

Obama's entirely mild prayer breakfast speech

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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[Chuck Todd may be right](#): Obama doesn't like the National Prayer Breakfast, so he uses his speech to stir up trouble there. [I don't like it either](#). But it's astonishing that [this](#) counts as trouble.

At the breakfast, Obama said that multiple religions have been used to justify terrible violence, and that people of faith should work to, you know, not do that. He didn't say that American slavery or the Crusades were worse than or even as bad as ISIS, just that they were *bad*, and done "in the name of Christ."

Yes, the Crusades were complicated. So is ISIS. "Complicated" doesn't mean "less bad."

What Obama said is [flatly, obviously, almost boringly correct](#). But rather than ignore it and move on to the next totally unnecessary event, [people flipped out](#). Because even though the president called ISIS "a brutal, vicious death cult" (so equivocal!), he also acknowledged that his own religion hasn't always been perfect, and that we should take care to be better. Too far, Obama.

And that's assuming it even is his own religion! Erick Erickson attacked the president's professed faith, [arguing that his positive invocation of doubt makes him a fake Christian](#). By this standard, of course, a lot of the rest of us Christians don't count, either. (That's okay; we're used to it.)

[Andrea Mitchell's criticism of Obama was narrower](#): he shouldn't have invoked the Crusades "so out of context and...so much in passing. If you're giving a major speech about theology perhaps, but this is the prayer breakfast, and remember the context of that is very limited."

Yes, it is limited. Here's the context of the National Prayer Breakfast: a conservative evangelical group sponsors this weird sort of prayer-branded networking event, the president is politically obliged to show up and say some words, and if these words include something that's obviously true yet uncomfortable to those who guard the

boundaries of “real” Christianity, then the president’s on the hook for his clear hatred of Christianity and/or America.

If the event were about religion in any meaningful way, “a major speech about theology” would presumably be welcome. If it were actually about prayer, there would be less speechifying and more, well, praying. Perhaps including prayers about how Christians have at times sinned against our neighbors, in what we have left undone but also what we have done.

But no, the prayer breakfast is all about politics and power dressed up in that weird American hybrid of bland pluralism and evangelical particularity. Show up, toe the line, or if you can’t or won’t toe the line then say something mild and noncontroversial.

Woah, Obama, don’t say that people of faith should be humble and that the Crusades and slavery were bad! Try something even less controversial than that.