



Has Obama Turned His Back on Gays?

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President-elect Barack Obama's decision to invite Southern California megachurch Pastor Rick Warren to give the opening invocation at his inauguration on January 20 has sparked an avalanche of criticism from LGBT activists and elected officials - as well as from other liberal and left-leaning Democrats - who have characterized the decision as a slap in the face of gay Americans, a naïve effort to woo Christian evangelists, or both.

Still, other famous gay and lesbian voices, including rocker Melissa Etheridge, have embraced Obama's decision, while, from the other end of the spectrum, some are questioning why religious leaders of any stripe should take part in a civic event of such moment.

In the week since inaugural planners announced Obama's choice of Warren, the mainstream media has shorthanded the problem the gay community has with the popular pastor - whose book "The Purpose-Driven Life" was a huge bestseller - by saying he opposes marriage equality for same-sex couples. Just about the only additional detail press accounts have bothered to mention is his active support for California's Proposition 8.

In fact, Warren's views on homosexuality are considerably more troublesome than simple opposition to legal equality for same-sex couples. In a video interview December 15 on Beliefnet.com, a faith-based Internet site owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, Warren explained his opposition to same-sex marriage by saying, "I am opposed to having a brother and a sister be together and call that a marriage. I am opposed to an older guy marrying a child and calling that a marriage. I am opposed to one guy having multiple wives and calling that a marriage." Asked by the Beliefnet correspondent whether he believes "those are equivalent to gays getting married," Warren responded, "Oh, I do."

In a December 19 interview with Ann Curry of "Dateline NBC," Warren said, "I've had many gay friends tell me, 'Well, Rick, why shouldn't I have multiple sexual partners, it's the natural thing to do.' Well just because it seems natural doesn't mean it's best for you or society. I'm naturally inclined to have sex with every beautiful woman I see, but that doesn't mean it's the right thing to do.... I think that's part of maturity. I think it's part of delayed gratification. I think it's part of character."

The president-elect has faced questions of his own since his team announced Warren's role at the inauguration. Asked at a Chicago press conference why he was inviting someone whose attitudes were so at odds with his own to play such a high-profile role in his first day in office, Obama said, "Well, let me start by talking about my own views. I think it is no secret that I am a fierce advocate for equality for gay and lesbian Americans. It is something that I have been consistent on and something that I intend to continue to be consistent on during my presidency."

He went on to argue, however, that unity was at the heart of the choice.

"What I have also said is that it is important for America to come together even though we may have disagreements on certain social issues," Obama said. "There are going to be a wide range of viewpoints that are presented, and that's how it should be, because that's what America's about, that's part of the magic of this country is that we are diverse and noisy and opinionated."

The president-elect mentioned that Warren invited him to participate in a World AIDS Day event in 2006 at the pastor's Saddleback Church, "despite his awareness that I held views that were entirely contrary to his when it came to gay and lesbian rights, when it came to issues like abortion." Obama also noted that the closing benediction will be delivered by the Reverend Dr. Joseph Lowery, an African-American Methodist minister who co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership conference with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Terming Warren's comments on marriage equality "degrading," Congressman Barney Frank, the out gay Massachusetts Democrat, issued a written statement the day after the pastor's appointment was announced, saying he was "disappointed," adding "the President-Elect has not simply invited Rev. Warren to give a speech as part of a series in which various views are presented. The selection of a member of the clergy to occupy this uniquely elevated position has always been considered a mark of respect and approval by those who are being inaugurated."

Christine Quinn, the out lesbian City Council speaker, wrote to the Presidential Inaugural Committee, voicing her "profound objection," stating, "In his acceptance speech, President-elect Obama called on all Americans to come together for the good of the country. The message of divisiveness and hatred preached by Pastor Warren stands in direct contrast to the President-elect's call."

Joe Solmonese, the president of the Human Rights Campaign, the Washington-based LGBT lobby, in a letter to Obama, argued, "Rev. Warren cannot name a single theological issue that he and vehemently anti-gay theologian James Dobson disagree on. Rev. Warren is not a moderate pastor who is trying to bring all sides together. Instead, Rev. Warren has often played the role of general in the cultural war waged against LGBT Americans."

By the weekend, Warren, at least, apparently felt the need for damage control. In a video message to his congregation posted on the Saddleback website on December 21, the pastor insisted that in mentioning marriage between siblings, between an adult and an underage person, and with multiple wives, he did not intend to compare gay unions to incest, pedophilia, or polygamy.

"I believe no such thing," Warren insisted, though later he added, "The gay view of sexuality is contrary to God's word. I do believe that God gives us a free choice, and he gives us a choice to obey his word or to disobey it."

A day later, Warren's critics noted that his church's website had been scrubbed of a notice that "someone unwilling to repent of their homosexual lifestyle would not be accepted as a member at Saddleback."

Jeff Lutes, the executive director of Soulforce, a group that aims to engage religious groups in dialogue about LGBT rights and social justice, knows something about Saddleback's resistance to accepting gays. In early 2008, the group, in tandem with several other LGBT organizations, reached out to six megachurches across the nation, Saddleback among them, in what they called "An American Family Outing," or, alternatively, "Can We Talk?" The aim was to have groups of LGBT families - gay and lesbian couples and their children - visit conservative evangelical churches to establish "dialogue."

Lutes wrote about his experience last week on the Bilerico.com blog site and this week told Gay City News, "While it's true that all six churches approached us carefully and tried to manage the situations and tried to protect their empires and their ministries, to me Saddleback was the least satisfying and most difficult to deal with. We felt led on and strung out."

