

CORPORATIONS, CHRISTIANS AND CHURCHES

Speech given at King's College, Edmonton

December, 1987

My thesis is the following: The Christian community harbours a fatal inconsistency between its ecclesiastical missionary outreach and its economic outreach via corporations. It is that theses that I want to explain to you and defend. I am going to do so by summarizing for you the main thrust of a manuscript¹ of some 365 pages I have just written. Consider yourself privileged in that you are the first beneficiaries of this research.

Allow me to illustrate the thesis with an example of an outreach of a church with which we are all familiar.

A few years ago, a large transnational corporation concluded an agreement with the Philippino government to establish a large-scale pineapple plantation and a cannery. The 8000-acre area allocated for this plantation is very fertile and has been farmed by Philippino peasants for years. Arrangements were for these peasants to be relocated some miles away, thus uprooting their lives and community. Though compensation was paid to them, the community was not able to handle the relocation. Their traditional farming methods did not work in the new location and so the compensation money was soon depleted. Hunger and despair set in. The farmers, especially the younger ones, decided in increasing numbers to try their fortune in a

1 In 1992, this manuscript developed into a book: *Caught in the Middle: Christians in Transnational Corporations*. It is available to you free of charge on the very page of the website where you have found this document.

nearby city, where they joined the throngs of other unemployed and unskilled peasants.

A North American denomination has a staff of missionaries based in that city. One of their programmes is to teach various skills to unemployed peasants to help them make a living in an urban situation. This programme is expensive once you add to the operating budget, the salary and other amenities these missionaries receive. The beneficiaries of the programme, however, are grateful for a chance at a new start.

The denomination supporting this programme, like other American churches, invests in corporations in order to support the pension funds for their pastors and other employees. The corporation referred to above is one of those in which members of this denomination and perhaps the denomination itself invests. Some of the profits of these investments go towards the pension fund of their missionaries engaged in the Philippino rehabilitation programme. Some of these members pay a tithe from their investment income into the treasury of their mission organization that operates the programme.

I trust you have caught the pathetic contradictions in this scenario. You may think that such a scenario is purely the figment of my imagination and that the likelihood of such a constellation of contradictory relationships is highly unlikely. I want to show you that such situations are not only possible, but they exist. Christians spend part of their income from their investments to undo the damages inflicted by their investments!

Now you may not be interested in business, money or corporations and thing you have nothing to do with them. You might even be inclined to get up and leave this room, as all of this is irrelevant as far as you are concerned: *Listen no further! Except, that you or your family members or your church or your college or your profs here are involved, whether you know it or not.*

But my purpose is not merely to let you know something. *Knowledge is power!* As your knowledge of this situation increases, so do your power and ability to bring about changes in the way in which Christians participate in the economic order. Apart from sex, there probably is no area where people are more secretive than in the way they handle their money. If you do not know how your Christian brother or sister, your denomination, or your corporation handles her/his money, you can do nothing to change it; indeed, you will have no reason to want to change it. But once you know

My purpose is even more than described above. *Knowledge brings responsibility.* When you know what is wrong within the Christian community or even in the world as a whole and you become aware of your own participation in it – however slight – then you have no choice but to exercise your responsibility. Christian economic responsibility is often referred to as *stewardship*. Well, once you know what is wrong, your responsibility as a steward of God’s resources becomes greater.

Thirdly, *knowledge takes away your excuses* for not doing anything about the problems I discuss in this lecture—and even more in the longer manuscript or future book-- with you. My research has made it plain to me that not only are individual Christians hesitant to discuss their own stewardship practices with each other, but those with responsibility for denominational funds also tend to be hush-hush.

Business Practices Are Often Barriers to the Christian Mission

Why do I want to disturb you with such issues? I discuss the reasons fully in the manuscript, but for in this lecture let me summarize them for you. The main reason is that Christians have the *mission* in this world to be the image bearers of God Himself. We are to reflect God’s love and justice in a loveless and unjust world. We are to be agents of that love and justice by seeking to establish an order that makes room

for love and justice as much as lies within the realm of possibility in this present age. Christians have sought to carry out this task especially in terms of mission to all the peoples of the world. We seek to bring the Gospel everywhere. I myself have been such a missionary for some twenty years.

During the last 200 years, most missionaries have come from Western countries. The peoples of the countries to which we missionaries have brought the Gospel are not stupid; they have observed that our sending constituencies in the West are often involved in economic enterprises that counteract the spirit of the Gospel that these missionaries are bringing. Some churches and missionaries have become aware of this gross inconsistency, but few Evangelicals can be found amongst them.² Many missionaries and members of their supporting churches do not understand why they are often accused of being stooges of capitalism. Rather than listen carefully to the complaints, many prefer to hide behind the excuse that such accusations are part of a baseless Communist plot – and then continue with business as usual, even when such business builds barriers to the Christian mission. Such Christians can continue to fool themselves; they cannot continue to fool their hosts.

