

BEST PRACTICES FOR SHORT-TERM HEALTHCARE MISSIONS	
Question: Under which (if any) conditions is bribery acceptable in short-term healthcare missions?	
Participants in discussion	Background (perspective)
Steven Falkiner	Steven Falkiner his wife, and two daughters returned from Nepal in May, 1997, after failing to receive long-term visas "due to our refusal to pay bribes." Falkiner, based in Langely, B.C., is finishing his master's degree at Associated Canadian Theological Schools as he prepares to return to the field with Foursquare Missions.
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Why is this important? This is an issue of trust and honesty	

CONSENSUS STATEMENT

As followers of Christ, we represent what is good and right. Deception is not part of who we are, as it can quickly erode trust and grieve the Holy Spirit. It should be obvious that bribery is not an option for a Christian. However, many unprepared healthcare missionaries encounter bribery solicitations. To compound the problem, they may also have well-meaning friends encouraging them to do it. If healthcare missionaries don't realize the weakness of the arguments in favor of bribery, they may be tempted to give in and do the easy thing. To counter this we need to be prepared; prepared to answer the arguments in favor of bribery; prepared to pay the cost of not bribing; and prepared to recognize a bribery solicitation. If we are prepared, then we can face the "ethical dilemma" of bribery with confidence.

BEST: DO NOT USE BRIBES AS A MEANS OF ACCOMPLISHING GOD'S WILL

Biblical concepts involved

Psalm 62:10, Do not trust in extortion or take pride in stolen goods; though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

Proverbs 27:3, A wicked man accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the course of justice.

Ecclesiastes 7:7 Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart.

Deuteronomy 17:1 instructs judges: Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous.

Bribery is one of the most common moral problems for Two-Thirds World Christians

The problem is so prevalent that it is almost impossible not to encounter it. This moral dilemma is also faced by those who go as missionaries to these countries. The question for the short-term healthcare missions leader is how to respond to bribery. This is something that is best not left until the last minute, because pressure tends to blur our thinking. In those pressure situations, there will also be those who encourage the bribe. If the missionary isn't prepared to answer their arguments, then it becomes easy to give in. The following arguments aren't the only ones that encourage bribery, but they are the ones that Steven Falkner faced in Nepal.

1. "Don't Force Your Culture on Others." Some say that it is wrong for Westerners to impose their culture on another people. This is a sore spot in many nations because during the colonial period many missionaries did just that. Sensitivity to Western domination still remains, especially as many nations strive to discover and assert their own identities. Some Two-Thirds World Christians even exclaim, "Bribery is an accepted mechanism for legal transactions in this context. Westerners have no right to impose their own legal norms on a context in which small-scale bribery has almost the status of customary law"².

One of the weaknesses of this argument is that it bases the morality of bribery solely on cultural acceptance of the practice. But if cultural acceptance were the only measure of morality, then slavery in the 18th century southern United States would have to be considered moral, along with female circumcision in some African tribes. However, culture can only be seen as absolute if we deny the existence of any universal absolutes.

Only two types of morality exist that appear to be culturally influenced, and bribery doesn't fit either one: culturally influenced expressions of universal morals (such as a woman showing respect and submission for her husband by covering her head during public worship) and what many call "matters of conscience," moral rules that are either culturally informed or based on personal convictions and are concerned with issues that are not addressed as universally immoral in the Bible (such as the amoral practice of eating meat that has been sacrificed to an idol). Bribery, however, doesn't fit in the definition of culturally influenced morality because it is universally condemned in both testaments.

The strongest argument against accepting bribery as a cultural norm is that virtually every nation of the world has laws prohibiting it. John T. Noonan claims:

There is not a country in the world which does not treat bribery as criminal on its lawbooks. . . . In no country do bribetakers speak publicly of their bribes, or bribegivers announce the bribes they pay. No newspaper lists them. No one advertises that he can arrange a bribe. No one is honored precisely because he is a big briber or a big bribee. No one writes an autobiography in which he recalls the bribes he has taken or the bribes he has paid³.

