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LARGE VASE OF FLOWERS, 1991; COLLECTION OF NORMAN AND NORAH STONE. © JEFF KOONS

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NATION

The Contraception Showdown

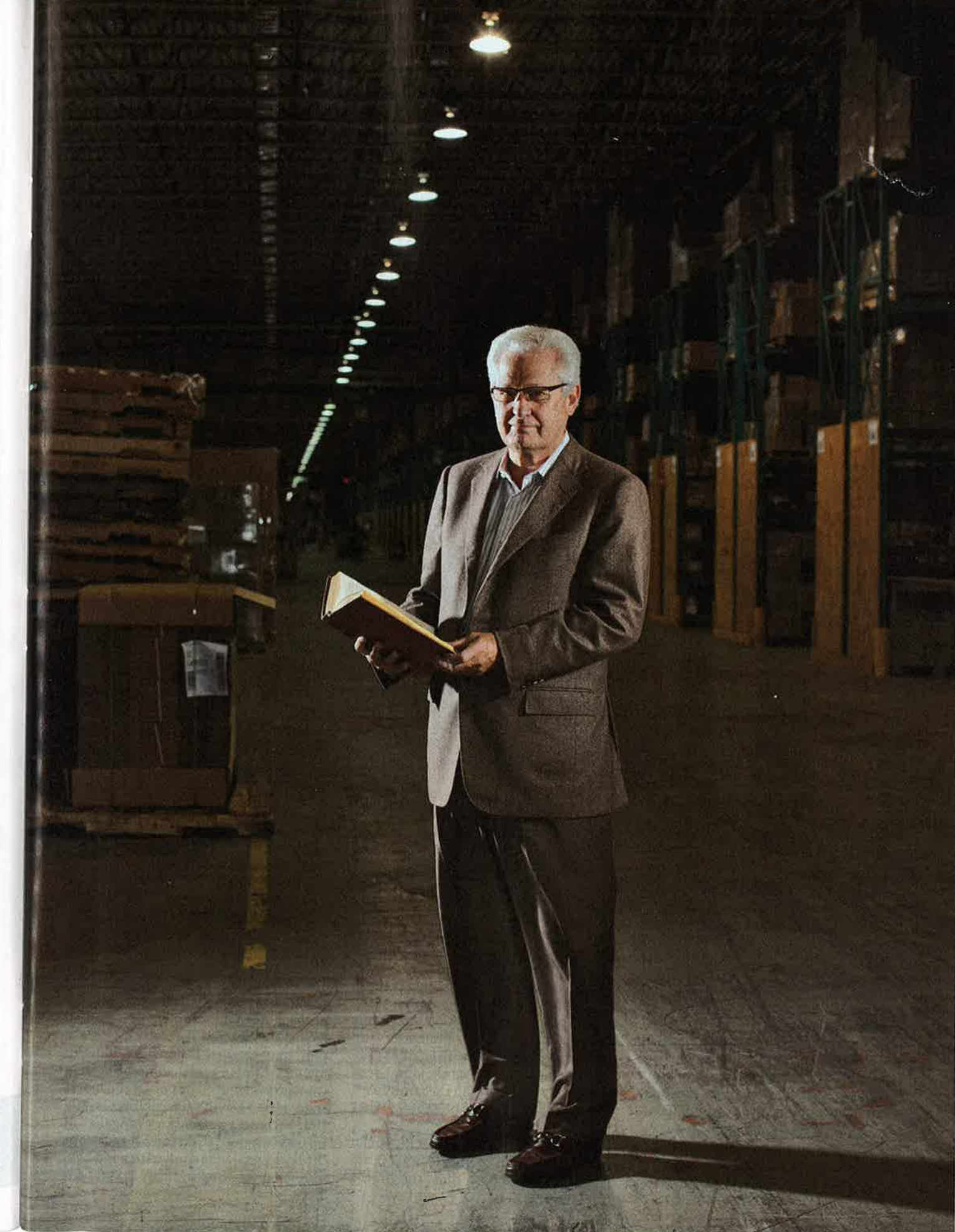
Inside one Oklahoma family's campaign to make America a more biblical place By David Van Biema

