to drive out the inhabitants of the promised land, He warned: “Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare (מוקש) to you.” (Exodus 23:33) The Septuagint translates the word for snare as προσκομμα (stumbling).

On the other hand, the Lord God commanded: “Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block (מכשול) in front of the blind, but fear your God.” (Leviticus 18:14) Here the Septuagint uses the word σκανδαλον. These are examples of inconsistencies in the Septuagint.

A case of the disastrous effects of idolatry is recorded during the period of the Judges: “Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare (מוקש) to Gideon and his family.” (Judges 8:27). The Septuagint this time has σκανδαλον.

An example where someone intentionally tried to bring about another person’s downfall is in Saul’s dealings with David: “Now Saul’s daughter Michal was in love with David, and when they told Saul about it, he was pleased. ‘I will give her to him,’ he thought, ‘so that she may be a snare (מוקש) to him ...’” (1 Samuel 18:20f) The Septuagint uses the word σκανδαλον again. “A snare metaphorically is something that allures one from his real purpose and then destroys him. In such light Saul to ruin David gave his daughter Michal to him in marriage so that she might become a snare to David.”²

The psalms have a lot of imagery, and the figurative use of snares and traps appears many times. A well-known psalm of David states: “May the table set before them become a snare (פח); may it become retribution and a trap (מוקש).” (Psalm 69:22) I believe the NIV translations for snare and trap should be reversed, and this is done in the God’s Word translation, which renders the verse: “Let the table set for them become a trap and a snare for their friends.” The Septuagint does have παγίς (trap) for the first word and σκανδαλον for the second. Later we will see how Paul utilized this verse in Romans.

The picture of a snare is used several times in Proverbs, and the Hebrew word is always מוקש. For example: “Fear of man will prove to be a snare (מוקש), but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.” (Proverbs 29:25) The Septuagint here uses the verb υποσκελιζω (to trip up one’s heels).

The prophet Isaiah uses forms of both Hebrew words קש and כשל. The best example, which also will appear in the New Testament, is his Messianic prophecy: “He will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble (נגף) and a rock that makes them fall (מכשול), and for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap (פח) and a snare (מוקש). Many of them will stumble (כשל); they will fall (נפל) and be broken, they will be snared (נקש) and captured.” (Isaiah 8:14,15) For the word מכשול the Septuagint has προσκομμα, but for מוקש it has πτωμα (fall). It has the Greek verb αδυνατω (to be disabled) for כשל and a Greek noun ασφαλεια (security against falling) for the Hebrew verb קש. *Septuagint translators for the prophets never used the word σκανδαλον.*

The prophecy of Isaiah promises encouragement for believers, but judgment for unbelievers. “While the Lord Almighty will be a sanctuary for his believing and faithful people, he brings no comfort to those who reject him. Instead, he becomes a cause of stumbling. Isaiah referred to Christ in these verses. Peter (1 Peter 2:8) and Paul (Romans 9:33) both cite this passage as referring to the Savior. God will judge unbelief. God leaves no room for doubt here. The unbelievers will ‘stumble,’ ‘fall,’ ‘be broken,’ and ‘be snared and captured.’ The five verbs emphasize the point. Clearly, here two audiences will have decidedly different reactions to the Lord. Believers will find him to be a sanctuary; unbelievers will find him to be a trap and a snare.”³

¹ Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, p. 340.

² Harns, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, p. 399.

³ Braun, *Isaiah*, p. 118f.

Jeremiah uses the verb form שקׁ: “Among my people are wicked men who lie in wait like men who snare (שׁקׁ) birds and like those who set traps to catch men.” (Jeremiah 5:26) The Septuagint uses the word παγίς. Hosea is the only other prophet to use this word form: “The prophet, along with my God, is the watchman over Ephraim, yet snares (שׁקׁ) await him on all his paths.” (Hosea 9:8) The Septuagint has παγίς.

It is Ezekiel who uses מׁשׁול (stumbling) often in a figurative sense. But the Septuagint uses four different words to translate it into Greek. One example is the prophet’s description of the end: “Their silver and gold will not be able to save them in the days of the Lord’s wrath. They will not satisfy their hunger or fill their stomachs with it, for it has made them stumble (מׁשׁול) into sin.” (Ezekiel 7:19) The Septuagint has the word βασανος (torture, trial).

