

David Green: The Biblical Billionaire Backing The Evangelical Movement

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Credit: Jamie Lipke for Forbes

David Green insists God is the true owner of his \$3 billion arts and crafts chain. Acting as His disciple, Green has become the largest evangelical benefactor in the world—with plans for unprecedented gifts once he's in heaven.

Fresh off an inspection of Hobby Lobby's sprawling 5.5 million-square-foot distribution warehouse in [Oklahoma City](#), the company's CEO, [David Green](#), retreats to his office in the adjacent executive building, where he surrounds himself with a collection of homely elephant figurines. His coffee table is draped with a bird's-eye-view photograph of his corporate campus, annotated with scribbles in black marker that show the expansion under way.

When I ask him to walk me through the secrets to his company's growth, which the aerial plans represent, the 70-year-old, with a full head of white hair, blue eyes and a prominent square jaw, doesn't take any personal credit. Nor does he laud his executives or his 22,000 employees or his customers, who will gobble up more than \$3 billion worth of crafts products from him this year. "If you have anything or if I have anything, it's because it's been given to us by our Creator," says Green, sweeping his hand over the acres laid out before him. "So I have learned to say, 'Look, this is yours, God. It's all yours. I'm going to give it to you.' "

He means that literally. David Green has one of America's great, little-known fortunes, having turned a makeshift manufacturing operation in his living room for arts and crafts into a retail monster, with 520 superstores in 42 states. Green and his family own 100% of the company and he ranks No. 79 on our list of the 400 richest Americans, with an estimated net worth of \$4.5 billion. Hobby Lobby's cash spigot currently makes him the largest individual donor to evangelical causes in America.

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I don't care if you're in business or out of business, God owns it," says Green. "How do I separate it? Well, it's God's in church and it's mine here? I have purpose in church, but I don't have purpose over here? You can't have a belief system on Sunday and not live it the other six days.”

There are very few members of The Forbes 400 who bring religion to work. Most notable are Chick-fil-A's [Truett Cathy](#) and [Forever 21's Jin Sook and Do Won Chang](#), born-again Christians who keep Bibles in their office and print John 3:16 on the bottom of each shopping bag. More typical is [Warren Buffett](#), who admits to being agnostic. Green joined Buffett's Giving Pledge in 2010: His public letter doing so quotes 2 Corinthians ("Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver"). And that's about all that Buffett and Green have in common philanthropically. Rather than try to cure malaria or fix the U.S. public school system, he's turned his arts and crafts empire into a massive missionary organization, the equivalent of the largest church bake sale in the world. Hobby Lobby takes half of total pretax earnings and plunges it directly into a portfolio of evangelical ministries. Green keeps the total amount of his charitable contributions private, but based on information received from him and discussion with various recipients, FORBES estimates his lifetime giving at upwards of \$500 million.

In the U.S. Green's wealth produces the physical underpinnings of dozens of churches and Christian universities. It began in 1999, with a former V.A. hospital building in [Little Rock](#), Ark. that he purchased for \$600,000 and converted into a church. Green has since spent over \$300 million donating about 50 properties. The word is out: Ministries approach him constantly with proposals for their

new church or Christian community center—only one in ten is chosen. He won't help them unless they pass a doctrinal vetting process, which includes questions about the Virgin Birth. Even well-known pastor Rick Warren needed to pass Green's muster before the billionaire handed his Saddleback Church a 170-acre ranch property last August to use as a retreat.

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Green's influence, though, comes through education; he currently carries evangelical education on his back. He gave a former Ericsson plant in Lynchburg, Va., which he bought for \$10.5 million, to Jerry Falwell's Liberty University in 2004. He gave an entire campus to Zion Bible College in Haverhill, Mass. in 2007, at a cost of \$16.5 million. In 2009 Green snapped up the 217-acre former campus of Massachusetts prep school Northfield Mount Hermon for just \$100,000, spent \$9 million on renovations and plans to give it away. Christian universities across the country have been auditioning for this attractive location, causing a minor stir in the liberal New England town of Northfield. In his biggest splash, Green bailed out scandal-ridden, debt-laden Oral Roberts University with a \$70 million gift in 2007, a donation with strings attached: Green got to replace the college's misgoverning board of trustees. Today, with his son Mart chairman of the board and one of his granddaughters a new alumnus, Green calls Oral Roberts a “healthy university.”