NORMALLY, WHEN THREE generations of the Green family meet, it is for one of two joyful purposes: an Oklahoma City Thunder game (a luxury suite is one of the few perks the billionaire family allows itself) or a monthly gathering to decide how to donate the tens of millions of dollars it gives away annually. Two years ago, though, the mood was somber. The topic was whether the Greens—the only shareholders in the \$3 billion, 626-store Hobby Lobby arts-and-crafts empire—should take on the

Obama Administration. They had been invited by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, a conservative religious-freedom law firm, to challenge the Affordable Care Act (ACA) on the grounds that it infringed on their Christian beliefs by requiring employers to cover contraceptive methods that the family regards as forms of early abortion. The case had—and has—huge ramifications. But participation would also be a huge departure for the low-key Green clan, which had finally grown too big to avoid public conflict between its deeply conservative faith and a government whose actions it found increasingly unbiblical.

The patriarch
Hobby Lobby CEO
David Green,
who founded the
company in 1970,
in its warehouse in
Oklahoma City

Photograph by Jamie Lipke



David Green, 72, the company's founder and CEO, called a meeting in the living room of Hobby Lobby's board chairman, his older son Mart. According to a friend, Steve Green—David's younger son and the company president—spoke last, using the Bible's Book of Daniel to review the possible repercussions of litigation. Like the Greens, Daniel was a privileged participant in a culture indifferent to his faith. In one instance, he requested a religious exemption from eating King Nebuchadnezzar's meat, and it was granted. In another, he was thrown into a lion's den for praying, but God delivered him, closing the lions' mouths. Steve reminded his family that there was a third possibility, untreated in Daniel: sometimes God allows those who champion his law over man's law to suffer. Steve said that he didn't know which fate awaited them if they joined the suit but that he rested in his belief that they were in the Lord's hands. He called the family to a vote.

Unanimously, about 19 Greens opted to sue. David subsequently announced, "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."

Before its current term ends June 30, the Supreme Court will decide whether Hobby Lobby and a smaller co-plaintiff have standing to apply for First Amendment religious protection under a 1993 law called the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), and if so, whether the act should be interpreted to award them an exemption from Obamacare's birth control parameters. If the court rules broadly in the Greens' favor, it would in effect grant for-profit corporations the same sweeping religious freedoms enjoyed by individuals. That would immediately give the nation a more faith-based cast and invite a wave of corporate piety by American businesses interested in regulatory exemption. A narrower ruling in Hobby Lobby's favor could carve for religiously focused companies a notable new exemption from certain federal laws. And, of course, a ruling against Hobby Lobby would buoy Obamacare and leave the

family with a choice of complying with the birth control provisions in the Affordable Care Act or paying heavy fees.

However, even if the court rejects their case, the Greens—and especially Steve, 50, who is square-jawed and slightly jugged, with an even temper and a heartland twang—will not disappear from the national scene. The lawsuit is the first of three family projects that could propel a little-known clan of Christian philanthropic superpatrons into the limelight as evangelical leaders positioned to expand the place of religion in American life.

In addition to *Sebelius v. Hobby Lobby*, the Greens are beta testing a high-tech Bible-study curriculum for public schools this September in an Oklahoma district. They hope to see it adopted in thousands more districts within three years. A draft copy suggests it will be a wonderland of technological pedagogy but will raise church-state issues that could also end up before the high court.

And then there is the as-yet-unnamed museum of the Bible in a 440,000-sq.-ft. building two blocks from the National Mall, which was bought to house the best of the Greens' 45,000-piece collection of biblical artifacts. The museum will function as both a magnet and a marker for evangelical Christians on the country's most symbolically loaded swath of real estate.

Such efforts may seem low-key compared with the court case, but John Green (no relation), a keen observer of evangelicals at the University of Akron's Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, notes that the head-on approach hasn't served the religious right that well lately: "Their party is out of power, and in any case it has been more interested in economics than the values focus, which worked very poorly for all the effort and money that went into it." Evangelical leaders have debated taking a softer approach to addressing what many see as a post-Christian nation. And while the lawsuit is certainly a straightforward power move, all three Green gambits neatly sidestep the voting booth. John Green thinks they may position the family as "a new kind of evangelical presence ... They could fill the vacuum."

