

# I get mail . . . about earthquakes

In response to my post entitled "[Why God Does Not Prevent Earthquakes or Tsunamis,](#)" I received some questions from "Rob." Here's my somewhat lengthy response.

Rob,

Thanks for your comment. The above is a blog post, and is by necessity concise. I could not address every possible question or concern, and some things were implied more than stated, or, I assumed could be concluded reasonably in what I wrote above. To your questions:

*1) Do you think this same sort of destruction of being is both possible and inevitable in the new heavens and new earth, which will be just as contingent as the first heavens and earth? If you don't think this will be the case, why?*

1) By definition, anything that is contingent is subject to the possibility of non-being. In fact, in a created universe, everything is intrinsically subject to the possibility of non-being at any given moment. The traditional Christian doctrine of creation is that if God were to cease the act of creation at any given moment, the entire universe would "blink out" like a light bulb. Even angels, who are "naturally" immortal, because immaterial, are dependent on God's continuing power to exist at all. (Angels are "naturally" immortal, because they are pure minds. Not being composed of physical parts, they cannot die should their parts be destroyed. Nonetheless, should God cease to create them, they would cease existing.)

Of course, any universally broad statement like "destruction of being is both possible and inevitable" also has to be understood in light of other premises implicit in the very

definition of contingency that would include an “unless.” Since all contingent being depends on God for its initial and continuing existence (by definition), the inevitability of destruction contains an assumed “all other factors being the same” or “unless” God wills otherwise. All contingent being always has the possibility of non-being, but, since all contingent being is given by God, there is nothing to prevent God’s continuing to give being. So, in the new heavens and the new earth, destruction of being is certainly intrinsically possible, since God alone is the source of creation, and could, if he willed, cease to create. However, destruction of being is not inevitable, if God decides either to preserve intrinsically destructible beings from harm, or to create beings in such a way that they have an intrinsically natural immortality (something like the angels). Both possibilities are logically possible. What God will do is up to him.

*2) If God could have created a world without these possibilities in the first place (which must be true if there is going to be a new heavens and new earth where there is no more pain and there are no more tears), why did he not go ahead with that in the first place?*

You are correct that God “could have” created such a possibility in the first place. But it is only your assumption that he didn’t. Our knowledge of what God has done in the universe is restricted to what he has done in the universe (or rather portion of the universe) we actually live in. The traditional Christian doctrine is that human beings are not the only rational creatures. Angels, for example, are “naturally” immortal. For all we know, God might well have created universes where other intelligent creatures exist who have something like the “naturally” immortal resurrection bodies of the new creation, something like Tolkien’s “elves.” Who knows?

However, it should also be clear that I was not addressing in my initial points what God "might have done" or "could have done," but what he actually "has done." My claim is that the goodness of God is not inconsistent with the world in which we actually exist, a world in which earthquakes and tsunamis actually exist.

As I stated: "It is likely the case that a planet like earth could not be the kind of planet that could support intelligent life like human beings if it were not also the kind of planet that has tectonic plates."

I perhaps should have qualified "like earth as we know it (and not how God could have created it in his infinite power)" and "like human beings as we know them (and not how God could have created them in his infinite power)", but I assumed that was obvious. A planet that did not have tectonic plates would not be a "planet like earth." Moreover, the "human beings" I was referring to are "human beings" like us, like we are now. I don't know whether a new creation and a new earth would have tectonic plates, but the kinds of human beings it would contain would certainly be different than the kind we are now.

There is an inherent logical inconsistency when a person complains that there should be no earthquakes or tsunamis. The person who makes that claim almost certainly owes his or her existence to living on a planet in which there are necessarily tectonic plates, which, when they shift, necessarily cause earthquakes. To wish there were no such things as earthquakes is almost certainly to wish that I were not here to complain about the existence of earthquakes. So the "nonsensical" implied "within the possible conditions for this actual universe in which human beings like us can actually live."

And, of course, it is also the case that the traditional Christian position is that God did create something like such a universe (with no human pain, death, or tears). The historic

Christian position is that human death is a consequence of sin. (As I stated above, the Christian claim is that the problem of evil has a moral, not ontological solution.) If human beings had never sinned, would there have still been earthquakes and tsunamis? Presumably. What would have happened if there had been an earthquake in a morally perfect world? I don't know. Perhaps there would have been an infallible earthquake alert system.