These Old Testament references are meant to demonstrate the Hebrew use of certain words and to show a problem in the Septuagint. The problem was that the Greek had no comparable words used in a figurative sense as the Hebrews words were. In just one tally that this writer made, to translate 9 Hebrew words referred to previously in this paper, the translators of the Septuagint used 29 different Greek words. These men seemed to be at a loss how to put the Hebrew metaphors into Greek.

Use in the Apocrypha

Some writers of apocryphal books did make use of the word pictures of a snare, a trap, or a stumbling block. But most, especially the authors of later works, show a more literal meaning. Of course, we have no idea what the original word may have been, if there even was a Hebrew original. These books are only in Greek in the Septuagint. The big difference between the Septuagint and the Apocrypha in comparison with the inspired writings of the Old Testament and New Testament should make us thankful the Lord God has preserved all these books so that we can see the difference.

These are some pertinent apocryphal references: “Therefore even upon the idols of the Gentiles shall there be a visitation: because in the creature of God they are become an abomination, and stumblingblocks (σκανδαλα) to the souls of men, and a snare (παγίδα) to the feet of the unwise.” (Wisdom 14:11) “Seek not to be judge, being not able to take away iniquity; lest at any time thou fear the person of the mighty, and lay a stumblingblock (σκανδαλον) in the way of thy uprightness.” (Ecclesiasticus 7:6) All the Apocryphal translations are from the Authorized Version and show inconsistencies in the translation of σκανδαλον.

On the other hand, the verb form is translated in a stronger sense, as it should be: “Gaze not on a maid, that thou fall (σκανδαλισθη) not by those things that are precious to her.” (Ecclesiasticus 9:5) In a very literal use later is this passage: “...The children of Israel had prepared for war, and had shut up the passages of the hill country, and had fortified all the tops of the high hills, and had laid impediments (σκανδαλα) in the campaign countries.” (Judith 5:1)

Finally, there is this verse which brings us closest to the New Testament times and approaches a new understanding of the Greek words: “Also he remembered the injury of the children of Ben, who had been a snare (παγίς) and an offence (σκανδαλον) unto the people, in that they lay in wait for them in the ways.” (1 Maccabees 5:4) But this usage still leans toward a more literal sense than what we will see in the New Testament.

Use in the New Testament

Before we consider the use of σκανδαλον in the New Testament, let us review its etymology. A classical Greek dictionary lists an original form: “σκανδαληθρ, το, *The stick in a trap* on which the bait is placed, and which, when touched by the animal, springs up and shuts the trap, *the trap-spring*, metaph., σκανδαληθρ ιστας επων, setting word-traps, i.e., words which one’s adversary will catch at, and be caught himself, Aristophanes.”⁴

⁴ Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 731.

A New Testament dictionary gives the following information: σκανδαλον is synonymous with σκανδαλη, which is found only once. Σκανδαλα first appears in a papyrus of the early 3rd century B.C. The stem σλαμδ- is perhaps etymologically connected with Sanskrit *skandati* “he springs,” and it means originally “to spring forward and back,” “to slam to.” The nouns formed from this then denote “the means whereby one closes something,” e.g., the stick in a trap. This is probably the basic meaning of σκανδαλον and σκανδαληθρον too, but then *pars pro toto*, the trap itself is meant.⁵ “The force of the verb σκανδαλιζω is even stronger than that of the noun σκανδαλον in the NT. Whereas σκανδαλον is only an ‘occasion of falling’ which might lead to a fall or not, σκανδαλιζω is the causing of a fall and σκανδαλιζομαι the actual taking place of the fall.”⁶ In simpler terms, σκανδαλον is an offense, σκανδαλιζω is to give offense, and σκανδαλιζομαι is to take offense. The verb forms were only used in New Testament times and thereafter.

Use of σκανδαλον.

