



# A Response to the Indiana Ministries Statement

Nicholas Stanton-Roark

Many responses have been made to the background, framing, and implicit threats of State Pastor Jeff Matas's [response](#) to the [ChogAffirm.com](#) statement. I would like to offer a response to the biblical and theological argument Pastor Matas presents in favor of the Church of God's continuing refusal to consider making room for affirming arguments. (As he writes in his conclusion: "Moving from the orthodox biblical definition of sexual identity and marriage is a line we will never cross. Never.")

Matas begins by providing a rapid overview of the biblical data, possibly because the Chog Affirm statement doesn't attempt to make a biblical-exegetical case or possibly because he thinks the data is so clear as to need little attention.<sup>1</sup> He summarizes the case this way:

What does Scripture say about same sex relations? It always condemns and prohibits them.

- Leviticus 18:22, 20:13
- Romans 1:26-27
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10
- 1 Timothy 1:9-10

Some progressive theologians assert that these passages don't apply to modern same-sex relationships and same-sex marriages, but they must contort themselves into an exegetical pretzel to make the attempt. *And they must hold that the vital sexual difference of male and female in marriage—as defined in Genesis 1-2 and affirmed by Jesus—is irrelevant.* [emphasis original]

---

<sup>1</sup> I observe that this section of Matas's response is clearly modeled on an article from Preston Sprinkle's *Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender*. I say this not to accuse Matas of plagiarism—the article is unsigned and for all I know Matas wrote it in the first place—but to let readers know that they can find a more fleshed out version of this same argument there.

[https://www.centerforfaith.com/blog/the-debate-about-same-sex-marriage-is-not-a-secondary-issue?fbclid=IwAR12sYZz6hGnyYp9FOSsTTGzoEeW\\_ptRrUgojgASyEiLBtPOCFWBbo-JDzc](https://www.centerforfaith.com/blog/the-debate-about-same-sex-marriage-is-not-a-secondary-issue?fbclid=IwAR12sYZz6hGnyYp9FOSsTTGzoEeW_ptRrUgojgASyEiLBtPOCFWBbo-JDzc)

Before touching on the case itself, we have to acknowledge how dismissive and patronizing the characterization is that anyone who disagrees with him “must contort themselves into an exegetical pretzel” to do so. A progressive theologian might respond that conservatives must rely on unsophisticated fundamentalist flattening of the text—but that would be classless.

The same charge—that plain reading is faithful reading and any attempt to engage larger narrative patterns, the trajectory of unfolding biblical revelation, or the need for sociocultural hermeneutic application is just a form of denial—is regularly leveled at the Church of God by the majority of Protestant Evangelicals who do not affirm women in ministry. It is made regularly by Calvinists of Arminians. “The text is plain,” they insist. “The words are right there on the page.”

We can do better than this. But returning to the argument itself.

He says more about the claims in the underlined portion above, which are the real heart of his biblical case, but does not say much more. He asserts, with citation to N. T. Wright, that Genesis provides the figures of Adam and Eve as a “definition” of marriage necessarily consisting of “two sexually, biologically different persons,” and that this definition is a “load-bearing wall of the gospel and the church.” But Genesis nowhere calls Adam and Eve the definition of marriage. This is an interpretative move made by the reader. Which elements of their union are normative, if any? Which are incidental to the mythic narrative, if any? The text itself does not give us a key (as Jesus occasionally does for the parables); we are left to interpret and cross-reference with scripture more broadly.

Even less does Jesus call Adam and Eve a “definition.” He invokes their example, certainly, not because he was asked to define marriage, but because he was asked whether “it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” And according to Jesus here, one element of the union of Adam and Eve that is ethically normative is its permanence! Needless to say, we have been willing to twist our theological pretzels over this teaching. To invoke this passage as Jesus “defining” marriage as exclusively and universally reserved for “two sexually, biologically different persons” is not a move demanded by the text nor necessarily invited by it. It can be seen, rather, as a projection onto the text by a reader deeply steeped in a culture where heterosexuality is deeply entrenched. This is as exegetically stable as arguing for monarchy as the sole appropriate form of government because the Bible nowhere advocates democracy (though casting lots for Judas’s replacement comes close) and Jesus presumes the normativity of kingship when he responded, “Have you not heard that David and his men, when they were hungry...”