I jest, but only because we are talking about a non-existing possibility. In the world in which we exist, people do bad things, and there are earthquakes. Again, the question is not about what God "might have done," but rather whether there is any incompatibility between the goodness of God and the existence of earthquakes in the world in which we (sinners) actually exist.

But some possible answers to your question might include:

a) God likes variety. Thomas Aquinas suggests that creation ranges from purely immaterial substances (God and angels) to purely material substances (minerals). In between are non-rational living material substances (plants and animals), and in between them are rational material (bodily) substances – human beings. But those "in between" rational material (embodied) substances happen to live on planets and the normal way in which those planets come into existence includes tectonic plates, and thus the very real possibility of earthquakes.

b) The decision to create human beings in a contingent and potentially destructible universe was a decision by God to create creatures that could be "historical." Again, relying on Aquinas, Thomas argues that, as immaterial creatures, angels intuitively and completely know and will whatever they know and will. Angels do not ratiolate. They simply know. Angels do not consider. They simply choose. Accordingly, the very first decision each angel makes is either to love God

before self or to love self before God. And this decision is permanent and irrevocable. Thus, it is not that fallen angels do not repent. Rather, they cannot repent.

To the contrary, because human beings are embodied creatures, their knowledge and choices are mediated through physical created objects. Humans do not know God directly and immediately as the Chief Good, but rather know directly only created goods. Humans can know God only as the giver of goods, but do not (apart from revelation) know him directly. Human choices are always between various higher and lower goods, and take place over time. In the choice of higher and lower goods, humans develop virtues (or vices) and formed virtue produces character. Ultimately, it is human orientation toward God as Chief Good that enables human choices of lesser goods, but human beings can always choose lesser goods in preference to God as their Chief Good and final end. For human beings, unlike angels, both salvation and damnation are processes, a kind of pilgrimage that takes place over time. But life as pilgrimage in this sense is something that can only take place for embodied creatures. But – such embodiment by its nature is subject to the possibility of destruction and death, unless God acts to preserve contingent being from destruction.

Because human beings will and know “historically” (over time), redemption also must take place over time, and so God redeems human beings through a historical process of redemption that begins with Israel and comes to fruition in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, because human beings are historical, redemption is also possible – in a way that it was not for angels.

In the new creation, human beings will for the first time see God directly “face to face,” and will no longer come to know God through the mediation of fellow creatures. However, once this immediate knowledge takes place, “history” will end. Human beings will no longer live in “pilgrimage” but will be

finally fixed in their choice of Good or Evil, like the angels.

The above is entirely Aquinas's speculation, but I find it plausible.

Another possibility is:

c) We don't know. My number 5) in my initial post, combined with my 15) means that God is free, he can create a number of universes, any of them will be good, and, again, there can be no possible best.

*In this case your 'no best possible world,' response doesn't make much sense, because it seems that Christianity is interested in two worlds, one in which sin and death exist, and one in which they don't. It doesn't matter that the latter world isn't the best possible world, or that God could continue to improve this world eternally (which presumably He will in the eschaton) – what makes the question sensible is the fact that we can delineate between two such possible, contingent worlds. The question remains why God chose to create the first kind.*

It is not exactly the case that Christians believe in “two worlds,” like a Platonic distinction between this world of matter and another world of disembodied spirits. Rather, Christians believe there is one world that has two stages. The current stage is something like a “dress rehearsal” for the real play that is going to follow. During the “dress rehearsal,” human beings practice their parts (they live out their lives, they live and die “natural deaths”) At some point, the Director steps in and says, “Dress rehearsal is over. This is the real thing.” There is a direct correlation between “dress rehearsal” and the new creation which is the “actual play.”

I think that fiction has often done a better job of portraying

the relation between the “dress rehearsal” and the “actual play” than has theology or literature, perhaps because fiction writers have less constricted imaginations. Dante and C.S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce* are two of my favorite examples here.

Of course, God could simply have omitted the “dress rehearsal,” but then, we’d have to make sure we got our parts absolutely right the first time. Because, if Thomas is right, when we see God “face to face,” there is no opportunity for second choices, not because God does not allow them, but because they are not possible. “History” is only possible in a contingent universe in which we don’t have immediate awareness or intuition of God. The kind of world we live in now. Where there are earthquakes.