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“Even the most generous Christian philanthropists often don't see the purpose of their giving,” says Dr. Mark Rutland, the new ORU president and founder of the Global Servants evangelical ministry. “There are impulse givers, people who give to their alma mater or their church or some particular ministry with which they become familiar—but the Greens are Kingdom givers. ... They consider it an honor; they consider it a mission.”

Abroad, Green is putting Scripture into the hands of nonbelievers. “People ask, ‘How are you going to get a Bible to everyone in the world?’ We're doing it,” Green says. Through foundations he supports, he has already distributed nearly 1.4 billion copies of Gospel literature in more than 100 countries, mostly in Africa and Asia. The OneHope Foundation targets children age 4 to 14 with Scripture tailored to them, while Every Home for Christ sends evangelists with Bible booklets door-to-door in some of the poorest countries on Earth. “It's not like you give them that but don't give them food; you do both,” Green stresses. But the priority is clear: “If I die without food or without eternal salvation, I want to die without food.”

Green and his family show what giving looks like “from a biblical perspective,” says Rob Hoskins, president of OneHope. “For high-net-worth individuals, particularly people that created first-generation wealth, to look at the growth of their business, not for them to maintain a lavish lifestyle or accumulate generational wealth but for the cause of Christ—they're a shining light in the Christian community.”

Green makes a distinction between “good” causes—employing people or researching cures for disease, for example—and “great” causes, which will echo beyond our temporal existence. “I don't know how to get anywhere else once you start with that one thing: that the Bible is God's word,” he says. And Green has taken God's word digital. **He sponsors the YouVersion Bible app for mobile phones, equipped to offer almost 300 different versions of Scripture in 144 languages—all available at the tap of your finger. It has already been downloaded more than 50 million times.**

Perhaps his most personal mission yet is just gearing up. Green is creating a permanent, public home for his collection of handwritten scrolls, rare books and ancient cuneiform tablets the family has amassed over the decades. At 44,000 artifacts, it appears to be the largest private collection of biblical antiquities in the world. Some of the most precious pieces are currently housed in a modest temperature-controlled storage room in the Hobby Lobby warehouse. It's not much bigger than your average walk-in closet, but Green steps lightly as he enters. He's treading on sacred ground. “This isn't just some book that someone made up,” Green says as he gingerly takes one Bible down from the shelf. “It's God, it's history, and we want to show that.” He purchased a building in Washington, D.C. with the hope of opening the Museum of the Bible, an expanded version of a current traveling exhibition, within three years.

While he has donated as much money to evangelical causes as anyone alive, Green is more humbled by the memory of his parents' putting their last dime on the collection plate. His father was a small-time preacher who bounced from one tiny congregation to another, eventually landing at a church of just 35 attendees in Altus, Okla., a speck of a town amid a sea of cattle ranches and cotton fields. The family subsisted on hand-me-down clothes and food donations from the congregation, going weeks without having meat to put on the table—but that didn't stop Green's mother from donating to the church. His wife of 51 years, Barbara, recalls her mother-in-law with reverence. “We don't give out of our need, we give out of our surplus,” she says. “David's mother gave out of her need. She would give stuff when she might not have something to replace that with, yet she stepped out in faith.”

All of Green's five siblings followed his parents' example and became either pastors themselves or pastors' wives. Green himself took the faith down a less traveled path. After flailing his way through middle school (he had to repeat seventh grade), he jumped at the opportunity to do a work-study program during his junior year of high school. As a stock boy at McClellan's general store, where he would later meet Barbara, Green spent most of his time sweeping floors and unloading boxes for 60 cents an hour, but he fell in love with the romantic idea of buying something for 10 cents and selling it for 20.

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After serving briefly in the Air Force Reserve and marrying his sweetheart, the 29-year-old Green was working as a manager at TG&Y, another five-and-dime, when he started the small business that would become Hobby Lobby. **Borrowing \$600 to buy equipment, Green teamed up with another store manager in 1970 to manufacture his first of many arts and crafts products: miniature picture frames.** Soon the Green family kitchen table was converted into factory space manned by Barbara and the couple's two young boys, Steve and Mart, who churned out frames for an allowance of 7 cents apiece. In 1972 he opened his first store, a 300-square-foot space in Oklahoma City.

