

Supreme Court rules for Hobby Lobby

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The Supreme Court has sided with the evangelical owners of Hobby Lobby Stores Inc., ruling 5-4 on June 30 that the arts-and-crafts chain does not have to offer insurance for four types of emergency birth control that conflict with company owners' religious beliefs.

The justices broke new legal ground by affirming that corporations, not just individual Americans or religious nonprofits, may claim religious rights.

Does the decision mean that the religious beliefs of business owners stand paramount? That they are more important than a female employee's right to choose from the full array of birth control methods she is promised under the Affordable Care Act? Or that a business owner may invoke his religious rights to deny service to a gay couple?

Not necessarily, legal experts say.

The justices made clear that the decision for Hobby Lobby applies to privately held companies such as Hobby Lobby—not to vast, publicly held corporations, for which the owners' religious beliefs would be difficult to discern.

But in general, the ruling—the most anticipated in the high court's current session—is a victory for conservatives who had hoped the justices would find that the federal government had trampled on the Constitution's guarantee of free exercise of religion.

“This case demonstrates that Americans don't give up their religious freedom when they open a family business,” said Lori Windham, senior counsel at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which represented Hobby Lobby. “The court understands that religion isn't limited to what you do in a synagogue on Saturday or a church on Sunday.”

But Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, called the court majority's decision "a double-edged disaster": "It conjures up fake religious freedom rights for corporations while being blind to the importance of birth control to America's working women."

Lynn warned that the ruling sets a dangerous precedent: "While the Obama administration may arrange for the government to provide contraceptives, a future administration could easily take that away. In years to come, many women may find their access to birth control hanging by a thread." —RNS

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