There is an even more important reason I am bringing these issues to your attention. The last paragraph talks about mission. The problem is that as soon as we talk about mission, about how to bring the Gospel to a people, we soon end up discussing strategy. Now, the materials in the last paragraph can easily be understood as no more than strategic concerns that must be taken into consideration if we want our hosts to accept the Gospel, but that have little to do with the central truths of the Gospel. Strategies can change with circumstances and time. The concerns of the last paragraph may be legitimate in our own day as a matter of strategy, but they were irrelevant in an earlier day when our

² Boer, 1979: 37 ff, 106 ff, 230 ff, 340 ff; 1984: Chapters 6 and 7.

hosts did not understand these concerns.³ It is possible that this issue will again become irrelevant in the future if or when the focus of the world's interest ever shifts away from politics and economics.

It is my contention that the issues I am about to discuss with you are not merely matters of missionary strategy: they are among the foremost concerns of the Gospel. They spring out of the so-called Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1. The central message of the Gospel demands that we treat our economic stewardship as a most serious matter not only in missionary endeavours, but in our individual lives and social structures, especially in our economic lives. This concern is more acute in our own day, because the world as a whole is so much more conscious of these global economic issues than ever before.

I am no economist; I am a missionary first of all and a theologian second. Many of the issues I am about to discuss are more economic in nature than theological. I would have preferred to leave this work to economists who have learned to integrate their economic theory with Christian principles. There are economists who struggle with these issues, but they generally leave out the missionary dimension, the one that is our central point in this lecture.

Since I am talking about TNCs or MNCs, it is good to define them before I proceed any further. For our purposes the definition of T.J. Biersteker of MIT will suffice: *a TNC is any enterprise that undertakes foreign direct investment, owns or controls income-gathering assets in more than one country, produces goods or services outside its country of origin, or engages in international production.*⁴

Many of these TNCs are giants by any standard and all statistics about them staggers one's imagination. Take the example of Exxon, the largest of them all, since it surpassed General Motors in sales in 1974.

³ Boer, 1979: 476. Neill: 1966: 334.

⁴ Biersteker, p. xiii; Ms, p. 9.

It has activities in almost 100 countries, a figure that does not include other Rockefeller corporations or others in which Exxon has investments. Employees number some 180,000 world wide, more than half of which live outside the USA, Exxon's home turf. It boasts more than 500 subsidiaries. It is owned by more than 790,000 shareholders, of which 24,000 are institutions. Tax statistics are impressive: in a recent year Exxon paid a total of \$23.3 billion in taxes and other payments to the many jurisdictions in which it operates.

In a lecture like this, you don't have the time to fully describe the culture of transnationals. A few isolated statements will have to pique your curiosity enough to reach for the book when it comes out.

In 1970, GM net sales was more than the GNP of all but the 23 largest countries in the world!⁵

In 1972, the annual sales of the twelve largest TNCs was \$144 billion – a figure far exceeding the total annual national income of the world's 35 poorest countries.

In 1976, of the 75 largest economic units, 40 were countries and 35 were corporations, listed respectively according to their GNP and profits.⁶

A few years later the proportion is said to have changed: 51 are corporations vis-à-vis 49 countries.⁷ (Zaccheus: 19).

By 1980, no more than 300 large TNCs would control about three-quarters of the world's manufacturing assets.

5 Zaccheus, p. 19.

6 Antonides, p. 9.

7 Zaccheus, p. 19.

In 1980-1981, each of the 50 largest companies had a revenue more than that of 37 countries (MM, Nov/1981).

The balance is now tipped in favour of corporations!

The manuscript I am summarizing for you here discusses many other aspects of transnationals that I cannot possibly discuss here. Some of the points are:⁸

The scope of the Rockefeller empire—Ch. 2

The relationships between transnationals —Chps. 3-5

The shadow side of transnationals—Chps. 7-10

Transnationals and underdevelopment of nations—Ch. 11

Then, in Part III I discuss the relationship between Western churches and transnationals. Topics here are:

Ecumenical Critical Participation—Ch. 12

Ethical Investment Attempts—Ch. 13

Investment practices in the Christian Reformed Church—Ch. 14

Towards an alternative Christian missionary investment style—Ch. 15

Alternative Investment Styles

It is to the last one that I wish to devote the rest of our time together. What alternatives do we have, if any? How can we reflect God's image in our global village?⁹ Or His justice?

⁸ Remember, at the time this paper is published on this website in 2015, the book itself shares space with this lecture. So, you can check this all out now in full detail.

⁹ I really prefer the term "global city," for in the village neighbours know each other, but in the global city there is increasing individualism and loneliness.

Some, like Sojourners, have proposed that we give away much of our wealth. Though this sounds pious, it is a copout. We have a cultural mandate which includes a mission or mandate in the economic sphere of life. To give away all we have is to forsake that mandate, for it would amount to leaving the economic sector without Christian involvement. No, we Christians belong there with a mission.

