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## INTRODUCTION



**IN 1804 A YOUNG MAN NAMED WILLIAM COLGATE, LOOKING FOR** work, arrived in New York City. His family had come to the United States from Kent in southeast England and had settled in Hartford County, Maryland. They purchased a farm there, but the title to the property was found to be illegitimate. It was the first in a long line of heavy financial losses for the Colgates, such that at the tender age of seventeen William became the breadwinner for the family.

He began life as a clerk, offering to work for free in the principle chandlery in the city. He soon rose to the rank of manager and at twenty-two opened his own firm. Business was a pleasure to him, as well as an opportunity to do good. From the very beginning he committed himself to donating 10 percent of his earnings to charitable causes and often surpassed this goal, donating 20, 30, and eventually 50 percent of his earnings each year. For his remaining fifty-one years he lived a life of industry, application, and philanthropy, attending a Baptist church for much of his life.

This story was published first in Colgate's *New York Chronicle* obituary and then in abbreviated form for the first volume of *The Young Men's Magazine*, a Christian publication intended for the moral benefit of its titular audience.<sup>1</sup> Colgate's is one of a generation of hard-working Protestant success stories, men for whom hard work and religious piety were closely linked, for whom directing profits into charity was a moral obligation, and for whom education was the primary goal. His legacy is still felt today, not only at Colgate University but at the many other institutions of higher learning he supported.

Colgate represents one of many rags-to-riches stories that undergird and illustrate the American Dream. His Christian principles,

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proudly displayed, made him different from the robber barons who profited from the railways. He became—for readers of *Young Men's Magazine*—a model to be emulated. He was not only wealthy, he was devout. His home, as his obituaries stated, was a pillar of the state and a “nursery for the Church.” His piety, his patriotism, and his business acumen were all folded together into a single recipe for success.

As remarkable as his story is, Colgate was just one of a cadre of successful Christian businessmen who intermingled religion and entrepreneurship. The evangelical leader Dwight L. Moody, eponym and founder of the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, is another example. A shoe salesman, Moody explicitly sought to bring his business acumen to bear on the spread of a socially activist evangelicalism.<sup>2</sup> John Wanamaker, the Philadelphia department store magnate, combined religion and retail into a powerful notion of Christian stewardship.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in the last third of the nineteenth century, stories like these became typical for popular books and articles that identified Christianity and capitalism.<sup>4</sup> Alongside success stories like Colgate's ran books like Bruce Fairchild Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows*, a life of Jesus that portrayed the Savior as the “founder of Modern Business.”<sup>5</sup> Colgate and men like him credited God for their success and invested in the divine plan. And in exchange for tithes, God repaid them with capital gains and success. “If you will allow me to make money to be used in Your service, You will have the glory,” Henry Crowell, the founder of Quaker Oats, put it.<sup>6</sup> Their theology of tithing anticipated what would later be called “the prosperity gospel.”

If he had been born a century later, William Colgate might have been friends with the Green family of Oklahoma City, owners of the crafting empire Hobby Lobby. Like Colgate, the Greens are devout Christians, businessmen, and patriots, and, also like Colgate, they are seen as living embodiments of the American Dream.

In his youth, David Green felt inadequate. The current chairman of Hobby Lobby was born in Emporia, Kansas, in 1941, one of six sons of a small-town preacher, but he was the only one who didn't follow his parents into the ministry. Not having that call, he felt

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for years that he was, in his own words, the “black sheep” of the family.<sup>7</sup> He thought that God had passed him over. When he called his mother to tell her that he was the nation’s youngest manager in the chain of five-and-dime stores, TG&Y, she was unimpressed: “Oh yeah, what are you doing for the Lord?” As a child he grew up poor—dirt poor. His father migrated from one small congregation to the next, never preaching to churches larger than fifty or seventy-five people, before landing in Altus, Oklahoma. The family survived on small donations from congregants, sometimes going for weeks without eating meat.

Green’s path was not ministry; retail was in his heart. In 1970, following a brief stint in the Air Force Reserve designed to make him eligible for management positions, the twenty-nine-year-old Green borrowed \$600 (about six weeks’ worth of his wages) to buy a molding chopper and form Greco Products, a company that manufactured miniature picture frames.<sup>8</sup> His home became a makeshift factory: his wife Barbara oversaw operations at the kitchen table and his young children Steve and Mart were paid seven cents apiece to assemble the frames. Barbara would do most of the manufacturing herself and would take their infant daughter Darsee in her carrier to ship the frames.