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## Why God Does Not Prevent Earthquakes or Tsunamis



There is an atheist apologetics website that calls itself [“Why Won’t God Heal Amputees?”](#) By “atheist apologetics,” I mean the kind of thing engaged in by advocates of the New Atheism like Richard Dawkins, that is, an attempt to make an argumentative case for atheism and against religion, specifically against Christianity. The basic argument of the website is a simplistic argument against the

existence of God based on the problem of physical evil. It is a variation on the “old chestnut” “village atheist” chain of argumentation:

*If God is good, he would want to eliminate evil.*

*If God is all-powerful, he could eliminate evil.*

*But evil exists.*

*Ergo,*

*Either God is not good*

*Or*

*God is not all-powerful*

*Or*

*God does not exist.*

The website presents the argument in terms of the problem of amputees.

*If God were good, he would want to heal amputees . . . etc.*

*But God does not heal amputees.*

*Ergo*

*There is no God.*

Atheist versions of the argument from evil do not usually distinguish carefully between moral and physical “evil,” and this is a classic example. The vast majority of suffering that takes place in the world is a result of moral culpability on the part of human beings. Hitler killed 6 million Jews. Wars create amputees. Physical suffering and moral evil need to be distinguished.

Moreover, it also needs to be noted that any attempt to address the problem of evil and suffering in the world can really only opt for one of two solutions, a metaphysical solution or a moral solution. Metaphysical solutions say that “evil and suffering are just the way things are.” Moral solutions say that evil is the consequence of the moral choices of some rational being or beings. Atheism, pantheism



and all versions of monism must necessarily opt for metaphysical solutions. Dualisms (Zoroastrianism, Gnosticism, Manichaeism) also opt for a metaphysical solution. Good and evil are in eternal and irresolvable conflict, and that is “just the way things are.”

Partially moral solutions can be found in those Eastern religions that advocate karma. At least some of the evil and suffering that exist in the world is a direct consequence of moral choices made by rational beings, either in this life or a previous life. Nonetheless, the solution is not complete, insofar as Eastern religions often try to combine karma with some kind of monist ontology. At heart, the basic problem in monist systems is still metaphysical. Since everything is ultimately Brahman, the existence of plurality, evil, and suffering is *maya*, an illusion, and so, at the end of the day, “evil and suffering are just the way things are.”

The Abrahamic religions may be unique in advocating a moral solution to the problem of evil. Evil exists because of the choices of rational beings (either human beings or spiritual beings [fallen angels]), choices for which God is not responsible. Augustine is the chief architect of what is sometimes called “the free will defense,” in his arguments against Manichaeism. I remain convinced that Augustine’s solution is still the only intelligible one, insofar as any solution that is not moral is not a solution. Any attempt to explain the existence of evil by saying that “this is just the way things are” is at bottom a throwing up of the hands in defeat.

At the same time, it is crucial to distinguish between the problem of moral evil (caused by the moral choices of rational beings) and what is sometimes called “physical evil.” Why are children born blind? Why does God not heal amputees? Or, as the question has been asked ever since the Lisbon earthquake, and frequently in recent years: [Why does God not prevent earthquakes or tsunamis?](#) The following is a preliminary

reflection not on the problem of moral evil – What about the holocaust? – but physical “evil.” Specifically, why does God not prevent earthquakes or tsunamis?

Any doctrine of creation has to include the following affirmations.

1) By definition, created being must be other than God, and a consequence of God’s free decision to create. God does not have to create at all, but if God creates a universe, that universe will necessarily have certain characteristics that must distinguish anything that is not God from God.

2) Creation is contingent, not only in the sense that it does not have to exist at all, but also in the sense that it could be radically different.

3) Creation is finite. By definition, anything that is contingent has limits.

4) Created being has an intrinsic order and intelligibility. An unintelligible and disordered creation could not be a universe in the strict sense, but would rather be a chaos, incapable of either supporting intelligent life like ourselves or of being understood by intelligent life.

5) Creation could be greater than it is, but also less than it is. By definition, any finite contingent being could be improved, to an infinite extent. By any definition, any finite contingent being could be less than it is, to an infinite extent. There is no upper or lower limit to that which is finite and contingent. To speak of a “best of all possible worlds” is nonsense. To demand that we should live in such is delusional nonsense.

