

**Of Pastors and Presidents:
Brief Reflections of Rick Warren's Inauguration Prayer and
Christian Participation in American Civil Religion**

by Rich Lusk

Rick Warren's participation in the inauguration ceremony of President Barack Obama was controversial from the moment it was announced. The "God and country" crowd couldn't stand the thought of an evangelical blessing the event with his presence, much less his prayers, since they oppose Obama squarely. Liberals were incensed that the world's best known conservative, Bible-believing pastor was going to be given such an important platform. Indeed, the selection alienated gays because Warren has been on the frontlines in fighting gay marriage legislation in California. Warren himself declined interviews before the event, saying he would simply pray the only way he knew how.

Christian participation in such events is indeed tricky. While Christian faith used to have a rather privileged, if unofficial, position in the American public square, that is no longer the case. The God (or god) who's name is invoked on our coins and in our pledge is now up for grabs. The shift to pluralism means that the specific, absolute truth claims of the gospel are taboo in the public square. Compounding this fact is that Obama, while coming from a quasi-Christian milieu, stresses tolerance over truth. He may indeed have some kind of Christian faith (as some of his private rhetoric suggests), but there are many indications (in both his policy views as well as his public rhetoric) that suggest his Christian faith is overshadowed, if not overrun, by an even stronger commitment to pluralism.

Faithful, orthodox Christians have always seen pluralism as a thin mask for idolatry. (I am using "pluralism" in the ideological, rather than descriptive, sense. Obviously, we have a plurality of faiths in America, and I do not believe non-Christians should be persecuted. But ideological pluralism forces specific religious truth claims out of the public square; the public square must be controlled by religiously neutral principles that are supposedly accessible to all persons.) Why do Christians see pluralism as idolatrous? The god of pluralism is not a Trinity. The god of pluralism did not send his son in human form to die on the cross. In pluralism, the Christian gospel gets swallowed up by a larger category of "religion"; it is, at most, one of many ways or paths to personal enlightenment and peace, but it is not *the way, the truth, the life*. The ultimate offense of Christians in our culture is that we do not believe in neutrality. We

believe that Jesus is the *only* true revelation of God and faith in him is the *only* way to enter eternal salvation. The gospel and pluralism simply cannot be mixed or synthesized in any way. To the extent that American civic religion is now pluralistic, it is idolatrous and stands condemned by the gospel. Religious neutrality is a damned myth.

That's not to say evangelical Christians have been consistent with this conviction at all times. Professed evangelical George Bush got himself into trouble with many other evangelicals when he participated in an inter-faith prayer service after 9/11. Such events recall the ungodly kings of Israel, who worshipped YHWH, but also paid homage to the pagan deities on the high places just to make sure the people were happy and the bases were all covered. Before the inauguration, there was some question what Warren would do. Would he play his cards as Bush had, giving up his Christian distinctives in the public spotlight? Or would he risk offense by rejecting the pluralist conception of God and by using Jesus' name? Would his prayer be Christian or American? Specific or generic?

But there is still another layer of complexity to the event. The historic inauguration service for the American President is deeply steeped in the rituals of Christendom, going all the way back to George Washington, who borrowed the service from the British coronation liturgy. Indeed, even though we have basically eliminated Christian prayer from graduations and pre-game ceremonies in our public school system, we have managed to keep prayers, pastors, and Bibles present in the single most visible political ritual in all of American society. In some shadowy way, Christendom still lives on because American Presidents still want their rule undergirded by the faith of the largest sector of the American populace. They want their regimes grounded in the gospel, whether consistently so or not. The service is so classically Christian, some have spoken of 'consecrating,' rather than merely 'inaugurating,' the President. Our ceremony looks more like the Pope crowning Charlemagne than it does like anything one would expect from a secular republic. It may have become a more pluralistic in recent years, but it is still *not* a religiously neutral event. Presidents need chaplains, and even in 2009, they look to the church to provide them. Presidents need a book to swear upon, and they still use Bibles.

Given all of this, what should we say about Christian participation in an event like the inauguration service? Was Warren right in accepting the invitation? And was his prayer suited to the occasion for a minister of the Christian gospel?

First, Christians should object to “praying” along with an adherent of another religion, e.g., we should not kneel or bow our heads while a Muslim leader gives a prayer to Allah. This is the issue at stake in Daniel 3, and the three young Jewish men show us the more excellent way. It’s one thing to treat another man with charity and respect in spite of his false faith; it’s another thing to actually join him in his idolatry. But this was not at issue in Warren’s participation.

