



# A Theological Reflection of '*Imago Dei*' as a Response to 'LGBTQ' Advocates

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## Abstract

The paper aims to engage a theological reflection of *Imago Dei* as a response to some of the claims of the LGBTQ movement. The reason is consequent to one of the Postmodern challenges, which is an assault challenging the sex of human beings as either male or female. There are arguments for and against the notion that people are created either gay, bisexual, transgender, or straight, for which some are advocating for equal rights and recognition. The paper examined the LGBTQ concept and some of the claims of its advocates. With an analytical approach, the paper submits that being gay, lesbian, or transgender is a choice premised on distorted thinking patterns that have nothing to do with natural inclination. The paper concluded by affirming that human beings as the image of God imply the substantive, relational and functional purposes of humanity, which can only be achieved in two sexes, male and female, making up the whole of humanity for marriage, family life, and community. The implication is that the Church should be intentional in the promotion of sexual education according to biblical teachings.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ, *Imago Dei*, Sexual Orientation, Image of God.

## Introduction

In recent times, there has been an attack on the sexes of human beings. The assault has become a reality in the sense that people directly queried that human beings are a creation made either male or female based on the roles played by individuals. This thought pattern, due to the influence of postmodernism, has secretly crept into the contemporary Church consequent to the relativity of approaches people now engage in the practice of their marriages. Besides the fact that some Christians now consider it appropriate to indulge in gay practices. The worldview of publicly addressing someone as gay has come to the point that some people are advocating for this erroneous belief that the Apostle Paul called people with vile passions (Romans 1:21-27). Some worthy probing questions will be: what claims do the advocates of the movement have, and how valid are these claims? What theological response avails for the ideology? Furthermore, what implications does it have for the contemporary Church? These are issues of concern the paper seeks to address.

The erroneous belief system of people claiming to be Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) is posing a significant challenge in that the gender of human beings is being quarried as either male or female, according to God's creation order. Sympathisers of the claim have led some to advocate for acceptance and equal rights among humanity. To this end, the paper aims to provide a theological response to the challenge. The purpose is to adopt the concept of *Imago Dei* as a theological reflection



in advancing a response to the claims of LGBTQ advocates. To achieve this goal, the paper discusses a brief understanding of the LGBTQ concept, and it also advances some of the claims of its advocates. It then discusses a response to the allegations using a theological reflection of *Imago Dei*, and finally, it draws some implications for the contemporary Church.

### **Understanding the LGBTQ Concept**

This section of the paper is focused on a brief discussion to clarify the LGBTQ<sup>1</sup> concept.

According to Vanderbilt University, a private research university in Nashville, Tennessee, USA, the LGBTQ terms are defined as stated below:

**LESBIAN:** Usually refers to a woman who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation toward women. Some nonbinary people also identify with this term.

**GAY:** Used in some cultural settings to represent men who are attracted to men in a romantic, erotic and/or emotional sense. Not all men who engage in same-gender sexual behavior identify as gay, and as such this label should be used with caution.

**BISEXUAL or BI:** A person who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction to more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree.

**TRANSGENDER:** A person whose sense of personal identity or gender does not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth, or does not conform to gender stereotypes. Sexual orientation varies and is not dependent on gender identity.

**QUEER:** a multi-faceted word that is used in different ways and means different things to different people. 1) Attraction to people of many genders. 2) Don't conform to cultural norms around gender and/or sexuality. 3) A general term referring to all non-heterosexual people. Some within the community, however, may feel the word has been hatefully used against them for too long and are reluctant to embrace it. (see <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/resources/definitions>)

