

Perry's Planned Prayer Event Riles Critics

By Stephen Clark

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Texas Gov. Rick Perry's latest call for a day of prayer is being met by a chorus of boos from critics who say the potential presidential candidate is showing favoritism toward Christianity and violating the separation of church and state.

Perry has ordered a day of prayer and fasting on Aug. 6 to "seek God's guidance and wisdom in addressing the challenges that face our communities, states and nation." It is part of what is being described as a non-denominational, apolitical, Christian prayer meeting hosted by the American Family Association at Reliant Stadium in Houston.

Perry will participate in the all-day event that encourages people to bring a Bible and a notebook. Perry has invited every governor in the country to attend, and he is urging them to issue similar proclamations.

"Given the trials that beset our nation and world, from the global economic downturn to natural disasters, the lingering danger of terrorism and continued debasement of our culture, I believe it is time to convene the leaders from each of our United States in a day of prayer and fasting, like that described in the book of Joel," he said in a written statement.

"I urge all Americans of faith to pray on that day for the healing of our country, the rebuilding of our communities and the restoration of enduring values as our guiding force," he said.

But the Secular Coalition for America, the national lobby for secular and nontheistic Americans, has called on all elected officials to reject Perry's invitation, saying the event favors Christianity over other religions and beliefs.

"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 Sean Faircloth, executive director of the organization.

"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," he said. "Religion should be a private matter, especially for elected officials in a secular government."

The Rev. Welton Gaddy, president of Interfaith Alliance, said Perry's call "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," he said.

Perry's office brushed off the criticism.

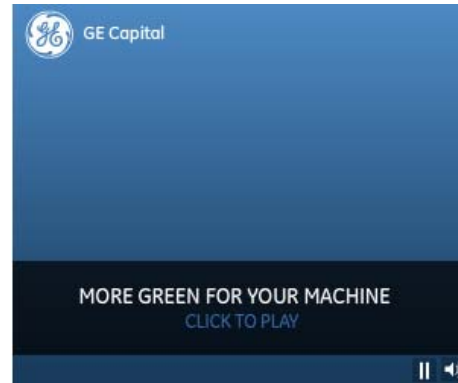
"The governor has made it clear that this is a nondenominational, apolitical event. It is a Christian event and there are many Americans that believe this to be an important issue – Americans of all faiths," Perry spokeswoman Catherine Frazier told FoxNews.com. "And the governor believes in the power for prayer and believes it is important that we as a nation join together and pray for wisdom and guidance in finding solutions to the problems that we face."

Frazier added that no taxpayer money is being used to sponsor the event.

It's not the first time Perry has sanctioned a day of prayer in the state. In April, he called on all Texans to pray for rain for three days as the most of the state battled an extreme drought that led to massive wildfires that scorched more than a million acres this year, claimed the lives of two firefighters and destroyed nearly 400 homes.

He also joined three other Gulf Coast state governors – Bobby Jindal in Louisiana, Haley Barbour in Mississippi and Bob Riley in Alabama – last year for a day of prayer more than two months after the BP oil spill.

All that praying has infuriated supporters of religious freedom, who say that his calls for Jesus' help go beyond what is acceptable.



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So far, though, not every governor is listening to the criticism. Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback plans to attend the August event, and three governors – Rick Scott in Florida, Nikki Haley in South Carolina and Christine Gregoire in Washington – will declare Aug. 6 a day of prayer in their states, Frazier said.

The Texas Democratic Party slammed Perry's motives.

"Gov. Perry is the last person who should be talking about what's right for our country," spokeswoman Kirsten Gray said in a written statement. "When campaigning, he claims he will fully fund our schools, protect the elderly and balance the budget, but the ... state GOP budget broke every one of those promises. A budget is a moral document about our priorities, but it's obvious the governor is a shameless opportunist whose real priority is whatever furthers his own career ambitions."

Frazier countered that Perry "is proud of what Texas has done to balance its budget without raising taxes."

"Voters made it clear in November what they want their elected officials to do and they made it clear they want the government living within its means," she said, adding that the governor has funded "necessary programs."

"That priority is what keeps Texas creating jobs and keeps our economy strong to provide opportunities for citizens," she said.

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