N. T. Wright, for his part, does not call Adam and Eve a definition, but a signpost. Wright, in the article from which the quote originates, points out that the Genesis creation accounts are filled with signposts: the “two creation stories, which of course are not meant to be photographic reproductions of ‘what happened at the beginning,’ are themselves great symbolic pointers – signposts towards a deeper, stranger reality which human words are probably unable to

express.<sup>2</sup> If Wright describes Adam and Eve as signposts, to what do they point? “The coming together of male plus female is itself a signpost pointing to that great complementarity of God’s whole creation, of heaven and earth belonging together.”

As symbols (as well as historically contingent progenitors for the human race), a male and female pair make an obvious literary sense. There is, however, a strong sense of gender essentialism running through the claim that their opposite-sex status is as necessary for giving meaning to the arc of redemption as any other form of difference. The emphasis on the figures as “sexually, biologically different” is not present in the text; indeed, the text emphasizes biological similarity, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen 2:23). What is meaningfully different is not biology, but personhood. These are two individuals, different from one another by virtue of being persons, with their own minds, desires, agency, etc., not merely opposite sexes.<sup>3</sup>

Man and woman, as such, are not really so different from one another, and very often a man is far more different from another given man than another given woman, not out of degrees of masculinity and femininity, but due to personalities, hopes, fears, interests, and desires. Yet all people outside of close family are sufficiently meaningfully different that their coming together and bearing with one another in covenant relationship can stand as a signpost for heaven and earth coming together. Am I projecting onto the text here, adapting symbolism to the literature? Sure, but no more than Pastor Matas.

My point here is that the creation stories (as Wright refers to them) are fertile soil for a range of meaning, and they do not invite us to read them as primarily prohibiting certain types of otherwise morally neutral or even morally positive relationships. Indeed, we *must* go outside of Genesis to answer the question of the moral status of same-sex love, because Genesis doesn’t seek to address the question.

Yet one can see why Pastor Matas is willing to engage in such speculative exegesis to bring them into the conversation, even to make such a bold claim as that the “vital sexual difference” of Adam and Eve is a “load-bearing wall of the gospel.” Without this move, the one advocating against LGBT affirmation is left with only a small list of verses that do not themselves elaborate *why* same-sex love should be regarded as immoral. We have one passage from the Levitical law (alongside others regulating beard trimming, shellfish consumption, etc.), two mentions of terms with wide and unclear semantic meaning in rapidfire sin lists, and Paul’s rhetorical tripwire in Romans 1 that amounts in 2:1 to a judgment on the reader/listener for judging the groups described in the first chapter! To raise disagreement over such a barely and unclearly described ethical norm above the level of killing in some settings (over which Matas acknowledges disagreement is reasonable) to the level of the gospel, one is motivated to reach somewhat.

---

<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, “What Marriage is For,” *Plough Quarterly*, No. 6, <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/life/marriage/what-is-marriage-for>.

<sup>3</sup> Here I recommend two books for further reading: Megan DeFranza’s *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female and Intersex in the Image of God* (2015), and Paul Jewett’s *Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human: A New-Evangelical Theology* (1996). Jewett does an admirable job of critically expanding Barth’s theological anthropology.

The observation that the Bible was written in cultural settings that assumed the normalcy of heterosexual relations is not, however, an insuperable obstacle to the affirming Christian. The Bible is also a product of cultures that assumed the normalcy of patriarchy and slaveholding. Many exegetes rightly perceive within scripture the prophetic trajectory toward the abolition of these cultural ideologies, even if it has taken thousands of years to approach their practical overthrow, and even if many Christians today still defend these ideologies from the pages of scripture.<sup>4</sup>

The Bible is also the product of cultures that viewed the earth as the firmament of creation rather than a planet orbiting a star. The Church of God has never held to Biblical inerrancy in the sense that would require rejection of scientific progress in understanding the natural world. The Church of God has never required affirmation of young earth creationism. The possibility for the need to synthesize the Biblical writers' understanding of the natural world with our understandings (which would extend to the fairly recent recognition of sexual orientation as such) has always been a viable reality in the Church of God. (This is also relevant for Matas's claim that this is an issue on which there has been total uniformity of thought in the Christian world until the 20th century.<sup>5</sup>)

Meaningful questions Christians must ask about the moral status of same-sex love involve understanding the warrants behind the proscriptions in the Bible. What ethical or theological logic undergirds them, in their context? They also involve a holistic theological anthropology rooted in Scripture and informed by (though not uncritically beholden to) contemporary scientific understanding. This is work Matas does not attempt to do in his short response, but it is essential work for the subject.<sup>6</sup>