According to An Ally's Guide to Terminology, the abbreviation LGBTQ means Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer. When shortened to gay, it refers to gay and transgender. It is, however, necessary to further clarify each term for comprehension. Firstly, gay is an adjective, not a noun, as its proponents claim it. So it is sometimes used as "a term encompassing people with gay, lesbian and bisexual orientations, though lesbian is clearer when talking only about a woman to woman"(An Ally's Guide to Terminology). It is further pertinent to state that one may refer to anyone in this category as 'gay people' or 'gay man' or 'lesbian couple' or 'bisexual people' or, better still, he is gay or she is a lesbian. The reason is that their perception of what they feel about their sexual attraction makes them conclude that it is their personality. Hence, calling them homosexual reduces their entire lives to purely sexual terms. Secondly, bisexuals refer to individuals "Who are emotionally and sexually attracted to and may partner with, both males and females."(Providing Services and Supports for Youth)

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<sup>1</sup> The paper recognizes that LGBTQIA+ which is the Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. The additional "+" stands for all of the other identities not encompassed in the short acronym. However, it focuses on the first four (LGBTQ).



Thirdly, the term transgender refers “to people whose gender identity (the sense of gender that every person knows inside) or gender expression is different from their sex at birth.” (*An Ally’s Guide to Terminology*) In other words, *transgender individuals are people who indicate a gender identity different from their birth-assigned gender*. At some point in their lives, transgender individuals decide they must live their lives as the gender they know themselves to be and often transition to living as that gender. More so, since transgender is also an adjective and not a noun, one must be careful not to call someone ‘a transgender’ nor add ‘ed’ to the word to become transgender. It will connote a condition of some kind not deserving. A person identifying as a specific gender should be referred to using adjectives consistent with the gender expression portrayed by nature and appearance.

A synopsis of the LGBTQ concept reveals that none has a natural inclination. Instead, each has its premise on a subjective perception of an individual's sexuality, different from the sexual affiliation given by God at birth. Having established this fact, it is, therefore, necessary to turn to the claims of those in the practice of LGBTQ and their advocates.

### **Claims of LGBTQ Advocates**

According to Sprigg, LGBTQ activist groups and a growing portion of major social institutions have come to adopt a view of sexual orientation that one might call the “gay identity” paradigm. The foundations of this paradigm are built on the following beliefs, which have developed into their claims.

The first claim of LGBTQ advocates is that “sexual orientation is an innate personal characteristic, like race.”(Sprigg, n.d.: 2) The claim stands on the assumption that the various aspects of sexual orientation will always be consistent with one another. However, a person can scrutinise what they mean by sexual orientation because sexual orientation is not a unitary phenomenon with a direct meaning. To start with, Sprigg argues that all researchers in human sexuality understand that ‘sexual orientation’ is an umbrella term for three quite different things. He listed the three as:

First, one’s sexual attraction is a person sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex, the same sex, or both. The second element of sexual orientation is sexual conduct, meaning what sex acts an individual chooses to engage in and with whom. The third element of sexual orientation is sexual self-identification; does an individual think of himself or herself and/or publicly identify himself or herself to others as “gay,” “lesbian,” “straight,” “bisexual,” or something else. (Sprigg, n.d.:2)

A critical look into these elements in the description of sexual orientation calls attention to the fact that an individual’s sexual orientation does not in any way suggest the notion of an innate characteristic (see, Ngun and Vilain 2014). Corroborating Sprigg, the American Psychology Association also held all of these three definitions of sexual orientation and added a fourth element, which is ‘membership in a community.’ The fourth element, as stated by the American Psychological Association, is “Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions to men, women or both sexes. Sexual orientation also denotes a person’s sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviours and relationships in a community of others who share those attractions” (Sexual Orientation). Thus, when those in the practice of LGBTQ and their advocates claim that sexual orientation is an innate characteristic, it is a faulty claim because none of the four elements of the definition bears the notion of inherent characteristics. Each individual chooses whatever form of sexual attraction he or she feels as influenced by some external forces, which, of course, may contradict one’s natural



sexual identity as male or female. Sexual identity is thus mainly how one labels themselves.