6) Both contingency and intelligibility are necessary to a universe in which rational physical creatures (like ourselves) can live. A universe that was not contingent would not change, but would be static and without history. A universe

that was not intelligible would be unknowable.

7) The above characteristics are not only demanded by a Christian doctrine of creation, they are necessary to modern science. A universe that was not contingent would not need to be examined by experimental method to be known. A universe that was not intelligible could not be known by being examined. The reason why modern science developed in the West was because the Christian doctrine of creation (and only the Christian doctrine of creation) laid down the conditions by which modern science is possible.

8) In any universe that is both contingent and intelligible, destruction of being is both possible and inevitable. In universes where hard substances like rocks exist, contacts between rocks of sufficient size with organic beings (plants and animals) will result in death. In universes where animals require oxygen to live, lack of oxygen will lead to death. In cases where that destruction happens to intelligent self-aware beings, that destruction will be perceived as a disaster.

9) In a contingent and intrinsically ordered universe, there are conditions that make intelligent physical life possible. It is likely the case that a planet like earth could not be the kind of planet that could support intelligent life like human beings if it were not also the kind of planet that has tectonic plates. It is certainly the case that a planet that supports human beings must have water. However, where there are tectonic plates, there will inevitably be earthquakes. Where there is both water and tectonic plates, earthquakes will produce tsunamis, and if people live near shore lines, tsunamis will cause death.

10) To ask God to prevent earthquakes in order to prevent human suffering and death is likely to make a nonsensical request. It is possible that God could create a world without tectonic plates, but such a world would likely be one in which human beings like ourselves could not live.

11) To demand that any universe that God creates would be a world in which there were no possibility of suffering or death would be to demand that God create a world that is not both contingent and intrinsically intelligible, but such a world would not be a created world because contingency and intelligibility are the necessary conditions of creation.

12) To demand that God intervene whenever the conditions of creation might lead to suffering and death would be to demand that God either perform constant miracles or that God violate the conditions of a contingent and orderly creation. Questions like "Why does God not prevent earthquakes?" or "Why does God not restore the missing limbs of all amputees?" are silly questions. They do not take the conditions of creation (contingency and order) seriously.

13) In an orderly contingent world where there will inevitably be numerous threats to the lives and well being of intelligent creatures like ourselves, both pain and fear of death are good things. Pain is a warning that protects animals (both rational and non-rational) from destruction. Fear of death is a necessary motivator to keep animals and people alive.

14) The doctrine of creation also inevitably includes a doctrine of providence. Providence entails that God continues to order and preserve creation, but does so in such a manner that accords with both its contingency and inherent intelligibility. Providence is neither determinism nor deism. Providence entails that God is good to both the moral and immoral. Providence entails that God deals with evil and suffering not by doing away with them, but by producing good out of suffering and evil. Granted that God is all powerful, and God exercises providence, God can certainly heal people, and answers to prayer no doubt happen. However, to demand that God must prevent every act of physical suffering or that God restore amputated limbs is to demand that God perform constant miracles, that he override the normal operation of a contingent and ordered creation.

15) In any contingent universe, being (and life) are gifts, not owed to us by God. Whether or not human death is a consequence of sin (Christians believe that it is), that God gives life freely means that human beings can not demand it as something owed to us

16) Eschatology is a necessary part of the Christian doctrine of creation. The Christian claim is that history has a purpose and direction, and the current physical universe is not only not the only one that could possibly exist, but that it is also not the only one that will always exist. There is therefore a ground for the unlimited hope for something better that seems to be an inherent characteristic of human beings. Nonetheless, such hope is not grounds to question the real and limited goodness of the world in which we live now, complete with its earthquakes and tsunamis and amputees who are not healed.

There are, of course, some necessary pieces that to be added to the above if one is going to adopt any ultimately Christian and moral solution to the problem of evil, namely:

1) The relation between moral choices and suffering. In a world in which rational beings make moral choices, there would have to have been a first evil choice. What relation is there between the inherent possibility of physical suffering in a contingent and ordered world and actual suffering? That is, if there had been no fall into sin, would human beings still have been subject to physical suffering like that caused by earthquakes and tsunamis? Presumably, in an ordered and contingent universe that contains tectonic plates and water, earthquakes and tsunamis would take place whether human beings had sinned or not.