Second, there is no problem with a Christian in the lead role, offering up prayers at mixed gatherings like an inauguration. The only alternative is to be an Anabaptist-style cultural drop-out. Sure, the “we” language of prayer gets a bit dicey and creates tensions given [1] the way Christians in our nation’s past have been prone to carelessly confuse the church’s “we” with America’s “we”; and [2] the way we relate to the powers that be is incredibly complex in our post-Christendom situation now that our national civic religion is an amalgam of Christian and non-Christian elements.

Thus, one leading in prayer needs to make sure he does not fill a “we” statement with something that is untrue of the non-Christians present, e.g., “we thank you that you have saved us, forgiven our sin, and promised us eternal life.” But given this caveat, I still think it’s acceptable to participate. Indeed, it is a privilege and we should take advantage of these opportunities every time we have them.

Yes, a Christian praying Christianly in public will make some non-Christians feel uneasy, alienated, and left out. But that’s why the content of the prayer needs to indicate, in some form or fashion, that all (including Christians) are in need of forgiveness, and that such forgiveness is available to all in Christ. The prayer should not be self-righteous, but it should be inviting. It should be both exclusive and inclusive: exclusive in the sense that it is directed to the Triune God, but inclusive in that it makes clear that this God is the God of the nations, offering himself to men, women and children of every nationality and color in Christ. A faithful Christian prayer in public will inevitably provoke a negative reaction – but that’s ok. Jesus and his apostles provoked a reaction too. Daniel provoked a reaction. Leave that to God to deal with. If some feel excluded, perhaps God will use that to awaken them to their need. Personally, I am very grateful Obama chose an evangelical to be our nation’s representative before God at the spiritual apex of his inauguration ceremony. Who knows – this may be the last time it ever happens in our country.

Now let’s turn to an evaluation of Warren’s prayer. Here is the text:

Almighty God, our Father, everything we see and everything we can't see exists because of you alone. It all comes from you, it all belongs to you, it all exists for your glory. History is your story. The Scripture tells us, 'Hear, oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one' and you are the compassionate and merciful one and you are loving to everyone you have made.

Now today we rejoice not only in America's peaceful transfer of power for the 44th time, we celebrate a hinge-point of history with the inauguration of our first African American President of the United States. We are so grateful to live in this land, a land of unequaled possibility, where the son of an African Immigrant can rise to the highest level of our leadership. And we know today that Dr. King and a great cloud of witnesses are shouting in heaven.

Give to our new president, Barack Obama, the wisdom to lead us with humility, the courage to lead us with integrity, the compassion to lead us with generosity. Bless and protect him, his family, Vice President Biden, the Cabinet and every one of our freely elected leaders.

Help us, oh God, to remember that we are Americans, united not by race or religion or by blood, but to our commitment to freedom and justice for all. When we focus on ourselves, when we fight each other, when we forget you, forgive us.

When we presume that our greatness and our prosperity is ours alone, forgive us. When we fail to treat our fellow human beings and all the earth with the respect that they deserve, forgive us. And as we face these difficult days ahead, may we have a new birth of clarity in our aims, responsibility in our actions, humility in our approaches and civility in our attitudes—even when we differ.

Help us to share, to serve, and to seek the common good of all. May all people of good will today join together to work for a more just, a more healthy, and a more prosperous nation and a peaceful planet.

And may we never forget that one day, all nations, all people will stand accountable before You. We now commit our new president and his wife, Michelle, and his daughters, Malia and Sasha, into your loving care.

I humbly ask this in the name of the One who changed my life—Yeshua, Esa, Jesus, Jesus—who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

The prayer is specifically Christian, in language and content, yet it is also designed to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding. The prayer is humble and

winsome rather than self-righteous, and while it contains many moral exhortations, they are couched appropriately. Warren and I are on opposite ends of the evangelical spectrum in many ways, but I was quite pleased with his inaugural prayer. It's not exactly Thomas Cranmer (!), but it could certainly be much worse. While prayers are not made to be scrutinized in this way, given the nature of the occasion, this one deserves examination. I will not analyze the whole prayer, but just point out a few features, both positive and negative.

