

Prayer and conversation: A truce in the culture war

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Apart from Billy Graham, who is sidelined by age, the most influential evangelical Christian in the U.S. these days is probably author and pastor Rick Warren. His best sellers on the “purpose-driven church” and the “purpose-driven life” have reached millions in both evangelical and mainline circles. His casual, unbuttoned demeanor captures the modern evangelical style. He has spoken of Christians’ need to fight global poverty, disease and illiteracy, and he has distanced himself from the religious right by calling for “a new day of civil discourse.” He took the unusual step for an evangelical leader of inviting Barack Obama—both before and while he was a presidential candidate—to speak at his church.

For these reasons, Warren was a logical choice for Obama when it came time to pick a pastor to offer a prayer at his inauguration. After all, the chief focus of Obama’s religious outreach during the campaign was telling evangelicals in the Warren mold that even if they didn’t agree with Obama on all the issues, they still had good reasons to vote for him. Wisely, Obama saw no reason to write off a religious bloc that constitutes a quarter, perhaps a third, of the population.

Obama’s choice of Warren for a role in the inauguration understandably disturbed many on the left, especially advocates of gay rights, who remember not only Warren’s support of Proposition 8, which overturned a California Supreme Court ruling in favor of gay marriage, but also his crude comparison, in an interview, of gay relationships to incest and pedophilia (remarks Warren later tried to revise).

Indeed, in the case of several of Warren’s stances—homosexuality as un equivocally wrong, abortion as a “holocaust,” U.S. power as a divine instrument for punishing evildoers—the pastor would learn a lot from some sustained civil discourse with those who disagree with him.

But that, we take it, was the point of Obama’s invitation: to keep the conversation going. The invitation to Warren was consistent with Obama’s longstanding effort to

call a truce in the culture war, or at least to lower the intensity of the conflict.

The problem with the culture war is not that it is wrong to fight for one's beliefs. Rather, the culture war is a problem because in an all-out war, opponents become enemies to be defeated at all costs. In a war there is little incentive to search for middle ground or to make alliances on other issues.

The culture war has been especially debilitating to Christians, who make the unusual claim that those united with Christ are also united with each other in Christ's body, the church. If that is what the church is, then Christians will always encounter in the church people with whom they disagree—but are bound to keep talking to.

In a ceremonial way at least, and doubtless not without some political motivation of his own, Obama's choice of Warren offers a small illustration of that ongoing conversation. At this moment in American life, it comes as a gift.