First, let us look at the use of σκανδαλον in the New Testament. Matthew’s gospel shows how Jesus used the idea: “The son of man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin (σκανδαλα) and all who do evil.” (Matthew 13:41) Some, however, think the word is personal: “σκανδαλον here, and only here in the NT is patently used of persons. The OT ring of the second member (transgressor of the Law) suggests that is τα σκανδαλα are those who seduce into breaking of the Law.”⁷ Accordingly, Beck translates: “The Son of Man will send His angels, and they will take out of His kingdom *those who do wrong and all who lead others to do wrong.*” (AAT)

In a similar usage, though, the Lord says: “Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin (απο των σκανδαλων)!” (Matthew 18:7) The NIV translates the Hebrew word for sin as “offense” and translates σκανδαλον as something leading to sin but never as offense. It would be so much simpler to translate: “Woe to the world because of its offenses.” The very first meaning of offense in the dictionary is “an offending; specif, a) the act of breaking a law; sin or crime; transgression.”⁸ The dictionary also says under offense: “[Rare] something that causes sinning or wrongdoing.”⁹

In probably the most well-known verse in Matthew where the word σκανδαλον is used: “Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block (σκανδαλον) to me; you do not have in mind the things of God but the things of men.’” (Matthew 16:23) This translation bothered me all during the Lenten season, because I happened to have had the Lenten text that includes this verse. Having already done much of the research for this word study, I kept wondering why the NIV has “stumbling block.” After all, there are several Greek words that convey that idea, and I do not think that σκανδαλον should be translated “stumbling block.” I don’t know what the origin of the expression is. The dictionary merely states: “**Stumbling block** an obstacle, hindrance or difficulty standing in the way of progress or understanding.”¹⁰

Out of curiosity I asked the people in my Bible classes, “Which word do you think has the stronger meaning -- offense or stumbling block?” The vote was unanimous for the word offense. I think our people understand the Biblical use of offense better than stumbling block. Someone compared a stumbling block to a little rise in a sidewalk over which one stumbles but does not fall. That certainly is not the meaning of σκανδαλον. Hermann Cremer in his lexicon notes under this verse: “σκανδαλον is that at which one takes offense as an abomination, from the standing-point of him who knows it of himself.”¹¹

It is notable that writers with a Jewish background, such as Matthew, Mark, John, Paul, and Peter, use the word σκανδαλον when writing especially to people who may have had the same background. In comparison,

⁵ Friedrich, *op.cit.*, p. 339f.

⁶ Friedrich, *op.cit.*, p. 345.

⁷ Friedrich, *op.cit.*, p. 346.

⁸ *New World Dictionary*, p. 987.

⁹ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁰ *New World Dictionary*, p. 1414.

¹¹ Cremer, *Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, p. 859.

Luke only used the word a few times in his gospel (Luke 7:23;17:1,2) and only in direct quotations, but he never used it in Acts.

The Apostle Paul uses σκανδαλον several times in certain epistles. In Romans he quotes Isaiah: “As it is written: ‘See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble (προσκομματος) and a rock that makes them fall (σκανδαλου), and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’” (Romans 9:33) Professor Panning in his commentary comments on this verse: “The NIV translation, which speaks of God’s setting up Christ as a stone that ‘causes men to stumble,’ could be misleading, as though God’s intention from the start was that people should stumble over the stone and be lost. As indicated earlier, Scripture does indeed speak of God choosing people from eternity for salvation, but it never says that God elected others for damnation. And we don’t have that thought in Isaiah, either – even though at first sight it might seem that way.

“It helps to know that in the Greek original the same two words for ‘stumbling stone’ are used in verses 32 and 33. Literally, the phrase in question is the two-word expression for ‘stone of stumbling.’ That’s well translated in verse 32 as ‘stumbling stone,’ and that translation could have been retained in verse 33, ‘See, I lay in Zion a (stumbling) stone’ rather than ‘a stone that causes men to stumble.’

