

## RELIGION

# The Imago Dei Campaign: Evangelical Groups Say Gays Made in God's Image

By Elizabeth Dias | Jan. 20, 2014

Gays are created in the image of God. So are liberals. The rich. The undocumented. Unbelievers. Everyone, even, and most importantly, the people with whom you do not agree.

That's the message of the [Imago Dei Campaign](#), a new movement of prominent evangelical groups launched on Monday to erode the culture war battle lines that have helped define evangelical discourse for the better part of half a century. The Imago Dei, or Image of God, pledge is simple: "I recognize that every human being, in and out of the womb, carries the image of God; without exception. Therefore, I will treat everyone with love and respect."

Recognizing that every human is made in God's image may seem like an easy statement for evangelicals to agree on, but the contemporary political implications are deep. The campaign takes pains to clarify what "every human being" really means—"For the image of God exists in all human beings: black and white; rich and poor; straight and gay; conservative and liberal; victim and perpetrator; citizen and undocumented; believer and unbeliever."

The leader behind the movement, Rev. Samuel Rodriguez Jr., president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, says the goal is to change the narrative of evangelical engagement in the public square, especially when it comes to traditional culture war issues. Other heavy hitters have joined him. President of Focus on the Family Jim Daly, televangelist James Robison, producer of *The Bible Series* Roma Downey and her



David Goldman / AP

Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Coalition

husband, *Survivor* producer Mark Burnett, and vice president of the Liberty University Mat Staver have all signed on. The launch of the website was pegged to Martin Luther King Day as a reminder that the Biblical message and justice go hand in hand.

The Imago Dei signers are not making a political statement about hot-button issues like gay marriage. But the Imago Dei campaign does mark the first time, Daly says, that Focus on the Family—a group that opposes gay marriage—has publically stated that gays are created in God's image alongside straight individuals. "People have said love the sinner, hate the sin," Daly explains. "So often I think that has fallen woefully short, and it certainly appears like we are hating the sinner as well as the sin. And that is the difference—you've got to recalibrate and say I know you are made in God's image, and therefore you deserve my respect."

That change in tone is significant for organizations that have used the image of God doctrine to defend their opposition to gay marriage. A position paper still posted on the Focus on the Family website says: "Focus on the Family is dedicated to defending the honor, dignity and value of the two sexes as created in God's image—intentionally male and female—each bringing unique and complementary qualities to sexuality and relationships." When asked whether or not that position page would change given the Imago Dei Campaign, Daly did not say, but he clarified that affirming the image of God in people does not condone their behavior.

Rodriguez says that too often evangelicals in the United States have become known for what they oppose, and not for what they propose, and younger generations have had enough. "The church of Jesus Christ and the word hatred should not even appear in the same sentence," Rodriguez says. "What if every single person can recognize the image of God in the other? Wouldn't that bring down the noise of the hateful rhetoric? Wouldn't that build a firewall between intolerance and bullying? Wouldn't that build a firewall against extremism?"

It's a fresh take on an old spiritual principle. The image of God doctrine, or *imago dei* doctrine as it is called in theological circles, has been central to Judeo-Christian faith from the beginning, and theologians long used Bible passages to explain the core dignity all people share. It comes first from the Genesis creation story, which says that humanity is made in the image of God: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." The Apostle Paul picked up on the idea in the New Testament, calling Jesus the "image of the invisible God, firstborn of all creation."

The inclusion of the "straight and gay" clause is particularly bold given the heated political climate over gay marriage in the evangelical community, and that is precisely the point. Rodriguez, Daly and others hope that the Imago Dei message sets a new tone for evangelical conversations about controversial political topics. "We have broken this down into simply battle language, culture war, and I think it is frankly unhealthy," Daly explains. "We need to express the Christian message in a different way."

The Imago Dei may not go far enough for activists who want evangelical groups like Focus on the Family to completely reverse their position on gay marriage. But it is a step reminiscent of Pope Francis' now historic "Who

am I to judge” tone-shift on the gay community. Rodriguez hopes the Imago Dei will take hold with similar weight. “Can we go beyond having a confrontation, can we have a conversation that is better than a debate?” he asks. “We are coming into the room as equals because we are both made in the image of God. It changes everything.”

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