In 1972, David and Barbara opened their first store, in a snug studio-apartment-sized space in Oklahoma City. A mere three years later, on the back of the hippie obsession with beads, the Greens were able to acquire a second, 6,000-square-foot store. Against the wishes of his wife, Green quit his job at competitor TG&Y, and in the next thirty years took his company from annual sales of \$100,000 to more than \$3 billion. TG&Y no longer exists; many of its former retail locations are now Hobby Lobbies.

What began as a living-room family photo-frame assembly line grew into a retail giant. By 2012, Hobby Lobby had 520 superstores in 42 states, and the Green family, which owns 100% of the company, was ranked at number 79 on the Forbes list of the four hundred richest Americans, with an estimated net worth of \$4.5 billion.

Every step along the way Green quietly stayed true to his religious beliefs, often at the expense of company profits. The company pays for public printing of images of the biblical stories of

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Christmas and Easter in the local paper of every town with a Hobby Lobby store; these stores are closed on Sundays in order to give employees time to attend church. The company employs three Christian chaplains, who dispense financial as well as spiritual advice, and offered a free health clinic to staff at its headquarters long before free healthcare came into political vogue.

Green has raised the minimum wage for full-time employees by a dollar an hour every year since 2009, with the result that their minimum hourly wage is currently \$15. It's a gesture that he grounds in his religious beliefs. He told *Forbes* in 2012, "God tells us to go forth into the world and teach the gospel to every creature. He doesn't say skim from your employees to do that."<sup>9</sup>

As is to be expected with any company of this size, there are some murmurings of discontent. In 2013, a Jewish blogger inquiring about the lack of Hannukah-themed merchandise at a New Jersey Hobby Lobby was told by a salesperson, "We don't cater to you people."<sup>10</sup> A local representative can hardly be said to speak for the Green family themselves, but the absence of Jewish items can be contrasted with the interest in Christmas decorations. For the first twenty years of the company's existence, David and Barbara Green personally selected the Christmas items that were sold in stores. Amid public accusations of anti-Semitism and discrimination, the family was forced to apologize, citing their donations to Israel's Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem, for example, as proof that the company respected Judaism.

The incident appeared to be isolated. But there are rumblings that all is not well for those working inside the gates of the Greens' Kingdom. In the past the Greens have proudly stated that they have never been sued by disgruntled former employees. Yet lawsuits have indeed been filed: for gender discrimination, discrimination against those with disabilities, lengthy work hours, and improper documentation of work hours.<sup>11</sup> These kinds of accusations are standard for large corporations, but, unusually, those leveled against Hobby Lobby have been withdrawn under threat of countersuit.<sup>12</sup> The reason: all Hobby Lobby employees sign an agreement that they will not sue the company, even in cases of

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sexual harassment.<sup>13</sup> Instead they agree to either secular or religious mediation, the results of which remain private.

Throughout, the Greens have seen God as the ultimate owner and director of the company. In 1985 the company lost \$1 million, and its bank was threatening to foreclose. The company had aggressively expanded in the '70s and early '80s, but it was a period of false security: the stores were stocking expensive gifts and high-end luggage, both of which failed to sell with the economic downturn. David Green recalls praying at his desk on a daily basis, asking God to tell him where they had gone wrong. In retrospect, he says, they had gotten prideful, and so God left them to manage the company alone. That feeling, he says, lasted about a year; since then he has depended on the Lord for guidance.

The sharp side of divine management was felt again when Hobby Lobby decided to cease Sunday trading. The decision was taken so that employees could put God first in their lives, but in the late '80s, when they decided to close the stores, they were doing around \$100 million worth of business on Sundays alone. Today, that number would be in excess of \$250 million. While the family collectively felt that God was instructing them to cease Sunday trading, they “didn’t have enough faith to close them all.” So the rollback was staggered state by state. Nebraska, home to three stores, closed first, and Texas, which then housed around sixty stores, closed last. During this period when they were “halfway obedient” sales started to slump. It was only when all of the stores were closed that things picked back up. “We had done what we were supposed to do, then at that time we saw things were going in the right way.” There was a direct correlation between fulfilling God’s commands and company profits.

The principle had been instilled in David Green as a child. Despite his family’s poverty and itinerant lifestyle, any gift they received—either from their garden or from congregants—they tithed; that is, they gave a tenth back to God. He has said that “if we picked cotton and we made a dollar, we would give a dime of it to the church, so that’s just something that was bred in us. We think that God would reward that.”

