

Obama's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage Divides Black Leaders

Written by Hazel Trice Edney
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Most Say President's Position Won't Hurt Him With Black Voters

– President Barack Obama's announcement that he supports same-sex marriage for gay and lesbian couples has sparked heated debate among Black leaders. Though some predict his position will not erode Black support for him at the polls, others say they're not so sure.

"We'd make a mistake to be a one-issue people. That would be a tremendous mistake," said the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr., who agrees with President Obama on the issue. "Equality is indivisible. We live under the law whether it's equality of races or gender or religion, we live under the law."

In an interview, Jackson ticked off a list of issues that he believes overrides same-sex marriage in terms of importance and interest to African-American voters, including the job that Obama had done on the economy.

"We were losing 800,000 jobs a month; now it's running up; the auto industry was gone, now it's born again; the Ledbetter act - equal pay for women - was signed into law; he raised Pell grants for students and fought to lower tuition," Jackson said. Jackson added the President's sensitivity toward racial injustices, including his "positive statement to Trayvon Martin's family."

But, some Black leaders find themselves doing damage control this week.

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"I was absolutely in shock because I couldn't understand the timing of it and why it was necessary. It wasn't a national issue or agenda he needed to respond to. I don't know why he used his energy in this direction," said the Rev. Dr. Jamal Bryant, pastor of the Baltimore-based Empowerment Temple with a membership of more than 5,000. Bryant says he adamantly disagrees with the President's position and will hold a national phone conference this week to discuss the matter with leading Black clergy from several denominations.

"I'm a member of the AME church. We have in our book of discipline that same sex union same sex marriages are not welcomed in our denomination. And any pastor that performs a same sex wedding [could be considered] for suspension and the book of discipline also says that you can't even hold a ceremony in your church," he said.

About 10 years ago, the Council of Bishops of the predominately Black AME (African Methodist Episcopal) church, which boasts 2.3 million members and 7,000 congregations, reaffirmed that the official position of the AME Church is "not in favor of the ordination of openly gay persons to the ranks of the clergy of our church," stated Bishop Richard Franklin Norris in a letter that he ordered read in every AME church.

Despite his disagreement with the President's position, Bryant, who is leading an "Empowerment Movement" to register millions of Black voters, says he hopes the new controversy does not hurt him politically and agrees with Jackson that there is so much else to consider.

"I hope that the African-American community is larger than just one issue. I will say that it will have an impact and preachers are very much split heading into Sunday and how they will address it because we've covered and prayed for him the last four years, but this is something that is counter-culture to the general Black church traditions," he said.

Meanwhile, an Open Letter from civil rights leaders and clergy was circulated to the media by the Rev. Al Sharpton, who has long been in support of the President's position.

The letter, circulated by e-mail encouraged "a civil debate on this issue and to encourage all

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individuals to keep all issues of import to our communities in mind in the days ahead.”

It continues, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.’ As leaders in today’s Civil Rights Movement, we stand behind the President Obama’s belief that same sex couples should be allowed to join in civil marriages. We also affirm that individuals may hold different views on this issue but still work together towards our common goals: fair housing and equitable education, affordable health care and eradicating poverty, all issues of deep and abiding concern for our communities. President Obama stated his view that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry. This is a view that we concur with, because as civil rights leaders we cannot fight to gain rights for some and not for all.”

The letter was signed by Sharpton; Melanie Campbell, president/CEO of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation; Rev. Joseph Lowery, civil rights icon and president-emeritus of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; and Julian Bond, chairman-emeritus of the NAACP.

The controversy came front and center last week after Vice President Joseph Biden publically stated that he was in support of same sex marriage and that the president’s position was ‘evolving’ - a move that turned the media spotlight and pressure on President Obama to make his position clear. He had previously supported civil unions for gay couples.

In an interview with ABC News’ Robin Roberts, the President made it clear:

“At a certain point, I’ve just concluded that-- for me personally, it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that-- I think same-sex couples should be able to get married,” Obama said. He added that he had not said anything because he did not want to nationalize the issue and the decision should be made by states.

“And what you’re seeing is, I think, states working through this issue-- in fits and starts, all across the country. Different communities are arriving at different conclusions, at different times. And I think that’s a healthy process and a healthy debate. And I continue to believe that this is an issue that is gonna be worked out at the local level, because historically, this has not been a federal issue, what’s recognized as a marriage.”

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The Sharpton letter underscored that the President's position was personal and not meant to influence neither federal laws nor churches which are constitutionally protected by separation of church and state.

"The President made clear that his support is for civil marriage for same-sex couples, and he is fully committed to protecting the ability of religious institutions to make their own decisions about their own sacraments," the letter states.

The political damage to the Obama re-election bid remains to be seen.

Howard University Political Scientist Wilmer Leon III says he believes there will be little backlash among Black voters.

"The repercussions will be negligible," he said in an interview. "Basically, I don't think he's going to lose any significant support within the community even though there are certain ministers who are homophobic; anti-gay marriage, who will speak out heavily against this. But, at the end of the day, those who are going to support the president will continue to support the president."

The key to the Obama position, he said, is that it does not affect the church.

"I was raised Catholic. I am a Catholic and I was taught to believe that a marriage is between a man and a woman. Personally, I disagree with same sex marriage. But, I am not arrogant enough to believe that my perspective should control other people's lives. And that to me is the problem with those who are so adamantly opposed to and get so exercised about same sex marriage," Leon said.

Despite the clear separation of church and state, some clergy believe the President's statement will be hurtful to the cause of the Gospel because of the power of his position.

Rev. Anthony Evans, president/CEO of the National Black Church Initiative, felt so strongly that

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he got out in front of the President, issuing a press release shortly after Biden's statement.

"The National Black Church Initiative calls on President Obama to Declare his Support for Jobs for Black People Not for Gay Marriage," said the headline on the May 8 news release. The President made his statement on May 9.

"The National Black Church Initiative, a faith-based coalition of 34,000 churches comprised of 15 denominations and 15.7 million African Americans, is sad to see that the Obama administration is sending the gay marriage political trail balloon up again," Evans said in the statement. "We love our gay brothers and sisters, but the black church will never support gay marriage. It is and it always will be against the ethics and teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Evans continues, "The current move by the Obama administration on same-sex marriage will cost him support from the Black church. The administration knows all too well that even though we love the President, the black church will never support same sex marriage."

Evans predicts the President could "lose 15 to 25 percent of the Black Christian vote. The Black Church will never support anyone or any issues that go against our personal faith and belief in God, Christ Jesus and the Bible."

The controversy is red meat for right wing Christian conservatives who are already opposed to the Obama presidency. Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, stated in a weekend commencement speech at conservative Liberty University that he believes marriage is between "one woman and one man."

President Obama, the nation's first African-American president, received about 95 percent of Black voter support in his 2008 election. Rev. Jackson said he thinks reasonable Black voters will not be swayed from their support.

"You got to look at the box score," Jackson said. "You look at the end totals and you look at the alternatives."

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