

The Blessing in Bribery:

a biblical worldview for cross-cultural workers

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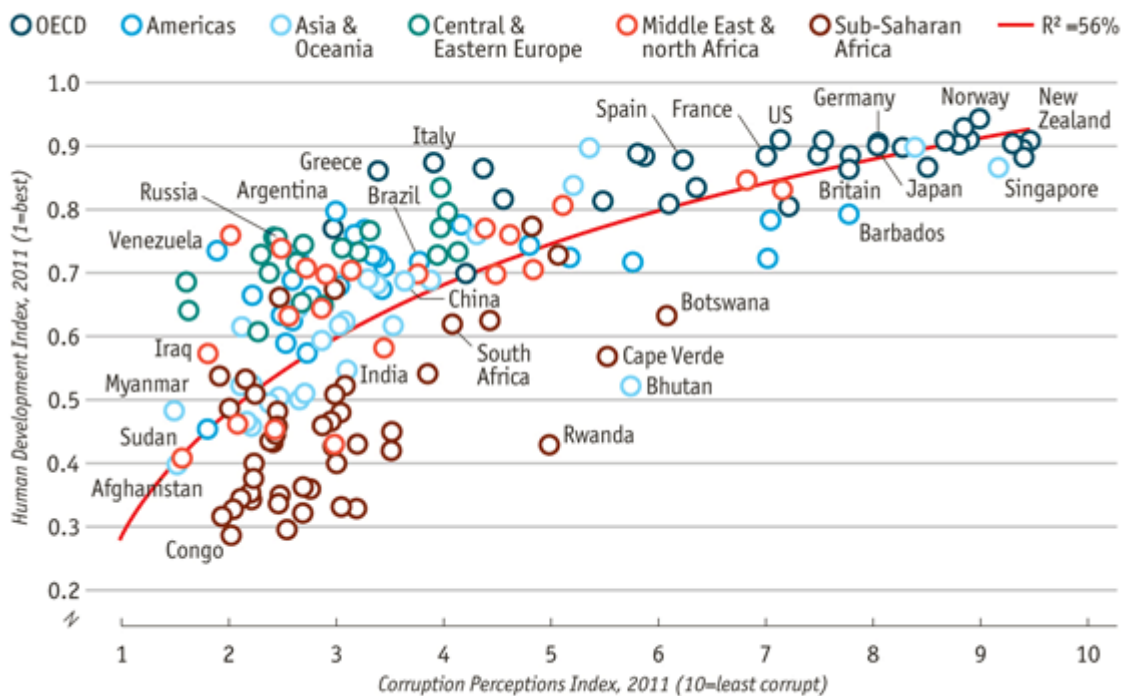
Bribery is becoming an increasingly hot topic in government, business, and ministry. New laws and watchdog organizations are springing up in nearly every country in the world as the devastating impact of corruption trickles down to the poorest and most marginalized populations. It is often in the neighborhoods of those most affected by corruption that Christians come face to face with the issue fanning the flames of oppression. Under what circumstances, if any, should a Christian pay a bribe, and what impact does this decision have on the community they serve?

When we look at this issue through a biblical worldview, we will begin to see that there may be unforeseen opportunities that arise within the context of bribery. What we can discern of God's character in scripture ultimately leads us to a worldview that will inform our response to the problem of bribery and corruption. It is my position that Christians ought not participate in bribery at all. Rather, they should seek alternatives that will glorify God, testify to the grace of the Gospel, and advance kingdom culture. This paper will examine various forms of bribery, how the practice impacts culture and ministry and what the Bible has to say about it.

In many parts of the world, bribery smooths the flow of paperwork, cuts through red-tape, seals the deal, and mitigates conflict. Some cultures see an added fee to a government clerk as normal as a tip for the waitress who pours a hot cup of coffee. But is it the same? In a recent article on BlueNotes.com, ANZ's head of financial crime, Guy Boyd, reported that the World Bank estimates the equivalent of \$1 trillion is offered in bribes every year and 0.5 per cent of a country's GDP is lost through corruption (Boyd). The article goes on to say that according to Transparency International's survey on bribery, one in four people in the world paid a bribe over the course of a year. It's a problem that is coming to the forefront of the global economy because, according to the World Bank, bribery and corruption directly impact economic growth and

human development. The following chart illustrates the relationship between perceived corruption and human development.