Megapastor Rick Warren, with whom the family has numerous connections, some financial, agrees that "the Greens



could be a new voice ... I think the religious-liberty issue will be the civil rights issue of the next decade, and they are its poster people."

The Business Is the Mission

DAVID GREEN GREW UP IN A DEEPLY CONSERVATIVE religious environment. His father was a pastor with the Pentecostal Church of God of Prophecy, a denomination that—beyond believing the Bible to be absolutely true and reliable—advised against the wearing of jewelry by women and "amusements" in bowling alleys or cinemas. (Mart Green had never been in a movie theater until he produced a movie as an adult.) David's five siblings would each become a pastor, an evangelist or a pastor's wife. Yet his own prodigious gift lay in retail. Starting with a kitchen-table business making tiny frames for



told a Christian website, the High Calling, “We’ve had a couple of [resignations]. At this point no one has given us any legal issues. We would fight it.”

The flip side is that a job at the Lobby can be good and steady work. In 2009 the Greens began raising their starting wage a dollar a year: at \$15, it’s now double Oklahoma’s legal minimum. In 2000 they started shutting down all stores on Sundays—a move that meant a \$100 million-a-year hit on the bottom line—to allow employees family and church time. Yet by 2012 the chain’s revenue had climbed stratospherically. In that year, *Forbes* reported that the company had \$3 billion in annual sales and that David, worth \$4.5 billion, was America’s 79th richest person. The moral, to him, is obvious. Says William Wilson, a Green friend and the president of Oral Roberts University: “It’s a little hard to convince people not to make a decision based on biblical values when every decision they have made based on biblical values causes them to prosper.”

The Greens share that prosperity like people who truly believe that the money is God’s, not theirs. The family’s first passion is Bible dissemination and education. They finance huge tract agencies as well as a campaign to translate and digitize Scripture in every language and champion YouVersion, the world’s most downloaded Bible app. The family’s single most heroic charitable act was the 2007 \$70 million bailout and cleanup of Oklahoma’s debt- and scandal-ridden Oral Roberts University, to which they had no prior connection. Notes D. Michael Lindsay, author of *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite*: “That’s radical generosity.” David and Steve have both said the company gives away half its earnings, and in 2012 David told the High Calling that he and his children have legally signed away any money from future stock sales, seemingly to avoid the temptation of an eventual cash-out. If so, Hobby Lobby seems nearly as much a steroidal evangelical charity as a conventional business.

None of this was lost on the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, based in Washington. When Obamacare went into effect last year, the Administration exempted religious bodies from obligatory contraception coverage and made lesser accommodations to faith-based nonprofits. Becket apparently saw an opportunity to

do-it-yourself paintings in 1970, he had founded more than a dozen Hobby Lobby stores by the mid-1980s and hit triple digits by 1991. But for years, he once wrote, “I felt I was the black sheep of the family.”

The solution was, in evangelical parlance, to make the business the mission. Hobby Lobby became very Christian. It wasn’t just the CEO’s custom of crawling under his desk to pray. In 1997 the Greens began to buy newspaper ads at Christmas, Easter and the Fourth of July about the religious basis of those holidays. The stores salt their Muzak liberally with hymns. There are chaplains on staff, and corporate-level meetings can start with prayer. Many customers love the ambience—Hobby Lobby is big with homeschoolers—but non-Christian employees are evangelized along with everyone else. Asked if problems result, David

Full-court press *The Greens’ case could significantly broaden the definition of religious freedom*

‘The religious-liberty issue will be the civil rights issue of the next decade, and [the Greens] are its poster people.’

—RICK WARREN, MEGAPASTOR

sue for conscientious-objector status on behalf of the for-profit sector—arguing, in effect, that corporations have religious rights. For a plaintiff, the group's backers courted the closest imaginable facsimile of a religious corporation: Hobby Lobby.

The Greens are not natural agitators or political players. Steve gives hardly any money to candidates. Yet he seems to have been preparing for this kind of confrontation. While acknowledging in his 2011 book *Faith in America* that “part of the freedom our country allows is for people to make their own choices and to live in different ways,” he also wrote, “If someone takes seriously the whole idea of world-views they will see it isn’t really possible just to coexist and get along.” The family spent months, as Steve has said, analyzing the ACA. Yet the clan remained reluctant to litigate. Says Mart’s friend Bobby Gruenewald: “They were praying that there was some kind of reprieve,” perhaps the law’s abrogation by the Supreme Court.

