

Kanye West, Chic-Fil-A, and the Age of Authenticity

One year ago, no one could have predicted that American Christians would hold Kanye West in higher esteem than Chick-fil-A. Yet the nation has seen two cultural transformations take place this week at the intersection of faith and commerce.

[Kanye West](#) sang Gospel music to [prisoners](#) this weekend, as Chick-fil-A readied a [statement](#) that it was [ending](#) its [partnership](#) with several distinctly Christian charities. American Christians, who make up [70 percent](#) of the U.S. population, have reacted accordingly.

West's latest CD, "Jesus is King," [debuted](#) at number one on the charts. The project sold 265,000 units in its first week and landed [seven](#) singles in the Top 40. Last weekend, he performed at Joel Osteen's megachurch and inside a prison. He will [perform](#) "Nebuchadnezzar: An Opera" at the Hollywood Bowl this Sunday and has [promised](#) that a sequel to "Jesus is King" is "coming soon."

West used to traffic in [lyrics](#) that exalted crass materialism and sexuality. Since his recent conversion, he's singing a different tune. "Now that I'm in service to Christ, my job is to spread the Gospel," he said.

But predictable questions surround Kanye West: Is this a real conversion or a ploy to expand his sales base? Are his prison visits an [act of mercy](#) or a marketing strategy?

If it is an act, his whole family has [literally](#) immersed itself in it. His wife, Kim Kardashian, got [baptized](#) with their children at the ancient [Etchmiadzin Cathedral](#), the most important site of the Armenian Apostolic Church. West has raised [concerns](#) about his wife's revealing attire. He has

even [said](#) that reliance on government programs enabled the disintegration of the family unit and a disregard for human life.

West referenced Chick-fil-A in his song "[Closed on Sunday](#)," which encourages families to pray together. Ironically, many Christians wish the chicken peddlers exhibited some of West's boldness.

On Monday, the nation's [third-largest](#) fast food chain [announced](#) it would end its funding of the Salvation Army and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, two charities that had come [under fire](#) for alleged anti-LGBT bias. Foes – including the [City of New York](#) – have charged the Salvation Army with "transphobia," because it it assigns bedrooms in its homeless shelters "based on a patient's gender assigned at birth rather than their gender identity."

Chick-fil-A's official statement provides more smoke than light. President and COO Tim Tassopoulos [said](#), "Our goal is to donate to the most effective organizations in the areas of education, homelessness and hunger." Yet the Salvation Army assists [25 million](#) people a year struggling with these maladies. It operates an [LGBT-only shelter](#) because, as its website states, LGBT people "often experience unacceptable homophobia and transphobia," and it [describes](#) itself as "the largest provider of poverty relief to the LGBTQ+ population." Its mortal sin seems to be rejecting the modern zeitgeist (which is less than a decade old), which holds that gender is fluid, gender is a social construct, and that society must disregard any observable reality that does not affirm an individual's [self-identification](#).

Stepping away from Christian charities in the middle of a cultural crossfire has caused a rift with Chick-fil-A's faithful customer base. The nation's Christians, especially evangelicals, have shown almost religious devotion to the chain for most of the decade.

The turning point came during the same-sex marriage debate in 2012, when CEO Dan Cathy [said](#) his family is “very much supportive” of “the biblical definition of a family unit.” Politicians including the mayors of [Chicago](#) and [Boston](#) threatened to deny the restaurant the ability to do business by blocking necessary licenses and permits unless it abandoned its views.

In response, Governor Mike Huckabee organized “Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day,” encouraging Christians to “affirm a business that operates on Christian principles and whose executives are willing to take a stand for the Godly values we espouse by simply showing up and eating at Chick Fil-A.”

On August 1, 2012, lines [stretched](#) out the door and snaked around corners at restaurants nationwide. The chain’s executive vice president announced that Chick-fil-A [reaped](#) record-breaking profits that day.

