

God Speaks as a Man

How can we get to grips with the biblical paradox between God's decree to save his elect, and his expressed desire to save all?

God speaks as though he has the feelings of a man

God, at times, reveals himself to us by speaking as a man, and this inevitably leads to paradoxes. For instance: Like a man, God is said to repent, to be sorry, to be grieved, to regret, relent or change his mind (Ex. 32:11-14; 1 Sam. 15:11; 2 Sam. 24:16; Ps. 106:45; Jer. 18:7-10 *etc.*),¹ yet he cannot repent since he is not a man (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29). Again, although God is a Spirit and does not have a body (John 4:24), he speaks of his ear, nostrils, arm, hand and heart (Ps. 18:6,8,15; 31:2; 44:3; 75:8; Jer. 31:20 *etc.*) Speaking like a man, 'the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and he was grieved in his heart', and vowed he would destroy 'both man and beast' for, he said, 'I am sorry that I have made them' (Gen. 6:6-7). God sorry, grieved? On another occasion, he went further; because of their sin, he would have destroyed the Hebrews, he explained, 'had I not feared the wrath of the enemy' for their misrepresentation of his action (Deut. 32:26-27). God afraid? What does it all mean? Why is it that God, as Calvin said, 'figuratively assumes a human feeling... speaking in the character of a man'? Why this 'figurative appropriation of human affections'?² Why?

The answer tells us a great deal about God, about his infinite kindness towards us, displayed in the steps he takes to make himself known to us.

¹ In addition to the NKJV, see the AV, NASB and NIV.

² Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.2 Part 1 p337; Vol.8 Part 1 p487. I quote Calvin at large in this chapter, but many others, including Gill, have said similar things.

It is for our benefit that God speaks as though he has the feelings of a man

God wills to make himself known to us, but we are men, fallen men at that, and can only understand things expressed in human terms. As a consequence, God, because of his infinite wisdom and unspeakable grace, is willing to accommodate himself, and picture himself as a man, in order to make himself known to us. He does this for our good, taking pity on our ignorance. If he did not, as I have said, we should be unable to grasp anything of the Godhead. Even as it is, our understanding is, at best, feeble: ‘We know in part... Now we see in a mirror, dimly’ (1 Cor. 13:9,12; see also 1 Cor. 8:2). As Calvin put it: ‘But you will say, “How can it be that God, who is ever consistent with himself... should yet will that which is contrary to that which seems to be?” I reply, It is no matter of wonder that God, when speaking with men, should accommodate himself to the limits of their comprehension. Who will affirm that God ever appeared to his servants, even in visions, such as he really is?’³ Again: ‘It is evident that [God] is constrained to borrow comparisons from the common practice of men, because he could not otherwise express what is necessary for us to know’.⁴ But, I would add, God is ‘constrained’ only because in his grace he wills to reveal himself to us; pitying our weakness, he delights to ‘constrain’ and accommodate himself to our limitations, in order that we might know him. The ‘constraint’ is entirely his own pleasure, from within himself; it is not ‘forced’ upon him.

Scripture, said Calvin:

Ascribes human affections to God, because [it] could not otherwise express what was very important to be known... Certainly God is not sorrowful or sad... yet, because it could not otherwise be known how great is God’s hatred and detestation of sin, therefore the Spirit accommodates himself to our capacity... God, in order more

³ Calvin: *Calvin’s Calvinism* p254; see also pp122-123,127,180,190,193, 253,256,275-277,313.

⁴ Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.15 Part 1 p215; see also p248. The same applies to God’s use of human names in order to reveal himself to us. See Berkhof pp47-48.

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effectually to pierce our hearts, clothes himself with our affections.⁵

In short, God accommodates himself to our ignorance in order to help us grasp such infinite spiritual mysteries as his hatred of sin, the immensity and importance of his glory, his love for us, his kindness, his willingness to listen to our prayers and his power to answer, and so on.⁶ It is a mark of God's compassion to us, of his grace. Nevertheless, as I say, the very process itself inevitably leaves us with paradoxes. In particular, when God declares he desires to save sinners, he speaks as though he has the feelings of a man, and this leaves us with a paradox between his desire and his decree. But it is in this way that God graciously reveals his love for sinners, and makes known his pleasure and delight in their salvation.⁷

As to God's desire, our difficulty arises, in part, because to desire implies the possibility of disappointment. So, it might be argued, God cannot desire or wish, since he can never be said to be disappointed or frustrated. But this well-intentioned thinking misses the point. God does not need us and our puny logic to protect him from his own revelation of himself. As I showed in the previous chapter, speaking as though he has the feelings of a man, God tells us he does have desires (see also Job 14:15; Ps. 40:6; 51:6,16; 132:13-14; Hos. 6:6; 10:10 *etc.*), desires which are not always fulfilled. Our task is to believe what God has said about himself.

Even though God expresses himself in human terms, no human frailty attaches to him

It is essential to remember, of course, that although God accommodates himself to us by speaking in human terms, we must

⁵ Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.1 Part 1 pp247,249.

⁶ As Gill on Lam. 3:33: 'It is with reluctance the Lord afflicts his people; he is as it were forced to it, speaking after the manner of men; see Hos. 11:8; [in this way he shows] he does not do it with delight and pleasure; he delights in mercy, but judgement is his strange act' (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.4 p258). See chapter 9 for Gill on Hos. 11:8.

⁷ And we should, of course, focus on God's expressed desire, not the difficulties of the paradox.