But when the court upheld the law’s crucial personal mandate in 2012, says another family friend, Becket “reminded” the family that the ACA would require coverage of two birth control methods that they regarded as forms of early abortion: the IUD and the morning-after pill. That led to the meeting at Mart’s house. “The Greens hate controversy,” says Mart’s friend Rob Hoskins, but “when they’ve done the research and interpreted the Bible and believe they’ve reached a righteous decision, there’s not much room for gray. It’s ‘We’re not going to bend our knee.’” (The family declined to be interviewed for this story, they said, for fear of seeming to want to influence the case but allowed friends to talk to TIME.)

The Curriculum

IN APRIL THE SCHOOL BOARD IN MUSTANG, Okla., near the Hobby Lobby corporate headquarters, posted the first 200 draft pages of *The Book: The Bible’s History, Narrative and Impact*, which Mustang schools will start teaching as a high school elective in September. It is the first volume in a wildly ambitious four-year public-school curriculum created by the Green Scholars Initiative (GSI), based in Texas and North Carolina. Mustang is a trial run, and GSI executive director Jerry Pattengale hopes to place the curriculum in “thousands” of schools by 2016.

Two hurdles confront anyone teaching the Bible in public schools. One is constitutional: the Supreme Court banned religious courses on campus during school hours in 1948. A nonbinding side note to its 1963 school-prayer decision stated that Bible courses were acceptable “when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education.” Case law so far suggests that judges read *objectively* and *secular* with some lenience. But equally daunting is the issue of money: schools are strapped, and electives requiring a textbook can be prohibitively expensive.

Especially a book like *The Book*. As its full title suggests, its three themes are the Bible’s narratives, a history of its composition and transmission, and its impact. It will convey these not only through a deftly interwoven text but also via links to 550 digital resources. They include illustrations that come alive as video when you run your smartphone over them, original footage shot all over the world for the project, clips from the TV miniseries *The Bible* and lectures by members of the GSI who are affiliated with Oxford University and the Vatican. And the text will be affordable, says Pattengale: although the R&D costs have already reached millions, they will be absorbed by the GSI. Pixel for pixel, it will probably be the best deal on a textbook ever.

However, the draft text, soon to be supplemented by books for all four high

school years, pushes the constitutional envelope hard. Describing the project in a 2013 speech, Steve said its goal was to “reintroduce” the Bible, which he called historically “true” and “good,” to a nation “in danger because of its ignorance of what God has taught.” (He also said he thought Bible courses should be required.) *The Book* reflects those goals. Although not openly evangelistic, it contains a section titled “How Do We Know That the Bible’s Historical Narratives Are Reliable?” and head-scratchers like “Was Moses mentally unstable? No. His titanic swings of emotion and behavior sprang from his special call to stand in the gap between God and the people.” It describes the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as “one grand story”—a basic tenet of Christianity but an offensive notion to most Jews. Says Mark Chancey, a professor of religion at Southern Methodist University: “The [conservative Protestant] views in the draft aren’t shared elsewhere across the religious spectrum or in the broad academic community. When the draft presents them as fact, it’s promoting a particular religious viewpoint.”

The Museum

BUT WHAT CREATES A PROBLEM IN A PUBLIC school is not necessarily an issue in a museum off the National Mall. The Greens bought their first trophy-quality Bibles in 2009 for friends planning a Scripture museum in Dallas. That project foundered, says Steve’s friend Brian Banks, but the collection “just began exponentially growing and taking on a life of its own.” Since then the Green family has amassed 45,000 Bibles and artifacts, including (according to the family’s own experts and some independent scholars) cuneiform tablets dating “to the time of Abraham,” the world’s second largest private collection from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest complete edition of the Gospel of John, the oldest Jewish prayer book and a despairing note written by Martin Luther. “I’ve been in their vault,” says Rick Warren. “I’m something of a collector myself.” (He has a 35,000-book library.) “This was stunning.” The collection has been appraised—conservatively—at \$23 million.