Corruption and human development



Sources: Transparency International; UN Human Development Report

(The Economist Online)

While the subject of bribery is near universally condemned both morally and legally, many people feel that it is a necessary evil in getting things done—especially in developing countries. As we’ve already seen, bribery and corruption have an adverse effect on human and economic development, yet it is the least developed countries in the world that are most likely to engage in corrupt practices. For Christian workers, the cost can include the inability to work effectively in the culture and accomplish their goals. International workers face the issue of bribery on a regular basis, and Christian workers specifically, need to have a game plan that will honor God and break the cycle of corruption.

According to John T. Noonan, Jr., who wrote an exhaustive work on the history of bribery, this is not a new issue. “From the fifteenth century B.C. on, there has been a concept that could be rendered in English as “bribe,” the concept of a gift that perverts judgment” (13). Today we see that bribery takes place in many forms and to many extremes: the transactional bribe, a payment made to accelerate an official’s duty; a variance bribe, a payment made to get around a requirement or law; and extortion, the attempt to extract payment through force or coercion. While the vocabulary surrounding the concept can be synonymous with other accepted forms of culturally beneficial reciprocity, such as gift, tip or fee, Noonan summarizes the distinction between gifts of reciprocity and bribery as follows,

A bribe expresses self-interest, a gift conveys love; a bribe subordinates the recipient to the donor, a gift identifies the donor with the recipient. A gift brings no shame, a bribe must be secret. A gift may be disclosed, a bribe must be concealed. The size of a gift is irrelevant; the size of a bribe, decisive. A gift does not oblige, a bribe coerces. (697)

It is the shameful or secret nature of bribery that alerts us to its presence, even in cultures where the practice is common. Noonan’s comparison will serve as the definition of bribery for the sake of this discussion which may therefore include terms such as corruption, gift, tip, fee, extortion, ransom, and bribe.

While some prefer to differentiate between extortion and bribery, we will not make that distinction in this paper as it is my contention that they are degrees of the same issue. The temptation when making such a distinction is to broaden the concept of extortion and narrow the definition of bribery. The motivation here is to excuse bribes or extortions in a broader range of circumstances. By considering both topics as one, we will see that participating in bribery has the

same outcome as participating in extortion (including ransom)—it encourages future incidences of the practice. A recent NY Times article notes that while countries like Italy and France are likely to pay a ransom, countries like the US and UK refuse to pay ransom because it leads to future terrorist demands (Callimachi). Dr. Richard Langston of East Asia School of Theology in Singapore states, “Transactional bribes tend to foster greed and lead to more extreme forms of bribery and corruption. This in turn perpetuates the cycle of corruption that tends to exclude the poor, who cannot afford a bribe...” (253). For this reason, we will examine bribery in its extremes, from facilitating gift to extortion, and seek to further our understanding of the implications of such forms of corruption.

Today’s western culture is influenced by a zealous emphasis on cultural relativism. People who contend that bribery is a strictly cultural issue say that we should not impose a western standard of morality on the economic systems in developing countries. But is bribery cultural, moral, or both? Dr. Bernard T. Adeney is a professor of theology and ethics at Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana in Indonesia and explains that virtuous action does not reside in the action itself, but in a deep understanding of what is appropriate in a given situation. This understanding must be accompanied by a character that is capable of responding appropriately. “Cross-cultural ethics forces us to acknowledge that the form of goodness often lies not in an act itself but in the cultural meaning of the act” (27). This leads us to ask whether there are moral absolutes that transcend culture or if all goodness is defined within the context of culture.