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not ascribe any human weakness to him. On the contrary, the weakness is entirely ours. As Dagg put it: When God expresses his pleasure or desire, he is in fact commanding or requiring the sinner to obey him. ‘When the person, whose desire or pleasure it is that an action should be performed by another, has authority over that other, the desire expressed assumes the character of precept... The expressed will of a ruler is [a] command. What we know that it is the pleasure of God we should do, it is our duty to do, and his pleasure made known to us becomes a law’.⁸ This is right. In the United Kingdom, to be ‘detained during the Queen’s pleasure’ is a euphemism for being imprisoned until the Crown (nominally the Queen, but in effect the Government) determines otherwise. If a subject is told it is her Majesty’s pleasure that he should wait upon her, it has all the force of a command; he is expected to be there!

I repeat, although God speaks in human terms, this does not show any weakness in him; rather it shows *our* weakness. Calvin again:

[God] accommodates himself to our ignorance, whenever he puts on a character foreign to himself... God [of course] does not in vain introduce himself as being uncertain... God... does not deliberate as to himself, but with reference to men... God... accommodates himself to us... He speaks not according to his own majesty, but as he sees to be suitable to our capacities and weakness... God... accommodates himself to our ignorance... Whenever... God puts on a character not his own, let us know that it is through our fault...⁹

It is a mode of speaking which often occurs in Scripture, that God repents of evil... but this is said according to the apprehensions of men... God... is... described to us in such a way as we can comprehend, according to the measure of our infirmity. Hence God often puts on the character of men, as though he were like them...¹⁰

Because our weakness cannot reach his height, any description which we receive of him must be lowered to our capacity in order to be intelligible. And the mode of lowering is to represent him not as he really is, but as we conceive of him... The mode of speech [is]

⁸ Dagg p100. Once again, here is the connection between the two issues I am tackling – duty faith and the paradox between God’s desire and his decree. It will continue to recur throughout the rest of my book.

⁹ Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.13 Part 2 pp401,440-441,464.

¹⁰ Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.14 Part 1 p61.

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accommodated to our sense... He makes no pretence of not willing what he wills, but while in himself the will is one and undivided, to us it appears manifold, because, from the feebleness of our intellect, we cannot comprehend how, though after a different manner, he wills and wills not the very same thing... Since, on account of the dullness of our sense, the wisdom of God seems manifold... are we, therefore, to dream of some variation in God, as if he either changed his counsel, or disagreed with himself? No, when we cannot comprehend how God can will that to be done which he forbids us to do, let us call to mind our imbecility...

Why do they not attend to the many passages in which God clothes himself with human affections, and descends beneath his proper majesty in accommodation to our weakness?¹¹

Edward Marbury agreed:

Where it is in Scripture charged upon God that he repents, we say... it is... a word accommodated to our weakness... This, for want of understanding in us to comprehend the ways of God, is called repentance and grief in God.¹²

What is more, although God speaks of himself as having human feelings – and this does not imply any weakness in him – even less does it imply that his feelings are sinfully tainted like those of fallen man. God loves, desires and hates, but not as we do. As Calvin said: ‘God is exempt from every passion’.¹³

Edwards put it this way:

Though it be not just the same with our desiring and wishing for that which will never come to pass, yet there is... all in God that is good, and perfect, and excellent in our desires and wishes for the conversion and salvation of wicked men... These things are infinitely more agreeable to his nature than to ours. There is all in God that belongs to our desire [for] the holiness and happiness of unconverted men and reprobates, excepting what implies imperfection... Therefore, there is no reason that his absolute prescience, or his wise determination and ordering of what is future, should hinder his expressing this

¹¹ Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.1 pp195-196,202-203; Vol.2 p257; see also *Commentaries* Vol.10 Part 2 pp108-109; Vol.12 Part 1 pp265-266; Vol.14 Part 1 pp122-123; Part 2 pp115,330,348-349; Vol.15 Part 2 pp32,35.

¹² Marbury p365.

¹³ Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.13 Part 2 p402; see also Vol.13 Part 2 p372; Vol.15 Part 1 p248.

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disposition of his nature, in like manner as we are wont to express such a disposition in ourselves, *viz.* by calls and invitations, and the like.¹⁴

William Greenhill:

Repentance sometimes in Scripture is attributed to God, and then it is spoken after the manner of men; and it must warily be understood, so as God may not be wronged in men's apprehensions thereby. In men's repentance there is grief, change, something falls out as they did not foresee... These things are not in God; he foresees all events, he grieves not, he changes not; therefore in this sense he cannot be said to repent... His repentance is alteration of things and actions, no change of his purpose and will. In human repentance there is the change of the will; in divine repentance there is the willing of a change, and that in the thing, not in the will or counsel of God, which are unchangeable.¹⁵

As with God's repentance, so with his desire to save sinners. Neither implies the slightest weakness in the Almighty.

But there is a further point.

Even though God assumes the character of a man, the desires he expresses are real desires

That is to say, although God speaks as a man, we must never imagine that this means he 'pretends'. For instance, when God speaks of his ears being open to the cry of his people (Ps. 34:15), his ear not being heavy so that it cannot hear (Isa. 59:1), he is telling us he really will hear his people when they pray, he sincerely wants his people to cry to him. Although God does not have an ear, this does not mean that his willingness to listen to his children is anything but sincere and real. The same goes for his desire to save all sinners. God's desire is expressed in human terms, yes, but the desire is real, true and sincere. God really does desire the salvation of sinners.

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¹⁴ Edwards p528. See the previous chapter for my comments on Paul's desire for the salvation of sinners.

¹⁵ Greenhill p577. Gill used very similar words in his comments on Jonah 3:10 (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.4 p709).

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God speaks to us as though he is a man. Regarding the salvation of sinners, therefore, it means that God expresses what seems to us to be a twofold will; namely, his decree to save his elect, and his desire to save all sinners. In the next chapter, I will look at this twofold will of God.