

- h. Paul's closing exhortation brings his entire argument to its apex (10:31-33). The Corinthians were concerned with the specific question of food sacrificed to idols; Paul addressed that concern, but by situating it within the overarching principle which governs it as well as every other issue that might confront Christ's people as they live out their lives in Him. And that principle is that every facet of the Christian life – including the use of one's freedom – is to be subjugated to the cause of the gospel and its fruitfulness. This is true whether the issue at hand concerns only the believer himself, other Christians, or even unbelievers: "*Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*"

The Corinthians were concerned with matters of eating and drinking in connection with ritual sacrifices, but Paul didn't want them to limit his instruction to that issue. They needed to take the principle he'd labored to convey in his letter and apply it to every area of their lives; they were to do *all* unto the glory of God.

Paul's exhortation is general and all-encompassing, and for that reason must be more precisely defined. Just what does it mean to do everything "*unto the glory of God*"? Not surprisingly, various views have been put forward.

- Some start with the premise that God's glory speaks most closely to His *moral excellence*, and so conclude that Paul was urging the Corinthians to conduct themselves in all things in a manner that conforms to and manifests the same uprightness that characterizes God Himself.
- A wider view holds that God's glory speaks to the *sum of His innate and infinite perfections* (sometimes manifested tangibly, as in Yahweh's Shekinah or in acts of power; cf. Exodus 16:1-10, 24:1-17; etc.). Thus doing all things unto God's glory means striving in all things to manifest the divine character – to manifest authentic godliness ("God-likeness").
- But the best approach is not to start with an assumed theological definition of the glory of God, but with Paul's argument in the broader context. When this is done, it's clear that God's glory must be viewed in the light of the gospel: what the triune God has accomplished in Jesus Christ, its present fruit in the Church and the testimony to it in the world.

This approach moves beyond treating God's glory in the abstract as a kind of divine attribute. Again, many regard it as a virtual synonym for God's moral perfection (as is also commonly done with the notion of divine *righteousness*). But the problem in treating God's glory this way is that it detaches it from the very manner in which God reveals Himself and shows Himself "glorious." Indeed, this is the case in every instance where a divine quality or attribute is considered and defined in isolation from divine activity. One theologian has rightly observed that God *does* reveal Himself, but He does so through His actions and interpretation of those actions; *He reveals Himself through the lives and lips of men* – finally and exhaustively in the person and work of the man Jesus Christ.

God *is* glorious, but this attribution falls far short of the biblical perspective and meaning when it is confined to – or even conceived primarily in terms of – some inherent quality within the Godhead. To do justice to this concept, it must be understood in terms of *revelation* – that is, God’s relation to His creatures.

God’s concern in His glory is not who He knows Himself to be, but who He *shows* Himself to be and the way His creation acknowledges and responds to Him. His concern is that His creation (most particularly *man*) knows Him as He is and relates to Him in truth. The divine glory is about revelation because it concerns *relationship* (ref. Exodus 19-20, 24:1-18; also God’s Shekinah (“glory presence”) in the midst of Israel.) But God’s self-disclosure becomes revelatory when – and only when – it is coherent to its recipient, and this requires that He make the truth of Himself available to human conception and apprehension.

This means that God must qualify Himself in order to reveal Himself (beyond what is known of Him from the divine stamp upon the creation itself; ref. Romans 1:18-20): *He must, as it were, enter into the realm and reality of His creation in order to make Himself known to His creatures.* Indeed, even God’s statements to men fit within this criterion because human language is itself a creaturely construct subject to creaturely limitations. By speaking of Himself in human language, God has entered and accommodated Himself to the realm of man; however one defines the notion of divine inspiration, it is, in the very nature of the case, an accommodation of humanness – it is an *anthropomorphism*.

And so propositional revelation (that is, God making statements about Himself) isn’t exempt from the principle that all authentic revelation is anthropomorphic. If God is to reveal Himself to human beings, He must meet them where they are, and this is precisely the case whether He acts or speaks. Many Christians (perhaps most) think of God’s self-revelation purely in terms of the scriptural text; they maintain that God has revealed Himself in a collection of inspired statements recorded in the Bible. But the truth is, while the Scripture is revelatory, it is not so in the way many think. *God has not revealed Himself in a body of propositional statements as such, and the simple reason is that He cannot do so: Were God to adopt this approach in attempting to make Himself known to His image-bearers, He would preclude the very goal He has in mind.*

Mere propositions are insufficient to divine revelation for the same reason that words alone cannot accomplish the goal that is communication. The issue in communication is the conveyance of *meaning*, not the transmission of linguistic symbols (whether visually on a page or auditorially in speech). Communication implies a “meeting of the minds,” which necessitates the sharing of meaning. Linguistic structures (words, grammar, syntax, etc.) aren’t irrelevant to meaning, but they are neither synonymous with meaning nor sufficient for it. In the final analysis, *context* is both essential and determinative for meaning. Even a child recognizes that the same words, expressions, and ideas can have very different – even antithetical – meanings when set in different contexts.