These arguments lead to a variety of approaches on the subject of bribery. In the case of transactional bribes, or grease payments, for example, some people feel that a small payment serves as a tip to supplement the underpaid government clerk. This is often the perspective held by the person expecting the payment, especially when they are working with a westerner who

has far more resources, but even those paying bribes defend the practice on the basis of being culturally relevant. Patrick O'Neil, in his writing on bribery, also addresses cultural norms that are in direct opposition to published laws and considers the practice equivalent to offering a tip.

The customs of many regions and nations support the making of moderate payments to public officials to perform their ordinary tasks. [A] person...may be required to pay small "bribes" to the appropriate officials, but where sanctioned by long-standing custom (even though technically illegal), such payments are more akin to tips than to bribes. (169)

Nichols concurs and explains that since God's people are subject to wicked rulers, God shows his mercy by allowing the payment of bribes when the person's future depends on it, "regardless of the written law" (Falkiner 31-32). Making such judgements of when a situation warrants paying a bribe can be a slippery slope toward justifying the privilege of one with the capacity to pay a bribe in order to avoid an inconvenience or facilitate action.

Gregory Nichols served as a missionary in the Ukraine and argues that gifts or bribes serve as a culturally based incentive to get officials to do the job they are supposed to do. Nichols declares that the Bible always condemns taking a bribe, but never condemns giving a gift or a bribe. "For example, it would not be biblical to bribe an official in order to evade a building code or visa requirement. But if this official is delaying action, or is misinterpreting the law, it would not be unbiblical to offer a gift" (Falkiner 30-31). This type of transactional bribe is the most common type of corruption.

Steven Falkiner, missionary to Nepal, understands the cost of refusing to participate in bribery. He and his family had to leave the field after failing to receive long-term visas due to their refusal to pay bribes. "The idea that bribery is "necessary" is relative to the price that one is

willing to pay to operate without bribing” Falkiner states. “Many missionaries and businessmen have worked successfully without succumbing. Creative ways to operate without bribery have been found” (24). Falkiner goes on to say that missionaries who opt to pay a bribe because that is “what works” or for the “greater good” assume that scripture contains a hierarchy of values and that we as humans have the judgement to ascertain what the outcome of our actions will be.

One of the primary reasons Christians subscribe to the cultural permissibility of bribery is because they don’t see a clear stance on the subject in scripture. Dr. Jason Richard Tan, a pastor in the Philippines, states, “Most cultures do not have a word for “bribe.” Even the Old Testament does not have a modern equivalent” (279). Tan explains that the Old Testament scripture uses the words *kopher*, meaning “ransom,” and *shohad*, meaning “gift.”¹ Since neither of these words directly translate to the English equivalent of “bribe,” we must depend on the context to establish their meaning.

The book of Proverbs is where some of this confusion originates. Proverbs 15:27, “The greedy bring ruin to their households, but the one who hates bribes [mattan] will live” (*New International Version*), clearly condemns the practice of bribery while other verses seem to condone it. “A bribe [shohad] is seen as a charm by the one who gives it; they think success will come at every turn.” (Proverbs 17:8) Tan states that since the term bribe carries a negative connotation in the English language, the Proverbs 17:8 verse seems to condone an unethical practice. “However, if it were translated as “gift,” then the verse would make more sense” (279). Tan’s argument is that the word *shohad* is morally neutral in Hebrew and as used in Proverbs 17:8, is a culturally acceptable gift, not a bribe. Since the Hebrew words are translated as bribe,

¹ Tan only referenced two Hebrew words translated as bribe, but the New International Version also translates mattan (Proverbs 15:27 and Ecclesiastes 7:7), t^eruma (Proverbs 29:4), and sillum (Micah 7:3) as bribe.

gift, offering or ransom interchangeably, we have to dig a little deeper to determine the intended message.

