

THE SEVEN LEVELS OF OFFENCE

In the ideal world of the New Testament, there are seven levels of offence by the individual, with seven commensurate levels of correction. These levels of correction refer to those of ordinary positions and those of regular responsibilities. Correction is intensified toward those given greater understanding, light, higher calling and/or responsibility. A brief explanation of these seven levels of offence and correction are as follows:

1. Those who are weak and do not know proper Christian behavior yet.
 - a. Romans 15:1 Those who are strong, bear their weaknesses.

2. One who is overtaken in a sin.
 - a. Galatians 6:1 Those who are spiritual are to restore him in a spirit of gentleness.
 - b. Matthew 18:15 "...if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained a brother."

3. One who continues in a sin (following 1,2 above).
 - a. I Tim 5:20 Elders are to rebuke him in the presence of all.
 - b. Titus 2:15 Speak these things, exhort and rebuke with all authority.
 - c. Luke 17:3 ...if your brother sins against you, rebuke him; if he repents, forgive him.
 - d. Matt. 18:16-17 But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be as a heathen and a tax collector.

This refers to one who has been warned, either in the proper mode by the Body, or in its absence and/or abdication, by a believer outside the normal channels. Once warned, admonished or reprovved, etc., and the brother/sister does not heed, the above disassociation is to be applied. Once ostracized, the Body has no immediate responsibility except to pray for the conditions required for repentance. These can be quite severe.

4. Those who cause divisions, dissensions
 - a. Romans 16:17 Avoid them.
 - b. II Thess.3:6,14,15 Withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. ...note that person and do not keep company with him. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

The word division here means to cause to stand apart, form factions, parties, and cliques. The phrase “to cause division” is the central meaning.^{1*}

Level 4 is a pivotal point (interestingly in the middle of 7) in which is the word “dissension.” Our understanding of “divisions” is fairly clear, and by extension we would naturally think “dissensions” would have an associated meaning. However, this is one of those very tricky translations that often passes us by. The word “dissension” is the Greek word *skandalon*. The meaning of *skandalon* is the “trigger on which the bait is placed, which, if touched by the animal, springs and causes it to close, causing entrapment. ...it denotes an enticement or occasion leading to conduct which brings with it the ruin and destruction of the person in question. It produces certain behavior which leads to ruin and *rarely denotes a hidden and unexpected cause* of the ruin.” “Ruin and destruction” are best delineated in Deuteronomy 28:15-ff.

Vine describes “dissension” as the New Testament word used to describe metaphorically any *offence* that causes another to stumble, trip, fall or to be hurt. Further, it means whatever arouses prejudice, becomes a hindrance to others or causes them to fall by the way.^{2*} In other words, dissension is whatever one does that prevents or influences another from growing in Christ and instead results in their ruin and destruction. The word “stumble” is lamentably used in many translations. Thus the word “dissension” has been extended from a part of a trap to the trap itself

Jesus addresses this in Matthew 18:7: “Whosoever shall *offend* (trap, ensnare, cause to stumble) one of these little ones, it were better for him that a millstone were tied around his neck, and drowned in the depth of the sea. **Woe** to that man by whom the *offence* comes.” “Woe” here means full of distress, overwhelming sorrow, grief, misery, calamity, disaster, dire things. In the Old Testament, “woe” means pain, suffering, evil, misfortune, adversity, deadliness, severe, malignant, injurious, hurtful and heinous ruin.

In his commentary, Matthew Henry writes: “The guilt will be laid at the door of those who give the *offence*. The righteous God will reckon with those who ruin the eternal interests of precious souls, and the temporal interests of precious saints. Men will be reckoned with for the fruit of their doings.”^{3*}

It is evident that the offences experienced in Levels 1 through the middle of Level 4 are to be handled by members of the body. Beginning in Level 4 are the commandments to avoid, do not associate, do not keep company, and let the recalcitrant offender be as a heathen and a tax collector, etc. From thence the Body is relinquished of its direct responsibility to deal with the offender and God Himself takes over. At this point the discipline comes with greater and greater severity.

5. Those who disturb (trouble).

- a. Gal. 5:10, 12 ...he who troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is... I wish that those who trouble you would even castrate themselves!