The second claim of the LGBTQ movement is that “Social conservatives ‘hate’ gay people for ‘who they are.’”(Sprigg, n.d.: 2). The claim implies that people are either gay or not gay, so to criticise homosexuality is to denigrate some people for ‘who they are.’ On examination, the claim is first subjective because of the emotional claim for hatred. Judging issues based on personal emotion is questionable because emotions are not always constant. Secondly, the subjectivity has led them to a distortive thought pattern and the illusion of believing that they are created gay, ‘who they are.’ If not, why should someone who naturally bears a sexual identity as either a male or a female feel that they are made to be gay or bisexual? By the phrase ‘who they are’, they assume that God made them that way, and the assumption cannot be substantiated with fact.

The third claim of LGBTQ advocates is that “People are born either straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual” (Sprigg, n.d.: 4). The claim dovetails with the second warrant above. It is a paradigm based on a belief that same-sex attractions develop because of a biological (and likely a genetic) characteristic that is present from birth and cannot be changed during the life course (Carroll & Fernandez, 2010). As dicey as this may appear, there is no concrete scientific proof of it. According to Mayer and McHugh, “One may not be able to say that there is no genetic influence on the development of same-sex attractions, but there is a significant difference between a trait being genetically influenced and genetically determined”(2016, 34). Recent research involving identical twins (who have a similar genetic makeup) has shown such low concordance rates (the percentage of cases in which both twins identify as homosexual when at least one of them does) that the idea of homosexuality as a fixed, genetically determined trait must be considered to have been disproved (Mayer & McHugh, 34). For instance, a 2002 study in the United States of America showed concordance rates of only 5.3 per cent for female twins and 6.7 per cent for males. The authors declared that this finding “does not suggest genetic influence independent of social context. . . . Our results support the hypothesis that less gendered socialisation in early childhood and pre-adolescence shapes subsequent same-sex romantic preferences.”(Bearman & Brückner, 2002:1180). More so, some investigators have suggested non-genetic biological theories for the origin of same-sex attractions, such as hormonal influences or intra-uterine experiences (Hines, 2011). However, none have been definitively scientifically proven. They remain the subject of legitimate scholarly debate.

The fourth claim is that “...gay people can never become straight. Therapy to change someone’s sexual orientation never works and is always harmful”(Sprigg, 5). The claim relates to the question of the origins of same-sex attractions, the question of whether such attractions can change over time as a result of therapeutic intervention. The assumption, however, flies in the face of a large body of both empirical and anecdotal evidence. Sprigg asserts that “There are many psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, and therapists who have reported success in treating clients for unwanted same-sex attractions. Much of this research and clinical experience has been reported in the peer-reviewed scholarly literature for decades” (Sprigg, n.d.: 5). In addition, many people have specified personal testimony to changes in any or all of the measures of their sexual orientation.

Claim number five is that “Gay sex is no more harmful than any other type of sex.” The most obvious evidence of this is the harmful physical health consequences directly from homosexual acts. An HIV Surveillance Report asserts that the most dramatic of those negative consequences is the highly elevated risk of HIV infection and AIDS among men who have sex with men (MSM). According to the report on HIV Surveillance conducted in 2017, “Of all the Americans who have died of AIDS since the epidemic began over three decades ago, more than 300,000 of them have been men whose only known risk factor



was that they had sex with other men.” The study's finding agrees with the report of the American Centres for Disease Control (CDC). The report says that men who have sex with men account for “more than two-thirds of all new HIV infections each year. For instance, 70 per cent, or an estimated 26,200 infections in 2014, indicates a rate more than 44 times that of other men. (CDC Fact Sheet: HIV among Gay and Bisexual Men) Citing a reason that is no mystery or bogus, the CDC confirms, “Anal sex is the highest-risk sexual behaviour” (Gay and Bisexual Men’s Health: HIV/AIDS), and the tendency of men who have sex with men to have multiple sex partners is more effective at spreading it. These illustrations and reports are scientific shreds of evidence that gay sex is more harmful, causing more hazardous health-related diseases than the natural way of sexual intimacy between a male and a female.