Context is critical to meaning, but context involves much more than simply the surrounding statements within a written correspondence (as people so often conceive of the notion of “biblical context”). Context is an *existential* category: It refers to the *human setting* in which communication occurs, and includes not simply matters of place, time, and argument, but also personal and relational dynamics. Linguistic forms – as every instrument of communication – must be *interpreted* to be communicative, and context is the framework for interpretation.

Communication depends upon meaning and meaning depends upon context (in the sense discussed above) and its correct interpretation. The critical implication is that, for God to communicate with men – for Him to reveal Himself, He must control and interpret for men the context for His words and actions. If God came to men only with bare propositions, the meaning of His words would be left to the hearers themselves to assign. Even if He used what He regarded to be the perfect words to express truth about Himself, it would still be up to human beings to assign the meaning of His statements. God can say, “I am a God of glory,” but the statement itself is meaningless; short of Him conveying His meaning (by controlling and interpreting the context for His words), the hearer is left to assign his own meaning. And whatever he may conclude, in the end his interpretation is *strictly human*. Thus, in themselves, bare propositions fail at two points: First, they have no context to assign and control meaning (except the context the hearer supplies); secondly, and as a result, whatever meaning is assigned, it is entirely human – it has no essential connection with the God who has spoken.

All of this discussion is to substantiate and explain the truth that God reveals Himself through His self-interpreted actions. He employs words in the process of revelation, but words set in the relational context of His own activities and interactions with His creation. The divine “word” thus consists in divine acts interpreted by both divine commentary (itself a kind of action in that it explains, instructs, warns, exhorts, etc.) and further divine acts. This is precisely why the Scripture – as the written account of God’s revelation of Himself and His relation to and purpose for His creation – consists of the two components of *narrative* and *commentary*. God acts in His creation (the narrative storyline) and then interprets His actions (commentary). In this way He makes known the truth of Himself in the only way creatures can know Him, which is in creaturely terms and relations.

God has spoken, and *He* interprets His words in terms of the existential context of His own interactive activity in the world: Scriptural propositions are set within an historical and salvation-historical context. God’s spoken word is itself a “speech-act,” *and it is precisely from this perspective that men are to understand the doctrine of Jesus Christ as the Word of God.* From the day of creation the Creator/Lord and Father has revealed Himself in His self-interpreted actions – interpreted through the lives and lips of men, and this “word” of revelation has now reached its truest and consummate expression in the incarnate *Word*: the singular divine action and commentary which binds together all others (cf. John 1:1-18, 14:1-11; Revelation 19:10-13; also Colossians 1:15, 2:9; Hebrews 1:1-3).

God can reveal Himself to men only by entering into their existential context: He must come to them where they are and encounter them within the context of their human existence. For long ages He did so by His acts and interaction on the stage of human history; *now He has brought His self-revelation to its pinnacle by taking to Himself man's humanness as the ultimate entrance into the human existential context* (cf. Zechariah 2-3 and 6:9-15 with Haggai 2:1ff; Malachi 3:1).

*“What Jesus Christ does as the Son of God and in virtue of his divine essence, and what he does as the Son of Man and in exercise of his human essence, he not only does in the conjunction but in the strictest relationship of the one with the other. **The divine expresses and reveals itself wholly in the sphere of the human, and the human serves and attests the divine.**”* (Karl Barth, emphasis added)

The point of all of this is to provide the proper foundation for understanding and applying Paul's exhortation to do all things unto the glory of God. And it shows that, as a starting point, if the divine glory has something to do with the divine being, and if it is something which men can discern and also worship and serve God in light of (i.e., it can be the focus and goal of all their doings), *then Paul's exhortation and the saints' compliance with it must be centered in the person of Jesus Christ and the relevance of His person and work for the creation.*

This is not merely a logical or theological conclusion, but is evident in Paul's larger argument. Nothing could be clearer than that his exhortation wasn't a call to the Corinthians to have some vague, theological notion of God's excellence before their minds as they went about their daily lives. But neither was he calling them to apply some sort of moral litmus test to their actions – to “glorify” God by conforming their conduct to the moral uprightness that marks His “glory.” Indeed, if that was Paul's charge, then he applied a different standard to himself.

