

*The Scandal of*  
**STUMBLING BLOCKS**



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**STUMBLING BLOCKS**

*AVOIDING SPIRITUAL HARM*

James Durham

Edited by  
Matthew Vogan and Catherine Hyde



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*The Scandal of Stumbling Blocks*

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## PREFACE

Most Christians have not given a lot of thought to the issue of causing others to stumble and just how much it ought to influence our lives. They have not often heard or read it emphasized. If they were asked what duties were most emphasized in Scripture, very few would identify the duty of not being a stumbling block.

It is, however, something to which the Bible gives great emphasis. Christ mentions it frequently, as do most of the apostles. Whole chapters are given to it, such as Matthew 18, Acts 15, Romans 14, and 1 Corinthians 8. This is surely significant. Besides being so prominent in the Bible, the seriousness of this subject also attracts our attention. It is condemned in the most solemn ways due to its destructive effects on individuals, churches, and communities. We are certainly justified, therefore, in devoting a whole book to this vital theme.

In this preface we will introduce to you more of what stumbling is, where it occurs, why it must compel our attention and how we can apply these truths to ourselves. We will also introduce a book on this theme that goes deeper than any other. First we will meet the author of that book, James Durham.

### **James Durham's Analysis of Stumbling**

No one has explored the theme of stumbling from Scripture more thoroughly and comprehensively than James Durham (1622–1658). He was a prominent minister in Glasgow in the middle of the seventeenth century, known to excel in exposition and handling especially difficult practical matters. He did not shy away from expounding difficult books of the Bible like Revelation, Job, and Song of Solomon. James Walker compared Durham's profound depth and thorough analysis to that of the puritan John Owen and commented: "No Scotchman of that age was more profoundly venerated." John Owen in turn highly commended the "known piety and abilities" of the Glasgow minister. Durham shone during this high point of gifted ministers and scholars like Samuel Rutherford and David Dickson and left an enduring legacy of writings.

Durham wrote *A Treatise Concerning Scandal* as he was dying in 1658. As James Walker notes, "It has a forbidding, or at all events not an attractive name." But to mistake or reject the book for its title would be a grave error. The title also included the words, *The Dying Man's Testament to the Church of Scotland*. Nothing could be more helpful as a legacy for Christians and the church than a book that would address matters that cause division between fellow Christians and impede their spiritual growth. In four distinct parts, Durham covers problems that occur between individuals; issues within a congregation requiring discipline; the evils of doctrinal error; and how to heal church divisions.

Despite being so helpful, the language used and the way that Durham develops his argument make it very difficult for most Christians today to access. In this book, Durham's



language has been updated slightly so that his powerful and searching analysis of this subject can best be appreciated today. The order of one or two sections of the argument has been rearranged for the same reason. Discussion questions have also been added to help further study and reflect on the issues raised. We hope this book will encourage you to seek out and benefit from the original book once you have grasped the key points of Durham's argument.<sup>1</sup>

This volume is part of a series of four books that will present Durham's classic in a fresh way for today's church. Until now it has only had a limited readership, but the subjects addressed are so essential to the well-being of the church that it would be a tragedy to lose its benefit. Indeed, there are few more vital and important books for contemporary churches of every complexion to engage with.

### **What Do We Mean by Causing Others to “Stumble”?**

Scripture sometimes refers to causing other people to stumble as “giving offense.” Other times it is referred to as “scandal.” It is important to understand that “giving offense” does not simply mean displeasing or upsetting people, making them take umbrage and feel indignant or insulted by something. Instead, it means causing them to go wrong and offend against God's Word. The word *scandal* in Greek literally comes from the idea of a trap or snare into which people fall and are inevitably injured. When the Bible speaks of “stumbling” and “scandal,” it includes a wide-ranging view of how, in our words

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1. James Durham, *A Treatise Concerning Scandal* (Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1990). This book is sadly long out of print but can be obtained as an e-book or print on demand.

and actions toward others, we can (even unintentionally and unconsciously) say and do things that could lead others to sin or harm their spiritual progress.

Even when we do not intend to do this, our intentions are not the main issue. What we do might be lawful, or not especially good or bad in itself, but the circumstances can still harm someone spiritually or lead someone to sin (1 Cor. 8:13). This could even happen when we fail or choose not to do or say anything in a situation, despite having a duty to do so.

### **What Does Stumbling Look Like?**

How does this happen?

1. Someone may be made to fall into outward sin.
2. They may be made to stumble in their conscience and call into question the way of truth.
3. They may be made to halt in their spiritual progress or become weak in their full assurance.
4. They may be hindered in their growth and progress, and (even if they do not fall, stumble, or halt) they may be made to have a smaller degree of progress.
5. They may be given an opening to sin in some way.

