

At Christian Companies, Religious Principles Complement Business Practices

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Hobby Lobby, which identifies as a Christian company, closes on Sundays because of the Sabbath. Credit Danny Johnston/Associated Press

In June, a federal court ruled that Hobby Lobby, the art-supply chain, could not be fined for refusing to offer its employees morning-after contraception coverage. This challenge to the Affordable Care Act will surely go to the Supreme Court, where Hobby Lobby's lawyers will argue that a commercial company can, legally speaking, be Christian — with the same rights to religious freedom that a person has.

Hobby Lobby is not alone in identifying itself as a Christian business. In-N-Out Burger, Chick-fil-A, the trucking company Covenant Transport, and the clothing store Forever 21 all call or market themselves as Christian or faith-based.

But what does that mean? To promote a conservative agenda? To insist on certain music in their stores or to print Bible verses on their wrappers? What about bigger questions, like how management treats — and how much it pays — its workers?

Most Christian-identified businesses were founded by evangelical Protestants who are mostly politically and socially conservative. (The well-known Roman Catholic businessman Tom Monaghan, who founded and then sold Domino's Pizza, also finances conservative causes.) Chick-fil-A is well known for its gifts to gay-conversion ministries, but it also supports group foster homes. Tyson Foods, which was founded by evangelicals and, according to its Web site, seeks to "honor God," offers chaplaincy services to employees.

Photo



Steve Green, president of Hobby Lobby, which plays Christian music in its stores. Credit Jonathan Alcorn/Reuters

Hobby Lobby is now famous for its stance against what its founders consider abortion pills. But it also promotes a central liberal goal by offering a minimum wage of \$14 an hour for full-time employees, about double that of the fast-food employees who struck nationwide this week for better pay and conditions. Hobby Lobby closes on Sundays because of the Christian Sabbath, but guaranteeing all workers that one day off surely pleases secular workers, too — even if some of them may object to the stores' Christian-music-only policy.

Forever 21 prints "John 3:16" on the bottom of its shopping bags. Covenant Transport, founded in 1985 by David A. Parker, an evangelical, wears its Christianity on the side of its trucks: in its name, which refers to the many covenants made with God in the Bible, and in its logo, a scroll that recalls the parchment on which biblical texts would first have been written.

The Bible verses on In-N-Out Burger milkshake cups, burger bags and other packaging are quite fun, even for an atheist. The verses are tiny and varied, so you have to hunt and see what turns up. Proverbs 24:16 is on the fry boat: "For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down by calamity."

The verses were introduced by Rich Snyder, the founder's son, who died in 1993. They "are small because he wanted to express his faith without imposing it on others," Carl Van Fleet, an In-N-Out spokesman, wrote in an e-mail.

Steve Green, the president of Hobby Lobby and a Southern Baptist, said that the Christian identity of his company affects how it negotiates with vendors.

"We'll negotiate as, 'Here's what we'll pay,' and leave it at that," Mr. Green said on Wednesday. I asked if that meant that they never budged on their initial offers, which seemed improbable. "Sometimes you don't intend on paying more, but they come back, and things do change," he said. "But we're not going to intentionally lie in our negotiating."

Photo



In-N-Out Burger, also faith-based, prints Bible verses on milkshake cups and burger bags. Credit Adam Lau/Associated Press

Focusing on particular practices, like quotes on fry boats or gospel music, can obscure deep philosophical divisions among Christians who think about business ethics. For some, the Bible is a kind of business manual you'd buy in an airport bookstore, offering timeless precepts that happen to maximize profits.

Philip J. Clements, the founder of the Center for Christian Business Ethics Today, tells a story to illustrate how Judeo-Christian principles make business run smoothly. He once met with a group of businessmen in Africa, most of them Muslim, who complained of the corruption in their countries. So he shared with them Jesus' parable of the talents, from the Book of Matthew, in which a master offers his servants some money for their use. When the master returns much later, two of the servants have made a profit and pay him back. They could have simply absconded with it.

Mr. Clements's point is that the kind of trust Jesus teaches is a precondition for an efficient marketplace. "The Roman Empire was more corrupt than your countries," Mr. Clements said he told the Africans, yet within it, Christians could trust one another. "These principles are transcendent."

For Christians like Mr. Clements, who was raised Pentecostal and is now Baptist, religious guidance is primarily useful for business operations. He's less interested in how business practices affect the environment, or the role of labor rights. He was in fact dismissive of living-wage laws, offering the example of Mexicans who work in the United States for below minimum wage. "So give me a break on the whole concept of minimum wage or living wage," Mr. Clements said, "because these people are here working hard and sending money back."

For others, Christian business is about something much larger. Douglas A. Hicks, a Presbyterian minister, the provost of Colgate University in Hamilton, N.Y., and the author of "Religion and the Workplace," said that Christians must focus on how business affects people, especially the workers.

"Are people able to live out their own agency by making a contribution in the workplace?" is, according to Mr. Hicks, a question Christians should ask. Do employees have meaningful work, or just repetitive, low-paid, mind-numbing work?

Mr. Hicks did not object to burger-wrapper or shopping-bag evangelism. But he cautioned that the businesses that behave in the most Christian manner may not have visible marketing plans. "It's the actions," he said, not the branding.