

Corporations and the Bible

By Dave DeWitt

We live in a world of corporations. We are born in a hospital corporation. We go to school corporations. We buy our food from grocery store corporations. We buy everything else we use from everything-else corporations. This all produces garbage collected by a garbage collection corporation. During the week, we work for a profit-making corporation, and on weekends we go to a religious non-profit corporation, and involve ourselves in various activities run by various-activity corporations. All this is done while living under a government corporation. When we get old, we are placed in a nursing home corporation until we die and are buried by a funeral home corporation.

But just exactly what is a corporation? The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a “corporation” as:
A body formed and authorized by law to act as a single person, although constituted by one or more persons, and legally endowed with various rights and duties, including the capacity of succession.

The New Oxford American Dictionary defines a corporation as:

A company or group of people authorized to act as a single entity (legally a person) and recognized as such in law... A **corporation** is created under the laws of a state as a separate legal entity that has privileges and liabilities that are distinct from those of its members.

The Corporation CorpNet suggests the following reasons to incorporate:

- Asset Protection - Limited Liability
- Corporate identity
- Perpetual life
- Transferability of ownership
- Ability to Build Credit & Raise Capital
- Number of Owners
- Tax savings

[<http://www.corpnet.com/incorporate/why-should-i-incorporate/>]

But all this misses a very important ingredient. Corporations are formed by people. People are spiritual creatures who cannot avoid thoughts of morality, purpose, destiny, God, and religion. So all that is also injected into their corporations.

A more realistic definition, and an elaborate description, of a corporation was provided by Dr. Michael Black in a December 2011 article entitled “The Crisis of the Corporation.”

(http://www.secondspring.co.uk/uploads/articles_16_180288471.pdf). [Dr. Black is Research Fellow and Librarian at Blackfriars Hall, Oxford. He was formerly with McKinsey & Co and several other firms.] Black writes:

The distinguishing feature of a corporation – a limited liability company, for example – is that it somehow possesses an identity, a life, independent of its members. It can act through its members, whereas in the other cases it is the members who act through the association, either individually or collectively. This is expressed in law in a variety of ways, but the most important is the rule that the Corporation has its own interests, values, or criteria of choice, which are not those of its members. This is universally accepted without question. It is the formal method by which *dominium* (management) is separated from *usufructus* (benefit) and is the essential mark of the corporate relation... Recovery of the authentic corporate

relationship is in the first instance a spiritual task, which can only be understood theologically. The very essence of this relationship, the separation of managerial control from beneficial interest, is an ancient theological idea which has been refined and developed over millennia... So corporate reform is a critical part of any programme for social improvement. But this reform cannot be brought about by legislation or regulation. It is a reform that must start with the heart not the head, with the spirit not the flesh, and with a suspension of the rationale of hierarchy and commercial thinking. Ultimately the Corporation is about the relationship among human beings... The Corporation is not “more” than the individuals that make it up; it is, however, distinct, and its existence is dependent solely upon the continuing commitment of the members. This manifests as a preparedness to forgive – to show mercy, and to receive it... Each corporate participant must recognize the right (in fact the obligation) of *all* other members to judge him. The “payoff” for this radical submission to each other is an equally radical forgiveness. Corporate grace is bestowed upon all who err in good faith, as all human beings do. This is the source of the *corporate protection*, which appears at least strange if not criminal without an understanding of the theological roots of the institution.

We can therefore conclude the following 10 aspects of a corporation:

1. A corporation is “a body formed and authorized by law to act as a single person although constituted by one or more persons” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).
2. Pragmatically, corporations are mainly for protection of assets (CorpNet).
3. A corporation “somehow possesses an identity, a life, independent of its members” (#s 3-10 are from Dr. Michael Black).
4. A corporation “has its own interests, values, or criteria of choice, which are not those of its members.”
5. Dealing with a corporation is “in the first instance a spiritual task, which can only be understood theologically.”
6. “Ultimately, the Corporation is about the relationship among human beings.”
7. “Corporate reform is a critical part of any programme for social improvement.”
8. “The corporation is not ‘more’ than the individuals that make it up; it is, however, distinct, and its existence is dependent solely upon the continuing commitment of the members.”
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A corporation is a legal entity set up to protect the physical assets of one or more people. Those people can then act as a single person. Small corporations rarely see beyond that as a purpose for incorporating. Partnerships, small businesses, small churches and civic corporations are usually just for the legal protection of physical assets. But they are still spiritual in nature because they are established by people.

