

RIGHT or WRONG? Church incorporation

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Our church is newly organized. We've been advised to incorporate and to adopt a constitution and bylaws. This all seems like a lot of work, and it might negatively impact what we are trying to do. What's the validity of this advice?

Incorporating and adopting a constitution and bylaws must seem like the very last things you would want to spend time working on. But the truth is that churches in present-day America cannot survive long without the protection and privileges provided by incorporation. By incorporating, your church will become a legal entity and will be registered with the government, enabling your church to open a bank account, obtain insurance and enter into legal agreements, including contracts with builders or service providers. Incorporating also allows the church to register with the IRS and obtain an Employer Identification Number. Finally, incorporation shields members of your new church from personal liability should some tragedy occur or the church face a lawsuit.

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Every church needs structure and organization. Mostly likely, the members of your new church have gathered numerous times and discussed goals for this new church, dreams for its future and practical ways of meeting those goals and making those dreams a reality. Your constitution and bylaws, in some ways, are simply the documented version of those discussions. Your discussions probably considered denominational affiliation on the regional, state and national levels. If you have made decisions about what form that affiliation will take, this information should become part of your documents. Church governance also should be addressed, including the process for making major decisions and matters surrounding personnel, church leaders and finances. Specifying church governance in writing helps provide security and stability for a new church.

Another item to include is a statement of beliefs held commonly by those who have formed the church. Working on such a statement will motivate your church to search the Scriptures, read Baptist confessions of faith, study Baptist history and likely decide together what the core beliefs you as a community of faith will embrace. And finally, because all churches need flexibility, make sure to include instructions for amending the constitution and bylaws.

Gathering all this information and putting it in formal documents does seem like a lot of work, but help is available. Contact other churches, both new churches like yours and long-established churches, and ask for copies of their constitutions and bylaws. Use those documents as a guide. Go online and check the numerous websites that offer sample church constitutions and bylaws. The bottom line is that the advice you received is not only valid, it is invaluable.

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Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.

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