While some, like Dr. Tan, argue that the ambiguity of translating Hebrew linguistics leaves the ethical position of bribery vague, David Montgomery, an associate minister at Knock Presbyterian Church in Belfast, counters this interpretation of Proverbs 17:8 with a careful exegesis of the lexical structure of the original Hebrew. Montgomery states that the Proverb employs the use of irony to indicate that a person subscribing to such a philosophy of bribery as a charm, is only deluding himself (Packer 138-139). The literary construct observed in this verse is quite common in Old Testament writing—especially in wisdom literature. Montgomery states that the writer is merely demonstrating the dangers of seeing a bribe as a means of getting ones way through the charms of their material assets. “On the contrary, the careful reader will immediately pick up the implicit condemnation... the reader is meant to understand the futility of the actions of the self-deluded who imagine that everything can be bought” (139). This interpretation is upheld not only by the genre of wisdom literature, but also by the consistent disapproval of bribery throughout scripture.

If we take a broader look at scripture, we will see that we can learn even more about how Christians should respond to the issue of bribery. Adeney says that we need to look at more than just what the Bible states about a topic. “The message of the Bible, or the way it is interpreted, is always perceived and stated in human language that reflects the priorities of particular people in a particular culture. The entire canon of the Bible, on the other hand, is constitutive of what it means to be a Christian in every time and place” (79). So perhaps our guidance on the issue of bribery should be gleaned from the whole of scripture, and not just isolated verses.

Dr. Peter Gosnell, associate professor of religion at Muskingum University, responds to those who see the Bible as a prescriptive book of moral dos and don'ts, "Though that religious approach may appeal to the Bible, it also tends not to reflect consistently what the writings themselves communicate and should also not be confused with biblical ethics..." (17). An overly legalistic approach misses not only the plan and purpose for God's Word, to restore creation, but also falls far short of providing clear answers to subjects not expressly deliberated in scripture. The Bible expresses a variety of thoughts on some subjects because it was written over a wide timespan and in the context of a variety of cultures and languages. Gosnell says, "Though that will lead us to consider a variety of ethical approaches in the Bible, we should also recognize one constant to all biblical texts: people's ethics flow from their relationship with God" (18). Biblical ethics is based not only on what the Bible says regarding a particular topic, but also on what the Bible tells us of the nature and character of God. "What we will see throughout the Bible is the notion that how a person chooses to respond to God affects the kind of person he or she becomes" (21). When we examine topics, such as bribery, from a biblical worldview, we can more easily glean the cultural context that may sway our contemporary ideas.

We must remember, however, that we are not merely speaking of our knowledge of God, but also of our relationship with Him in the context of the cultural mandate in Genesis 1:28 and the great commission in Matthew 28:18-20. We've been called to develop the world that God has given us and make disciples of all nations. Yet we know that since the Fall, sin attempts to divert our mission at every turn. It should come as no surprise that corruption and bribery stand in direct opposition to human and economic development because these acts are in direct opposition to God's nature. Montgomery summarizes his scriptural position on bribery.

The Scripture has nothing good to say about bribery. Its statements are either explicitly or implicitly negative, or ironic. Bribery offends God and by participating in it or giving tacit approval to it, Christians, in the vast majority of cases, are misrepresenting the character of God and submitting to the pressure to conform... By perpetuating the practice those who bribe, including missionaries, may be guilty of unwittingly continuing the long-term oppression of the poor and weak (Koteskey 180).

Montgomery's point is well made. Not only do we offend God by participating in bribery, we also damage our ability to fulfill the cultural mandate and the great commission.

So what are the options? Cliff Harder, Campus Crusade for Christ, was interviewed regarding his experience with bribery in Russia and he says that relationships are key. "In order to try to avoid bribes and to get people to do what they are supposed to do, several times a year we give them flowers, candy, or some other token of appreciation, just to say, "We appreciate our working relationships with you."'" Harder says that keeping the relationships friendly is important and can help to open closed doors (Falkiner 35). The type of gift that Harder describes is different from a transactional bribe because it is made in the open with no demand for immediate reciprocity. It is a gift of friendship for the purpose of establishing relationship and is not demanded, nor expected. In this way, it is similar to the gift spoken of in Proverbs 18:16.