Looking critically at these claims suggests that one or two appear as a re-echo of another. For instance, to say that sexual orientation is an innate personal characteristic is similar to saying that people are born either straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The emphasis in both claims is that being gay is inborn or natural to them. To this end, this writer merges the five claims into the following. One, sexual orientation is an innate personal characteristic for people who are born either straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Second, gay people cannot become straight for therapy to change someone’s sexual orientation, which never works. Third, gay sex is no more harmful than any other type of sex. These three synthesised claims that the paper seeks to respond to in the next section using a theological reflection of *Imago Dei*.

### **Responding to LGBTQ Claims through a Theological Reflection of *Imago Dei***

This section uses a theological reflection of *Imago Dei* to respond to the three synthesised claims of LGBTQ advocates discussed above. *Imago Dei* is a concept that discusses humanity as being created in the image of God. Erickson (2013) argues that there are various interpretations of *Imago Dei*, otherwise referred to as the man in the image of God, which can be classified into three general ways. The first interpretation of *Imago Dei* according to Erickson, is substantive, which refers to some physical, psychological or spiritual characteristics. It reveals the intricate aspects of an individual, evident to all and not concealed (2013: 460 – 462). The second interpretation is relational, indicating human enablement to relate to other beings. The individual relates with himself/herself and, with such understanding, relates with other human beings as a person. The basis of such a relationship is that the individual is considered male or female. The third is functional, which centres on what makes humans function and exercise dominion (Erickson, 463 – 467). By God’s design, an individual functions based on his/her body metabolism with assigned roles congruent with other people of like body make-ups. Concurring these three categories, Pyne (2003) avers image as relational and moral capacity, image as a community, and image as a dominion. Invariably, the three interpretations of *Imago Dei* as substantive, relational and functional stand out in scholarship. Hence, the writer’s response to the three synthesised claims earlier discussed will be in the light of these three understandings of man in the image of God.

The substantive, which reflects Erickson’s position, emphasises that *Imago Dei* “Is something in the very nature of man, in the way he was made. It refers to something man is rather than something he has or does” (2013, 513). He argues that, by contrast, the focus of the relational and functional views is actually on the consequences of the image rather than on the image itself. Although very closely linked to the image of God, experiencing relationships and exercising dominion are not themselves that image. Erickson’s view addresses the fact that the very nature of man remains in what God made man to be, and in this case, it is male and female. Being made as male and female also affirms human beings as relational, which Jesus Christ also corroborates in Matthew 19:4 – 5, “That at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this



reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” (NIV)

On the relational interpretation, Nihinlola (2018), taking a contrary position to Erickson’s position but agreeing to the three interpretations, subscribes to the relational interpretation of man in the image of God. The reason is that he believes the central focus of human life is that of a relational being; he/she relates with God, with other human beings, and with other creations of God. Supporting Nihinlola’s assertion, Ferguson (1988) maintains that of the five significant directions in the history of theology concerning the concept of *Imago Dei*, the fifth view affirms that the image of God is societal in nature. He argues that “This view goes back to Emil Brunner who postulated that the image is not a possession of an isolated individual, but rather it belongs to a man-in-community living in a state Brunner called “existence-for-love” (Ferguson, 1998:328). Brunner (1889–1966) was a Swiss Reformed theologian who along with Karl Barth, is commonly linked with neo-orthodoxy. The same emphasis manifests in Karl Barth (1886-1968) who opines that the societal nature of the image is primarily in male-female relationships.