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As a result, like Colgate and other Christian moguls, the Green family is committed to dedicating a substantial portion of their revenue to charity. They started small, supporting the distribution of Bible tracts around the world. In keeping with David's missionary church roots, evangelization was the soul of their charitable work. Most of the primary recipients of Hobby Lobby funds—charities like One Hope, Need Him, Every Home for Christ, Every Tribe Every Nation, and Wycliffe Translators—are concerned with spreading the Word of God and promoting Christian evangelization.<sup>14</sup>

Hobby Lobby donates half of its pretax earnings to charity and invests them in a portfolio of evangelical ministries. The total sum of charitable contributions is unknown, but estimates by Forbes in 2012 placed the company's total giving at upwards of \$500 million.<sup>15</sup> If Hobby Lobby were ever to be sold, the structure of the company is such that 90 percent of the proceeds from the sale would go to ministry work. Dedication to philanthropy has kept the Hobby Lobby stores privately owned; in an interview in 2009 David Green said that the most important reason he declined to take the company public was that it would have prevented him from donating company profits to missionary endeavors. Missionary work, Green has said, is his contribution. He never became a minister like his siblings, but as Hobby Lobby has prospered the family has become convinced that Green's business acumen is both God-given and providential. Had David been a newspaper man, his son Steve told us, they would be in a very different position today, given the precarious state of the print media. The historian Darren Dochuk describes the evangelical acceptance of this link between business success and faith-based giving as a "corporate formula, which at its essence meant: more money, more ministry."<sup>16</sup>

Involvement in Hobby Lobby's charitable projects comes with the kind of strings that many philanthropists attach to their gifts. Like the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, or the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Greens have expectations of those with whom they work. Unlike those organizations, Hobby Lobby's requirements are religious: beneficiaries must pass a doctrinal vetting process, "which includes questions about the Virgin Birth."<sup>17</sup> Only about one in ten ventures that approach the Greens

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passes muster, both for doctrinal and financial reasons. In deciding how to allocate funds, Green distinguishes between causes that are merely “good” (like building hospitals, or improving childhood literacy) and causes that are “great” (like the dissemination of God’s Word).<sup>18</sup> This conviction gives a laser-sharp focus to Hobby Lobby’s philanthropic work. The Greens focus exclusively on spreading the Good News: they have sponsored a free Bible app, multiple international evangelical Christian missionary endeavors, and programming that helps children understand the Bible even if they are unable to read.

If Hobby Lobby’s choice of causes seems impractical, it is a choice that David Green would sincerely make for himself. He has said, “If I die without food or without eternal salvation, I want to die without food.”<sup>19</sup>

The Greens are poster children for the American Dream. David and Barbara have enjoyed a lengthy and successful marriage. Their sons—the current CEO, Steve, and Chief Strategic Officer, Mart—are family men who have been married to their respective wives for over thirty years. And their daughter, Darsee Lett, is Creative Director for the Hobby Lobby stores. Together this family, as a family, turned their small business into an empire.

But there is one key aspect of the Green family that sets them apart: they didn’t just want to turn their mom-and-pop home-crafts store into a billion-dollar empire, or even merely to give back to society once they had made it big. They wanted to play a role in the course of human history. As Mark Rutland, the former president of Oral Roberts University, put it, “the Greens are Kingdom givers.”<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, David Green aspires to personal cosmic impact. “I want to know that I have affected people for eternity,” he said. “I believe I am. I believe once someone knows Christ as their personal savior, I’ve affected eternity. I matter 10 billion years from now.”<sup>21</sup> Green has been clear that God is the author of his success, but there’s no shortage of ego here, either.

Almost all of the Greens’ philanthropic activity once took place without fanfare and out of the eye of the general public. They could walk the streets of Oklahoma City, Steve Green told us, and



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nobody knew who they were. In Christian circles, however, things were very different. They were well known as the largest Christian philanthropists in North America: everyone from the celebrity evangelist Jerry Falwell to enterprising Bible scholars beat a path to their door. They receive hundreds of charitable requests each month.<sup>22</sup>

With a much-publicized lawsuit against the U.S. over the provision for birth control in the 2010 Affordable Care Act, the Greens were suddenly transformed into public figures on a national scale, transitioning from salt-of-the-earth billionaires to iconic patriotic Christians. Their Supreme Court case, *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, which the Greens won in June 2014, played out on the world's stage. Hobby Lobby was represented by the Becket Fund, a non-profit legal organization that specializes in religious freedom cases. This was the same firm that in 1999 successfully fought for the rights of two Sunni Muslim police officers to be exempted from their government employer's no-beards policy and in 2009 defended the right of a Santeria priest to perform animal sacrifice in his own home. The Greens' lawsuit too was about religious principles; more specifically, it was about their rights as owners of a closely held company to refuse, in accordance with their religious beliefs, to provide insurance covering certain medical procedures.

