



Controversy over inaugural prayer is nothing new

By Bob Allen
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WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President-elect Barack Obama's surprise pick of Purpose Driven Life author Rick Warren to give the invocation at his inauguration Jan. 20 isn't the first time the ceremonial prayer has created controversy.

Eight years ago Kirbyjohn Caldwell, senior pastor of Windsor Village Methodist Church in Houston, drew criticism for closing the benediction at President Bush's first inauguration with: "We respectfully submit this humble prayer in the name that's above all other names, Jesus, the Christ. Let all who agree say, 'Amen.'"

At Bush's second inauguration in 2005, Caldwell was more inclusive, modifying his closing to: "Respecting persons of all faiths, I humbly submit this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen."

Franklin Graham also offered the invocation at the 2001 inauguration in Jesus' name, drawing rebuke from non-Christians. Harvard Law School Professor Alan Dershowitz called it "particularistic and parochial language" that "excluded tens of millions of American Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Shintoists, Unitarians, agnostics and atheists from his blessing." Graham said the backlash was evidence that "there are factions of society today that hate God and everything that He stands for."

Atheist Michael Newdow, best known for his fight against the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, sued unsuccessfully in 2005 to block prayer at Bush's second inauguration, claiming that inaugural prayers violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

Invoking God's blessing has been a part of the presidential inauguration ceremony since 1789, when George Washington took the oath of office and then proceeded to St. Paul's Chapel, where the Senate chaplain read from the Book of Common Prayer.

The prayer was moved from the church to the Senate chamber for the 1937 inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Every inauguration since has included prayers by one or more clergymen invited by the president-elect.

For years Billy Graham was a fixture of inaugural prayers, befriending every president since Eisenhower. Unable to attend the first inauguration of George W. Bush because of illness, Graham sent his son as a substitute to deliver the invocation in 2001.

Joseph Lowery, an icon of the civil rights movement and co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, is scheduled to pronounce the benediction at Obama's inauguration, but garnering most of the attention is Obama's selection of Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., for the invocation.

The high-profile invitation particularly upset supporters of gay rights. Warren has compared homosexuality to incest, pedophilia and polygamy. He also spoke on behalf Proposition 8 a California referendum to ban gay marriage, which homosexuals regard a civil right.

Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., one of three openly gay members of the House of Representatives, said he was "very disappointed" by the choice.

"Religious leaders obviously have every right to speak out in opposition to anti-discrimination measures, even in the degrading terms that Rev. Warren has used with regard to same-sex marriage," Frank said. "But that does not confer upon them the right to a place of honor in the inauguration ceremony of a president whose stated commitment to LGBT rights won him the strong support of the great majority of those who support that cause."

Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, wrote in the *Washington Post* that inviting Warren "sends a chilling message to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans" and "makes us uncertain about this exciting, young president-elect who has said repeatedly that we are part of his America, too."

Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, called it "a divisive choice, and clearly not one that will help our country come together and heal."

Obama defended Warren's selection by saying there will be a "wide range of viewpoints" presented at the inauguration. "We're not going to agree on every single issue," he said, "but what we have to do is be able to create an atmosphere where we can disagree without being disagreeable, and then focus on those things that we hold in common."

Warren commended the president-elect for "courage to willingly take enormous heat by inviting someone like me, with whom he doesn't agree on every issue" and called it an effort "to model civility in America."

While Warren differs with Obama on homosexuality and abortion rights, they share values like fighting AIDS in Africa. Warren took heat from fellow religious conservatives for inviting Obama to speak at a conference on the subject at his church in 2006.

Joseph Farah of World Net Daily expressed "profound and abject revulsion" at Warren's acceptance of the invitation to ask God's blessing on Obama's policies, which he called "evil."

"Yes, we are commanded to pray for our leaders," Farah said. "But there is no suggestion in the Bible that we are ever to be used as political pawns by praying at their events -- especially when they are promoting the wholesale slaughter of innocent human beings."

Warren's selection also disappointed the religious left, who say his non-partisan image belies a social agenda in lockstep with the religious right. Rob Boston of Americans United for Separation of Church and State called Warren "a kinder, gentler Jerry Falwell in a Hawaiian shirt."

Don Byrd, who blogs on church-state issues at the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, said regardless of their stances on controversial issues, he hopes both Warren and Lowery "manage broad, all-inclusive, non-sectarian approaches to this solemn occasion that should be for all Americans" and if Obama wants to offer a specifically Christian prayer with the religious leaders that it be done before or after the public event.