Expanding on the nature of human beings, Nihinlola (2018) advances two main issues. The first issue is that God creates human beings as male and female. Drawing two implications from this point, he argues that first, both male and female equally reflect the image of God. One of the privileges and responsibilities of being made in the image of God is that the two sexes together make up our full humanity. Second, man and woman were created for marriage/family life in particular and communal life in general (Nihinlola, 72). He affirms that man is not made for a solitary, self-sufficient existence; man was formed to be a social animal. It is a theology of human life that must speak to marriage and family life. Invariably, an individual’s sexuality was created to be full of humanity when it is man and woman. Anything outside of the view contradicts God’s natural designation and purpose of humanity as male and female, just as Jastrum argues, “To be created in the image of God includes being created by God for his purposes, according to his calling, or vocation” (2013:39) Therefore, man/woman in the image of God carries the idea that man’s image and existence is for love, including sexual expression of it, in accordance to God original design to be between a man and a woman in a marital relationship. Sexual relationship and intercourse are strictly, initially, and deliberately meant for expression between a male and a female who are marriage partners, and there is nothing harmful about it (Genesis 4:1; 1 Corinthians 7:1–5). It is when expressed outside of God’s established way that it becomes harmful. Therefore, any other form of expression of this instinct will be a distortion of God’s plan and purpose for the creation of males and females (Luke 16:18). How does having gay sex fit into this?

The functional interpretation of man/woman in the image of God agrees with Nihinlola’s second issue. “Man’s creation is for marriage and family life. Marriage and family are two closely related universal human institutions” (2018, 74). What this means is that marriage for the Christian is for three purposes: companionship, sexual purity and procreation. Supporting Nihinlola, another author, Onuche (2013) maintains that marriage is held very sacred and in very high esteem and of a very ontological and moral value. In African moral thought, marriage and procreation belong together. Without procreation, marriage is incomplete — the unity which attempts to recapture, at least in part, the lost gift of immortality (Gbadegesin, 1998:51). Marriage is an obligation through which an individual donates the seeds of life towards man’s struggle against the loss of original immortality. Biologically, both the husband and wife are replicated in their children, thus perpetuating the chain of humanity.

Similarly, the pro-creational purpose of marriage can never be actualised within the context of gay practice as it will negate the holy character of God deposited in His image: humanity. Musopole addresses the issue thus, “To be made in the image of God is to



share in the character of God, the ability to be true to self as human beings. No wonder the lack of integrity and hence a life of contradiction is one of the symptoms of being under the power of sin, and therefore under subhuman conditions”(1993:110) It is, therefore, germane to assert that being created in the image of God places a functional responsibility on man to demonstrate the nature and character of his/her maker. Any opposing opinion may result from human depravity consequent to human disobedience to God. Hence, the distortion and illusion of redefining a person’s sexual orientation cannot be adjusted to be normal. Oyelakin (2017) opines that the cause of the disposition and the way out as:

“After the fall, the human race became morally corrupt by nature and lacked spiritual discernment. The fall resulted in a total breakdown of law and order and evidential manifestations of acts of rebellion against the commandments of God. The spiritual standing of human beings with God and sense of moral uprightness has been greatly hampered. People need special help and intervention from God through Christ to live a life of freedom from sin and death.”(61-62)

Therefore, it is necessary to affirm that there are appropriate spiritual and psychological treatments for gay people which could normalise their erroneous perceptions and behaviour.

From the preceding discussion on *Imago Dei*, it is evident that all three claims of LGBTQ advocates negate the divine purpose, plan and order. The first claim that ‘sexual orientation is an innate personal characteristic for people who are born either straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual’ is as a result of this refuted because the substantive meaning and nature of man (humanity) in the image of God establish that the Creator made humans with a specific gender as either male or female.

The second claim, ‘gay people cannot become straight for therapy to change someone’s sexual orientation, never works.’ is also invalid because ‘gay people’ are created straight, and that is who they are. By the nature of creation, every individual made in the image has their natural sexual identity (or gender) that is assigned to them, which matches their body metabolism, including their sexual instinct. The concept of human beings as created in the image of God as relational beings implies that a man/woman is a moral being with the expectation to live and relate within a community where an acceptable ethic will govern all. If God made man either straight or gay, as claimed by the LGBTQ advocates, there would be a contradiction and no equal moral judgment for people’s actions, especially in sexual matters. The submission refutes the claim. No human being is created to be gay.