Of course, it is wrong for someone to sin or come short in any of these ways. Everyone is responsible for their own actions and responses to what they see and hear. But we share some of the responsibility too if we have led them into any of these failings or sins, whether intentionally or unintentionally. It is wrong both to walk into a snare and to put a snare in someone else's

path. It is the goal of the world, the flesh, and the devil to cause souls to stumble and to ensnare people in sin—we must not assist them in this.

When someone has stumbled, we are blameless of making them offend against God's Word only if our action is not evil in itself, if we have not done it in an unreasonable and excessive manner, and if we have not done it in a way that gives the appearance of evildoing. It should go without saying that we cannot break any of God's commandments in order to avoid causing stumbling. It is not our fault if someone stumbles by something that is required by God and which we cannot delay until the circumstances change. We cannot, for instance, avoid necessary things such as praying and hearing the Word preached just because someone makes it an opportunity to sneer at the gospel. We cannot abstain from these necessary things even if the whole world is offended at us (Matt. 15:12).

### **Would We Cause People to Stumble If We Loved Them?**

The opposite of stumbling is “provoking one another to love and good works”—in other words, encouragement and edification. These activities are the outworking of loving our neighbor as ourself. This indicates the spiritual nature and depth of this commandment. It is not possible to cause stumbling *and* edify someone at the same time (Rom. 15:1–2). Stumbling and edifying are opposites.

We must not cause our neighbor to stumble. As we know, our neighbor means anyone, fellow believer or not (1 Cor. 10:32). We must, of course, seek the outward prosperity of our neighbor, but above all things we should seek that their soul would prosper. We must not, therefore, cause our neighbor to

sin or be spiritually harmed in any way. The second half of the Ten Commandments is all about loving our neighbor: loving them in what we say and how we treat them and their property, loving them enough to want to preserve their purity and prosperity. In all of these areas there is a real danger of causing stumbling by how and what we say and do, and what we do not say and do.

### **How Serious Is the Issue of Stumbling?**

It must be clear from what we have considered that causing stumbling is very serious, but there is still even more to understand about it. James Durham studied the Scriptures on this matter and reflected on it deeply. What he says is probably quite shocking for us.

He not only points to how often and how solemnly Scripture condemns causing stumbling but also shows the devastating consequences of this sin. It damages the church and society as a whole as well as individuals. Christ says it brings woe to the world and produces strife. And according to the apostle Paul, it also destroys souls.

#### *Stumbling Has Serious Consequences*

In fact, on this point Durham says that if you study the matter carefully, this carelessness about causing stumbling has been as damaging to the church as error. The outward beauty and peace of the church are greatly harmed by it. Believers do not thrive inwardly because of it.

Causing stumbling can lead to error and more serious consequences. Durham looks at the time of persecution and trouble Christ predicts in Matthew 24:10. Some would be

offended; they would cause stumbling in others and be careless of others, and it would lead them as far as to betray each other to persecutors. Then error and false prophets would arise within the church. Sin would also increase alarmingly, and the love of many would grow cold. All this would happen because of offenses (that is, stumbling blocks).

*Stumbling Springs from Serious Causes*

Durham also talks about the sinful attitudes that indicate when people do not care about whether they cause stumbling in others. These attitudes are what make them careless about God, themselves, and others. This damages Christian fellowship. It means we will not want to look out for other believers or seek to edify them as much as possible. If you have a lack of sensitivity about others in this way, your conscience becomes less sensitive to conviction in other areas as well. This is especially serious because it hardens you in sin.

This is natural in the individualism of our culture. Most people today say, "What I do is my own concern and no one else's business; if they have a problem with it, that's their problem, not mine." This is dangerous because other people's attitudes can be a helpful restraint when we are not as sensitive to God's requirements as we should be.

Our sensitivity and concern for others would help convince those around us of the real impact the gospel has had on our lives. But if we are careless about how we affect others, the world is quick to spot it. They expect a higher standard. Even if we keep within the letter of the law, they expect us to be above reproach. They expect that we will not give people a reason to talk behind our backs about our questionable business

practices and sharp dealings or our ignoring those in need or our mean-spiritedness.

### **How Does Durham Help Us Tackle Stumbling?**

Christianity is not healthy where causing stumbling in others is common and where it is not taken seriously as an issue. No wonder Paul describes it as literally evil to do something that will make a brother stumble (Rom. 14:20).

Durham helps us to consider the matter deeply by defining the nature of stumbling as well as showing its serious consequences. He looks in considerable detail at different kinds of stumbling (chapters 1–3). The book also identifies the ways people can stumble and be caused to stumble (chapter 4).

Durham's treatment of stumbling is very practical. For instance, he identifies different scenarios people might find themselves in and what they should do in these situations to avoid making others stumble. We need to assess the relevance of the risk of scandal before we come into such circumstances (chapter 5). He also offers practical advice about what we can do in a time when offenses abound, to make sure that we walk in love and edify our neighbors and brethren rather than cause them to stumble (chapters 6–7).