The crux of the issue for the Greens was that the regulations issued under the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (more popularly known as "Obamacare") required them, as owners of the privately held company Hobby Lobby, to provide abortion-inducing drugs and devices to their employees. In their original complaint, they stated that their "religious beliefs forbid them from participating in, providing access to, paying for, training others to engage in, or otherwise supporting" four medical devices: Plan B One-Step (the "morning-after pill"), Ella (another emergency contraceptive pill), and two forms of intrauterine devices.<sup>23</sup> The Greens maintain that life begins at conception and that, inasmuch as these devices interfered with pregnancy after that moment, they were abortifacients.<sup>24</sup> In insisting that they provide medical coverage for these products, the government mandate, the Greens argued, forced them "to violate their deeply held religious beliefs

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under threat of heavy fines” (\$1.3 million per day) and that doing so was unconstitutional and a violation of the “American traditions of individual liberty, religious tolerance, and limited government.” As evangelicals who ran their company in accordance with biblical principles, they requested an exemption from the mandate on the grounds that it violated their First Amendment rights and also the terms of the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment states that Congress shall not pass laws prohibiting the free exercise of religion; the RFRA maintains that the federal government is responsible for accepting additional obligations to protect religious exercise.<sup>25</sup>

The case travelled from the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Oklahoma, to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit, and finally to the Supreme Court, where it was consolidated with another case, *Conestoga Wood Specialties v. Sebelius*. The 2014 Supreme Court decision, which was split 5–4, sided with Hobby Lobby.<sup>26</sup> Writing for the majority opinion, Justice Alito stated, “The companies in the cases before us are closely held corporations, each owned and controlled by members of a single family, and no one has disputed the sincerity of their religious beliefs.” The Court’s decision did not address Hobby Lobby’s constitutional claims under the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment, but in addressing the statutory claim noted that for-profit corporations could be considered persons under the RFRA. Because there were other ways that the government could guarantee access to cost-free contraception, the Supreme Court judged that the HHS contraceptive mandate placed a substantial burden on Christian companies like Hobby Lobby and, thus, violated the RFRA.<sup>27</sup> While the lawsuit was won on the basis of the RFRA, the Greens continue to describe themselves as exercising and defending the First Amendment rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution.<sup>28</sup>

It was a case fought on statutory and constitutional principles, but a hefty part of the Becket Fund’s legal strategy involved telling a particular story about the Greens. That story was one of a Christian family from Oklahoma who lived the American Dream and whose livelihood was under threat because of an aggressive antireligious government health mandate. In a statement to the

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press in 2012, David Green said, “Our family is now being forced to choose between following the laws of the land that we love or maintaining the religious beliefs that have made our business successful and have supported our family and thousands of our employees and their families. We simply cannot abandon our religious beliefs to comply with this mandate.”<sup>29</sup>

It was not just the Greens who were on trial: it was the American Dream itself. A promotional video posted on the Becket Fund’s website for the Hobby Lobby lawsuit began with the rags-to-riches story of David and Barbara Green before pronouncing: “What’s at stake here is whether you’re able to keep your religion when you open a family business.”<sup>30</sup> In 2017, David Green described himself as politically disinterested: “I like to be left alone as a businessman and do my business without the government interfering. And so we had to sue the government or take life, that was our two choices. And so we didn’t want to sue our government, we love this country, but we were forced to do that and now we’re back to running our business.”<sup>31</sup>

The lawsuit introduced the Green family and their company to America. Many Americans regarded their lifestyles, now greatly scrutinized, as a pleasing medley of aspirational and down-home: they fly in private planes, but they eat Panera and Chik-Fil-A. When we interviewed Steve Green in 2015, he greeted us in an off-brand golf shirt, Levis, and sneakers. To many observers it seemed that these, the most wholesome of the superrich, were being targeted precisely, and solely, because they were Christian.<sup>32</sup>

As the lawsuit progressed, and even more so once it had been won, the Greens became Christian celebrities. They speak regularly at evangelical conferences, and even their political endorsements become national news.<sup>33</sup> They are paradigmatic examples of the kind of politically influential evangelical lay leaders discussed by Lydia Bean in her book *The Politics of Evangelical Identity*, and simultaneously part of the kaleidoscope of responses to the crisis of authority that historian Molly Worthen has identified in her work on evangelical communities.<sup>34</sup> In March 2016, David Green endorsed Marco Rubio for the GOP presidential nomination. Green’s endorsement was announced the same day as that

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of Mitt Romney, and yet it still received attention. In an interview on Fox Business, Green was presented as a “man of God,” his authority buttressed by his dual credentials as billionaire and famous Christian culture warrior. In the wake of the Trump tidal wave, Green, like many evangelical leaders, changed his position; it is yet another indication of his prominence that his endorsement of Trump was published as an op-ed in USA Today.<sup>35</sup>