The Bible tells us, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established."⁴ Therefore, even if it were considered to be a cultural norm, and even if everyone else is doing it, the Christian is called to obey the law that prohibits it.

2. "Do It for the Greater Good." In this argument, the mission is the higher good that makes bribery acceptable. Those who work in nations where bribery is rampant know the cost of not complying with its demands. A missionary says:

In many if not most Two-Thirds World countries very little gets done without some financial incentive. . . . A new business manager once came to one of our projects near the Indian border. It had been the custom for years to provide a little "token of appreciation" to the man at customs for expediting the passage of mission goods across the border. But the new business manager—a wonderful fellow, but prone to see things in black and white—regarded this as bribery, pure and simple. He put an end to the practice. And that put an end to the passage of mission goods across the border. There was a face-off, naturally; the mission reinstated the practice and the business manager went home⁵.

In another example of which Steve Falkner was aware, a relief worker in Thailand saw 25 of his national coworkers arrested, and he couldn't purchase or distribute food and fuel for 18,500 refugees, until he paid a bribe. However, giving in assumes that bribes are necessary to work successfully in these nations. Many missionaries and businessmen have worked successfully without succumbing. Creative ways to operate without bribery have been found. For example, to work in the face of strict visa laws, missionaries have gone as tentmakers or students or have approached these countries as nonresident missionaries. The idea that bribery is "necessary" is relative to the price that one is willing to pay to operate without bribing.

This argument places pragmatism over obedience.

Example: A well respected Christian otolaryngologist planned to conduct a training seminar with a series of operations to demonstrate a novel technique in an Asian country. The educational operation depended on having donated equipment brought into the country. Despite trying a number of different options

to move the equipment into the country, the otolaryngologist was able to get the equipment in after a bribe – because that was what worked. Three poor children experienced a dramatic response to the operation. God was praised and glorified by the otolaryngology team and their supporters.

The missionary opts for "what works," even though this involves sinning in the sight of God. A further problem with this argument is that it assumes that there is a defined hierarchy of values that will determine which is the "greater good." However, as Bernard Adeney points out: "Unfortunately, no fixed hierarchy of values can be demonstrated from Scripture, reason or experience"⁶. If this is true, then arguing for the greater good becomes a form of relativism that bases values on subjective logic. Almost anything can be justified if we argue it in the right way and feel strongly enough about it. Results are not only unpredictable, but they are based on the ability of fallen human beings to judge correctly. Also, making a judgment for the greater good assumes that the one making the judgment is able to accurately predict the final outcome of the action. Who can accurately gauge the long-term effects of an act of bribery on a person, a society, or a mission?

This argument often arises from confusion between bribery and extortion. Cases are presented where someone has to pay a bribe to cross a border without being robbed or beaten by the border guards. What must be understood is that the form of giving that the Bible condemns as bribery is that which perverts justice⁷. The Encyclopedia of Biblical and Christian Ethics defines bribery as "the bestowing of money or favor upon a person who is in a position of trust (for example a judge or government official) in order to pervert his judgment or corrupt his conduct"⁸. Perverting justice through bribery can take the form of paying for an unfair advantage, such as buying entrance to a school that has limited enrollment, or fixing a traffic ticket, or receiving a visa for which one is not qualified. The common denominator is that a perversion of justice has taken place. Both the giver and the receiver of the bribe are guilty.

In contrast, extortion withholds justice and services that are rightfully due a person or that should be provided without charge. The relief worker above who paid a "bribe" so that he could feed refugees was really a victim of extortion. He didn't pay to pervert justice, he paid to prevent the officials from wrongfully imprisoning his workers and preventing him from feeding 18,500 refugees. The victim can refuse to pay in order to help curb the continuation of corruption, but his guilt is not equal with that of the one who is extorting.