### **How Can We Apply Durham's Message to Ourselves?**

The following considerations will also be helpful in seeking to avoid offending others. The need to avoid stumbling is a spiritual principle of primary importance in all sorts of areas.

*In the Christian Life*

We are to avoid occasions of stumbling in our own Christian life. We do this by seeking to follow God's law out of love to Him (Ps. 119:165). We must stir up and provoke ourselves to love and good works. We are to identify those things that, although they are lawful, are not expedient and do not edify, so that we are not brought under the power of anything. This is because it is possible to be an occasion of stumbling to ourselves due to sinful principles of our own (Matt. 5:29–30). We must be prepared to sacrifice anything that would cause us to sin.

*In the Family*

Satan loves to make husbands and wives the occasion of mutual sin. The very first scandal was the temptation in Eden. A stumbling block was laid: Satan sought directly to ensnare Eve in sin, and she sought directly to ensnare Adam in sin.

God's purpose in providing a helpmeet for Adam was for them to share in the image of God together and to encourage and edify one another in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. Similarly, he seeks "a godly seed" in providing the gift of children (Mal. 2:15). Children are to be brought up in the fear and admonition of the Lord and be spiritually edified by their parents (Eph. 6:4), so that the spiritual wisdom and obedience of children in turn also edifies their parents (Prov. 23:25).

Children can cause their parents to stumble by neglecting lawful obedience in the Lord and their duties and proper attitude of respect toward their parents (Col. 3:20; Eph. 6:1). Children can cause their siblings to stumble by neglecting their proper duties to one another and by encouraging a disrespectful attitude to their parents.

Parents can cause their children to stumble by provoking them to wrath through reacting out of proportion, being quick to anger, and failing to exercise fair discipline, thus discouraging them (Col. 3:21). They cause them to stumble by failing to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). They cause them to stumble by neglecting to love, commend, and pray for them as they ought. They cause them to stumble by neglecting proper discipline, instruction, and counsel (Deut. 6:6–7) or by failing to protect them from sin and occasions of sin and temptation (1 Sam. 2:29–31). They can make them stumble by requiring unlawful things from them. They also cause them to stumble by their sinful example, especially inordinate self-seeking (Gen. 9:21).

Wives can cause their husbands to stumble by provoking them to be bitter against them (Col. 3:19), by not submitting to them as unto the Lord (Eph. 5:22) but seeking to usurp preeminence, and by failing to show due respect (Eph. 5:33). They may be an occasion for stumbling in their harsh words or negative tone or blame.

Husbands can cause their wives to stumble by requiring things from them that are not fitting in the Lord (Col. 3:18) and by failing to love them as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25, 28), especially in failing to provide for their needs (Eph. 5:28–29) and failing to seek to understand and show consideration for them (1 Peter 3:7). They cause them to stumble by failing to give leadership and example, especially in spiritual things.

### *In Society*

Society should be built on loving our neighbor as ourselves, which is the opposite of creating offense or causing our neighbors



to stumble. We must show our neighbors due care and respect as they are made in the image of God, showing them sympathy and honor, preferring others before ourselves. Pride and selfishness can be an occasion of stumbling. We can cause others to stumble when (through envy) we fail to show due sympathy or to rejoice in their advancement (Rom. 12:15–16). Yet we are not to turn a blind eye to sin in our neighbor. Rather, we are to challenge him; to neglect this is effectively showing hatred to him, and it is the opposite of love (Lev. 19:17).

Those in authority must not create occasions of stumbling by requiring things that are unlawful. They must not create stumbling blocks by neglecting to reward those who do well or neglecting to punish those who do evil, nor should they inflict unjust or disproportionate punishments. They must seek to deter and remove occasions of stumbling, whether through suppressing pernicious principles from being promoted or restraining those intent on evil, and they must provide security, law, and order to prevent occasions of people seeking their own justice and revenge.

Those who are in subjection to authority should not create a stumbling block toward those over them or their fellow subjects by despising or mocking those in authority or disobeying lawful commands and failing to cover over infirmities. They ought to honor the authority of those who are over them (Matt. 17:27).

### *In the Fellowship of Believers*

Causing a fellow believer to offend is one of the most serious matters spoken of in the New Testament (Mark 9:42). Christ utters a twofold woe against it (Matt. 16:6–10). To cause others

to stumble by setting an example of breaking a commandment is solemnly condemned (Matt. 5:19). It is a breach against the sixth commandment (Rom. 14:15), and the apostle Paul burned against such an offense (2 Cor. 11:29).

