

EBONY

Are Gay Rights Civil Rights?

By Julian Bond
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Of course they are.

“Civil rights” are positive legal prerogatives – the right to equal treatment before the law. These are rights shared by all – there is no one in the United States who does not – or should not - share in these rights.

Gay and lesbian rights are not “special rights” in any way. It isn’t “special” to be free from discrimination – it is an ordinary, universal entitlement of citizenship. The right not to be discriminated against is a common-place claim we all expect to enjoy under our laws and our founding document, the Constitution. That many had to struggle to gain these rights makes them precious – it does not make them special, and it does not reserve them only for me or restrict them from others.

When others gain these rights, my rights are not reduced in any way. Luckily, “civil rights” are a win/win game; the more civil rights are won by others, the stronger the army defending my rights becomes. My rights are not diluted when my neighbor enjoys protection from the law – he becomes my ally in defending the rights we share.

Objections to “gay rights” take many forms. For some, comparisons between the African-American civil rights movement and the movement for gay and lesbian rights seem to diminish our long historical struggle with all its suffering, sacrifices and endless toil. However, we ought to be flattered that our movement has provided so much inspiration for others, that it has been so widely imitated, and that our tactics, methods, heroines and heroes, even our songs, have been appropriated by or served as models for others.

No analogy between movements for rights is exact. African-Americans are the only Americans who were enslaved for more than two centuries, and people of color carry the badge of who we are on our faces. But we are far from the only people suffering

discrimination – sadly, so do many others. They deserve the law’s protections and civil rights, too.

Some who object to gay rights see homosexuality as a choice, but science has demonstrated conclusively that sexual disposition is inherent in some, not an option or alternative they’ve selected. In that regard, it exactly parallels race – I was born black and had no choice. I couldn’t and wouldn’t change it. Like race, our sexuality isn’t a preference – it is immutable, unchangeable, and the Constitution protects us all against prejudices and discrimination based on immutable differences.

Some who believe in Biblical literalism find sanction for their anti-homosexuality there, but selectively ignore Biblical injunctions to execute people who work on the Sabbath (Exodus 35:2) and to crack down on those who get haircuts (Leviticus 19:27) or who wear clothes with more than one kind of thread (19:19). There’s no Biblical mention of lesbianism – are we to think that male homosexuality is wrong but female homosexuality is not?

Many gays and lesbians worked side by side with me in the ‘60s civil rights movement. Am I to now tell them “thanks” for risking life and limb helping me win my rights – but they are excluded because of a condition of their birth? They cannot share now in the victories they helped to win?

Not a chance.