3. "Don't Think of It as a Bribe." Some say, "Don't think of it as a bribe; think of it as a gift, or a tip, or a donation." Is it really this simple? A bribe can be distinguished from all three alternatives. A gift is given in the context of a relationship to express a feeling. Where no relationship is present, a gift appears out of place. A bribe, however, is not an expression of relationship; it is an attempt to exploit a person for selfish gain. A gift may be given secretly—perhaps out of modesty—but secrecy is unnecessary. A bribe is concealed in the palm or given in a plain

envelope. Without secrecy it brings disgrace and possible legal consequences. The Bible says in Proverbs 27:3, "A wicked man accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the course of justice." The size of a gift is irrelevant; after all, "it is the thought that counts." The size of the bribe is equivalent to the task performed. A gift may hope for reciprocation. A bribe requires it.

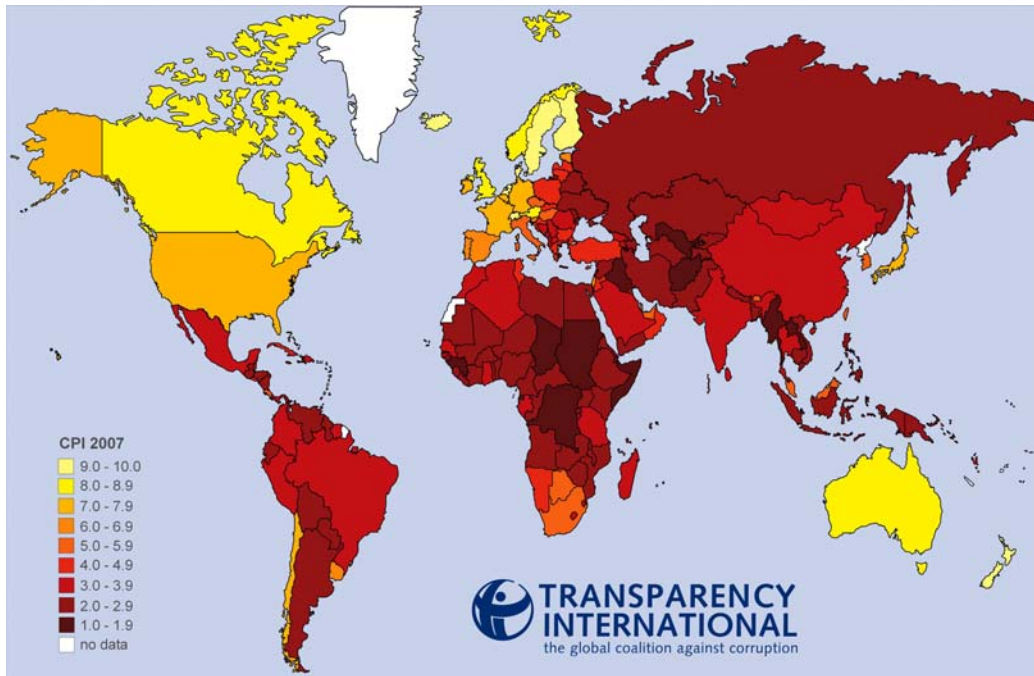
Example: A medical mission team is trying to get large boxes of (expired) medications into a country by bribing the airport customs officials. Money is given to an intermediary who pays off the custom officials. When a concerned team member asks, "Isn't this a bribe?", the team leader responds, "It is just a gift that we provide to our friend".

A bribe can also be distinguished from a tip as well. A tip is known and consented to by the employer. A bribe is hidden from the employer. This fits with the experience of Richard Langston: "Tips are given openly and encouraged in the Philippines, while transactional bribes are usually given subtly."⁹ A tip is for the proper performance of a job. A bribe causes a person to betray a job. A tip is given as a small bonus to reward past service and influence future service. A bribe is given in such a size that it creates an overriding obligation to perform a task. A tip is given to low level employees. A bribe is given to those with discretionary powers. A tip is optional. A bribe is required.

Bribes can also be distinguished from donations. A donation is given openly and usually acknowledged with a receipt. If the donation is large, public recognition may be appropriate. A bribe, once again, is secret. A donation may seek to influence, but a bribe creates an obligation.

4. "Bribery Doesn't Hurt Anything." It is well known that government workers in Two-Thirds World nations are very poorly paid. Some justify bribery because it provides additional income so that these workers are better able to care for their families. But this reasoning overlooks the overwhelmingly negative consequences of bribery.

