

Lobbying for Bible classes

by [David Van Biema](#) in the [May 14, 2014](#) issue

The Mustang, Oklahoma, school board has voted to adopt a Bible course developed by Steve Green, clearing the way for the Hobby Lobby president—whose suit against the Affordable Care Act is currently before the U.S. Supreme Court—to enter a contested arena at the borderline of church and state.

The board, whose district is practically in Hobby Lobby's Oklahoma City backyard, agreed April 14 to test the first year of the Museum of the Bible curriculum, an ambitious four-year public school elective on the narrative, history, and impact of the Bible.

For at least the first semester of the 2014–15 year, Mustang alone will use the program, said Jerry Pattengale, head of the Green Scholars Initiative, which is overseeing its development. In September 2016, he hopes to place it in at least 100 high schools; by the following year, “thousands.”

If successful, Green, whose family's wealth is estimated at upward of \$3 billion, would galvanize the movement to teach the Bible academically in public schools. The movement was born after the Supreme Court banned school-sanctioned devotion in the 1960s.

The Green curriculum “is like nothing we've seen before,” said Charles Haynes, senior scholar at the First Amendment Center and editor of a booklet sent out to all schools by the U.S. Department of Education in 2000 on teaching religion in public schools. “It's unique in its ambition and its scope and its use of the latest technologies. I think school districts far from Oklahoma will take note.”

So will civil libertarians. In an award acceptance speech last April before the National Bible Association, Green explained that his goals for a high school curriculum were to show that the Bible is true, that it's good, and that its impact, “whether [upon] our government, education, science, art, literature, family . . . when we apply it to our lives in all aspects of our life, that it has been good.”

If realized, these sentiments, although shared by millions of Americans, could conflict with the court's requirement that public school treatment of the Bible be taught in a secular, academic fashion.

In the same speech, Green expressed hope that such courses would become mandatory, whereas now they are usually elective.

Green's move into public school curricula grew out of his plans to erect a 430,000-square-foot museum of the Bible, due to open in 2017 several blocks from the National Mall in Washington, D.C., which will feature objects from his family's 44,000-piece collection of biblical artifacts.

A little over a year ago, said Pattengale, the realization that a high school curriculum could "help millions of students worldwide" understand the Bible's importance came to seem even more pressing than the museum. Having created an international network of scholars to assist the museum, Pattengale led a crash initiative on the curriculum.

He describes the first year of work, which took the project only to its quarter-way mark, as a multimillion-dollar effort involving more than 170 people. "It will never recuperate its expenses," he said, but "there's no desire to make money."

He describes the program as "robustly unique." It divides its topic into three areas: the Bible's narrative, the history of its composition and reception, and its impact on human civilization. The spine of the first-year program is a 400-plus-page book (the only text completed so far), currently spiral-bound, featuring 108 chapters divided into five-day-a-week lessons.

The book links to a dizzying array of state-of-the-art digital enhancements (Pattengale counts 550), including illustrations that "come alive" as video on the screen of a smartphone, original lectures by Green Collection scholars, clips from the Mark Burnett/Roma Downey miniseries *The Bible*, and deep digital access to the Green's biblical collection.

Asked to describe a typical chapter, Pattengale (who also serves on the Religion News Service managing board) outlined a "narrative" segment on creation that includes a summary of the Bible account; a section on how subsequent scientific discoveries relate to what the Bible says; and a consideration of key reasons for why it was written.

A sidebar called “Are People Created Equal?” explores the book of Genesis influence on that idea through history, including the famous phrase from the Declaration of Independence.

Contrary to popular assumptions, there is nothing unconstitutional about teaching about the Bible in public schools. The same Supreme Court ruling that outlawed school-sanctioned prayer in 1963 said that “nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible . . . when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.”

The key words, of course, are *objectively* and *secular*. Haynes suggested that “the bar is actually low—I think it’s hard for judges to get beyond the surface to questions of what a sound academic course looks like—but much more difficult to develop materials that actually both reflect constitutional principles and are academically solid.”

Southern Methodist University’s Bible scholar Mark Chancey noted: “The devil is in the details” of each plan.

Of his boss’s 2013 speech, Pattengale said: “The curriculum may or may not espouse those views. The last people [Green] wanted to hire were scholars who would embellish the facts to support his religious position.” A chapter with the title “How Do We Know that the Bible’s Historical Narratives Are Reliable?” will include diagrams charting the commonality of multidisciplinary scholarly findings with the biblical account—or the lack of such commonality, he said.

Green could not have asked for a more sympathetic research partner than the city of Mustang. Religious observance in the Oklahoma City bedroom community is largely Christian, and the majority of Christians are, like Green, Southern Baptist. The two nearest synagogues are populated with Messianic Jews who believe in Jesus.

In 2005, when a previous school superintendent canceled the schools’ annual Christmas pageant because of concerns over the separation of church and state, voters rejected a proposed school bond.

The Greens are a local employer—Hobby Lobby corporate headquarters are just five miles east on Oklahoma Highway 152.

Said Brady Henderson, legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Oklahoma: “We don’t like their Supreme Court brief, but they do give a lot to the community. They treat their employees better than a lot of service industries.”

The vote on April 14 was four yeas and one abstention. One former pastor spoke out against adopting the curriculum, citing the innate difficulty of finding common language about the Bible.

Abstaining board member Jeff Landrith grumbled that the community had not had enough time to review curriculum. Board president Chad Fulton responded that it would be available shortly for examination.

Soon many will have a chance to assess it. —RNS

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