The event cemented a loyal customer base dedicated to scriptural values, and intensified the enmity of its critics. Washington, D.C., councilman and former mayor (and ex-con) Marion Barry [denounced](#) it as “hate chicken.” When the Northwestern University Law School chapter of the Federalist Society asked Chick-fil-A to cater one of its debates, left-wing legal groups created a campus “[safe space](#)” to shelter traumatized students from the chicken sandwich. Most ominously, two weeks after “Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day,” a gunman attacked the [Family Research Center](#), admitting that he [intended](#) to “kill as many as possible and smear” Chick-fil-A sandwiches in his victims’ faces.

As recently as this July, after San Antonio official threatened to stop Chick-fil-A from opening a new store, Texas Governor Greg Abbott [signed](#) a law protecting businesses’ right to operate according to their religious beliefs. The chain also found opposition in [London](#) over its public image as a supporter of traditional morality.

Now, the Chick-fil-A has edged away from another target of cultural venom, and its Christian customers feel betrayed. “I coordinated a national Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day after they were being bullied by militant hate groups. Millions showed up,” Huckabee [tweeted](#). “I regret believing they would stay true to convictions of founder Truett Cathey. Sad.”



However, LGBT groups have not rushed to embrace Chick-fil-A. GLAAD said in a [statement](#) that “further transparency is needed regarding their deep ties to organizations like Focus on the Family,” as well as changing company policies.

The key to understanding the way people have reacted to Kanye West and Chick-fil-A is authenticity. Millennials [prize](#) “consistency and continuity between their online personas and their lives in the real world.” Marketers [agree](#), “Authenticity is the key to growing your business.” A global study of 35,000 consumers in three-dozen countries [found](#) that 62 percent of customers want companies to take a public stance on social issues; 42 percent of customers will stop purchasing a product that does not align with their beliefs, and one out of every five customers who leaves will never come back. This is, of course, outside businesses’ core functions.

Authenticity has a deeper meaning than consumer purchasing trends. For the Christian, it is deeply tied up with our salvation. Thomas Merton wrote that everything that has breath gives glory to God by reflecting the purpose for which He created it:

[T]he perfection of each created thing is not merely in its conformity to an abstract type but in its own individual identity with itself. ...

For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of

finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.

For human beings, this means a lifelong process of discernment to discover how, while maintaining all the commandments which are obligatory for all, we offer the rest of humanity our own unique gifts:

Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny. We are free beings and sons of God. This means to say that we should not passively exist, but actively participate in His creative freedom, in our own lives, and in the lives of others, by choosing the truth.

The Christian response to Kanye West has been a wary embrace. He may well disappoint tomorrow, but Christ's most cherished parable is the [Prodigal Son](#). At the moment, Kanye West's words and deeds appear consistent with his newfound faith, and Christian customers are responding to that authenticity.

Chick-fil-A, in the eyes of its most loyal customers, broke faith with its well-cultivated image as a family business with a Christian, Sabbath-keeping worldview. Christians are unlikely to boycott the chain, but they now have deep questions about its values, and how it values them. LGBT customers similarly question the authenticity of this week's announcement when weighed against its long association with traditional Christian views.

The good news is Chick-fil-A has wavered in the past, reportedly promising LGBT activists and [local politicians](#) it would cut off donations to disfavored Christian groups in [2012](#) and [2013](#). However, its charitable giving has continued to favor faith-based nonprofits whose services flows naturally out of their traditional beliefs – beliefs which elevate the sanctity of the human person from an object of sexual conquest to a co-equal child of God. The owners may find personal, or

financial, reasons to resume these donations and rebuild the faith their recent actions have shaken.

Christians would see proof of their authenticity as a welcome development. As Kanye West's rise proves, there's always room for another prodigal to come home.

—

This [article](#) was republished with permission from the Acton Institute.

[Image Credit: Pixabay, [CC BY 2.0](#)]