“A similar two-word expression occurs also in the next line -- dubiously translated as ‘a rock that makes them fall.’ Here the two-word expression literally means ‘rock of offense.’ Hence Christ is described as a rock people take offense at and therefore trip over.”¹²

Later Paul wrote about the situation for unbelieving Jews and quoted their hero: “David says: ‘May their table become a snare (παγίδα) and a trap (θηραν), a stumbling block (σκανδαλον) and a retribution for them.’” (Romans 11:9) Here Lenski comments: “The figure of the snare is amplified by that of a hunting net (θηρα) and of a trap trigger (σκανδαλον) in order to bring out fully the idea that ‘snare’ implies the death of the victim It is not ‘stumbling block’ (our versions) but ‘deathtrap,’ or still more exactly, the trigger that springs such a trap. The point is important since one does not kill himself by stumbling over a block but is, indeed, killed by this deadly trigger’s springing the trap.”¹³

When Paul gave instructions to the strong in faith about their weak brothers, he wrote: “Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block (προσκομμα) or obstacle (σκανδαλον) in your brother’s way.” (Romans 14:13) Lenski states: “The words προσκομμα and σκανδαλον do not have the same force, they are not two words to express the same idea.... The difference is important, for one may rise and recover from a stumbling, but to spring that trap trigger involves being killed. Both terms are, of course, used metaphorically, but in the sense and with the difference indicated. Our resolve must stand: never to hurt our brother spiritually nor -- which is worse -- to kill him spiritually. The trouble is that, when we offend a weak brother, we can never tell in advance whether he will be only injured or will be destroyed.”¹⁴

The last reference in Romans may be the most well-known to us, and much has been written on it in our times; so I will quote Pieper: “Every departure from the Word of Christ, as found in the Word of His Apostles, is expressly designated an offense (σκανδαλον ποιειν, Rom. 16:17: ‘Mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned’). Through a special gracious intervention of God the error may not harm its author, but it is and remains an offense to others, to those who, unable to discount the error, embrace it in its full implications and, spreading it, in some cases under the aegis of the ‘fathers,’ cause further division in the Church.”¹⁵

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block (σκανδαλον) to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” (1 Corinthians 1:23) Lenski says: “The translation: ‘to Jews a stumbling block,’ is incorrect and one that misses the point. One may stumble, even fall and rise again, but the word used here refers

¹² Panning, *Romans*, p. 168f.

¹³ Lenski, *Romans*, p. 689f.

¹⁴ Lenski, *Romans*, p. 832f.

¹⁵ Pieper, *Dogmatics*, Vol. I, p. 89.

to something that is fatal and deadly The figure is that of a deathtrap which kills the victim. What acts thus for the Jews and makes them reject Christ is the fact of his having been crucified.”¹⁶

To the Galatians the Apostle Paul wrote: “Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense (σκανδαλον) of the cross has been abolished.” (Galatians 5:11) Lenski writes: “The cross, the crucified Messiah, is deadly to the Jews to this day. Although it is the very power of God to save (I Cor. 1:14) by freeing us from the curse of the law in that Christ on the cross became a curse in our stead (3:13), by clinging to their law the Jews are still struck by this curse, by scorning Christ crucified have him as an odor of death unto death. At the heart of their fatal legalism is circumcision. If they could keep their legalism, if they could put into the cross something that is not atonement but only an example, a great model, a so-called inspiration, the Jews would adopt the cross. Many modern Jews, as also all deniers of Christ’s deity, do this very thing. But the σκανδαλον cannot be abolished. The cross cannot be perverted, it cannot be changed. It means atonement, justification by faith, abolition of law and works of law, complete Christian liberty.”¹⁷

When Peter wrote about the Living Stone, the cornerstone, and “the stone the builders rejected,” he also quoted the prophet Isaiah: “A stone (λιθος) that causes men to stumble (προσκομματος) and a rock (πετρα) that makes them fall (σκανδαλου).” (1 Peter 2:8) Lenski makes some interesting observations: “In πετρα the idea of a stone for the purpose of building is dropped, and only the idea of size is retained; it is a great rocky cliff, and the genitive σκανδαλου, ‘entrapment,’ brings out fully the thought of the deadliness of this rocky mass for all disbelievers.... To state that a rocky cliff does not act as a deadly trap is to forget the fact that the reality governs the figure and not the figure the reality. Strange indeed! Men cannot let this rock alone by simply walking past it, by wholly ignoring it; unbelievers are drawn to it as to a deadly trap, they are lured to run against this towering rock and kill themselves.”¹⁸