Their transition from entrepreneurs to political taste-makers may seem strange, but from the time of Andrew Jackson onward, success in one sphere of American life—at first the military, later business—came to be seen as evidence of universal competency. In a country founded on the explicit intention of replacing inherited status and aristocracy with individual democratic opportunity and meritocratic accomplishment, the blistering success of families like the Greens is generally understood as a transferable qualification. The backdrop for the Greens’ particular understanding of the intersection of business success and adherence to the Bible is a peculiarly American brand of what since World War II has been called “prosperity gospel.” At its core, prosperity gospel is the belief that God intends for humans to enjoy physical and financial good health, and that this kind of flourishing can be secured by, and even guaranteed to, those who possess faith and support the appropriate kind of religious causes. The roots of the American prosperity gospel go back to early twentieth-century Pentecostalism but are intertwined, as Kate Bowler has shown in her study of the movement, with the ideals of pragmatism, individualism, and upward mobility so prized by traditional articulations of “the American Dream.”<sup>36</sup> This “new gospel of wealth,” as historian Darren Dochuk calls it, brought conservative fiscal beliefs into the pews, and, momentarily, reshaped the nature of Southern evangelicalism itself: it was, as Dochuk says, “no longer the poor person’s religion.”<sup>37</sup>

A much wider circle of evangelicals and nonevangelicals holds to the same basic structure of expectation even if they are not part of the particular subset of Pentecostal preachers that coined the term. Thus, though Pentecostalism was somewhat unusual for Oklahoma City, David Green’s family held beliefs that were shared by many varieties of American Protestants; his household had

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practiced tithing and trusted in the almost contractual nature of faith as a means of securing God's protection. This is the central thesis of David Green's 2017 book *Giving It All Away . . . And Getting It Back Again*, in which he argues that the God-given rewards of philanthropy and Christian business are protection in times of stress, stable and joyful family life, and a familial legacy that goes beyond mere wealth.<sup>38</sup> Many of the Greens' discussions of professional failings and success are set against the backdrop of trusting in divine guidance and support. It is a belief system that guided their decision to cease Sunday trading, their interpretation of their financial losses in the 1980s, their Supreme Court battle, and their philanthropic work.

The Greens have been quite open about their belief that business, religion, and government are not separate and distinct spheres. In 2006, years before their famous lawsuit, they ran an Independence Day advertisement featuring quotes from founding fathers about the centrality of religion to education, governance, citizenship, and law. The poster—reprinted regularly since—clearly articulates the belief that the United States is a Christian country; it condemns legal measures that have prohibited prayer in public schools and ties Christianity to the founding of the United States. Unlike the biblical quotations in their Christmas and Easter advertisements, the purpose of which, according to the Greens, is to witness publicly to the truth and primacy of the Gospel message for its own sake, the Independence Day ads openly evangelize for the biblical foundations and Christian character of the United States. The 2006 advertisement, which has run seven times, included quotations about the Christian character of the country from a plethora of founding fathers, Supreme Court justices and rulings, U.S. presidents, and foreign commentators. In its original iteration it included quotations from the 1636 Harvard and 1737 Yale Student guidelines about the necessity of religious education and religious educators. It also added commentary to the 1892 *Church of the Holy Trinity v. U.S. Supreme Court* decision that declared that the United States is a Christian country. This decision, the commentary notes, “cited dozens of court rulings and legal documents as precedents to arrive at this ruling; but in 1962 when the Supreme Court

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struck down voluntary prayer in schools it did so without using any such precedent.” The quotation that follows the commentary is from the decision in *Vidal v. Girard’s Executors* (1844) which encouraged that the Bible “be read and taught as a divine revelation in [schools].” It is difficult to read these statements as anything other than a critique of the current religiopolitical climate.

What these advertisements represent is a particular understanding of the relationship between the founding of America and the Bible, and between America’s biblical foundations and the political obligations of today’s legislators and citizens. This narrative is not unique to the Greens—it is a commonly held belief with roots in the colonial New England Puritans’ sense of chosenness. That regional belief became national at the time of the American Revolution, when patriots saw their war for independence against Britain as particularly blessed by God.<sup>39</sup> This belief helps explain the Greens’ explicitly stated interest in using their wealth and influence to educate the public, and especially legislators, about the centrality of the Bible. For the Greens, this is not an inappropriate effort to force religion onto the nation; it is an attempt to return the country to its properly Christian roots.

