

Does God Try?

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It seems to me that if we hold that God can be trying to speak to someone, but some human limitation gets in His way, then we have to accept as valid the same objection against the authority of Scripture and surrender our confidence that God could guarantee the outcome of the writing of the Bible.

I want to present to you with a problem to solve. It's an aberrant view of inspiration we've been discussing in a summer course I'm taking at Talbot School of Theology. I want you to think for a moment how you might respond to it. Then I'm going to use that to segue into another application of the same principle that may have more direct significance to you as a Christian.

There's a certain kind of a challenge to the view that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God that I think is related to another issue surfacing in evangelical Christianity, something I'm certain you're aware of. I'm convinced that the answer to the first issue will serve as foundation to answer to the second issue.

The reason I'm setting this up like this is because I'm letting you know in advance I'm laying a little trap for you. I want you to see the logic of a certain kind of reasoning.

There is a particular belief about intimacy with God at issue here. My conviction is that statements made to justify this particular point of view are kin to statements made in defense of a view that undermines the authority of the Bible. If one view is legitimate then the other is legitimate. And if the first is in error, then the second is in error, too.

Here is the problem regarding biblical inspiration that surfaced in class. There are a number of different views of inspiration. There's the "*verbal, plenary inspiration*" view which is the more complete evangelical view. The Bible is *fully inspired* in all of its books, every word, every jot, and every tittle. The *Scripture can't be broken*. This is the view I hold.

Then you have the "*limited inerrancy*" view championed by Fuller Seminary. This view holds that those things necessary for faith, salvation, and Christian living are inspired and without error. The Bible is "infallible" in that sense. But it's *not entirely inerrant* because the history and science may have mistakes. So they bifurcate the Scriptures, distinguishing between infallible and inerrant.

A third example is called the "*limited infallibility*" view held by Bible translator J.B. Phillips. Phillips had an odd view of the Bible. **He said that the Bible is inspired--God-breathed, in a sense--but we can't take that too far because the Bible is written by men after all.** Even though God may have been involved in the process, whenever you have an amalgam of divine action and human action the result is going to be imperfect in some measure in virtue of the fact that human beings make mistakes.

This is a point often made by non-Christians. They object, "*Well, God may have been involved in your Bible. But after all, men wrote it and men make mistakes.*" Usually it's left at that, *as if all one has to do is point to the fact that human beings are involved in the process and that is adequate to show that the product, therefore, is fallible.* "Men make mistakes." End of issue.

How do we respond to this challenge?

The answer is actually quite simple. **Just because men are capable of making mistakes doesn't mean that they in fact made mistakes when they wrote the Bible.** You can't presume error is certain simply because error is possible. The conclusion simply doesn't follow from the premises.

In fact, taken at face value the objection is self-refuting. **If everything man produces is flawed and can't be trusted, then what about that very claim itself?** By that standard, *can we trust the basic premise, "Everything man produces is flawed and can't be trusted"?* **The operating premise can't satisfy its own conditions for truthfulness.** Those of you familiar with the suicide tactic will be familiar with what I'm doing here. So this objection to inspiration fails twice. First, it simply doesn't follow that since human beings are capable of error, they actually did err when it came to the Scripture. Second, the objection is

self-refuting.

There is another problem, though, that goes deep to the heart of theology proper. It has to do with the nature of God Himself. *What are we saying when we say that God is **trying** to get His Word written down, but all He has to work with are these goofy human beings that keep getting it wrong?* The best God can manage is a revelation that's half right and half wrong, and therefore we've got to take everything in the text with a grain of salt.

Think about the notion of God "*trying*" to do something. Is the idea of God "trying" actually a sound way to think about Him? "Trying" is an attempt to do something when we're not sure how it's going to turn out. Human beings try things. Sometimes they accomplish their goals and sometimes they fail. The difference between trying something and actually succeeding at it depends on knowledge and ability (or power). Sometimes we try and accomplish our intent because we figure it out right and we have sufficient power to accomplish it. Sometimes we get it wrong because something else is bigger than us and overpowers us, or maybe we misunderstand the circumstances or are missing some vital piece of information.