The Apostle John also uses the word σκανδαλον in his later writings. In his first epistle he wrote: “If you love your brother, you live in the light, and there’s nothing in you to offend (σκανδαλον) anyone.” (1 John 1:10, AAT) Lenski remarks: “The one who loves his brother and remains in the light has nothing in him that will be a trigger stick in a trap to kill any of his brethren spiritually. The other who is not in the light -- what does he care for the spiritual life of any brother in the church?”¹⁹ These words certainly apply to brothers in the ministry too.

Finally, in Revelation is the last use of σκανδαλον: “Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice (βαλειν σκανδαλον) the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.” (Revelation 2:14) Martin Franzmann has some interesting comments on this verse: “The church needs help both against enemies without and against enemies within. There are those in the church at Pergamum who would persuade the church to follow the way of accommodation and compromise, as Balaam had once taught Israel to compromise with the lascivious worship of Baal Peor.... Why give offense to our pagan townsmen and kinsfolk, these men might argue, by scrupling to eat of the ‘food sacrificed to idols’ set before them at so many civic and social occasions?... Why attempt to maintain an ideal of sexual purity which public opinion (and even some religious feeling) would brand as an inexplicable whim of eccentric rigor?... Would not a slight slackening, an insignificant compromise, keep all placid and serene and improve the public position of the church?”²⁰

Use of σκανδαλιζω

Whereas σκανδαλον is generally an entrapment or a temptation to sin, the active form of the verb σκανδαλιζω means to cause someone to sin. It is mostly the Gospels that use this verb form. When Jesus warned against adultery, He said: “If your right eye causes you to sin (σκανδαλιζει), gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.”

¹⁶ Lenski, *I Corinthians*, p. 66.

¹⁷ Lenski, *Galatians*, p. 270f.

¹⁸ Lenski, *I Peter*, p. 97.

¹⁹ Lenski, *I John*, p. 415.

²⁰ Franzmann, *Revelation*, p. 43f.

(Matthew 5:29) Lenski says here: “The verb σκανδαλιζειν always means actually to entrap, while σκανδαλον... refers to the enticement which may or may not lure to sin.”²¹ Somewhere along the line I read a comparison of Jesus’ words to what Paul said later: “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature.” (Galatians 5:24)

Jesus told Peter how to deal with the collectors of the temple tax: “But so that we may not offend (σκανδαλισωμεν) them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.” (Matthew 17:27) Lenski comments: “If Jesus and his disciples refused to pay the Temple tax, the people, unable to understand the true reason, would conclude falsely that Jesus and the disciples despised the Temple and its worship and would thus reject them and their gospel message. The refusal to pay this tax would be equal to baiting the crooked stick in a trap by which it is sprung; simple-minded people would bite at the bait and be hopelessly caught in the trap thus set for them. With hypocrites, who make traps for themselves of the words and acts of Jesus, he has no patience. . . but he is always considerate of ordinary and sincere souls.”²²

In a passage which all three synoptic gospels have, Jesus says: “But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin (σκανδαλιση), it would be better for him to have a millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6) In this regard Pieper states: “To give offense means to teach or to do something by which we lead another not to believe or to believe error or to lead a wicked life and thus cause him, as far as we are involved, to perish eternally. Hence the solemn warnings of Scripture against giving offense (Matt. 18:6...Mark 9...Luke 17).”²³

The only other use of the verb in the active tense in the Gospels is in John: “Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, ‘Does this offend (σκανδαλιζει) you?’” (John 6:61) My classmate Gary Baumler has it right: “Many of those Jews listening counted themselves as Jesus’ followers, his disciples, but they weren’t ready for what they heard. They considered his teaching hard to accept.... Jesus knew about their grumbling and asked them literally whether this teaching was a trap for them (‘Does this offend you?’) The Jews’ offense at Jesus’ Word is not surprising. They were depending on their flesh, trusting their own reasoning, for understanding.”²⁴