Some analysts say that bribery is one of the major factors preventing economic, political, and social development. An organization called Transparency International produces a yearly Corruption Perception Index (http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi)¹⁰. The least corrupt of the nations listed are the developed countries of Denmark, Finland, Sweden, New Zealand, and Canada, while the most corrupt are the underdeveloped nations of Nigeria, Bolivia, Colombia, Russia, Pakistan, Mexico, and Indonesia.



One of the realities in most Two-Thirds World nations is that quality control inspectors can be bought. Thus, inferior products and services enter the marketplace because inspectors have been paid to "turn a blind eye" to deficiencies. In addition, positions and contracts can also be bought by the unqualified, leading to massive waste.

A third reality in most Two-Thirds World nations is that government workers can be bribed to speed up the processing of documents or to move the briber ahead of those already waiting for service. This speeds up service for the briber but slows down everyone else.

Hindering development is only one of the negative consequences of bribery. A second is that bribery denies justice for those who cannot afford to pay. The Bible condemns those "who acquit the guilty for a bribe, but deny justice to the innocent."¹¹ Ancient Israel was so concerned about the swaying of judges that in the Talmud we find, "Even the slightest courtesy extended to a judge, such as giving him a hand to help him alight from a ferry, was enough to cause that judge to refuse to take the man's case in court"¹².

A third negative consequence of bribery is that it involves oppressing the powerless. Isaiah 1:23 says, "Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them." Justice and service go to the highest bidder. Those able to pay bribes in a government office get their permit processed immediately while those who are unable to pay must wait until all of the bribers have been served. Vinay Samuel has noted:

. . . it is also important to bear in mind another critical issue . . . the question of who is disadvantaged by rather than who gains advantage from the effects of bribery. . . . Bribery is never an isolated act. It always has consequences for one's relationship to neighbors and undermines the poor, compounding their misery and increasing the advantage to those who are already powerful.¹³

Bribery also has negative consequences for the person who receives the bribe. The common term that is used for bribing an official is "corrupting" them. Ecclesiastes 7:7 notes that, "Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart." Deuteronomy 17:1 instructs judges: "Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous." From a Christian perspective, is there any justification in "corrupting hearts" or "blinding the wise" by giving bribes? We are meant to love our neighbors, not corrupt them. Even if the person who takes them is relatively corrupt before we bribe them, our contribution adds to their guilt and reinforces their corruption.

Bribery also carries the social consequence of undermining basic trust. One businessman commented, "If you pay an official to get around the long process of obtaining a license for something, what's to prevent someone else from bribing another official or even the same one to steal my business?"¹⁴ We place a certain amount of trust in public officials. When we can't trust them, a certain amount of instability enters into the social structure.

For a missionary, bribery violates another trust relationship—the trust placed in a missionary or a missions board by the people who support the mission. There is no written agreement, but there is an inherent trust that the money will be used in an ethical, Christian manner. I expect that if we polled our churches, we would find very few in favor of using missions money for bribery.

5. "The Bible is Unclear on Bribery." There are three problematic texts in the book of Proverbs. The first is Proverbs 17:8, which states: "A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it; wherever he turns, he succeeds." At first glance this passage seems to put bribery in a positive light. However, here the briber considers his bribe to be a charm that brings him success. Compare this with Psalm 62:10, which counsels, "Do not trust in extortion or take pride in stolen goods; though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them." The overwhelming counsel of Scripture is to place our trust in God; not in riches, man, princes, weapons, idols or bribes.

The second problematic verse is Proverbs 18:16: "A gift opens the way for the giver and ushers him into the presence of the great." It is interesting to note, first of all, that the regular Hebrew word for bribe, *shochad*, is not used in this passage. Instead, a more generic term meaning "gift" has been used. The question must be asked, first of all, if the description of the gift in this passage fits the definition of bribery or if it is merely describing a gift. Here the gift opens a

way for the giver that his merits have failed to open on their own; thus he has bought an opportunity not rightfully his. The act, therefore, is unjust and can be thought of as a bribe.