In this prayer, Warren is doing what Christians are supposed to do. We're supposed to be priests on behalf of the world. We pray not just on behalf of the church but on behalf of the whole creation. For example, in the old covenant, during the weeklong Feast of Tabernacles, Israel's priests offered 70 bulls for the 70 nations of the world. These sacrifices were enacted, dramatized prayers on behalf of those outside Israel. I wonder if this is what Warren was doing by citing Jesus' name in several languages before he went into the Lord's Prayer. I thought the multi-lingual flourish was a brilliant move. Yes, the name of Jesus excludes – but it does not exclude African-Americans or Arabs as such. It only excludes those who exclude themselves by refusing to come to Jesus. It also includes, by showing that those speaking every tongue under heaven can call upon Jesus and be transformed by him. He is the King and Savior of the nations.

How should we understand the act of prayer in a mixed assembly? Consider an analogy: In terms of praying with unbelievers present, if I have a non-Christian friend over for dinner, I will still pray on behalf of everyone at the table before we eat and might even say “we thank you for this meal.” My guest may not be thanking God in his heart at all – but in a way, in my prayer, I am thanking God *for him*, as well as reminding him that he *should be* thanking God with me. I am acting as his priest (or, we could say, his prophet; cf. Gen. 20:7). I am offering a sacrifice of gratitude in his stead – with the hope that he will join me.

What can we say about the specifics of Warren's prayer?

Warren's prayer focused on our obligations before God, all of which can be demonstrated in Scripture. Warren's prayer was offered in Jesus' name, but focused on the common good of all Americans. It was a good application of Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 2:1ff, praying for all sorts and conditions of men. Warren was implicitly calling upon us to live out our earthly citizenship in a way that pleases God.

I was not surprised, but disappointed, that Warren's prayer did not mention the church. For most evangelicals, the church as an institution is culturally invisible – and so it was in his prayer. In the common evangelical view, the church is helpful in encouraging individual Christians to live more faithfully, but the church *as church* gets very little consideration. However, this fault belongs not so much to Warren as to American evangelicalism as a whole. I believe our low ecclesiology is what keeps us from having much success in the so-called culture wars. But it would be too much for this ecclesiocentric theocrat to expect Warren to get all that. So I will pass the issue by, overlooking the flaw. I guess low expectations keep one from getting too disappointed!

I thought a reference to final judgment in the prayer was entirely appropriate – not to mention very bold. I don't really like "preachy" prayers, but I thought this one was delivered well. To remind Obama that he will answer to a higher authority than the American voter, the media, or the Supreme Court was a wise move. Indeed, Warren reminded us that all nations (and, of course, all individuals as members of those nations) will face a final day of reckoning. We are all accountable to a Judge who transcends the political regimes of this world.

Warren's prayer was Christian, but without being sectarian. It did not divide Christians from one another, but it did divide Christians (who pray in Jesus' name and have been changed by him) from non-Christians. Some Christians will object to the reference to Martin Luther King, Jr. in heaven since he was a theological liberal of sorts. Others will revolt at the "green" jargon. But I don't see these things as problematic. King was indeed a pastor and professed faith, whatever his theological shortcomings. We should judge him with charity. And the environmental language was vague enough that all Christians should be able to agree with it. We may disagree over global warming, but we certainly stand united in the truth that we should act as wise stewards and caretakers of the earth.

The inclusion of the Lord's Prayer was an interesting move on Warren's part. In a way it shows the value (and inescapability) of liturgy: thanks to a tradition of liturgical worship, most Christians in America and throughout the globe know the prayer and can join in. The addition of the Lord's Prayer at the end has largely the same effect as praying in Jesus' name: it is a traditional Christian practice, thus linking Warren's prayer to historic Christendom. It gave the whole prayer deeper roots in Scripture and the life of the catholic church.

The one major thing I would have done differently (and no doubt this would have ratcheted up the negative responses) is included a petition along the lines of, "Father, help all Americans to look to your Son in faith, for he is the way, the truth, the life. Help us to all repent of our idolatries and live according to what you have revealed to us in your holy Word in all of life." Of course, I might have also snuck something in there about protecting innocent life in the womb and helping us to turn away from fornication and all other forms of sexual perversion. But I will not criticize Warren too sternly for leaving those things out. His prayer could not have possibly said everything that needed to be said to God on behalf of our nation in a few short minutes.