The last example of this verb form is Paul’s use twice in a verse concluding the chapter on meat sacrificed to idols: “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin (σκανδαλιζει), I will never eat meat again so that I will not cause him to fall (σκανδαλισω).” (1 Corinthians 8:13) Some comments of Lenski are notable here: “Although Paul uses himself as an example he enunciates a principle that is far broader in its application than to idol offerings.... Rather than to give such fatal offense to a brother, Paul says, ‘I will in no wise eat flesh to eternity.’ ...The repetition in the final clause: ‘in order that I may not entrap my brother,’ emphasizes the two points that are vital to the principle that is here voiced: first that of the brother, secondly that of entrapping him.... We who are strong in knowledge must be equally strong in love. Knowledge alone is nothing, knowledge combined with love is everything. We must protect the weak until they, too, become strong. Negatively, we must not offend their conscience; positively, we must bear with them and instruct them.”²⁵

In this regard, Pieper states: “Scripture teaches in addition that offense is given not only by doing evil (false doctrine and wicked life), but also through the inconsiderate use of permissible things (e.g., eating meat and drinking wine); for, by our example, Christians who are weak in knowledge may be induced to do things which in their erring conscience they regard as wrong and thus endanger their faith.”²⁶

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²¹ Lenski, *Matthew*, p. 228f

²² Lenski, *Matthew*, p. 675f.

²³ Pieper, *op.cit.*, p. 561.

²⁴ Baumler, *John*, p. 106f.

²⁵ Lenski, *I Corinthians*, p. 347f.

²⁶ Pieper, *op.cit.*, p. 561

According to Arndt-Gingrich the passive form of the verb, σκανδαλιζομαι; may mean to take offense at someone, be repelled by someone, or be led into sin. It is notable that there are many examples of this use, especially in the Gospel of Matthew and mostly by the Lord Jesus, as when He said: “Blessed is the man who does not fall away (σκανδαλισθη) on account of me.” (Matthew 11:6) Here Pieper makes the comparison between giving and taking offense: “From offense which is given we must distinguish offense which is taken. Offense is taken when one who is spiritually blind and wicked takes occasion to sin from the words or acts of another without the other’s fault. Christ the Crucified One becomes a ‘stumbling stone and rock of offense’ to the self-righteous Jews (Rom. 9:30-33), and to the Greeks seeking after wisdom He is foolishness (I Cor. 1:22-23). Both Jews and Greeks insisted on, and persisted in, their false notion of the way of salvation over against Christ’s way of saving men. Men will continue to the end of time to take offense at Christ and His Church. Even Christians take offense at Christ when they fall away from Him because they are not willing to follow Him on the way of suffering For this reason, Christ so earnestly warns ‘Blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in Me.’”²⁷

The Lord Himself gave an illustration in the Parable of the Sower: “What was sown on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away (σκανδαλιζεται).” (Matthew 13:21) Lenski explains: “The figure in σκανδαλιζεται is that of a trap which is sprung by a crooked stick to which the bait is attached. But this figurative sense is largely lost, as the present tense used here also shows. This tense is durative, hence it does not express the instantaneous act of being caught by the springing of the trap but the condition of lying caught in the trap: he is scandalized, offended by what is happening to him in this tribulation, etc.”²⁸

The people of Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth are examples of such taking offense: “They took offense (εσκανδαλιζονται) at him.” (Matthew 13:57) Albrechts’ commentary says, “When those people ‘took offense’ at Jesus, they regarded him as a dangerous false prophet. Luke reports that the people became violent.”²⁹ Incidentally, this is one of the times when Luke is not quoting and avoids the use of the Jewish idea in σκανδαλον. He just says, “All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.” (Luke 4:28)

The Pharisees are another example of people taking offense at what Jesus said: “Then the disciples came to him and asked, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees were offended (εσκανδαλισθησαν) when they heard this?’” (Matthew 15:12) Albrecht states: “It comes as no surprise that the Pharisees were offended at Jesus’ words, for Jesus had been very critical of them. Instead of being offended, however, they should have taken to heart the obvious, clear truths that Jesus expressed. Jesus pointed out their sins, not in order to humiliate or embarrass them but to call them to repentance.”³⁰