To summarize thus far, Pastor Matas's argument against LGBT affirmation relies on an unjustified interpretation of biblical passages, projecting his own (widely held) assumptions onto the text. By dismissing alternative perspectives and failing to engage with the larger narrative patterns and cultural contexts of the Bible, his argument lacks the depth and nuance necessary to fully address the moral status of same-sex love. To truly understand the warrants behind the biblical proscriptions, a more comprehensive and contextual examination is required, highlighting the need for further exploration and open dialogue, precisely what the Chog Affirm statement is asking for.

---

<sup>4</sup>If you have not encountered Christians today defending "biblical forms of slavery" or even specific antebellum slavers, I envy you.

<sup>5</sup> The history of understandings of sexuality in Christendom is well beyond the scope of this writing, but Boswell's research, imperfect though it is, is useful here, as is Judith Butler's. The vast majority of Christian history the church did not understand or hold to the "two sexes, two genders" model familiar today, but to an Aristotelian "one sex, two genders" model that viewed women as under-developed men.

<sup>6</sup> To be clear, I am not doing that work here either. I have written a positive case for same-sex love elsewhere, for those who wish to read further. Nicholas Stanton-Roark, "Thinking Morally about Same-Sex Love," <https://theopolitical.wordpress.com/2016/04/17/thinking-morally-about-same-sex-love/>.

Finally, Matas comes back to Church of God particulars, emphasizing that we are a holiness people. He writes, “I would remind you again—we are a holiness movement. For 2000 years the church of Jesus Christ has always been counter cultural.... This is just another instance where we stand humbly and firmly holding to the truth of God’s Word with the love of Christ. Yes, we are different than culture.” This is a frankly bizarre rhetorical move, especially coming on the heels of the argument that the Christian world (which for the past 1700 years is tantamount to western culture) has always been uniform in its heteronormativity.

Notice that this is written during the only slice of time in the history of the Church of God Movement where it would make even the slightest sense. It was not counter cultural to be anti-LGBT in the 1880s, nor in the mid 20th century, nor in 1979, nor in 1993, nor even in 2014. One can only plausibly make an argument that being pro-LGBT has become culturally dominant in the years since the 2015 Obergefell decision, and that rests primarily on the thin grounds that 1) courts have begun to uphold basic civil rights for LGBT people and 2) advertisers have begun to target pro-LGBT demographics. These are the result of the victories of LGBT civil rights activism that has been in process (and deeply counter cultural) for many decades. These are also highly tenuous, as a recent spate of anti-trans bills in state legislatures and corporations capitulating to conservative outrage have shown.

To make a comparison, it was for a long time counter cultural in the United States to oppose the institution of slavery, to oppose segregation, to support interracial marriage. As recently as the mid-1990s, a majority of Americans opposed interracial marriage. Today the overwhelming majority of Americans support interracial marriage.<sup>7</sup> This is a great victory in cultural persuasion, but what is the relevance of these statistics for a counter cultural holiness movement?

I believe that the core of our holiness witness is typified by individuals like Val Clear and Vern Norris, who in the 1970s, prior to any G.A. resolution, were advocating understanding of concepts like sexual orientation and for the civil rights for gays and lesbians in the United States. This despite how counter cultural their perspective was, how little rewarded, and their own status as respectable academics not personally embroiled in the struggles of the communities they advocated on behalf of. I find it needlessly dismissive to suggest that anyone in the Church of God today advocating for LGBT affirmation is taking the easy path, ceasing to be salt, “good for nothing” and “to be pitied.”

In short, I find that Pastor Matas presumes much more than he realizes about what “the Bible clearly says.” The few passages in the Bible that directly address the subject say little about it, and scholars of the Ancient Near East rightly point out that they condemn specific practices that they are familiar with. Whether those condemnations apply directly or only indirectly to non-identical lifestyles and practices in contemporary society is a question that requires a more sophisticated discussion. The Chog Affirm statement only asks that the Church of God remain true to its convictions as a place where people who agree on the centrality of Jesus can have that discussion.

---

<sup>7</sup> Justin McCarthy, “U.S. Approval of Interracial Marriage at New High of 94%,” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/354638/approval-interracial-marriage-new-high.aspx>.