The third problematic verse is Proverbs 21:14: "A gift given in secret soothes anger, and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great wrath." This passage also appears to present bribery in a positive light. But, is the one giving the bribe perverting justice? If the wrath he avoids is a consequence of a crime, then justice has been compromised. Bribing a judge to get an undeserved verdict of "not guilty" or bribing a police officer not to give a deserved traffic ticket would be examples of this. However, if the wrath is undeserved, then pacifying it hasn't perverted justice. Unfortunately, we don't know what the cause of the anger or the wrath is. On this verse we would have to agree with the commentator that "The verse does not condemn or condone; it merely observes the effectiveness of the practice."¹⁵

Apart from the three problematic verses in Proverbs, there are 21 cases of *shochad* in the Old Testament and several additional verses where another Hebrew word is used to describe a bribe. These all point to the immorality of bribery. In the New Testament, bribery is mentioned several times but is not commented on directly, although the motivations attached to it are soundly condemned.

Bribery is condemned because of the partiality it creates. The Old Testament commands us to "not pervert justice," nor to "show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great." In contrast to the gods of the nations, the Lord is revealed as one who "shows no partiality and accepts no bribes." The New Testament teaching corresponds to this in the solemn command: "I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism" (1 Tim. 5:21).

The Bible condemns greed, which is the primary motive in bribery. Because of the condemnation on bribery, those who participate in it are also condemned: "For the company of the godless will be barren, and fire will consume the tents of those who love bribes" (Job 15:34). The Psalmist pleads, "Do not take away my soul along with sinners, my life with thirsty men," who are described as those "whose right hands are full of bribes."¹⁶

Missionaries should understand their role as ambassadors of the living God. What impression is being conveyed about the God we serve? Is he like the gods of the nations who can be bribed? Marvin R. Wilson notes, "It was thought in Canaanite religion that gods could be manipulated or appeased through offering or ritual."¹⁷ This same attitude still persists in the majority of religions today. As ambassadors of Jesus Christ we not only speak of a God that cannot be bribed, but we also represent him in our deeds.

Sender Perspective

Before

The major challenge for a sender is whether or not to knowingly support bribery to accomplish a perceived “greater good” or out of a sense of acceding to the “way that it is done in _____”. By accepting the need for bribery, the sender precludes God moving in another direction either to provide what is needed in another (just) way or to re-direct the goals of the healthcare mission. Another problem is how to make the money/other gift appear to be for something other than bribery – as any oversight would create problems for a “bribery” line item.

After

Goer Perspective

Before

The team leader needs to determine whether the bribe is being used to do something illegal in a particular country. If so, it is wise to avoid any illegal activity in another country - and seek God’s leading in an area that is legal.

Bribery is rarely a planned strategy; however, there are occasions where paying an official is considered to be part of the necessary cost of working in a country. Determining the amount of the bribe the first time can be difficult. Should team money be used for the bribe? If so, how does one present one’s plan to bribe an official?

During

At a minimum, some of the team members will have concerns about offering bribes to officials. This concern can cause tension within the team regarding the motives of the team leaders and how the team’s action will reflect on the ministry. Does one pray that the bribe will work and that everything will go as planned?

The team leader may have acute concerns regarding bribing an official. There have been rare situations where the bribe has subsequently been made public or where a Christian missionary was caught by governmental officials. A number of Christian missionaries have been publically charged with bribery, thus smearing the name of Christians and limiting the spread of the Gospel.

On the other hand, it is possible that all goes well, allowing medications or eyeglasses to reach people who are in need.

There are examples of missionaries who have refused to pay bribes, only to see their ministry opportunities limited.

After

Assuming that the bribe went successfully, the team leader may return with a sense of justification that all went according to God’s plans. Unfortunately, team leaders who have successfully used bribes can influence other team leaders, encouraging their use.

If the bribe went badly, then there can be significant problems with the church or sending organization. Bad publicity can result and team leaders may be relieved of their roles.

Recipient Perspective

The recipient of the bribe will likely think that Christians are no different than other people – if they receive the bribe. If the recipient does not receive a bribe from a Christian group, there can be a sense of resentment towards Christians, unless Christians help countries to eradicate bribery through the payment of proper salaries and appropriate taxing/fees.

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