Not to nitpick, but another theological problem in the prayer is found in this line: "Help us, oh God, to remember that we are Americans, united not by race or religion or by blood, but to our commitment to freedom and justice for all." It is true that what brought America together from the beginning was not race or blood, but a set of ideals, namely, "freedom and justice for all." But the inclusion of religion in Warren's list of what does *not* define us as Americans is odd. Is this supposed to be a good thing? It is certainly true that Americans are not united religiously, but in the past, there was a large degree of religious unity. Indeed, a common faith, not formally established but widely professed and practiced, served as the glue that bound us together. We were in different Christian denominations, but we held "the big picture" of things in common. The Protestant faith, in various forms, played a huge role in shaping America's cultural and political life until very recently. Obviously, Warren, as an evangelical concerned with the evangelizing of the lost, would like to see Christian faith become so prevalent once again that it could be considered a uniting force in American culture. It's odd the prayer did not reflect that more clearly.

Furthermore, there's a bit of naïveté in Warren's language. Because Americans are now divided by religion, we no longer agree on the meaning of freedom and justice for all. Freedom and justice are religious concepts, and their definitions vary depending on which God (or god) is in view. To wit: What does freedom mean for Christians who want to publicly proclaim the biblical teaching on homosexuality? What does freedom mean for a man who wants to start a small business but finds governmental regulation strangling out his opportunities? What does justice mean for the unborn? What does justice mean for a family who lost a loved one to murder if the murderer is not executed? What will justice mean for conservative talk show pundits if the so-called 'fairness doctrine' is passed? And so on. We're just as divided by our views of freedom and justice as

we are anything else. This is why Obama's plan to unite Americans on his terms is never going to work. His proposed redefinitions of freedom and justice are the very things that continue to fan the flames of the culture war. It is impossible to give an account of these things without committing yourself to certain beliefs that will not be universally shared.

I have heard some say that Warren's referring to Jesus as the one who "changed *my* life" at the end of the prayer was a way of accommodating pluralism and privatizing the specific Christian content of the prayer. As if to say: "Jesus changed *my* life, so this is true *for me*...but it may not be true for you." But I don't see it that way at all. Jesus has done many things in the world – including transform Warren's life. But Warren is citing his conversion as a public fact, a demonstrable proof that Jesus is indeed a Savior and Lord who offers himself to sinners. Warren's prayer as a whole shows the God he prayed to in Jesus' name is the sovereign ruler of history, not merely a God of private experiences. The prayer did not sequester God from public life, but brought him into the closest possible relationship with it. The opening declaration of God's sovereign rule over history gave a context to the rest of the prayer, including the closing sentences. Warren was simply citing himself as an example of someone who has been redeemed by the life-changing blood of Christ.

I've also heard some say that Warren's allusions to the OT, especially his use of the Shema, was an attempt to placate Jews and possibly even Muslims. I do not see that at all. Those parts of the Bible are used by Christians, for Christian purposes, all the time. They are understood differently by Christians, but there is no doubt they belong to Christians. The Lord of the Shema is the Father of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6, which is Paul's Christian adaptation of the Shema, and James 2:19, which suggests even demons admit the truth of the Shema in one sense). There is no reason to doubt Warren meant the Shema to serve as a Christian confession in the prayer. The use of the Shema was not so much about finding common ground as it was about claiming *all* ground for Jesus Christ.

While it is true that Warren's language describing God as "the compassionate and merciful one" echoes Islam, the pastor is hardly throwing Muslims a bone. Rather, he's implying that the *truly* compassionate and merciful God is the one revealed in and approached through Jesus Christ. Allah is only a shadow; the theological bits and pieces that Muslims have right actually find their full realization in the Christian God. What Muslims are groping after in their idolatrous conception of God finds its fulfillment in the Christian God.

The bottom line: While the prayer has some significant flaws, I want to commend Warren for doing a good job in a difficult position. His prayer was not a watered-down prayer to the generic god of American civic religion. It was a robust Christian prayer that addressed the issues of the day. Rick Warren is a Christian. And he prayed like a Christian. My prayer for Obama, and for our nation, is that Warren's prayer will be answered.

I'm sure many conservative Christians will criticize Warren's prayer in various ways. I'm sure there are some Reformed Christians who will blast him for not going prophetic bonkers, naming and denouncing every sin our nation is committing, or will commit under the Obama regime. Warren certainly could have been more explicit and more combative. But I tend to think he did an adequate job under the circumstances. He did what he needed to, without compromising. It's obvious he made quite an impression on Obama when they met previously. Perhaps this prayer will allow him to make further inroads.

For more on American inauguration ceremonies, see:

<http://www.crosswalk.com/11598357/>

http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=3627

For more on how pastors can serve in the public square, see:

<http://bolsinger.blogs.com/weblog/2008/03/mayors-and-pray.html>