There is the avenue of alternative investment vehicles. These are companies that will invest your money according to whatever ethical grid you present them. They will avoid investing your money in any company to which you object. However, it is still investing in the happy family. The company in which you invest, if it is at all part of the larger scene, it probably is the recipient of investments from other members of the happy family and it will also likely invest in them. You are still very much part of the scene. As long as you are not aware of the incestuous relationships within the happy family, this approach may salve your conscience. It is not, in my estimation, an *optimum* ethical and mission response, though I have high respect for the warriors at that front.

The Christian community in NA is the blessed possessor of great wealth – denominations, other Christian organizations and Christian individuals command a lot of money and power. Furthermore, we have many Christian experts in economics and in business. I would like to see our Christian business community sit down and work out *a vision of business that is not based on the priority of profits, but on economic service, though that will not exclude profit*. I would like them to look around to see where there are economic needs not met and how they can meet these needs *as Christians*. This can be, for some, on a local level – e.g. real estate in slums. This can be done on a national or even international level. It can be done on small scale or large scale. We have the expertise. We have the money. What we need is the faith and vision. What we need is to believe the promise of Christ when He promised He would lead us into the truth:

E.g. of small international: Baissa citrus industry. It is an area of Nigeria's Middle Belt bordering on Cameroon. It is fertile rain forest country with a luscious citrus agriculture. However, it is all on a rather traditional style and scale. The area badly needs an economic lift that a modern citrus industry could provide.¹⁰

E.g of large: Reforestation south of Sahara in northern Nigeria, where the desert continues to creep further south.

All of this will require strong determination and clear vision, but I have enough faith in the leading of God's Spirit that we can accomplish something that is useful, realistic and expressive of the Christian mandate in this world.

My Rationale

Why am I as a missionary interested in such affairs? I began with an example that showed how our economic affairs and our churches' missionary programmes often contradict each other.

I am not the only one to have noticed it. It is, in fact, an official concern of the CRC Synod and of every CRC denominational board and of every CRC missionary. The church has officially stated that this is a missionary problem that must be brought to the attention of the constituency.

The missionary outreach of the Christian community must rest on the platform of the Christian lifestyle of that community. We cannot have a lifestyle that negates the missionary message we bring. Our lifestyle, including our economic style, is as much a witness to the world as is our missionary outreach. People in the Third World are aware of missionary support of colonialism and they now see us participate in

¹⁰ For our life and ministry in the Baissa area, see *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, ch. 18 and vol. 3, ch. 30. *Every Square Inch* is our memoir, the first entry on this Boeriana page.

neo-colonial ventures that are not consistent with our missionary message.

Our missionary message cannot stand in isolation. Though in Nigeria, e.g., thousands of people enter the church annually, university students, especially those in the humanities and social sciences, are leaving the church, many of them precisely because of this major inconsistency. They wonder what a church can offer when it supports economic ventures and related political policies that contradict the spirit of that Gospel and that so often tends to support the forces of oppression in Africa. The countries in Africa that have gone Marxist have done so because they saw no salvation in the West.

You may argue that we Christians cannot change our economic practices or political policies. Even granting that, we can be advocating policies that *are* consistent with the Gospel. And we can surely set up business ventures expressive of the Gospel – if we really wanted to.

It is not enough to be a missionary-sending church. We must be a missionary community across the board. We must bring the Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission into line with each other. The new heaven and the new earth must not only be a future hope; it must also provide us with a vision for the present.

Finally, the Gospel must not serve merely as a *brake* as it does in the lives of so many Christians.. It is not meant merely to restrain us from excess corruption. It must serve as the *motor, the engine*, that drives us on. Setting up our alternative efforts will give us the scope to creatively pursue whatever direction the Spirit will show us in our economic ventures. We must move beyond putting out the brush fires by means of shareholders' demonstrations.

Bibliography

Antonides, H. *Multinationals and the Peaceable Kingdom*. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1978.

Biersteker, T. J. *Distortion or Development: Contending Perspectives on the Multinational Corporation*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978.

Boer, J. H. *Missionary Messengers of Liberation in a Colonial Context: A Case Study of the Sudan United Mission*. Amsterdam Studies in Theology, vol. 1. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1979.

NOTE: The following three Boer books are all found in full on this same Boeriana page.

------. *Missions: Heralds of Capitalism or Christ?* Ibadan: Day Star Press, 1984.

------. *Caught in the Middle: Christians in Transnational Corporations*. Jos, Nigeria: Institute of Church and Society, 1992.

----- and Boer-Prins, F. A. *Every Square Inch-- A Missionary Memoir: The Life and Mission of Jan & Frances Boer*. Vols 2 and 3. Self-published, www.SocialTheology.com/Boeriana.htm, 2014.

Zaccheus Collective. *The Corporate Captivity of the Church: Myths, Multinationals, and the Church's Response*. Chicago: Zaccheus Collective, n.d.