The third claim, ‘gay sex is no more harmful than any other type of sex,’ is refuted by the functional nature of humanity as created in the image of God. The issue is not on whether gay sex is less harmful than regular sexual intercourse between a married man and his woman since scientific studies and reports earlier discussed have debunked the claim, the outright effects of sexual pervasion on the pro-creational function of perpetuating the chain of humanity raises a critical concern. Consequent to the preceding reflection, it is evident that none of the claims of those in the practice of LGBTQ and its advocates can be considered valid. These arguments fault all the claims. However, then, what implications does this reflection have for the contemporary Church? The next section of this paper will address this question.

### **Implications of LGBTQ Claims for the Contemporary Church**

In this section, the paper will draw some implications of the reflection for the contemporary Church. The first implication is that the contemporary Church should come to the



awareness that the LGBTQ concept is a description of sexual orientation that some people willingly choose to practice. God did not create anyone like that; that is not 'who they are' as they claim. Hence, anyone who indulges in any of the forms should be adequately addressed using the appropriate adjective. For example, a person may say that a boy/girl indulges in gay practice instead of saying 'he is gay.'

The second implication is that the Church and educational institutions should promote gender socialisation among its members, especially among children. Both parents (father and mother) should be readily available to relate with their children. The reason is consequent to a recent study mentioned in the paper, which submits that "less gendered socialisation in early childhood and pre-adolescence shapes subsequent same-sex romantic preferences" (Bearman & Brückner, 1182) Of course, recently, there has been an increase in the number of people who are paedophilia in society; this should not be allowed to hinder proper and adequate sexual orientation and development of children and adolescents. Once that is omitted, they are likely to develop a feeling or thought pattern that will have devastating effects on the children afterwards in life.

The third implication is that the Church should emphasise that "One of the privileges and responsibilities of being made in the image of God is that the two sexes together make up our full humanity... (and that) man and woman were created for marriage/family life in particular and communal life in general" just as Nihinlola maintains (2018, 71 – 72). The Church must see that she re-echoes to her members that Christian marriage is God's ideal estate for humanity where sacrificial love, mutual respect and unity should abound. Therefore, all forms of single-parenting, distance marriage, separation, divorce, and 'baby-mama,'\*2 among others, should be seriously discouraged among Christians as they could lead to adverse effects like the 'gay identity' among their children.

The fourth implication is that the Church should, as a matter of urgency, embrace the teaching and promotion of sex education in the light of Biblical teachings. It will help curtail various erroneous sexual misconducts prevalent today. Churches should plan and execute special programs where teenagers and the youth would be free to ask questions and provide answers to their questions. It may serve as an avenue to discover those already in the practice of gay and other ungodly sexual habits. Furthermore, with this, counselling services should be provided for individuals who probably are found wanting.

## Conclusion

The paper has given a brief understanding of the LGBTQ concept. It has also advanced some of the claims of those in the practice of LGBTQ and its advocates. The claims were examined and responded to with a theological reflection of *Imago Dei* in three broad interpretations of substantive, relational and functional meaning and nature of the concept. It can, therefore, be concluded that being created in the image of God as male and female human beings does not allow for any form of sexual pervasion. Whatever form of sexual orientation anyone chooses to practice is a matter of choice that does not have any natural inclination. As Nihinlola puts it, "The two sexes together make up our full humanity... (and that) man and woman were created for marriage/family life in particular and communal life in general" (71 – 72). Living with and accepting the Creator's order of human beings as a male and a female in a marital relationship guarantees the actualisation of the functional role of procreation on earth. All other ideological views distort the original plan occasioned by human frailty.

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\* 'Baby-mama' is an ideological concept in which lady seeks to bear children without having and living with a particular husband.





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