

Response to David Batstone / Review of *Saving the Corporate Soul*

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First, some praise. This is a refreshing [book with a compelling] vision of how a corporation might save its soul. And corporations *do* have souls, in a sense. They are not just social constructions with wholly fictitious identities in the eyes of the law. They are organic human social structures. Walter Wink has taught us much about the principalities and powers that emerge in such structures. They can be angelic or demonic. They can respect the reign of Jesus Christ over all things, or oppose that reign by asserting themselves or others as lord. The redemptive thrust of salvation-history makes their healing and new creation, or their judgment and condemnation, only a matter of time. I would like to see all tribes, tongues, nations, *and corporations* around the throne. These principles point to ways of realizing that promise. Further, they rightly make *relations* central – as in fact they are. (We in theology call this atonement.)

In fact, one of my strongest reactions in reading *Saving the Corporate Soul* is frustration over the failure of our *churches* to exercise anything like the effort that corporations exercise to act these ways. Do we work this hard to form our “members” as stakeholders and team participants, rather than just volunteers (who are a step below “hired hands” in material respect)? Do we work as hard as corporations really to include traditionally distant or marginal communities – not just pay respects to them, but include them radically as partners in our mission? Do we pursue financial and political transparency? Do we build by building up, rather than hyping and crossing our fingers?

What if on the Day of the Lord, some of the angels we judge (cf. 1 Cor. 6:3) turn out to belong to chambers of commerce, the United Way, and the National Association of Evangelicals? Who will be surprised to be on the left and who on the right?

If my church or my parachurch ends up on the left while some of Batstone's anecdotal companies end up on the right, then I think part of the explanation lies in the fact that we – the wider society, but also we Christians – take business more seriously than we take Christian community. After all, how do we allocate not only our money, but also our 'mindshare', our imagination, our time (for in a wealthy society like ours, time is growing more important than money)? Where these things are, there our hearts will be also.

As a result, our churches are being constantly pushed out to the margins of our common life – and not only the common life of the society but the common lives of Christians ourselves. The silver lining on this dark cloud is that it means churches can learn a lot from corporations on how to live. The stories that fill this book have lessons we churchgoers would do well to heed.

And now, a worry. *Saving the Corporate Soul* is a very helpful guide for a corporation or stakeholder that wants to tell a different story than that of Nietzschean-style capitalism. Profit *is* indeed “a means, not an end, for the successful business enterprise.” But what *are* the ends of successful business enterprises? What stories do the corporations tell that are featured in the book? Are they the story of Jesus Christ? Is their mission necessarily his mission? Are their souls his? That is not clear.

Batstone's eight principles seem to be derived from his Christian tradition. “Leadership and governance” seem to draw from ecclesiology, “transparency and integrity” from the Sermon on the Mount, “community” from mission, “customer care” from the gift of hospitality, “valuing the worker” from *charismata*, “respect for the environment” from the doctrine of creation, “equality and diversity” from the Pauline ethic of love, and “globalization” from cosmic teleology.

Whether or not these connections are intentional, they are potentially rich and mutually informative. Yet as Batstone develops them, his “principles” have been abstracted from the actuality of the reign of God in Jesus Christ. Batstone’s technique strikes me as Tillichian correlation between the needs of the culture and the resources of the Kingdom. Because the principles can float free of the master narrative, they are susceptible to being turned into parables of different kingdoms. For instance, environmentalism is easily conflated with postchristian *cosmos*-worship, diversity with multicultural relativism, community with American egotism, transparency and leadership with self-glorification through displayed cultural virtue, customer care with consumerism, and globalization with transnational progressivism.

The Spirit’s mission in our age is to take all things and declare them as belonging to Jesus Christ. What happens when spirits of the age take the things that belong to Jesus and declare them as belonging to their “corporate values” or “work ethic”? Isn’t that blasphemy?

In fact, I worry that this may have happened already in his analysis. Batstone argues “that a company’s capacity to integrate the eight principles detailed in this book will enhance or (alternatively) diminish its overall business performance” (13). I think he makes his case. His stories of corporations that prosper because they honor angelic spirits of the times and refuse to buy into demonic ones (say, those of racist America) are inspiring. They remind me of Daniel growing in strength because he eats only vegetables. Yet elsewhere Batstone acknowledges that sometimes social winds do not blow in the same direction as the Spirit blows. What then? What happens when fidelity lands us in a fiery furnace rather than the king’s court? Let alone when a cross comes between us and the throne? I don’t see resources in this book that can help corporations discern the difference between maximizing overall business performance and operating faithfully.

Finally, an exhortation. I sense that Batstone might be receptive to these friendly suggestions, but I don't yet have a sense of how it would change his project. And I wish I did. I am invested. I am a churchgoer, a son, a brother, a husband, a parent, an alumnus, a professor, an English speaker, a shopper, a stockholder, a principal in a software firm, a neighbor, a homeowner, a taxpayer, an American citizen, and a political partisan. I am a stakeholder in a whole spectrum of angelic and demonic entities. I need disciplines, and I need guides. Many thanks to Batstone for offering so much help in this book. All I want is what every American wants: *more!*