Toward the end of His public ministry our Lord gave many warnings about times of persecution: “At that time many will turn away from the faith (σκανδαλισθησονται) and will betray and hate each other.” (Matthew 24:10) The Albrechts tie this prediction to Jesus’ parable too: “The result of such pressures and persecutions will be apostasy. Many will renounce their Christianity rather than bear their crosses. We are reminded of the seed that fell on rocky ground”³¹

Finally, Jesus gave this warning to His closest disciples: “Then Jesus told them, ‘This very night you will all fall away (σκανδαλισθησεσθε) on account of me...’ Peter replied: ‘Even if all fall away (σκανδαλισθησονται) on account of you, I never will.’” (Matthew 26:31,33) Lenski makes these observations: “All of the eleven, not one excepted, σκανδαλισθησεσθε, shall be caught as in a trap So this night the trap will catch all the disciples. They will be trapped by what will happen to Jesus; it will completely upset them

²⁷ Pieper, *op.cit.*, p. 562f.

²⁸ Lenski, *Matthew*, p. 520.

²⁹ Albrecht, *Matthew*, p. 209.

³⁰ Albrecht, *Matthew*, p.224.

³¹ Albrecht, *Matthew*, p. 343.

They were simply caught (trapped) and overwhelmed by what happened to Jesus, namely his sudden arrest and trial.”³²

Mark 4:17; 6:3; and 14:27,29, and Luke 7:23 are parallel passages to what Matthew has.

In His words of comfort to His disciples the Lord said: “All this I have told you so that you will not go astray (σκανδαλισθητε).” (John 16:1) Gary Baumler has it right again: “Jesus had spoken hard words for his disciples. Anyone who follows Jesus can expect to face persecution. Jesus didn’t sugarcoat that truth. Rather, he told it to forewarn his followers. That way when persecution happened, Jesus’ disciples were less likely to fall into a trap and give up their faith.”³³

The last reference is Paul’s use of the verb in a personal way: “Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin (σκανδαλιζεται), and I do not inwardly burn?” (2 Corinthians 11:29) A very different translation puts it this way: “When anyone is weak, I’m weak too. When anyone is caught in a trap, I’m also harmed.” (GW) This is a good verse for us to end on. We sometimes think of Paul as a tower of strength, but as Lenski notes: “He sees nothing in himself but weakness. He feels like nothing in view of this vast load. Is any man weak, too weak to bear his load, and am I, says Paul, not weak? Has anyone a burden that is greater than mine to make his legs give way?”

“The second exclamation is synonymous but a climax. Its sense is: Is anyone getting himself into a fatal trap, and I on my part am not doing even far worse, getting myself into fire? We may ask why we have εγω only in the second question. It is because we have only a mere parallel in the first question: another is weak -- then Paul certainly has a right to say that he, too, is weak (just ασθεναι and ασθενω). But the next two verbs are immensely stronger, both are deadly, the second indicates a death that is worse than the first; hence εγω with all its emphasis must be used.

“The verb σκανδαλιζω means to catch in a deathtrap, and the passive means to be so caught. The noun σκανδαλον denotes the crooked stick to which the bait is affixed so that to touch the bait is to spring this trap that kills the victim... The point of comparison is deadliness. The noun never means ‘stumbling block,’ the verb never ‘to stumble,’ its passive never ‘to be made to stumble.’ When it is used metaphorically it means: ‘offense, to offend,’ etc., the idea is always mortal offense that kills spiritually. Our versions misunderstand the word; dictionaries and commentaries generally follow them.”³⁴

Giving and Taking Offense

Offense, a matter of give or take? Luther put it simply: “An offense is something that is said or done whereby our opinion of God and men is distorted; an offense is active when I give it, passive when I take it.”³⁵

Luther also has something to say on the offense given by misuse of Christian liberty: “What good does it do to use the spirit of liberty against the spirit of love? What we are doing is permissible, they say. Of course it is; but you must consider the weakness of your brother before you think of your liberty, for not to use your liberty will not harm you, while your brother is harmed if his weakness is offended by the use of your liberty. It behooves love to consider the interests of another, to consider, not how much you are free to do but rather how much you may benefit your brother. For to this servitude love subjects you when it frees you from the servitude of the Law. But, good God, how many monstrous offenses of the worst kind are given nowadays! And then the weak are left to carry all this, and what scarcely the strongest are able to bear they are to construe in a good way.”³⁶

