

TABLE TALK

# What Is An Offence?

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According to the Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church, US, what is an offense, and what is the proper ground of an accusation? Are there two grounds on which an act may constitute an offense, or only one? Two grounds of accusations, or only one? A century ago in the undivided Presbyterian Church (Old School) there were two grounds, but the General Assembly of that body had just given its tentative approval to a revision offered by an ad-interim committee with J. H. Thornwell as Chairman which changed this two-fold ground to a single basis. With the War and the separation of the South in which the Chairman lived, the matter of the change died in the USA Church, but was continued in the Southern Church. Indeed the Book of Church Order sent down by our General Assembly to the presbyteries in 1887 listed the two different and divergent definitions and directed the presbyteries to choose between them. The full meaning of our present definition, then, is only realized when it is seen that the other view was rejected when the present one was accepted. We invite a careful reading and a close consideration of these two definitions which we have labeled respectively, "A" and "B". "A" permits only one matter of accusation, one ground of offense; "B" prescribes two.

## The Rules of Discipline

### CHAPTER III

#### Of Offenses

**A Separate and distinct vote is required by the General Assembly making choice between these two definitions of offense.**

**A.** An offense, the proper object of judicial process, is anything in the principles or practice of a Church member professing faith in Christ, which is contrary to the Word of God. The Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly, together with the formularies of government, discipline, and worship, are accepted by the Presbyterian Church in the United States as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice. Nothing, therefore, ought to be considered by any court as an offense, or admitted as a matter of accusation, which cannot be proved to be such from Scripture, as interpreted in these standards.

**B.** An offense is anything in the principles or practice of a Church member which is contrary to the Word of God; or which, if it be not in its own nature sinful, may tempt others to sin, or mar their spiritual edification. Nothing, therefore, ought to be considered by any judiciary as an offense, or admitted as matter of accusation, which cannot be proved to be such from Scripture, or from the regulations and practice of the Church founded on Scripture, and which does not involve those evils which discipline is intended to prevent.

Now the presbyteries voted the first of these definitions (A) and in so doing voted down the second one (B). Accordingly, any Session or Presbytery, Synod or General Assembly which treats a deviation merely "from the regulations and practice of the Church founded upon Scripture" as a matter of accusation and as a ground of discipline is using a principle which our Church rejected, and is not properly using our Book of Discipline to which our third ordination vow obligates us.

Decatur, Ga.