2) Redemption: Any Christian account of the problem of evil and suffering needs to say something about the incarnation, saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Christian solution to the problem of theodicy ultimately focuses on the

cross. At the same time, the cross is a moral solution to a moral problem.

3) Eschatology: Does the notion of a “new creation” and a “new earth” suggest some kind of alteration of current physical laws such that there would be no earthquakes or tsunamis in the “new earth”? In the “new creation,” there will be no death and “all tears will be wiped” away. Such a new creation would have to be considerably different than the one in which we live now. Given that there are no limits to the possible “greatness” of any contingent universe, such a new creation is certainly within the limits of divine possibility.

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## **Some Brief Reflections on Inclusive Language**

I first encountered the problem of “inclusive language” when I was working on my doctorate quite awhile ago. The University of Notre Dame Theology Department had a policy that all written work had to use “inclusive language.” At least one of the faculty members interpreted this to mean that one could not use male language in reference to deity, and would penalize students a full grade for doing so. I encountered a real problem when I wrote my dissertation and had to decide how to translate *homo* (the Latin word for “human being”). Latin does not normally use pronouns, but English does. In translating Latin “homo,” should I use “man” or “human being”? Which pronoun should I use when an English translation of a Latin verb referring to the action of “homo” needed a pronoun – “he”? “He or she?” “They?”

I think the problem is less acute these days. However, if we

write papers or give sermons, we still have to ask the question of how properly to refer to God and to human beings. Do we call God "she"? If God is "Father" is God also "Mother"? Do we use "man" when referring to human beings? Why or why not? Following are some short reflections:

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed. First is the issue of theological language in general.

1) The motto of my blog is "*Non sermoni res, sed rei sermo subiectus est,*" which comes from Hillary of Poitiers on the Trinity. It translates approximately "The thing is not subject to the word, but the word is subject to the thing." I first came across Hillary's rule in Karl Barth, who appeals to it to make the point that the theology is always subject to its subject matter. That subject matter of theology is the Triune God *in se*, but as known in revelation.

We have to use some kind of language to talk about God, but that language is always subordinate to the Reality of the God who has revealed himself, not our own projections. We are not free to impose any metaphors we might wish when we speak of God in the matter of Sallie McFague's *Metaphorical Theology*. The Christian claim is that God speaks, and that the canonical Scriptures are faithful witnesses to God's Word of revelation. At the same time, any human language is inherently inadequate to speak of God. No language can capture God, and our attempts at conceptualizing continually demand correction. In the words of Charles Williams, "This is Thou, This neither is Thou."

Theological language uses the distinctions of the *via negationis*, *via affirmationis* and *via eminentiae* to speak of God.

*Via negationis* (the negative way) denies of God all limitations characteristic of creatures. Many of the traditional "divine attributes" are not positive affirmations

so much as negative denials of creaturely limitations. Divine omnipotence and omnipresence mean that God is neither temporally or spatially limited; divine eternity means that God is not subject to temporal limitations; God is Spirit means that God is not embodied; Impassibility means that God does not have passions or parts; Immutability means that God is not subject to the physical or temporal alteration – God does not “get better” or “worse.”

*Via affirmacionis* (the positive way) affirms that, as the source of all created perfections, God must *in se* contain these perfections in an eminent manner (*Via eminentiae*) and is self-identical with them. God is not only good, but Goodness Itself. God is not only loving, but Love Itself. God is not a being, but Being Itself.

At the same time, while we can affirm positive language of God, we can form no proper concepts of God. We can apprehend God, but not comprehend him. One of the inherent dangers of theological language is to confuse our theological conceptions with the reality to which the language refers. Theology can be incredibly flexible about the terms it uses, precisely because the terms do not encompass Divine Reality. At the same time, theology needs to be on guard that its language is not unfaithful to the reality.