The Greens’ actions are intelligible and understandable, especially in light of the moral imperative they feel to spread the Gospel. They are not content merely to profess Christianity; they want to witness to the world and improve the moral character of the nation. Their controversial efforts, as people of faith, to influence politics do not constitute a deliberate attempt to trespass across the boundary between church and state. They are merely enacting their constitutional right to advocate for their view of how the country should be run, like any other individual, family, community, or lobbying group. The authenticity of their faith commitments is not in doubt; all of their actions are sincere and internally coherent, and to many people they are also commendable and even heroic. Their actions are not, however, consonant with the public persona they have projected in the media, as a family that had quietly gone about its private business before being morally obligated by oppressive government intervention to finally take a stand. Long before the HHS mandate was even a gleam in President Obama’s

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eye, the Greens had been religiously motivated political activists. David Green may describe himself in almost libertarian terms as a businessman who likes to be left alone to simply run his company, but this self-description jars with his family's actions and activism.<sup>40</sup> The Greens' carefully crafted media image is inaccurate. If they are Christian heroes now, they were always Christian heroes. If they are culture warriors now, that has been the case for many years. They may not have sought the spotlight, but they always desired to convert the nation. They believe in the church-state divide but also, and absolutely coherently, in the rights of religion to try and influence public values and political choices.

In the last decade, the Greens have focused their efforts on a web of projects centered around the Bible. The prioritizing of the Bible is nothing new to them, of course; as evangelicals, the Scripture stands at the heart of their faith. In their recent ventures, however, they have gone far beyond funding Bible translations and distributing Bible tracts. Leadership in this initiative has also shifted, from David Green to his son Steve, the current CEO of Hobby Lobby. Although David was raised in the Pentecostal tradition, and raised his own children in that church, Steve and his family belong to a Baptist congregation in Oklahoma City. Such shifting allegiances are not uncommon among evangelicals.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, this change, according to Steve Green, is more about comfort than it is about doctrine: his church adheres to most of the same faith claims as the Pentecostal community he grew up in, including the absolute centrality of the Bible: "We believe the Bible is God's Word and has ultimate authority in our beliefs and actions," says the statement of faith on the church's website.<sup>42</sup> There are a thousand flavors of evangelicalism, and theirs is just one.<sup>43</sup> As is the case with the prosperity gospel, many individuals and congregations have their own variation of these core beliefs.

In public speeches, as well as in conversation with us, Steve Green regularly invokes the term "biblical worldview." This phrase, which may seem opaque to the nonevangelical, has a specific resonance within Green's faith community. The term was popularized in the 1960s in the work of the influential evangelical

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Francis Schaeffer, and it has since thoroughly permeated evangelical discourse.<sup>44</sup> Molly Worthen, in her book *Apostles of Reason*, lists a range of “worldview”-based projects: “Worldview Academy” camps in Texas; the “Worldview Initiative in Tennessee; a “Worldview Curriculum” at Whitefield College in Florida; a certificate in “Worldview Studies” from Boyce College in Louisville.<sup>45</sup> Though it uses the particular referent of the Bible, “biblical worldview” is in fact an all-encompassing concept: as the website for Focus on the Family puts it, “Someone with a biblical worldview believes his primary reason for existence is to love and serve God.” In language that echoes that of Steve Green’s church, it goes on: “A biblical worldview is based on the infallible Word of God. When you believe the Bible is entirely true, then you allow it to be the foundation of everything you say and do.”<sup>46</sup> This is fully consonant with how the Greens, both Steve and David, and millions of other Americans describe their lives and their livelihoods. What it implies—and what runs through almost every aspect of the Greens’ work, though they may not be fully aware of it—is a basic equation of the Bible with an identifiably conservative brand of Protestant Christianity.

What is unexpected about the Greens’ current projects, therefore, is not that they should be interested in promoting the Bible. It is, rather, the very public nature of these ventures, which stands in stark contrast to the relatively low profile with which they have carried out most of their philanthropic work. In November 2009, the Green family began a sweeping project of collecting biblical manuscripts. In the eight years since then they have acquired tens of thousands of artifacts. Their rate of acquisition is unparalleled: until recently, when we published our 2016 article about it in *The Atlantic*, the publicity for what came to be known as the Green Collection called it the largest privately held collection of biblical antiquities in the world.<sup>47</sup> While there are more prestigious university collections in existence, none is positioned to have the same kind of impact as the Green Collection, which is destined for public consumption on a massive scale.

The eventual home of the collection will be the Museum of the Bible, a vast 430,000-square-foot facility slated to open in Washington, D.C., in the fall of 2017.<sup>48</sup> The museum will include



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numerous exhibits, many on loan from world-class universities and collections, but will be drawn predominantly from the Green Collection. The Museum of the Bible is owned and will be operated by Museum of the Bible, Inc. (hereafter MOTB, to help distinguish it from the identically named physical museum), a nonprofit organization established by the Green family in 2010. Steve Green is listed as the founder and chairman of the board. He dedicates approximately half of his time to MOTB.