As far as giving offense to a brother in the ministry is concerned, I think most of us in the ministry are used to give and take in different ways. A greater danger may lie in us as pastors giving offense to members. Dr. Walther wrote on this matter: “Not only must the preacher avoid the appearance of evil (1 Thess. 5:22) and

³² Lenski, *Matthew*, p. 1033f.

³³ Baumler, *John*, p. 213.

³⁴ Lenski, *II Corinthians*, p. 1282f.

³⁵ *What Luther Says*, Vol. II, p. 991.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 994.

act honorably in the sight of God and of the people (2 Cor. 8:21), but the preacher must also beware of himself and consider that Satan pursues him everywhere to dash him, with the help of his flesh, into sin and shame, God's wrath and anger, death and damnation, and through him to cause fatal offense to whole groups of weak Christians while hardening the world."³⁷

In this writer's research only two essays on the subject of offense written in our circles were located, one with the help of our Seminary library and one in my personal library. For the record I will supply references. In a conference paper, "Giving and Taking Offense and the Pastor's Conduct," dated 1971, Ed Werner wrote a fitting observation: "Every member must grow in their sanctification. One aspect of the Pastor's call is to lead his members in this growth. To assume a passive position regarding a sin by individuals or groups of members may appear to be approval to the wrongdoers, with the attendant result that they will continue in their error. The Pastor's conduct has encouraged them to continue in their sin and thus his conduct becomes an offense for them."³⁸

The other essay, "The Doctrine of Offense," also was a paper delivered at a pastoral conference, by Prof Leroy Dobberstein. Now it is available in *Our Great Heritage*. Professor Dobberstein has written mostly about giving offense, especially to a weak brother. His first words reflect my experience in working on this subject: "In all my years of attending conferences and hearing and discussing essays, I do not recall a single assignment on the doctrine of offense, of giving and taking offense. I do recall an essay on adiaphora. In that connection the matter of offense, offending a weak brother, was also part of the discussion. But it was a matter of offense in connection with another subject, not a discussion of offense as such. Our dogmatics notes at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary do not have a section, even a page or part of a page on offense. This does not mean that the doctrine of offense is not taught. It is discussed in connection with adiaphora and any of those passages which speak of *skandalon* (the Greek work translated "offense") as they apply to other doctrines. In his Christian Dogmatics Franz Pieper devotes less than two pages to the doctrine. He does this in his discussion of actual sin."³⁹ Possibly these comments may lead to a practical paper on giving and taking offense, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Koehler wrote on this matter: "We must not give offense to any man On the other hand, we must not take offense. The world being what it is, it must needs be that offenses come. But this is no excuse for us to stumble in our faith and to fall into sin. To be tempted to sin is not an excuse for yielding to such temptation. Offenses and temptations are there for us to overcome."⁴⁰

³⁷ Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, p. 198.

³⁸ Werner, "Giving and Taking Offense," p. 4.

³⁹ Dobberstein, "The Doctrine of Offense," p. 349.

⁴⁰ Koehler, *Dogmatics*, p. 79.

O God, My Faithful God

O God, my faithful God, O fountain ever flowing,
Who good and perfect gifts In mercy are bestowing,
Give me a healthy frame, and may I have within
A conscience free from blame, A soul unhurt by sin.

Grant me the strength to do With ready heart and willing
Whatever you command, My calling here fulfilling,
That I do what I should While trusting you to bless
The outcome for my good, For you must give success.

Keep me from saying things That later need recalling;
Grant that no idle words May from my lips be falling,
But then, when in my place I must and ought to speak,
My words grant pow'r and grace Lest I offend the weak.

Lord, let me win my foes With kindly words and actions,
And let me find good friends For counsel and correction.
Help me, as you have taught, To love both great and small
And by your Spirit's might to live in peace with all.

(CW, 459)

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