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The High Cost of Being (and Staying) Cool — Rick Warren in a Whirlwind

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Pastor Rick Warren now stands at ground zero of a whirlwind, and he is likely to be there for some time. The announcement that President-elect Obama had chosen him to deliver the invocation at the inaugural ceremonies on January 20 came with formality but no fanfare. The first headlines speculated that Warren had become “the next Billy Graham” — for Billy Graham has missed praying at few inaugurations in recent decades.



Within hours, however, the story had quickly changed. Rick Warren had gone from being the next Billy Graham to being the next Fred Phelps — and in a media instant.

Joe Solmonese, President of the Human Rights Campaign, a group that promotes homosexual rights, sent a letter to the President-elect protesting the choice of Warren.

The letter began:

Let me get right to the point. Your invitation to Reverend Rick Warren to deliver the invocation at your inauguration is a genuine blow to LGBT Americans. Our loss in California over the passage of Proposition 8 which stripped loving, committed same-sex couples of their given legal right to marry is the greatest loss our community has faced in 40 years. And by inviting Rick Warren to your inauguration, you have tarnished the view that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans have a place at your table.

The outrage from gay activist groups and other liberal allies reached a fever pitch within hours. Blogs and news releases referred to Rick Warren as a “homophobe” and to his choice to deliver the invocation as a “hammer blow” and assault upon the homosexual community — a group that had enthusiastically supported the Obama candidacy.

The idea that Rick Warren would deliver the invocation at the inauguration after Obama had courted and received such support from the homosexual community was termed “abominable” and “despicable.” As *The Advocate* reported, “Even ardent Obama supporters seem to be up in arms. Progressive radio talk-show host Stephanie Miller — an Obama supporter from day one — took issue with the decision, saying he could have made a better choice. She told callers this morning that in light of eight years of a Bush administration and the passing of Prop. 8, having Warren deliver the invocation felt like a big slap in the face.”

Apparently stung by the criticism, the President-elect answered a reporter’s question about Warren by saying:

“I think that it is no secret that I am a fierce advocate for equality for gay and lesbian Americans. It is something that I have been consistent on and something that I intend to continue to be consistent on during my presidency. What I have also said is that it is important for America to come together, even though we may have disagreements on certain social issues. I would note that a couple of years ago I was invited to Rick Warren’s church to speak, despite his awareness that I

held views that were entirely contrary to his when it came to gay and lesbian rights, when it came to issues like abortion. Nevertheless I had an opportunity to speak. And that dialogue, I think, is part of what my campaign has been all about.

“We’re not going to agree on every single issue. But what we have to do is to be able to create an atmosphere where we can disagree without being disagreeable and then focus on those things that we hold in common as Americans.”

Now here is an interesting point. The protest against Rick Warren is that he is an opponent of same-sex marriage. But when Candidate Obama was asked to define marriage during the [Saddleback Civil Forum on the Presidency](#), he appeared to leave no room for same-sex marriage: “I believe that marriage is the union between a man and a woman. Now, for me as a Christian — for me — for me as a Christian, it is also a sacred union.” When asked follow-up questions by Warren, Obama endorsed civil unions and opposed a constitutional amendment protecting marriage as a heterosexual institution.

So, what’s the difference? Well, as Obama indicated, he is “a fierce advocate for equality for gay and lesbian Americans.” Even as he defined marriage in a way that apparently excluded same-sex marriage, he steadfastly refused to do anything to prevent same-sex marriage. Most pointedly, he opposed California’s Proposition 8 whereas Warren publicly endorsed it. Before the election, the Obama campaign also provided a message from Michelle Obama expressing hope for the eventual acceptance of same-sex marriage.

In other words, the gay rights community knows that the President-elect will be a reliable friend when it comes to policy. The President-elect virtually promised to do nothing to prevent or slow down the legalization of same-sex marriage.

The outrage directed at Rick Warren must be seen in this context. It is a genuine outrage expressed by gay activists and their liberal allies. To these Obama supporters, it is unthinkable that the President-elect could have chosen Warren for such a prominent role. As one [letter to the editor](#) in Friday’s edition of *The New York Times* expressed the sentiment, “Barack Obama’s choice of the Rev. Rick Warren to deliver the invocation at the presidential inauguration is as if Lyndon B. Johnson had selected a pastoral proponent of racial segregation to deliver the invocation in 1965.”