Because all human language originates in created concepts, and we have no direct or immediate access to Divine reality, human language is inherently inadequate to provide proper concepts of God. Nonetheless, human language about God can provide proper judgments about God. We can affirm that certain things about God are indeed true, although such affirmations are mediated through human concepts that are inherently inadequate to express the divine reality. Because of its inadequacy to conceive divine reality, positive language is either analogical or metaphorical. Analogous language is literally true perfection language. Because God does not participate in perfection, but is himself identical with the divine



perfections, such language is both universal and particular: God is not only good but goodness; God is not only just, but justice. Although expressed through creaturely concepts, the language of divine perfections applies primarily to God rather than creatures insofar as God in his self-identity is the original source of all created perfections. Creatures are created goods, because God is primarily Good and Goodness in himself, and shares that goodness with creatures.

Metaphorical language is language that is not literally true, but expresses some truth about God through comparison of some likeness with created reality: "Our God is a consuming fire."

Second is the question of specifically gendered language about God:

1) God has given us certain kinds of language to refer to himself in revelation, and this is the primary language we use because God has given it to us. If we take revelation seriously, we must believe that there is analogical or metaphorical correspondence between the language applied to God in biblical revelation and God's eternal reality. The primary way that God has given to refer to himself is by the Triune names: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe that God is Triune in himself because he has revealed himself in the history of revelation as the Father of Jesus Christ, Jesus who is the Son of his Father, and the Holy Spirit who has been sent by Father and Son.

2) Besides the Trinitarian names, Scripture provides us with other names in speaking of God. In the OT, God is YHWH, Elohim, Adonai, El Shaddai. In English translation, these generally are translated as LORD, God, Lord, God Almighty. Besides the divine names, Scripture refers to God with numerous metaphors. The metaphors are predominantly masculine, but occasionally are feminine. A crucial distinction is that between metaphor proper, and simile. Proper metaphors tend to be masculine or neutral (God IS a Warrior, a Lion, a King);

feminine metaphors tend to be similes (God is LIKE a mother, LIKE a woman in labor).

A predominant metaphor in the Old Testament is that of God as the Husband or Father of Israel and Israel as bride or daughter. In the NT, this analogy is transferred to that between Christ (as Husband) and the Church (as Bride).

At the same time, the wisdom literature of the OT regularly uses a feminine personification to describe the attribute of God's wisdom (*sophia*). Significantly, in the NT, this originally feminine language is regularly referred to Christ. HE (not she) is the Divine Wisdom.

3) Divine transcendence: One of the crucial differences between religions of transcendence (like Judaism and Christianity) and religions of immanence (Hinduism) is the metaphors they use to articulate the relation between Deity and creation. Religions of transcendence tend to use metaphors of height (God is in "heaven") and masculine language to characterize divinity (God as Father). Religions of immanence use metaphors of embodiment (the world as God's body) and feminine imagery (mother goddess). This is not consistent across the board, however. Scripture speaks of the Spirit as brooding over the waters, and indwelling the church. Hinduism has male gods like Brahmin who do not transcend created reality.

4) Monotheism: that God is One is a crucial distinctive of Biblical faith. The masculine imagery of God (particularly in the OT) does not make the point that God is male (he is never described below the waist), but that God has no partners (there is only one God, and the God of the Bible has no consorts) and God is distinct from creation (the earth is not God's body).

5) Pronouns: That God is personal demands that we use personal pronouns in referring to God. Such personal pronouns do not

mean that God is "sexed," but that God is personal (God is not an "it"). God is not sexed because God has no body. Refusal to use any pronouns (repeated and exclusive references to "God" or "God-self" or "Divinity") present the image of an impersonal God. In normal usage, the pronoun "she" really would seem to imply that God is "sexed." The preferred pronoun "he" is used, not because God is male (again, God has no sex), but because God is not an "it."

6) Some have suggested that because the Hebrew (*ruach*) in the OT is feminine in gender, we should refer to the Spirit with female pronouns ("she"). Insofar as the primary imagery of the Spirit is that of immanence, there might be some logic here. However, this seems to be confusing grammatical gender (which English does not have), with sexuality. There is no correspondence between grammatical gender and sexuality. Moreover, in the NT, the Greek *pneuma* is neuter, when Jesus refers to the Spirit, he uses the masculine pronoun (*ekeinos*), and the masculine "Comforter" (*parakletos*).

Conclusion: If we are going to be faithful to the language of biblical revelation, we should use the primary biblical language of the Triune names (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in referring to God. The proper pronoun would be "he." At the same time, there are numerous feminine similes applied to God in the Bible (God is not "mother," but God is "like a mother"), and these should not be avoided, but encouraged.