Parts are already well traveled: some in a show called “Passages” that involves 40 tractor-trailers, others with a group called



Core curriculum A textbook for a new high school elective course starting in fall 2014



The plaintiffs David and Barbara Green, center, with their family, the Hobby Lobby shareholders

Verbum Domini that has twice shown at the Vatican, where Steve's party of 18 received a 30-minute audience with Pope Francis on March 31. (They talked about religious freedom.)

But its ultimate showcase will be the treasure house five blocks from the Capitol, which is set to open in 2017.

The Museum of the Bible (its working name—it doesn't have a formal one yet) will be the brick-and-mortar version of the Green curriculum. The Good Book's stories, history and impact will occupy a floor apiece, each crafted by a different A-list designer. Museum COO Cary Summers says 46 staffers and more than 200 consultants are working on various aspects of the museum. Technical magicians will provide features gauged to every taste, from Holy Land Experience (yes, the Red Sea will part for you) to the interactive divine (press two buttons, says Summers, and your phone will fill up with advanced data on an ancient prayer book).

The museum will cost \$270 million to \$440 million. (The lower estimate is the Greens' figure for expenses before the installation of exhibits; the higher estimate is the industry rumor on its final cost.) The Greens' nonprofit arm will foot the bill. But the finances can be a bit circular. The \$50 million payment on the property came as a grant from the National Christian Foundation, a fund to which Hobby Lobby—connected parties donated \$65 million in 2009 alone, according to Salon.com. But if the Greens gave as

much money to the fund last year as they appeared to in 2009, it would have neatly covered the price of the land.

The Journey

IN FACT, MANY WEALTHY EVANGELICALS to whose causes the Greens have given in the past would be happy to return the favor, especially to place a Christian chit on the great multicultural scorecard of the Mall and its environs. Steve has declared that the museum, like the curriculum, will be "nonsectarian," which, if true, would make it an extraordinary resource for people of every creed. There may be reason to doubt him. The stated mission on an early tax form, which now says the museum "exists to invite people to engage with the Bible," originally declared that its purpose was "to bring to life the living word of God, to tell its compelling story of preservation, and to inspire confidence in the absolute authority and reliability of the Bible." But unlike Supreme Court cases and school curriculums, a privately funded museum lacks any element of government compulsion: if you don't like it, you just steer clear...

And step out of the way of the tens of thousands of empowered evangelical tourists. If Hobby Lobby prevails in court, the Greens will be conservative-Christian

heroes. If it loses, they will attain a kind of martyr status but without being vanquished. As the Bliss Institute's John Green puts it, win, lose or draw, their other projects will "bring the case back to mind," helping keep the religious-liberty argument alive. Meanwhile, the authority of the Bible is "a central issue to evangelical identity and one that both the curriculum and the museum cast in positive rather than negative terms." For a community on the defensive, it could be a fresh and successful rallying point. Adds Rick Warren: "These guys have great staying power."

James Davison Hunter, an influential Christian theorist at the University of Virginia, has identified three distinct streams in the long history of American evangelicals: "purity from" the majority culture, "defensive against" it and "relevance to" it. He proposes a fourth: "faithful presence within."

It can be a little hard to figure out which stream the Greens, with their vast resources and potential, are swimming in. Many large and successful religious families move with, and adapt to, a culture they long to change. In 2011 David, who grew up in a "purity from" culture, wholeheartedly endorsed what might be called an aggressive "defensive against" book by Os Hillman, a pamphleteer of rhetoric about Christians' need to "retake" the "seven mountains of influence," including business, education and government. The court case is "defensive against." Meanwhile, GSI executive director Pattengale, seemingly intent on "relevance to," reels off curriculum changes, some major, to correct for what he calls "overreaching." Summers, the museum director, asks forbearance regarding the museum's old mission statement: "When you're a one-man show, you have a tendency to put down some of your personal desires," he says. "But that's not necessarily what carries forward into the product."

"I think the whole family has been on a journey," says Rob Hoskins. "It's not like they had this 20-year plan to build this big business and affect the culture. When you've started out as a family as Oklahoma Pentecostals, who were pretty nonconformative with the broader culture, you have to grapple with it, and the whole family has been developing."

It's just that from now on, the Greens will be doing their developing in public. ■