

Hobby Lobby's Steve Green Stands on Faith in God's Word Against Obamacare Mandate

Once Steve Green sets his path, there's no turning back.

Not when he and his high school girlfriend, Jackie, totaled their cars playing chicken. "No one turned off," he said, recalling how he aimed right at her and she just kept coming. A year later, she married him.

Not when he saw no point in college, going directly into his family's **Hobby Lobby** craft store business. Green, now 50, rose up from assembling picture frames for "bubble gum money" at age 7 through every job, including cleaning toilets, to president of the \$3.3 billion national chain, one of the nation's largest private companies.

And certainly not now when, he says, the U.S. government is challenging his unshakeable Christian faith and his **religious liberty**.

Next week Green's path leads straight up the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court to witness oral arguments in the case *Sebelius v. Hobby Lobby Stores and Conestoga Wood Specialties Corp. v. Sebelius*.

That's Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. The department included all Food and Drug Administration-approved forms of contraception among services required for insurance coverage under the **Affordable Care Act**.

Hobby Lobby has provided insurance with contraception coverage for years, paying for 16 of the FDA-approved forms, from barrier methods to pills that prevent fertilization. Not

covered: intrauterine devices and morning-after pills such as Plan B. Those, the FDA acknowledges, could prevent a fertilized egg from implanting in the womb.

Blocking implantation would “terminate life” says Green. “We won’t pay for any abortive products. We believe life begins at conception.”

While scores of faith-based organizations and private business owners have filed suit seeking exemption from the mandate, **Hobby Lobby** has become the standard-bearer for religious opposition. The potentially landmark case is a **First Amendment** battle testing whether a private corporation can have freedom of religion rights and, if so, whether the government has a “compelling interest” in overriding such rights.

The justices will wade through thickets of questions: Can a company pick and choose laws to obey, based on the personal beliefs of the owner? Is it the job of government to decide whether those beliefs are worthwhile and sincere, deeply and consistently held?

Steve Green is a Southern Baptist, grandson and nephew of **Pentecostal pastors**, a Sunday school teacher for decades and leader of a business that has declared its Christian principles from opening day. **Hobby Lobby** stores are all closed Sundays “to allow employees time for family & worship,” the front door signs say.

He may be the ideal plaintiff “for such a time as this”—the line from the Book of Esther that believers often call on for courage when standing on faith.

Jackie and Steve Green, side by side in a Washington hotel restaurant crowded with people in town for February’s **National Prayer Breakfast**, remember another day when standing on faith carried them through a crisis.

Nearly 30 years ago, long before they were tagged as Oklahoma

City billionaires, Steve Green's father, **Hobby Lobby** CEO David Green, brought the whole Green clan together to consider—and pray for—the company's survival. The 1985 Oklahoma oil bust had devastated the state economy. **Hobby Lobby**, never in the red before, was in deep trouble.

David Green founded the company in 1972, the only one of six children who didn't become a pastor like their father in the Church of God of Prophecy denomination. After months of struggling alone to save the family business, he admitted, "I don't know how to make this work."

Steve Green was 21, his wife, 19 and pregnant with their first child. Married the year before, they had just bought their first home. Fear was not an option.

The whole family doubled down on work and on faith, "shared the stewardship," they said, and never looked back. It turned out to be the only year Hobby Lobby ever lost money. Now, the company has 640 stores, with 70 more opening in 2014.

Steve and Jackie Green, who met at a church camp as young teens, are a double-team interview. They have the same eyes, pale blue green. They share the same easy laugh, the same "no regrets spirit," Jackie Green says.

After all, not even a head-on collision could derail them.

Not surprisingly, he had his driver's license suspended for speeding a few years later. (Who would know this was the same Steve Green who won the driver's ed award among 68 students in his Bethany High School graduating class?) But he gave up the lead-foot driving – and parachute jumping and later his pilot's license—as their family grew. The Greens have six children including a daughter, now 7, adopted from China.

The **Hobby Lobby** kingpin has little time for hobbies of his own. The family enjoys skiing and the Oklahoma City Thunder NBA team. He became the chocolate chip cookie baker in the

family when his wife didn't make them as often as he had a hunger for them.

Their family foundation's charitable gifts focus on gospel outreach efforts in the U.S. and abroad, contributing to the building of a dome for the Oklahoma State Capitol, and supporting social services such as the City Rescue Mission.

The mission is a 640-bed homeless shelter in Oklahoma City run by CEO and President Tom Jones. He was Steve Green's youth pastor who became a lifelong friend (and an eyewitness to the infamous collision).

Jones still recalls how impressed he was by the teenage Green in his youth class at Sunday school.

"As a young man, when many others were just talking about everything from football to dating, his conversations were always centered around the importance of knowing and living by the truth of God's word as the way to move through life toward success.

"I told him, 'You need to share this!' and he was all, 'No, no, I'm good.' So, finally, I just announced one day that he would be teaching the class. He's been teaching ever since," said Jones.

Across three decades, says Jones, "I've never seen Steve angry." He's also never seen Green turn away from a challenge, certainly not one where, said Jones, "he could be forced by the government to do something contrary to the word of God."

Family, faith and business were the sole centerpieces of Steve Green's life until the late 1990s when a professor with a passion for ancient manuscripts brought him the idea to build a collection of Bible texts. He's since written two books, "Faith in America" and "The Bible in America."

Now, the Green's family foundation is building a Bible museum

five blocks southwest of the U.S. Capitol to house an unparalleled collection of rare and ancient Scripture manuscripts: 40,000 biblical texts, artifacts and antiquities, from the most ancient manuscripts in Jesus "household language" to Torah scrolls that survived the Holocaust.

It's planned to open in 2017 and research to choose a name is underway. Just don't expect to see "Green" in that name.

"Our hope is that the Bible is the hero of the museum, not me, or the Green family," he said last week, in a phone interview from Egypt. He was traveling to Jerusalem and Rome as well to discuss possible exhibition partnerships (and take a side trip to climb Mount Sinai).

The average American has four Bibles at home and rarely reads any of them. Steve Green has worked his way through his Bibles uncounted times.

Lately, it's the Book of Daniel that comes often to his mind. In Chapter 3, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would rather face a fiery furnace than bow to an idol at the command of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Green said, "They told the king 'Our God is able to deliver us.'"

As he faces the white-hot spotlight of the Supreme Court case, Steve Green said, "God has allowed us to take this stand. I don't want to be presumptuous to say this is God's will."

If the ruling goes against Hobby Lobby, "I don't know what we will do but I am sure what we will not do," he said. He will say as the three men told the king, "even if God does not deliver us, we still cannot do this." (Daniel 3:16-18)

Of more than 25,000 full-time and part-time Hobby Lobby employees, there are "13,000 lives" depending on their health plan, said Steve Green.

And the “greatest misconception” about the Green family and this case, he said emphatically, “is that we are trying to impose our religion on these workers or others. Not at all! That would violate our religion to do that.”

Yet through that religion, he said, they can face any court ruling with peace of mind.

“We are just going to do what God would call us to do, what he teaches us is right and trust him to do what is out of our control.”