Here's our question:

- ◆ **Is God ever in that situation?**
- ◆ **Is God ever in a position where He doesn't know, isn't in possession of all the facts, so that He's caught by surprise by some contingency down the line?**
- ◆ **Is God ever in a situation where He knows He has a good plan, but sometimes doesn't have the oomph to get it done?**

Clearly no.

God is *all-powerful*. Anything that power can do, He can do. He has access to all power that is available. He is omniscient: all-knowing. He knows everything there is to know, so there is nothing for Him to learn as far as future contingencies are concerned.

Keep in mind how my response to this objection is rooted in a fundamental understanding of the nature of God. If God is all-knowing and all-powerful, He never "tries" anything. He never makes an attempt, in the sense that He gives it a go to see if it happens. No. Whatever God purposes to accomplish, He accomplishes. He knows all the facts and has the power to complete what He sets out to do.

If that's true--and I think that's a pretty fair picture of the God of the Bible--then frankly it doesn't matter whether men or monkeys wrote the Bible, does it? If God is capable of taking creatures who may be prone to error in other circumstances and guaranteeing the final product, then whatever he intends to be recorded will in fact get written down. The perfection of the text itself is rooted in the character of God. If God is involved in the process, He is not limited by man's fallible contribution. God doesn't "try." He doesn't "attempt." He purposes to do something and then accomplishes it in virtue of His omniscience and omnipotence.

Amen? Amen. Now, here's the trap.

You're saying, "Amen, brother. That's a good answer." And you're right. God doesn't try. He is all-powerful. God doesn't attempt. He knows everything. Whatever He intends to accomplish He does, in fact, accomplish.

Now I've got another question. What about this sense in many evangelical circles, especially in charismatic ones, that God is working hard to speak to individuals, but they don't "hear His voice" because they simply aren't listening? What of the notion that the ability to hear the voice of God requires we simply quiet ourselves and get in tune?

Many have bought the idea that optimal Christian living involves *experiencing God* in a special manner: hearing His voice and getting special directives or assignments from Him. For those who say, "I don't hear God," the rejoinder is often, "He's been trying to talk to you, but you weren't listening."

Will somebody tell me what is the difference between that statement and the J.B. Phillips "limited

infallibility view" of inspiration? I know of no place in the Bible, ladies and gentlemen, where God attempted to speak and He wasn't heard. Frequently, He wasn't obeyed, true enough. Certainly, people hardened their hearts against the revelation--which itself was clear--and refused to believe that which was spoken. But I know of no case where God was speaking and He just couldn't get through because people were not listening.

For goodness sake, we're talking about [God's] **special revelation**. Paul's says in Romans 1 that even **general revelation** is so obvious and so forceful that people must actively suppress the truth in unrighteousness in order to ignore it.

As far as I can tell, the Bible knows of no such thing as God trying to speak, but is incapable of being heard because fallen men and women have somehow closed Him off, denied His ability, and so can't hear Him or are just simply too busy to hear the still, small voice of God.

This is simply a matter of consistent reasoning. It seems to me that if we hold that God can be trying to speak to someone, but some human limitation gets in His way, then we have to accept as valid the same objection against the authority of Scripture and surrender our confidence that God could guarantee the outcome of the writing of the Bible.

If, however, we say that God is big enough to overcome any human limitations so He can guarantee the word-for-word accuracy of the Scripture, then the same sovereign power is available to God to speak to any individual when He so chooses. God doesn't "try" to speak and not get heard.

Now, if that's true, then we don't have to spend any time quieting our lives to hear the voice of God as He "tries" to penetrate all the clamor. Instead, we can simply turn our gaze upon the only voice of God we are ever commanded to hear, to know, and to obey. That is the written, fully inspired, fully accurate Word of God: the Bible.

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