Unlike the other charities to which Hobby Lobby is committed, the Museum of the Bible describes itself as having an explicitly nonsectarian orientation and mission. Time and time again representatives told us that the museum would not evangelize to its visitors or issue them invitations to be born again. Instead, it would showcase the agreement among Jews, Catholics, and Protestants about the centrality of the Bible and its impact in the world.

The Greens have sponsored two other major Bible-centered projects, directly tied to their collection of biblical antiquities and the accompanying museum, both in the realm of education. The antiquities collection has not merely been left to sit unexamined in the Hobby Lobby warehouses; almost since they began collecting, the Greens and MOTB have funded a small group of scholars, along with their undergraduate and graduate students, who are tasked with studying the collection's artifacts—a project known as the Green Scholars Initiative. This investment in higher education, involving some of the most prominent names in scholarship on religion, is unusual in the evangelical community, which has often shied away from direct engagement with the world of secular academia. As the museum project has been progressing, MOTB has, under Steve Green's leadership, also developed an elective Bible curriculum for use in public high schools both in the United States and, more recently, Israel and the United Kingdom. Like the museum itself, this curriculum aims to be explicitly nonsectarian, intending simply to educate participating students about the Bible's history and its cultural impact.

Given the strongly and openly evangelical bent of the Green family's charitable giving up to this point, the emphasis on the nonsectarian nature of these projects is new and noteworthy. The

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soft-spoken open-tent approach of the official statements provided by MOTB contrasts with the fiery passion of David Green's statements about the imperative to spread the Gospel. In 2009 he concluded an interview on his charitable giving saying, "I still believe you must be born again. I still believe the Bible says go and tell the world and preach the gospel. That's just the basic foundation of what I believe. . . . How can I just sit here and get comfortable when there are people that need to know Christ when I can do something about it?"<sup>49</sup> Many of those who have been involved from the beginning in building the museum share his priorities. Bob Hoskins, for example, the secretary of the board of MOTB and one of three individuals listed on every one of the nonprofit's filings, has made it his life's work to proselytize. The purpose of his own charity, One Hope, is "to affect destiny by providing God's Eternal Word to all children and youth of the World."<sup>50</sup> Rick Warren, the famous conservative megachurch pastor and best-selling author, also sits on the board. At first blush, it is strange to imagine that this group could be convinced to pour funds into an organization that is committed to avoiding explicit evangelization.

Some of this ostensible disconnect may be understood through the lens of the term that is used so frequently by Steve Green and MOTB: "nonsectarian." To the casual reader, "nonsectarian" can easily read as a synonym for nonreligious, impartial, or unbiased—and this may in fact be what Green and his affiliates hope to communicate by it. But the term has a history within Protestant circles that suggests a different frame of reference. This can be seen in part in the word "sectarian." Judaism, Catholicism, Islam, and even atheism are not "sects," but complete religious (or non-religious) groups. Sects are subgroups within a given religion, and this was the way that the term "nonsectarian" was originally used in Protestant Christianity. It originated early in the mid-nineteenth century as a way of unifying Protestants of many varieties behind efforts to prescribe daily readings from the King James Bible in the nation's emerging public schools.<sup>51</sup>

In the mid-twentieth century, "nonsectarian" became code for "not fundamentalist," used by moderate evangelicals who were trying, especially in founding more ecumenical Christian colleges

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and universities, to distinguish themselves from conservative fundamentalist Protestantism. This is still the way that most Protestants employ the term: not to mean “nonreligious,” but to mean “not denominationally specific”—though still within the broader world of Protestant Christianity. At times, it carries an even broader meaning: “nondoctrinal,” or “generically religious,” as in a public prayer that invokes God but without, for instance, closing with “in Jesus’ name.” Even this more general use, however, still implies a basic framework of Christian faith, although a more inclusive one.<sup>52</sup>

In this light, the constant invocation of “nonsectarianism” by Steve Green and MOTB makes somewhat more sense: while they speak of bringing the Bible to a wider public without attempting to evangelize, they may not be envisioning a purely academic, intellectual, historical, or cultural appreciation of the book. There is still an underlying religious commitment, which, given the personal beliefs of the Green family, should not be surprising. In fact, Green admits that his own understanding of the import of “nonsectarianism” has undergone a process of change over the past ten years: from something like “not fundamentalist,” though still deeply evangelical, to something closer to “generically religious.” It is not clear, however, that he has ever understood it to mean “nonreligious”: whenever he touts the nonsectarian nature of the museum, he highlights the involvement of Catholic and Jewish groups (like the Vatican and the Israel Antiquities Authority) alongside his own Protestant tradition.