Can one really expect to get through a security checkpoint with an occasional box of candy? Of course not. If that were the expectation, the candy would be the same as a bribe. The point Harder makes is to establish relationships with people so we have the opportunity to share the reason why Christians don't participate in bribery. We must live our testimony first before God, but also before everyone in the community, including those who demand bribes. In this

way we establish credibility for the Gospel and for ourselves. Harder agrees, “If I feel I had to do something wrong in order to accomplish a good purpose, I think I would still feel very uncomfortable before God, because I feel I would have missed the opportunity to trust God to work out something supernatural.” When we rely on our own judgement in determining the “greater good”, we not only we rob ourselves of the opportunity to see God glorified in His purposes, we also compromise our testimony with the corrupt officials, the church and the community.

Christians sometimes fear that refusing to pay a bribe will hinder their opportunity for ministry. Langston encourages us to reconsider what the nature of our ministry could be.

The missionary or national Christian who does not give grease money will probably spend more time, effort, and even money in dealing with officials than those who give grease money. But he will probably have more opportunities to witness and demonstrate genuine Christian character in places where compromise and corruption have become common (259).

In addition to an unexpected opportunity to witness to officials, the missionary can demonstrate the biblical principles in action. Langston states that deeply practiced customs like bribery are not easily changed and require more than traditional lessons and sermons. But the daily opportunity to model Christian alternatives and practice them together, will slowly begin to transform the culture (256-257). Langston reflects on the possibilities, “I can imagine the impact that a Christian government official would have, if when offered grease money, he would graciously decline” (257).

Still, some may argue that the most extreme forms of bribery such as ransom or extortion should be an exception to the call to abstention. After all, it could cost the lives of the missionary or their family. While this is true, such tragic sacrifice is often time accompanied by a great call to action against injustice or a tremendous spiritual revival. Can we trust God to bring about the best possible outcome with our very life as well as our ministry? Langston reminds us of the reality for national Christians. “A [national] under the threat of extortion may face a far greater pressure than a missionary would face, because the missionary often has a relatively high status and more resources upon which to draw” (258).

An example of how God can work through bribery in an unexpected way is told in Acts 23 – 28. Paul was arrested while worshipping in the synagogue though he had done nothing wrong. Felix expected a bribe, so he sent for Paul often. Each time he held audience with Felix, Paul shared more of the Gospel, but never paid a bribe. When the injustices toward Paul continued, he remained humble and submissive to God’s plan—even when faced with the possibility of death. He worked his way through the justice system and was able to witness faithfully to many lands over the course of several years. Refusing to pay a bribe didn’t hinder Paul’s ministry. It facilitated it.

It’s not easy to respond like Paul did when faced with injustice. As we’ve already established, our character is developed through our relationship with God and the choices we make. These concepts are vitally important when faced with the in-the-moment situations of bribery and corruption. Adeney reminds us that it will be too late to develop our character when the need arises. “At the point where we have to make a decision, we are unlikely to reflect on [which theoretical approach] is most appropriate. The kind of person we are and the way we are

oriented to God, to our neighbor and to our own self-interest will most likely decide for us” (162). Our worldview is most revealed in situations of extreme pressure and stress.

Above all, cross-cultural Christian workers must remember that we are ambassadors of the living God. We represent His kingdom—not man’s. Montgomery says it well, “In our personal relationships, we can be generous without bribing; we can consistently refuse to stand up for our own rights and property while protecting the rights and property of others” (Packer 144). It should come as no surprise that we are in conflict with the ways of this world in every culture we encounter, but we are subject to a higher culture and a greater cause. When faced with issues of bribery and corruption, we must trust in the One whose ways are just, pray for guidance, and humbly seek opportunities to glorify God and share the Gospel in word and deed. We can then watch as God displays His purposes in the situation. While it’s true that we may suffer inconvenience, hardship, embarrassment, loss and even death, we can be certain that God’s purpose is always just. While the blessing of suffering may remain a mystery, God’s purpose will ultimately triumph.

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