

Rick Warren's conservative. So what?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

December 19, 2008

While members of the religious right are [upset](#) that Rick Warren accepted President-elect Obama's invitation to give the invocation at his inauguration, much of the [left is upset](#) that Obama asked him in the first place.

The latter group's criticism focuses on statements Warren's made about [abortion](#) and [gays and lesbians](#), and on the [role](#) he played in organizing support for California's [Prop. 8](#). Couldn't Obama have asked someone a bit lower-key?

But

it seems to me that the more basic question is this: Is it appropriate for the clergy involved with the day's program to include a representative of the country's (many) evangelicals? Okay, so the *really* fundamental question is, why do we have to go and baptize civil events in the first place? But leaving that aside, why not an evangelical? During the election—which, of course, he *won*—Obama continually reached out to evangelicals and talked about making common cause with them. Inviting an evangelical leader to give an invocation—which, by the way, isn't exactly a seat at the policymaking table—[fits right into this theme](#).

And if asking an evangelical makes sense, why not Warren? He's [no moderate](#), but he's not a religious-right thug, either. His culture war bona fides are weak compared to other evangelicals. Yes, Obama could have asked a liberal pastor to participate—actually, [he did](#), and it's reasonable to balance this with an evangelical.

Warren

has an enormous following, and his work has never been primarily political in nature, despite recent shoulder-rubbing with political power. He's a bit like Billy Graham, who was cozy with a long, continuous string of presidents starting with Eisenhower.

Why is Warren such a controversial choice?