The word “disturb” here means to excite, unsettle, cause tumult, an uproar, to incite rebellion (against wife, children, father, mother, Christ, any authority).

6. Those brothers in Christ who are immoral (sexually)
 - a. I Cor. 5:9-13 Drive him out, do not associate with him, not even to eat with him....Do you not judge those who are inside ? ...Therefore “put away from yourselves that wicked person.” (So “wicked” *can* describe a brother!)
 - b. I Cor. 5:3-5 ...deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Some of the corrections of Level 5, and definitely Level 6 brings with it death, “destruction of the flesh” as it were. God will not allow one of His own to taste lostness; therefore, any level of pain, or even death is preferable in His mind. We see this repeatedly in the Old Testament and to some extent in the New. Implementation of the correction is to prevent a higher level of destruction, condemnation and/or lostness being the ultimate in Level 7.

7. False prophets
 - a. Acts 13:4-11 Having been filled with the Holy Spirit, call who he is, gaze into his eyes, condemn him, and pronounce judgment.

When we look carefully at the Word, we see time and time again that either the Body, or God Himself judges His people according to the light of their knowledge. Else, he would not be just in His judgments and edicts. Such is the case with believers (brothers if you will). There are levels of offence that are usually commensurate with our level of maturity. Equally then, we should have corrections commensurate with our level of understanding, but more so commensurate with our degree of influence and responsibility. David as king is a case in point.

Psalms 32 speaks of David’s body wasting away as a result of not declaring his sin.

Psalms 50 speaks of God tearing to pieces those who forget Him.

Psalms 39:11 is still more austere; when God rebukes a man for sin, He consumes like a moth what is dear to him.

Psalms 51 speaks of David’s remorse at the rebuke of Nathan and the death of his son by Bathsheba.

II Samuel 6 speaks of David’s sloppiness with the Word of God as it related to the handling of the Ark, and the subsequent death of Uzzah.

II Samuel 24 speaks of David’s numbering of Israel and the resultant discipline where 70, 000 men died as a result.

So we see a pattern from the point where God takes over in the disciplining of His sons. The “**woe**” addressed by Jesus above is the issue here. The pattern of correction increases in intensity from deterioration in health, to being torn to pieces, to whatever is dear to us being consumed like a moth in a flame (my son lost his prized hunting dog, his car was wrecked, his prized gun rusted), to the death of a family member, to the death of many.

In short, God is a whole lot tougher than any of us would dare to be. But, only He knows exactly the degree of intensity needed to bring about repentance and restoration.

However, some believers never want to see, nor repent. Their lives go from bad to worse, all the while blaming someone else, and missing the point of their losses altogether. (One of the Six Stages of a Fool is the characteristic of not even *wanting* to know). Still a more sobering thought about this whole issue of discipline is the **absence** of any correction in their lives. If that be the case, then they are not His sons at all, but illegitimate children, bastards as it were. God **never was** their heavenly Father. These types of apparent “believers” often wind up in some works-oriented group that assuages their spiritual vacuum. Groups that are occult or border on the occult are the more prominent attractors. Once there, very little can reach them. Their wives and children are the primary ones to bear the brunt of their apostasy, while they themselves remain the pillars of society, admired by all.

That is, all but God....

God is a holy God, and holiness is His path. The above levels of correction are meant to bring us into that holiness. In fact, correction and discipline are instruments to **educate** us. Once brought into education, or light as it were, then we are responsible. We then are to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.” God is serious about holiness, for that character trait is required for the marriage to His Son. Keep that in mind.

Back to the idea of dissension being the spring of a trap, it came to mind that my peculiar weakness is the “spring” under the keys on a TV remote. That spring is what leads me to (nearly all) TV channels containing half-naked women; once there, the cause of my downfall begins, which is sexual lust. I have been delivered of it, and its power, but that does not relieve me of the responsibility to avoid the trap. But the spring under the buttons entraps me.....if I choose to push the buttons...

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1. SpirosZodhiates, The Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible (Amg Publishers: Chattanooga, Tennessee, 1985).
2. W. E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words with their Precise Meanings for English Readers, (Fleming H. Revell Company: Old Tappan, New Jersey, 1966) 324.
3. Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1972) 1295.

* The above references are the sources of nearly all definitions and some commentary cited throughout this volume of papers. A footnote on each reference, in most cases, is not given.