Here is the deep irony — Rick Warren has devoted enormous energy toward the goal of defusing the culture war and creating common ground. He has attracted the criticism of many conservative evangelicals who have been concerned about how these efforts have been positioned and for what often appears as comments at their expense. At times, Warren has even had to issue clarifications in order to make his generalized statements more specific. If the President-elect wanted to choose a figure recognized as an evangelical in the public eye, but sympathetic to much of his stated agenda to unite, he could scarcely have chosen a more recognizable figure than Rick Warren.

But now many of Obama’s own supporters attack Rick Warren as if he is a hate-driven homophobe, which he clearly is not. All that was necessary to bring on this opposition is Warren’s opposition to same-sex marriage and his support for Proposition 8. Now, he is grouped along with the most strident and careless apostles of hatred.

It doesn’t take much. We would all like to be considered cool. Cultural opposition is a tough challenge and bearing public hatred is a hard burden. Being cool means being considered mainstream, acceptable, and admirable. Believing that same-sex marriage is wrong is enough to turn “uncool” in an instant, at least in many circles.

I am not throwing Rick Warren to the wolves over this. He now finds himself in a whirlwind, and he will not be the last. Pastor after pastor and church after church will face a similar challenge in short order. No matter how cool you think you are or think that others think you are, the hour is coming when the issue of homosexuality — taken alone — will be the defining issue in coolness. If you accept the full normalization of homosexuality, you will be cool. If you do not, you are profoundly uncool, no matter how much good work you do nor how much love and compassion you seek to express.

Liberal Protestantism came to this conclusion long ago, and those churches desperately want to be considered cool by the elites. Having abandoned biblical authority, there is nothing to prevent them moving fast into coolness. The only barriers are outposts of conservative opposition, but they will not last long.

Many in the “emerging” and “Emergent church” movements also state their intention to transcend the divisive issues like abortion and homosexuality. Some of these represent the quintessence of cool in cultural identification. But for how long? Eventually, the issue of homosexuality will require a decision. At that point, those churches will find themselves

facing a forced decision. Choose ye this day: Will it be the Bible or coolness?

Rick Warren has just found himself in the midst of a whirlwind. We must pray that God will give him wisdom as he decides what to do — and what to say — as he stands in this whirlwind. But every evangelical Christian should watch this carefully, for the controversy over Rick Warren will not stop with the pastor from Saddleback. This whirlwind is coming for you and for your church. At some point, the cost of being “cool” will be the abandonment of biblical Christianity. We had better decide well in advance that this is a cost far too high to pay.

Would I deliver the invocation at the inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States? Well, I have not been asked, but I can imagine that it would be difficult to turn down this invitation. After all, the inaugural ceremony is a national event, not a personal ceremony. Yet, in the end, the context of this inaugural ceremony would not allow me to accept. President-elect Obama has pledged to sign legislation including the Freedom of Choice Act, which would affect a pro-abortion revolution in this nation. He has also pledged to sign executive orders within hours of taking office that will lead directly to a vast increase in the destruction of human life. In particular, he has promised to reverse the Bush administration’s policy limiting federal funding of human embryonic stem-cell research. Sources inside the transition office have advised activists to expect a flurry of executive orders in the new administration’s first hours and days.

Knowing the intentions of this President-elect, I could not in good conscience offer a formal prayer at his inauguration. Even in the short term, I could not live in good conscience with what will come within hours. I could not accept a public role in the event of his inauguration nor offer there a public prayer, but I will certainly be praying *for* this new President and for the nation under his leadership.

I was interviewed about this question by *The Wall Street Journal*, and the article appears in today’s edition of the paper [[see here](#)]. From the article:

Some on the right were unhappy as well. R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said he wouldn’t deliver the invocation for a president who supports abortion rights.

“It certainly doesn’t help the pro-life movement to...participate in this kind of public way in the inauguration for one who holds to a very radical pro-abortion position,” he said.

Late on Thursday, Rick Warren released [this statement](#):

“I commend President-elect Obama for his courage to willingly take enormous heat from his base by inviting someone like me, with whom he doesn’t agree on every issue, to offer the Invocation at his historic Inaugural ceremony.

Hopefully individuals passionately expressing opinions from the left and the right will recognize that both of us have shown a commitment to model civility in America.

The Bible admonishes us to pray for our leaders. I am honored by this opportunity to pray God’s blessing on the office of the President and its current and future inhabitant, asking the Lord to provide wisdom to America’s leaders during this critical time in our nation’s history.”

We will discuss this issue on today’s edition of *The Albert Mohler Program*. Please call and let me know what you think.

Photo of Rick Warren and Barack Obama at *Saddleback Civil Forum on the Presidency* courtesy of www.rickwarrennews.com.
