



'Guilty as charged,' Cathy says of Chick-fil-A's stand on biblical & family values

By K. Allan Blume/Biblical Recorder

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CARY, N.C. (BP) -- Dan Cathy oversees one of the country's most successful businesses. As president and chief operating officer of Chick-fil-A, Cathy leads a business with 1,608 restaurants that had sales of more than \$4 billion dollars last year. They sell chicken and train employees to focus on values rooted in the Bible.

His father, S. Truett Cathy started the business in 1946, when he and his brother, Ben, opened an Atlanta diner known as The Dwarf Grill (later renamed The Dwarf House). In 1967, his father opened the first Chick-fil-A restaurant in Atlanta. Today, Chick-fil-A is the second largest quick-service chicken restaurant chain in the United States based on annual system-wide sales.

Dan Cathy's success has not erased the biblical values he learned as a child in a Baptist church. He is a warm, common man who is deeply committed to being a faithful Christian witness. And he is fully involved in New Hope Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Ga. He drives Chick-fil-A's efforts to provide genuine hospitality, ensuring that customers have an exceptional dining experience in a Chick-fil-A restaurant. Based on Matthew 5:41, Cathy is on a mission to provide customers with "second-mile" service -- exceeding even the highest expectations of a typical fast-food restaurant.

"We don't claim to be a Christian business," Cathy told the Biblical Recorder in a recent visit to North Carolina. He attended a business leadership conference many years ago where he heard Christian businessman Fred Roach say, "There is no such thing as a Christian business."

"That got my attention," Cathy said. Roach went on to say, "Christ never died for a corporation. He died for you and me."

"In that spirit ... [Christianity] is about a personal relationship. Companies are not lost or saved, but certainly individuals are," Cathy added.

"But as an organization we can operate on biblical principles. So that is what we claim to be. [We are]

based on biblical principles, asking God and pleading with God to give us wisdom on decisions we make about people and the programs and partnerships we have. And He has blessed us."

Rather than leading from his corporate office in Atlanta, Cathy chooses to spend the majority of his time traveling to the chain's growing family of restaurants and interacting with Chick-fil-A's committed team members. His actions stem from a belief that working in the field provides a clearer understanding of the needs of Chick-fil-A customers. Leading from the front line also enables him personally to convey his servant spirit to the chain's 61,000-plus employees.

Cathy believes strongly that Christians are missionaries in the workplace. "Jesus had a lot of things to say about people who work and live in the business community," he said. His goal in the workplace is "to take biblical truth and put skin on it. ... We're talking about how our performance in the workplace should be the focus of how we build respect, rapport and relationships with others that opens the gateway to interest people in knowing God.

"All throughout the New Testament there is an evangelism strategy related to our performance in the workplace. ... Our work should be an act of worship. Our work should be our mission field. As long as we are stateside, let's don't think we have to go on mission trips by getting a passport. ... If you're obedient to God you are going to be evangelistic in the quality of the work you do, using that as a portal to share [Christ]," he said.

When asked if Chick-fil-A's success is attributed to biblical values, Cathy quickly said, "I think they're inseparable. God wants to give us wisdom to make good decisions and choices." Quoting James 1:5, he spoke of how often he asks God for wisdom.

"Frequently Jesus challenged us to just ask ... we're simply not asking as often as we should. We need to be more faithful to depend on a God who does love us and wants to have a relationship with us, and wants to give us the desires of our hearts."

There is another success story attributed to Cathy's organization. They have a positive influence in the world of Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) and Southeastern Conference (SEC) football.

There was a time when the Atlanta college football bowl game, which is now named after Chick-fil-A, was called the Peach Bowl. The annual bowl features teams from the ACC and the SEC. It struggled for a long time. Then 15 years ago the Chick-fil-A organization got involved. It was rebranded as the Chick-fil-A Bowl and has been incredibly successful with 15 consecutive sellouts.

"We are the only bowl that has an invocation. It's in our agreement that if Chick-fil-A is associated in this, there's going to be an invocation. Also, we don't have our bowl on Sunday, either," Cathy said.

In 2008 Chick-fil-A began sponsoring a Chick-fil-A Kickoff game matching two of the nation's top teams and hosted on the first weekend of the season in the same stadium (Georgia Dome) as the Chick-fil-A Bowl. This year Chick-fil-A will host two kickoff games, one on Friday and one on Saturday.

"That's never been done before," he said.

The pair of Chick-fil-A Kickoff games is expected to generate more than \$60 million in economic impact. The bowl website describes the event as "a college football celebration of epic proportions."

When questioned about Chick-Fil-A's "Closed on Sunday" policy Cathy responded, "It was not an issue in 1946 when we opened up our first restaurant. But as living standards changed and lifestyles changed, people came to be more active on Sundays."

The policy has not changed over the years as malls began changing their policies by opening on Sundays.

"We've always put in our lease that we will be closed on Sundays," Cathy said. "We've had a track record that we were generating more business in six days than the other tenants were generating in seven [days]."

"While developers had no identity whatsoever with our corporate purpose to 'glorify God and be a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us and have a positive influence on all that come in contact with Chick-fil-A,' they did identify with the rent checks that we wrote to the mall, that were based on our sales.

"So, they would make an exception for Chick-fil-A when they wouldn't make an exception for anybody else, simply because they knew we would pay them more in rent than any other tenant would that was open even seven days a week."

The company invests in Christian growth and ministry through its WinShape Foundation (WinShape.com). The name comes from the idea of shaping people to be winners.

It began as a college scholarship and expanded to a foster care program, an international ministry, and a conference and retreat center modeled after the Billy Graham Training Center at the Cove.

"That morphed into a marriage program in conjunction with national marriage ministries," Cathy added.

Some have opposed the company's support of the traditional family. "Well, guilty as charged," said Cathy when asked about the company's position.

"We are very much supportive of the family -- the biblical definition of the family unit. We are a family-owned business, a family-led business, and we are married to our first wives. We give God thanks for that.

"We operate as a family business ... our restaurants are typically led by families; some are single. We want to do anything we possibly can to strengthen families. We are very much committed to that," Cathy emphasized.

"We intend to stay the course," he said. "We know that it might not be popular with everyone, but thank the Lord, we live in a country where we can share our values and operate on biblical principles."

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