Soon, with the help of a bead-buying craze among hippies (“God bless them,” Green says), he upgraded to a bigger location. Three years later he opened a second store in town, with 6,000 square feet of retail space, and quit his regular day job at TG&Y—against Barbara's wishes. “She wasn't on board at first,” Green says. “She was real comfortable with me working at TG&Y. They were doing \$2 billion in sales; we did \$100,000. Of course, they're gone now, and we're making \$3 billion.”

“I want to know that I have affected people for eternity. 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.”

Who is responsible for Hobby Lobby's success depends on who tells the story. CFO Jon Cargill, who has been with the company for more than 20 years, calls Green “the Bobby Fischer of merchandising.” It doesn't take more than a few minutes with the founder, walking through a local Hobby Lobby store, to see the reason he has been able to expand his company into a well-oiled, moneymaking machine without bringing in any outside investors.

Stopping at a display marked 30% off, Green explains how a kitschy rooster ornament is produced overseas for pennies on the dollar, then sold as part of an in-house brand of home accents: the ceramic vases, bookend statuettes and decorative mirrors that dominate prime center-store real estate and make up Hobby Lobby's highest-grossing department. The rooster doesn't have a common bar code under its tail feathers; Green is winning a war against computerized point of sale systems, with the belief that manually updating the price sticker makes his employees more knowledgeable.

Adhering to that stubborn dogma has helped Green, who continues to work six days a week, take Hobby Lobby to greater heights. **Same-store sales have increased by an average of 8.1% over each of the last four years, while larger competitor Michaels averaged only 0.4% during the same period.** “It's just a fantastic, unbelievable retail experience that I can't get enough of,” says Sue Turchick, president of Crafters Home, a buying group for independent arts and crafts retailers. “I tend to want to buy independent, locally owned and operated, but Hobby Lobby steals me away from that principle every stinking time.”

Yet Green steadfastly believes that the success is not his doing. **“I think God has blessed us because we have given,”** he says. Take Green's account of Hobby Lobby's close call with death in 1985. On one hand, there's the perfectly reasonable, Business 101 explanation: He overleveraged the business and diluted the inventory with off-brand, expensive products like luggage, ceiling fans and gourmet foods. Then there's Green's explanation: “It was a pride problem, and I had to get rid of it,” he says, describing his leadership style. “It's sort of like God says to me, because I was arrogant, ‘I'm going to let you have it by yourself.’ ” The Business 101 answer was downsizing, cost-cutting and pleading with creditors. The Green explanation: getting under his desk to pray for help. Whichever version is right, smart strategy or faith, combined with hard work, brought back profits.

Hobby Lobby remains a Christian company in every sense. It runs ads on Christmas and Easter in the local paper of each town where there's a store, often asserting the religious foundation of America. **Stores are closed on Sundays, forgoing revenue to give employees time to worship. The company keeps four chaplains on the payroll and offers a free health clinic for staff at the headquarters—although not for everything; it's suing the federal government to stop the mandate to cover emergency contraception through health insurance.** Green has raised the minimum wage for full-time employees a dollar each year since 2009—bringing it up to \$13 an hour—and doesn't expect to slow down. From his perspective, it's only natural: **“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.”**

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No matter how big Hobby Lobby becomes—Green is adding 35 stores this year, with a long-term goal of surpassing 1,000—its founder wants to make sure the company remains faithful long after he's gone. So far, Hobby Lobby has been a traditional family operation: All three of Green's children, Steve and Mart, plus daughter Darsee, are executives, and several of his grandchildren have already joined the company. The ownership has been structured for the company to continue indefinitely, but in the event of a sale or dissolution of Hobby Lobby, 90% of the company will go to ministry work while the remaining 10% will be shuttled into a trust reserved for the education and health of family members. "My grandkids can't say, 'I own 5% and I own 10,' and then all of a sudden they're sitting on a yacht," says Green, who, despite enough wealth for a fleet of Gulfstreams, still flies coach.

While the transition from a generational trust was difficult, Green is concerned only with behaving according to what the Bible tells him. Hobby Lobby, he knows, won't last forever. "Woolworth's is gone. Sears is almost gone. TG&Y is gone. So what? This is worth billions of dollars. So what? Is that the end of life, making more money and building something?" Green asks, answer already in hand. "For me, I want to know that I have affected people for eternity. 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. I matter. Someone that does all this doesn't matter. I'm sorry, it's gone."

It's that absolute conviction that drives him every day. Whether God is really watching over him and his stores, Green's certainty in his Savior's existence has gotten him this far. Why waver now?