This book is an exploration of the unusual intersection of faith and business, biblical worldview and academic scholarship, religion and the public sphere—all of which are brought together in the Bible-focused initiatives of the Green family, Hobby Lobby, and MOTB. In the chapters that follow, we will look closely at these four major projects: the antiquities collection, the scholarly study of that collection, the Bible curriculum and related educational ventures, and the Museum of the Bible. Taken together, these make up a coherent attempt on the part of the Greens not only to promote the Bible, but to promote a particular conservative evangelical understanding of the Bible—even though they may

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not be entirely aware that this is in fact what they are doing. Indeed, part of what makes the Greens so compelling is that they are both transparent in their essential faith commitments and at the same time often unable to see the assumptions they bring with them to this project and the impact that those commitments have on the projects that they pursue.

This disconnect may be largely responsible for the fact that none of these projects has proceeded smoothly. Many of the issues that the Greens have faced in launching these ventures were reasonably predictable, yet the Greens were seemingly unprepared for them: questions surrounding the means by which they amassed their antiquities collection; scholarly pushback against their forays into academic research; legal challenges to their Bible curriculum; editorials and other forms of public skepticism about their Bible museum.

A charitable read on the bumps in the road is that the Greens were out of their depth, poorly informed, and a little naïve when it came to the worlds of antiquities collecting, academics, and museum governance. Certainly there is truth to this: the Greens are gifted retailers, but they lack experience in almost every area that they have waded into in recent years. They do not see this as a stumbling-block, however. On the contrary, this attitude also comes from the early nineteenth century, when common people relied on the nation's democratic ideology to assert their competence in every sphere of life.<sup>53</sup> The same confidence comes from the American tradition that treats success in one realm of affairs to license authority in other areas of life, including public office and influence.

In interviews, David Green has been ambivalent about the necessity of college for his grandchildren, urging them instead to discern and follow the path that God has chosen for them. David Green and his sons Mart and Steve have only a year of college among them, but they have faith and the conviction that they have succeeded with the assistance of God. It is this combination that gives them the audacity to attempt to reform the public school system, create a new model for the study of biblical artifacts, and build a museum to bring the Bible to the general public. If prosperity is a

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test of piety, then the relative success of the Green family speaks volumes. Their success is God-given, and, thus, the combination of faith and hard-nosed business practices that has brought them success is blessed with divine approval. The implementation of those practices in the pursuit of furthering God's plan for humanity is thus appropriate.

As academics, we are particularly attuned to the intersection of business and the academy, which in the past few decades has had its own troubled history. The sponsorship of scientific research by "big pharma" and food advocacy groups, the increasing view that academic work is just labor, and the ways in which wealthy donors can impact university operations have all elicited concern.<sup>54</sup> Academics have protested the privatization of their guilds and the ways that this adversely impacts research and academic freedom. The Greens are far from the only business owners to use money to command attention and status within the academy. Philanthropic educational initiatives like the Ford Foundation, the John Templeton Foundation, and ventures funded by the Koch Brothers are engaged in analogous practices. What makes the Green family's involvement remarkable is the ambiguous relationship their donations create among business, learning, and piety. The interventions in higher education of business-savvy self-made Christians without even college degrees creates an unstable hierarchy of values. For academics, qualifications and expertise are key, and for the past two centuries the humanities has, with some notable exceptions, remained relatively or at least conceptually isolated from entrepreneurial control. With the Greens, this is certainly changing, and it is no coincidence that these changes come at the behest of Protestant Americans looking to change the way the broader culture thinks about the Bible. In many ways, the democratizing, antielitist spirit of the Green family's efforts to shortcut academic expertise replicates the Protestant belief that people do not need intermediaries between themselves and God.

The task of this book is to describe, explain, and understand the ways in which the Green family is seeking to bring its biblical worldview to America. With their antiquities collection, their scholarly investments, their curriculum, their museum, and their

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iconic status in modern America, they are among the most influential and powerful Christians in the United States. The scope of their influence makes it tempting to draw comparison with the Vanderbilts and other industrialist robber barons, but in their sincerity, self-understanding, and business practices they are more like William Colgate. They are “the real deal”: a sincere and well-intentioned family doing its best to improve the world in a manner consistent with their religious beliefs and cultural instincts. Even as we raise questions about their actions, we want to understand their motivations, explain their beliefs, and describe the ways that this small but powerful family is reshaping how the Bible is understood by the public.

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