As various issues come along, corporations reveal more of their spiritual side. NBC fires a broadcaster for making what it considers “inappropriate” comments. The NFL refuses to allow ownership of a team because of a person’s political views. A food chain supports homosexuals. Another food chain refuses to support homosexuals. Some companies support liberal politicians, some support conservatives. Public education tends to be liberal, and accept, attract, and reward liberalism. Private and parochial schools tend to be conservative, and accept, attract, and reward conservatism. The question is often asked: “Why are most media networks made up of liberals?” Well, that’s because corporations all have a moral/spiritual/ theological agenda. They cannot avoid a

moral/spiritual/ theological agenda, they can only accept one over another. Once having chosen one, they will accept, attract, and reward, people who concur with that agenda.

If you go to work for any company, you will soon find out they have a moral code that reflects the beliefs of the owners, the managers, the board of directors, and the majority of employees. For example, if you play on or coach a ball team, you will soon learn that the league has a code of conduct that governs your moral actions (your attitude toward discipline, your method of training, your philosophy of winning, right on down to what you are allowed to say to players and parents).

All these corporations also have a theology. There are certain theological beliefs that are promoted, and there are other theologies that are not tolerated, in every corporation. For example, most secular corporations today promote universalism, permit Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and liberal Christianity, but do not tolerate evangelical Christianity. Evangelical corporations will be just the opposite.

The USSR was a corporation founded upon atheism. The USA is a corporation founded upon theism. Saudi Arabia is a corporation founded upon Islam. Although it will be more obvious in some than in others, all corporations have a moral and spiritual and theological agenda. Of course, civic and charity groups, missionary organizations, and local churches are corporations with a more clearly stated moral/spiritual/ theological agenda.

Every corporation protects its physical assets, but it does much more than that. Each one “possesses an identity, a life, independent of its members” and each corporation “has its own interests, values, or criteria of choice, which are not those of its members.” Whether it is a hardware store, an automotive repair shop, or a church:

Every corporation is a religious organization.

Technically and legally, corporations did not begin until recent history. But in theory and practice, they are as old as society itself. Dr. Black said:

The rise of the modern global corporation dates from the mid-Victorian codification of limited liability [Queen Victoria reigned from 20 June 1837 until her death on 22 January 1901], but corporate life has existed for much longer than this. The Corporation (based on the Latin word for body, *corpus*) is the fundamental structural relationship of civil society, rooted theologically in notions of covenant that go back to ancient Israel (brackets mine, parenthesis his).

Although Dr. Black’s analysis of the corporation is excellent, he is not a theologian, and he makes two mistakes here.

First, I would suggest corporations date back to the Tower of Babel, where people organized themselves to act as one for their own protection.

They said, “Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4).

Second, Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church were not corporations. Israel was not a

corporation, it was a covenant. The difference is, corporations are an arrangement people make among themselves, to act as one, for their own protection (like the Tower of Babel). Israel was a covenant arrangement between God and the Hebrew people. There was a sense in which Israel acted as one, but the covenant was not for the protection of Israel, it was for the glory of God. It was not done by the people at all. It was God's revelation through Moses. That is, of course, what made Israel unique among all ancient societies. Other ancient covenant people (the Hittites, Assyrians, Canaanites, etc.) were corporations because their gods did not actually exist. Their covenants were just religious organizations of people who could act as one for their own protection—hence a corporation.

But whatever we might think about Israel, the church established by Christ and the apostles was definitely not a corporation. The institutional church was a corporation. The institutional church was legally established by the Emperor Constantine after the Edict of Milan was issued in A.D. 313. But that was not the case with the New Testament church.

Jesus said: *"I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it."*

He did not ask us to build it. His church was something He would build. It was not brought into existence by its members. Paul described it as *the church of God which He purchased with His own blood* (Acts 20:28). He said, *Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body* (Ephesians 5:23).

The New Testament was not a legal entity at all. Peter and John were forbidden to proclaim their beliefs (Acts 4:16; 12:1-5). The church of the apostles was a persecuted illegal thing, not a legal corporation. Luke said,

*And on that day a great persecution began against the **church** in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles... But Saul began ravaging the **church**, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison* (Acts 8:1, 3).

