



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on July 18, 2011

## Atheists Trying to Stop Texas Governor's Day of Prayer

The atheist group Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFR) has filed a lawsuit against Texas Governor Rick Perry (left) in an attempt to halt the planned day of fasting and prayer he has called for on August 6th at Reliant Stadium in Houston. In a press release, the group said that it was joining five of its members in "asking the federal court to declare unconstitutional Perry's initiation, organization, promotion, and participation in the Aug. 6 prayer event." The group said that it planned to file a restraining order to block "Perry's continuing involvement in the prayer rally...."



As reported by [The New American](#), Perry has invited government officials, as well as individuals from around the country, to the event, called [The Response: A Call to Prayer for a Nation in Crisis](#). Noting that America has been "besieged by financial debt, terrorism, and a multitude of natural disasters," Perry advised that as a nation "we must come together and call upon Jesus to guide us through unprecedented struggles, and thank Him for the blessings of freedom we so richly enjoy."

On the [event website](#), the Texas governor called on Americans to join him in asking for "God's forgiveness, wisdom, and provision for our state and nation. There is hope for America. It lies in heaven, and we will find it on our knees."

In their legal complaint the atheist plaintiffs note that they are "non-believers who support the free exercise of religion, but strongly oppose the governmental establishment and endorsement of religion, including prayer and fasting, which are not only an ineffectual use of time and government resources, but which can be harmful or counterproductive as a substitute for reasoned action."

The lawsuit charges that Perry's "official recognition" of the event, and his encouragement of prayer by citizens, violates the First Amendment's Establishment Clause by "giving the appearance that the government prefers evangelical Christian religious beliefs over other religious beliefs and non-beliefs, including by aligning and partnering with the [American Family Association](#), a virulent, discriminatory and evangelical Christian organization known for its intolerance." Such actions, the atheists argue, send an alarming and unlawful message "that believers in religion are political insiders — and nonbelievers are political outsiders."

According to the FFR press release, the atheist plaintiffs want the court to declare Perry's participation in the prayer rally and his proclamation unconstitutional, and to stop his further involvement in the event, along with forcing the AFA and other group sponsors to distance themselves from Perry's endorsement of the rally.

"The answers for America's problems won't be found on our knees or in heaven, but by using our brains, our reason and in compassionate action," declared Dan Barker, a spokesman for the FFR. "Gov.



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Perry's distasteful use of his civil office to plan and dictate a religious course of action to 'all citizens' is deeply offensive to many citizens, as well as to our secular form of government."

Added Annie Laurie Gaylor, Barker's wife and the group's co-director, "What he [Perry] is doing is beyond anything we've seen a governor do. It is his face you see when you go to the rally's website. It would not have happened without him. That is why we decided to sue."

But Eugene Volokh, a professor of constitutional law at the University of California-Los Angeles, predicted that the suit had little chance of success, noting that past courts have ruled that elected officials are individuals with constitutionally guaranteed rights of speech and religious expression. "When a governor appears at an event, he is understood to be acting as both a person and a government official," Volokh explained to the [Religion News Service](#). "The courts have given these folks tremendous latitude in what they can say in their own statements." The most the suit might do, Volokh said, would be to force the governor to remove the event link from his official website, "but that would be a small victory."

The FFR is not the first group to register its displeasure with Perry's efforts. Earlier an atheist group called the [Secular Coalition for America](#) had demanded that elected officials shun the event, pointing to its Christian leanings. "The last thing our officials should do in times of national struggle is promote a divisive religious event that proposes no real solutions to our country's real-world problems," said the group's director Sean Faircloth. "Calling upon all Americans to embrace Perry's personal belief system is an insult to the millions of upstanding citizens who practice religions other than evangelical Christianity, as well as the millions of secular Americans who contribute to society without pushing their views on others. Religion should be a private matter, especially for elected officials in a secular government."

Likewise, the Rev. Welton Gaddy of the [Interfaith Alliance](#) told [FOX News](#) that Perry's call to prayer "raises serious concerns about his commitment to the boundaries between religion and government. It has been my experience that when elected leaders invoke religion in this way, it almost always has more to do with furthering a political agenda than a religious one."

And David Silverman of the group [American Atheists](#) said that "Perry obviously has no idea how to fix the state's budget crisis, and instead of fixing it, he is literally using religion as a smokescreen. If he wasn't pulling this stunt, there would be a huge uproar about the state of Texas's financial situation, but ... a lot of Christians are giving him a bye — they're giving him a break."

Hiram Sasser, director of litigation at the conservative legal advocacy group [Liberty Institute](#), said he was amazed that atheist groups like the FFR have "never sued President Obama for ending any speeches with 'God bless you' or doing other things of a religious nature. It's as if these separationists don't understand that even our elected officials are still citizens of this country and enjoy the vast freedoms that are provided by the Constitution." He added that the effort is "tantamount to a lawsuit declaring Governor Perry is unable to attend church on Sundays. It's the most outrageous thing I've ever seen."

In an interview with the [Family Research Council](#), Perry responded to the efforts to derail the event, saying, "Isn't it just the type of intolerance to say that we can't gather together in public to pray to our God? That is amazing to me." Added the governor: "I can't wait until the 6th of August rolls around and we fill up Reliant Stadium with people who are Christ-loving and realize that our country has gotten off track. Just like back in days of old, God is the same God we had from the days of Israel, and in the book



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of Joel it said to blow the trumpet and assemble the people and go into a day of fasting and prayer to ask for God's direction ... it's nothing more than that."

Steve Riggle, the pastor of Houston's Grace Community Church and a supporter of the event, noted that the lawsuit was filed by the same group who forced the removal of the Bible outside a local courthouse a few years earlier. "It's time to stop this nonsense," he advised. "The best way is for all of us to show up in mass."



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