

Creative invocation: In that holy name

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 24, 2009](#) issue

When Rick Warren was invited to deliver the invocation at Barack Obama's inauguration, the choice annoyed some people because of Warren's conservative position on several important and controversial issues, and it pleased others who either like Warren or like Obama's ecumenical approach. Many members of the clergy guild, whatever our politics may be, were simply eager to see how an evangelical like Warren would deal with Jesus.

If he prayed in Jesus' name, he would offend Jews, Muslims and everybody who was not Christian. If he didn't pray in Jesus' name, he would offend his evangelical colleagues and supporters, some of whom believe that God doesn't pay attention to prayers not offered in Jesus' name and who think that not naming Jesus in such a prayer is forfeiting a major opportunity to witness to one's faith.

Most ministers know the dilemmas of offering prayer in a religiously pluralistic public setting. I remember such an event years ago when my sons were junior high athletes and I was asked to give the invocation at the athletic banquet. *Banquet* is much too expansive a term: the fare was pizza—stacks and stacks of pizza—and Coke, poured (or spilled) into paper cups. I recall marveling at the chaotic mess and feeling sorry for the janitors. I had tried to avoid praying at this kind of event because I knew that whatever I did someone would be unhappy. But two-time Heisman Trophy winner Archie Griffin was the speaker and I wanted to meet him.

Knowing that the town was 35 percent Jewish, I thanked God for football and pizza, for our school and our town, for our teachers and coaches and for Ohio State and Griffin, ending with "in your holy name." The students applauded—the first and only time I've been applauded for a prayer. Afterward an evangelical buddy of mine, also the father of a football player, reprimanded me for not witnessing to my faith in Jesus Christ. I had missed a great opportunity to do some evangelizing, he said.

I thought Warren handled his inauguration assignment creatively by praying “in the name of the one who changed my life,” then using the Hebrew word for Jesus, *Yeshua*, and the Arabic word for Jesus in the Qur’an, *Essa*, and finally “Jesus, who taught us to pray”—at which point Warren prayed the Lord’s Prayer, a prayer Jesus taught but which does not use his name. Not a bad solution. I’ll try to remember that if I’m ever invited to pray at a junior high school athletic banquet again—which, unfortunately, is not likely.