The New Testament church was just believers. For the apostles, it was just that simple. In the New Testament, the church is more than one true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ from the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 until the Rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4. It is those who have made the decision, and taken their stand among others who made the decision, to receive Jesus Christ as their God and Savior (John 1:12). They are those who have trusted the blood of Christ shed on the cross as sufficient payment for their sins. If you have a Bible program on your computer or phone, just search the word "church" and read the verses. There are 77 references in the New Testament. You will find the word "church" refers to everything from the universal body of Christ, to a house gathering of believers, to the believers in a city, to those in a large geographic region, to a network of believers across the world. The only definition for the church which fits all those contexts, is that the church is true believers in Jesus Christ.

Usually, the word "believers" can simply be substituted for the word "church." The ***church** throughout all Judea* (Acts 9:1) is the **believers** throughout all Judea, *the **church** of God which is at Corinth* (1 Corinthians 1:2) is the **believers** in God who are at Corinth, *the **church** that is in their house* (Romans 16:5) is the **believers** who gather in a house, etc. [The bold emphases throughout this book are mine.] But the church is never the region, the city, or the house. It's the believers in those regions, cities and houses.

But the New Testament church of Christ and the apostles was never a corporation.

Furthermore, the New Testament church was dynamic because it was believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit, not members incorporated for a personal or social purpose. Paul wrote,

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you ... Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19).

Dr. Black said the corporation “can act through its members, whereas in the other cases, it is the members who act through the association, either individually or collectively.” Every institutional church is definitely a corporation that “can act through its members.” But the New Testament church was a brotherhood of “members who act through the association, either individually or collectively.” This can be clearly seen when Paul gathered a gift from the churches (the believers) of Macedonia and Achaia to send to Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-3; 2 Corinthians 8–9). The gift was believers acting through their association together, not a corporation acting through its members.

Let’s compare the 10 elements listed above to the New Testament church:

The 10 Elements of a Corporation

1. A corporation is “a body formed and authorized by law to act as a single person although constituted by one or more persons” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).
2. Pragmatically, corporations are mainly for protection of physical assets.
3. A corporation “somehow possesses an identity, a life, independent of its members.”
4. A corporation “has its own interests, values, or criteria of choice, which are not those of its members.”
5. Dealing with a corporation is “in the first instance a spiritual task, which can only be understood theologically.”
6. “Ultimately, the Corporation is about the relationship among human beings.”
7. “Corporate reform is a critical part of any programme for social improvement.”
8. “The corporation is not ‘more’ than the individuals that make it up; it is, however, distinct, and its existence is dependent solely upon the continuing commitment of the members.”
9. “Each corporate participant must recognize the right (in fact the obligation) of *all* other members to judge him.”
10. “Corporate grace is bestowed upon all who err in good faith ... a preparedness to forgive – to show mercy, and to receive it.”

Corporations and the NT Church

1. The NT church was not formed or authorized by law, therefore, it was not an entity that allowed people to act as one person.
2. The NT church had no physical assets that it needed to protect.
3. The NT church had no identity or life independent of believers.
4. There is no such thing as interests, values, or choices for the NT church apart from those of individual believers.
5. There is no NT church to deal with theologically or any other way apart from individual believers.
6. Ultimately, the NT church about the believer’s relationship with God.
7. The NT church was never involved in social improvement.
8. The NT church is nothing other than the individuals that make it up; therefore, it does not exist as, or depend upon, members being continually committed to it.
9. The NT church members are individual believers who judge one another according to the Word of God.
10. There is no such thing as “corporate grace... mercy, or forgiveness” in the NT church. These are individual actions toward those who repent of sin against God, not some corporation.

So, as we can see, the church of Christ and the apostles was not a corporation, and that's because it was not a work of man but of work of God, where individual believers in Jesus Christ were indwelled by the Holy Spirit. Corporations are a creation of men, not God. On the other hand, if we considered the institutional churches, whether Catholic, national, denominational, or local, they would all meet the 10 above criteria for a corporation.

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Corporations and the Institutional Church

1. The institutional church is a body formed and authorized by law to act as a single person, although constituted by one or more persons.
2. Institutional churches incorporate mainly for protection of physical assets.
3. The institutional church possesses an identity independent of its members.
4. The institutional church has its own interests, values, or criteria of choice, which are not those of its members.
5. Dealing with an institutional church is in the first instance a spiritual task, which can only be understood theologically.
6. “Ultimately the institutional church is about relationships among human beings.”
7. Most institutional churches have a program for social improvement.
8. The institutional church is not ‘more’ than the individuals that make it up; it is, however, distinct, and its existence is dependent solely upon the continuing commitment of the members.
9. Each institutional church member must recognize the right (in fact, the obligation) of *all* other members to judge him.
10. Corporate grace is bestowed upon all institutional church members who err in good faith.