

Islands and Offences

I am fascinated by islands!

Last week, I was down at our local beach on a beautiful day and, as I sat there in the early winter sunshine, I gazed at all the different islands out there 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 north-west, I could see the relatively flat Denman Island , twinned with the lovely escarpment of Hornby Island . To the south-west, I could just about see the tip of Gabriola Island and few other small islands off the port city of Nanaimo . As well as all these inhabited islands, there are also lots of smaller, uninhabited islands and rocks around our local coastline. And of course, I was viewing all of these islands from another island – the island on which we live – Vancouver Island, which is a decent sized island, 290 miles long by about 50 miles wide at its widest point.

Internationally there are some absolutely 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 had the opportunity to visit the stunningly beautiful, verdant, volcanic island of Sao Miguel in the Azores , out in the Atlantic Ocean , 1,000 miles from its home country of Portugal . Earlier this year, we visited another lovely, volcanic, Portuguese island – the island of 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 islands in the Bahamas , and two in the Caribbean group.

But enough of that reverie! Just what *is* an island? It is 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. I always find it amazing to find bear and deer and smaller mammals on some of our more remote Canadian Pacific islands! How did they or their ancestors get there? How far did they have to swim to get there?

Islands give homes and refuge 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 sixties and seventies took refuge on some of our more remote and hard-to-get-to islands. Many of them enjoyed the life there so much that they stayed after the conflict ended.

Last week, as I sat and gazed at these lovely islands basking in the winter sunshine, and surrounded by billions of gallons of salt water, my mind began to think of them symbolically.

In the symbolism of my own 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. And 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. And because of the teachings of God's Word, we should feel safe from gossip, criticism and offence.

Let us home in on the subject of offence. Let us look at a couple of scriptures warning us against it, and a couple that give us instructions for what to do when we are faced with it.

Give no offence!

Let us start with what is perhaps the most well-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)

Please notice that the apostle Paul was writing here *to* church members... advising them not to offend fellow church members!

And what did Jesus say on the subject?

"Then... *{in the end-times}*... 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 Saviour 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.

How to handle offences

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

First of all, please keep in mind that, no matter which side of the fence you are on – whether you are the offended one or the offender – it is not going to be easy:

A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a castle. (Proverbs 18:19)

What should we do if we are offended by one of our fellow church members? 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 that He gave us in Matthew 18:15-17!

It is true that 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. Let us run through this procedure in some detail, and let us break it down verse-by-verse.

Step Number 1: Speak privately to the offender

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)

“If your brother *sins* against you.” The Greek word for “sins” is “hamartano” and 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 you – 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 1 – the private communication between the offender and the offended one.

Please notice that Jesus wants us to resolve such problems at the lowest possible level – if at all possible, before taking it to other people, and 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 want to fast about it too, 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 you for even bringing it to him – even in this proper Christ-sanctioned way, as you did?

Then you must go on to Step Number 2.

Step Number 2: Get a second opinion!

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 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 with you about the offence. 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! You do not want to start a war over this. Nor do you want to split the “protective island” of your congregation – into two opposing camps. Neither do you want to be accused of gossip.

Right at the beginning of Step Number 1, you should have advised the offender that you were bringing this to him in accordance with Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18. If Step Number 1 does not work, then you should tell him again that, according to Jesus’ command, you need to take it to Step Number 2 and that you wish to involve a second person, or persons. Be gentle! Be diplomatic!

Now, what if the offender refuses to resolve the problem even when you – the offended person – are backed by your “two witnesses”? That is when you must involve “the church.”

Step Number 3: Tell it to the church

And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church... (Matthew 18:17)

Does this mean that you are then free to go to all the other church members and tell them all of the offender's infraction? No, of course not! That would likely precipitate an unpleasant and unnecessary split.

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. And 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 2.

So here in Step Number 3 is the appropriate time for the ministry to become involved. Again, please avoid the temptation to jump the gun by trying to involve the ministry before you have completed Steps 1 and 2.

Do not use the involvement of the ministry as a threat! This might even inflame the problem. Also, please 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. But whatever the reason, there is still the possibility that Step Number 3 might fail. If it does, then we go on to Step Number 4.

Step Number 4: The Dreaded “Heathen or Tax Collector” phase

Continuing in verse 17:

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 your case is a fair and valid one, you are within your 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 race (the tax collectors) and of the Gentiles (the heathen).

There is an implication here, however, that Jesus is saying 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:

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. (Romans 16:17-18)

Paul says here that the church leadership is to “note” those who cause offences. In the King James Version, the term “note those” is given as “mark those.” Paul is telling church leaders to mark 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. I mention this here merely to show you what a serious sin the giving of offense can be if not properly resolved.

Many branches of the Church of God are very small in our membership numbers. Most of our individual congregations are very 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. There were also greater opportunities for 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 tiny 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; 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.

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