Paul was exhorting the Corinthians to follow his own example of seeking God's glory in all things by subjugating every arena and aspect of their lives to the cause of Christ's gospel and its full fruitfulness in the lives of men.

The God of glory had caused the light of His glory to shine into and illumine Paul's heart – not to give him a fresh and deeper spiritual awareness or sense of moral obligation, *but as communicating to him the light that is the true knowledge of His own glory which is in the face of Christ.* The living God revealed Himself to Paul by revealing *in* him (not merely to Him) His divine glory which is embodied in and communicated to men in the God-man, Jesus Christ (cf. Galatians 1:15-17, 2:20; Colossians 1:25-27). *And He did so with the intent that Paul would “do all things for His glory” by giving himself entirely and in all things to the testimony of the “good news” of Jesus Christ who is the radiance of His glory – the divine radiance that shines into the darkness and calls men into His glorious light* (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:1-6; Colossians 1:24-29; cf. also Isaiah 35:1-10, 40:1-11, 42:1-12, 44:21-23, 59:20-60:3; also Ezekiel 43:1-7; Haggai 2:6-9; Zechariah 6:9-15; Malachi 3:1 and Hebrews 1:1-3 with 1 Timothy 1:1-11).

Doing all things for God's glory means subjecting every aspect and exercise of life to the cause of God's gospel (9:23), and this involves becoming the slave of all men for the sake of their faith (9:19-22). The implication ought to be obvious, but Paul made it explicit: *Doing all things unto the glory of God means "giving no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God"* (10:32).

These two exhortations are inseparable but also mutually interpreting: Each explains the meaning of the other. Paul wasn't suggesting that the Corinthians were to prevent every conceivable form of offense in all of their interactions with other people. If this was his meaning, then he was instructing the Corinthians counter to his own example (including his example with *them* – ref. 1 Corinthians 4:1-21; 2 Corinthians 11:1-15, 13:1-3; etc.), not to mention the example of Jesus Himself. Paul knew all too well that offense is inevitable if one is committed to glorifying God in His gospel; there will always be men who stumble over the stumbling stone (John 15:18-25; 2 Corinthians 2:14-16, 4:1-5; cf. 1 Peter 2:6-8), and even laboring for the godliness and growth of the saints will risk their offense (Galatians 2:11-21, 3:1-5; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; 1 Timothy 1:1-7, 2:9-15; etc.).

Paul wasn't talking about offense in any and every regard, but offense that works against the truth, testimony and fruitfulness of the gospel. *His charge to not give offense to any man – Jew, Gentile or Christian – is precisely his charge to become all things to all men for the sake of the gospel.* Those who give offense in the way Paul was speaking are those who fail to partner with the gospel (9:23), whether they do so out of ignorance, carelessness, foolishness, or selfishness.

Christians should expect that some will take offense with them, but this offense must come from the *gospel itself*, not because of the one who testifies to it. Paul's interaction with men provoked offense and opposition, but because He preached Christ Jesus – not himself or his own notions or agenda – and there are those who cannot see the light of the gospel of Christ's glory (ref. again 2 Corinthians 4:1-5). The Corinthians weren't obliged to guard against *all* offense, but every offense that doesn't derive from the true gospel of Jesus Christ as it is proclaimed and lived out in truth and love. If a Christian finds someone taking offense at him when he is serving the cause of the gospel in this way, he can rejoice and count himself a faithful servant; he is simply bearing in himself the reproach of Christ.

This is what Paul meant by "*pleasing all men in all things*" (10:33): It is "pleasing" every man in the sense of being careful to not become a "rock of offense" to anyone. It is applying the mind of Christ so as to purposefully pursue every man's profit – his true spiritual benefit (cf. 10:23) – with the express goal of seeing him be saved. Such a Christian isn't a "man-pleaser" but a true son of Abraham; such a one glorifies His heavenly Father (ref. 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12).

Thus Paul's bookend: The Corinthians sought his input on the question of "idol meats" and he pointed to his own example in answering them: He followed Christ by subjecting himself to the cause of the gospel; that ethic, not lawfulness, was to be their guide (11:1).