As believers, we do not live or die to ourselves, and we must not seek our own things but rather those of others. We are to avoid the appearance of evil (1 Thess. 5:22). We are under a duty to edify one another, not to mar other people's edification (Rom. 14:13, 20–21). All things should be geared toward edification. Failing to seek to have a brother's erring conscience correctly informed is an occasion of stumbling. The more we walk in the light of God's law and the spirit of love, the less we create offense for others (1 John 2:10).

Our lack of reverence in praying or speaking can be an occasion of stumbling. Our actions in things moral or merely outward may be an occasion of offense (1 Cor. 8:13). Failing to speak the truth in a spirit of love may create stumbling. Equally, neglecting to reprove also creates stumbling, because we only harden others in a course of sin if we do not seek to recover them (Matt. 18:15–35).

It is possible to be an offense to others in our advice (Matt. 16:23). We must show sympathy, Christian love, and patience, and we need to be prepared to bear with others and bear their burdens (Gal. 6:1–2). Sometimes, through our rash words, our murmuring and complaining spirit, or through uttering the truth unseasonably, we can offend against the generation of God's children (Ps. 73:15). We are to minister grace through our speech, not to slander and provide an occasion of stumbling in those who hear the slander.

*In Church Discipline and Government*

Church discipline seeks to remove scandal for those in the church who may be affected by a sinful example. It protects the honor of Christ in the world, as the world is caused to stumble when the sins of believers are ignored.

Church government must require only what is required by Christ, and it cannot add to or take away from those requirements. Both neglect and excess can stumble. Ministers and elders must, in a Christlike way, assert, maintain, and defend the truth. Failure to do so leads others to stumble. Church courts must also show tenderness toward those under their care lest they provoke them to anger, cynicism, or discouragement. They should seek to bring all to repentance.

*In the Ministry*

Ministers can create offense by an irreverent and careless attitude to spiritual things (Mal. 1) and by a blasphemous use of the things of God (1 Samuel 2). They can cause stumbling by striving about words (2 Tim. 2:14–16), by providing comfort where rebuke is needed, and by discouraging those who are weak, tender, and lacking assurance. They can cause stumbling by requiring things in the worship of God that are not required by Christ in His Word, or by removing components from Christ's institutions. They must take heed to themselves and how they live because of the risk of causing stumbling through their lack of personal holiness. They must beware of pride and self-seeking, lest the ministry be blamed (2 Cor. 6:3; 1 Cor. 9:15). They are ambassadors for Christ and must not make anyone stumble at Christ or His message through their words or actions. They must take heed to their doctrine, continually

ensuring that it neither errs nor comes short of Scripture. It must be the whole counsel of God.

### *In Relation to Those outside the Church*

There must not be anything in our lives or actions that would cause those outside the church to blaspheme God or deride the truth and true religion (1 Cor. 10:32). We must rather suffer damage and forego our rights than endanger the good name of Christ (1 Cor. 6:7).

This does not mean that we are to forego anything which God requires simply in order to suit those outside the church. For example, Daniel was right to continue to pray despite the fact it had been made illegal. Sometimes the world will stumble at the gospel and holiness even though these are no stumbling block in themselves (Prov. 4:19; Matt. 5:12).

However, we must not give the kind of offense that leads to people refusing to believe the truth because of our example. Our failure in love toward other Christians, for instance, fails to manifest the attractiveness of the church and Christ's name before the world (John 17:21). People ought to see our good works as plainly as if we were living epistles, known and read by all, and so they ought to be prompted to glorify God.

### **Conclusion**

The implications of these principles are not only far-reaching but virtually all-encompassing. There are almost no lengths we should not go to in order to avoid putting a stumbling block in the way of someone's spiritual well-being. Yet, as Durham shows us, this is simply how the love of Christ in a believer flows out in love for the spiritual health of one's neighbor.

## *Chapter One*

# **WHY IS THE ISSUE OF STUMBLING IMPORTANT?**

### **Causing Stumbling Is Condemned by Christ**

There is no sin that has more woes pronounced against it. The Lord Himself denounces it and doubles a woe against it in Matthew 18:7. The apostle confirms this in Romans 14:20, where he describes it as literally evil to do something that will make a brother stumble. The Lord takes special notice of how people walk in reference to causing stumbling in others and is highly provoked where He sees anyone guilty of it (Rev. 2:6). He shows this by comparing it with what Balaam did (Rev. 2:14).

### **Causing Stumbling Is Condemned by the New Testament**

Whole chapters in the New Testament are devoted to the subject of scandal (Matthew 18; Acts 15; Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8). No duty is more extensively commanded than the duty of giving no offense, nor is any sin more fully condemned than insensitivity and carelessness about giving offense. Indeed, in Acts 15 the apostles and elders thought that regulating indifferent things so as to prevent scandal was worthy to be enacted in the very first synod and church council.