Originally, Lutes wrote on Bilerico, Saddleback agreed that Warren, his wife Kay, and six members of his staff would have a meal with eight families, and then a smaller group drawn from

the families would sit down with church officials for a 90-minute meeting. That all changed, Lutes wrote, when Newsweek published "a single sentence" referring to the planned exchange. Suddenly, Saddleback pulled back, and Lutes ended up spending "hours" on the phone and in email exchanges with Warren's chief of staff.

In the end, Warren would agree only to a ten or 15-minute meeting with Lutes' family after a service at one of Saddleback's satellite churches; that encounter would be followed by a longer sit-down between other church officials and the eight families. As Lutes describes it, this denouement of months of negotiations approached farce. As Lutes' family waited near their pew after the agreed-upon service, he heard his name called, turned to see Warren approach him, and then "he hugged me, my partner, and our three children... and then walked away. No conversation. Minimal eye contact. Just an awkward hug and he was gone."

The eight families next had lunch with four church representatives - one of whom Lutes had the impression was a media consultant who had flown in for the day - after which each family was allowed to select only one member to sit down for the "dialogue" sought. Even that proved disappointing.

"We tried to share our stories," Lutes recalled, in a phone interview with Gay City News. "They didn't seem all that interested in our stories." What the Saddleback team was willing to talk about was the church's AIDS ministry, but in terms that Lutes felt suggested that the church could teach the families about advocacy regarding the epidemic, rather than the other way around.

"It felt very condescending," Lutes said.

As of press time, Saddleback Church had not responded to telephone and email requests for comment on Lutes' account.

Lutes' experiences with the limits of Warren's interest in dialogue about gay issues were echoed in comments Barney Frank made to MSNBC on December 22.

"Oh, I believe that he overestimates his ability to get people to put aside fundamental differences," Frank said of Obama's outreach to Warren. "I think he overestimates his ability to take people, particularly our colleagues on the right, and, sort of, charm them into being nice... To be honest, when he talks about being post-partisan, having seen these people and knowing what they would do in that situation, I suffer from post-partisan depression."

But other notable LGBT voices disagree.

Melissa Etheridge had never heard of Warren before last week's flap emerged, but as chance would have it, right after she saw the comments he had made about same-sex marriage, she learned he was the keynote speaker at a Muslim-American gathering she was performing at. Her manager reached out to Saddleback, and Warren called her the day of the event and told her what a big fan of hers he is.

"When we met later that night, he entered the room with open arms and an open heart. We agreed to build bridges to the future," Etheridge wrote on the Huffington Post. "Brothers and sisters the choice is ours now. We have the world's attention. We have the capability to create change, awesome change in this world, but before we change minds we must change hearts."

Conservative gay blogger Chris Crain echoed the notion that common ground - or at least the neutralizing of anti-gay rhetoric - is one possible outcome of Obama's invitation. "Even if you suspect the whole 'unity' thing is really just about politics, the selection of Warren still makes good sense, including for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans," he wrote on Newsweek.com. "It is a stroke of political brilliance to recruit a conservative megapastor in support of a president-elect who is arguably the most pro-gay, pro-choice, and progressive in our

history."

And longtime San Francisco AIDS activist Michael Petrelis, writing on his blog, characterized Warren's selection as "a golden opportunity presented on a silver platter to the gay community."

"Which of my leaders will initiate a discussion with Warren, who will play a significant role in future battles over gay marriage and our other struggles?" Petrelis wrote, challenging movement advocates. "Who among the brave gay leaders, either cowardly returning inauguration invitations or attending the event, will pick up the phone on January 21 and begin a conversation with Warren?"

But, for some gay leaders, enough is enough with the preachers. Bill Dobbs, a longtime gay and anti-war activist noted for his civil libertarian views, said, "The most obvious angle of this is: Why are preachers participating in this most important civic event?"

"The toxic effects of religiosity are what are at issue," he told Gay City News. "I don't think that having Joseph Lowery is any better at bringing about unity. Let's remember what preachers do. Their perspectives are based on faith and are not based in rationality or science. It's worrisome that so many people in this controversy have forgotten how important it is to keep religion out of the public sphere."

Dobbs was particularly critical of LGBT advocates who challenged Warren on religious grounds.

The Reverend Rebecca Voelkel of the National Religious Leadership Roundtable, a project of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said, in written statement, "My prayer is that Pastor Warren allow himself to repent of his hatred and harm to the LGBT community."

Debating Crain on Newsweek.com, Leah McElrath Renna, who blogs regularly on the Huffington Post, wrote of the individual selected to offer the inauguration invocation, "The person is charged with the responsibility of calling upon God for God's assistance on *all* of our behalf, and the reality is that Warren does not recognize lesbian and gay people as being spiritually whole or as having been created by God exactly how we are."

Yet, even as dedicated a secular organization as Americans United for Separation of Church and State could not refrain from specifically criticizing Warren, even as it echoed Dobbs' view that religious figures ought not be part of the formal inauguration ceremony at all.

"We have never thought it appropriate for there to be a religious element in these inauguration events," Barry Lynn, the group's executive director, told Gay City News. Still, he added, "There is so much about the Warren thing that is so disappointing. In some ways he is worse than Jerry Falwell."

Asked why the group's website blog seemed more focused on Warren's shortcomings than on the issue of keeping religion out of the official inauguration, Lynn said, "We always try to make both points."