To reiterate, use of the Triune names in reference to Deity and the masculine pronoun follows the language of biblical revelation. It does not imply that God is male, because God is not sexed. The use of "he" in reference to God does not mean that God is male, but that God is personal.

Use of inclusive language in reference to human beings is a rather different question.

1) The primary purpose of language is to communicate. Language

evolves and changes over time, and what communicates at one time does not necessarily communicate at another.

2) The church should avoid getting involved in the politically charged culture wars. We have no stake in taking sides at either preserving or demolishing "the patriarchy." The church has fundamentally different loyalties.

3) The "offending" words are the generic "man" and the masculine pronoun "he." While previous generations used these regularly in both an inclusivist sense ("human being") and an exclusive sense ("male human being"), English language use has considerably changed, and many (perhaps most) now hear the word "man" in only an exclusivist sense.

4) English has a peculiarity in that it does not distinguish between an inclusive and exclusive use of "man." Latin, for example, distinguishes between *homo* (human being), *vir* (male human being), and *femina* (female human being). Greek distinguishes similarly between *anthropos*, *aner*, and *gune*. In Middle English, *man* was "human being," *wer* was "male human being," and *wifman* (woman) was a female human being. In modern English, *wer* has long ago fallen out of use.

5) It seems that any contemporary English document should use language in the way that it is used by the general population. While "man" seemed to be avoided for a couple of decades, it now seems to have found its way back into the general population. "Man" (with a capital M) is regularly used by the media and popular culture to refer to "humanity" or "humankind." "Man" (small "m") is also regularly used in reference to "male human beings." However, the pronoun "he" seems regularly understood to refer only to a male human being. "Men" (plural) is never understood to mean "human beings" (plural) but "male human beings" (plural). A document that deliberately reverted to the terminology of forty years ago would be understood to be deliberately provocative. People would notice not the content of the language, but the way it

was used. Whether intended that way or not, the document would be read as “sexist.”

6) The ESV translation of the Bible has adopted what I think is a good compromise. “Man” (capitalized) is used for Greek or Hebrew “human being.” “Man” (not capitalized) is used in referring to male human beings. When no gender is present in the original Hebrew or Greek, “Man” or “man” are not used. ESV does not use “men” for plural human beings, but “humans,” “people,” etc.

7) My own standard practice when writing is to use “human being,” “human,” or “humankind,” when the context calls for generic “human being,” but sometimes “Man,” as in Aristotle’s definition of humanity as “Man is a rational animal.” For pronouns I use “he or she” or “one.” I do not use “they” to refer to individual human beings, although many of my students do, as did even Jane Austen almost 200 years ago. (That just seems grammatically awkward to me.) For the plural, I use “human beings” “humans” or “people,” not “men,” unless I am referring to more than one male human being. I think my students (particularly those under 30) would hear consistent use of “man” and “men” as referring to males. The plural of “brothers” should be “brothers and sisters.” Siblings sounds too formal.

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**New Article on The  
Hermeneutics of Same-Sex  
Practice**



It is only within the last generation that affluent Western Christians have suggested that same-sex sexual activity might be morally permissible. The unanimous consensus of the previous Christian tradition (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican) has been that homosexual activity is immoral, condemned by both Scripture and Church tradition. The vast majority of critical biblical scholars continue to recognize that the plain-sense reading of the biblical texts prohibits homosexual activity, and that Scripture endorses only one permissible model for sexual activity: exclusive life-long commitment within heterosexual marriage.

Given the historic Anglican commitment to the primacy and sufficiency of Scripture, it would seem difficult to make a case from an Anglican perspective for the approval of same-sex activity, for the blessing of same-sex relationships, or for the ordaining of practicing homosexual clergy. Those who attempt to make such a case necessarily have to address the question of biblical authority. How one attempts to reconcile the endorsing of same-sex practices with the authority of Scripture will depend, first, on whether one recognizes that Scripture prohibits same-sex activity, and, second, how one responds to Scripture's teaching.

*The above is the beginning of a new rather lengthy article I've just written entitled ["The Hermeneutics of Same-Sex Practice: A Summary and Evaluation."](#) It can be found in the Pages section to the left. I cannot imagine it will win me many friends.*