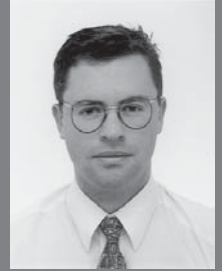


Dealing with Corruption in Malaysia: A Biblical Framework

■ by Mark Lovatt



Engaged in the actual fight against corruption, Mark here brings together personal stories, practical advice and an in-depth theological framework to equip Christians in those many countries of the world where such work seems hopeless.

Introduction

I first encountered the problem of corruption a few weeks after I arrived in Malaysia on the 1st of January 2009. I was invited to teach a Business Ethics class for a group of about 30 part-time seminary students, many of them business people. I asked them what the Number One challenge of doing business in Malaysia was. I expected them to say bureaucracy or perhaps competition from China. Instead, they cited corruption. This was a shock to me as I had never had any experience of this. I asked them for more details, which they readily supplied: permits and necessary certificates held back until a 'gift' was provided; multi-tier contracting, where one company takes a government contract but then sub-contracts it immediately to an associate company after taking perhaps 10%. The associate does the same in turn, and this occurs to four or five levels until the remainder is maybe 15% of the original contract price. This will form the budget for the actual work, delivered at substantially lower quality than originally intended. It is common for example for newly resurfaced roads to develop potholes in a matter of days. Closed tenders worth US\$100m, sometimes US\$500m, with 30% siphoned off by Cabinet Ministers for their own use: the figures staggered me. Malaysia

is a rich country, with minerals, and oil, gas and timber wealth, but many districts have only the most essential amenities. Schooling and health care are basic particularly in rural areas, and many roads are in a state of disrepair or are unsealed. With the sums of money involved, Malaysia, especially the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, should be in much better shape. As it is, the 'family jewels' of oil, gas and timber have been seriously depleted with the proceeds being channelled to the rich elite.

I soon fell in love with Malaysia. It is a beautiful country with mountains, jungles, tropical beaches, very friendly people and great food. I fell in love too with a Malaysian, Debra, who is now my wife. Much though I enjoy life here, it was impossible for me (like any committed Christian) to sit back and enjoy it all without making my own small contribution to the well-being of the country. By God's grace and foresight I have a PhD from Nottingham University on the ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr and his concept of the Will-to-Power. In fact I came to Malaysia to teach Systematic Theology, leaving my job in a large energy company on a career break. The Lord clearly had other plans for me, as I stayed well beyond the original six months. In June 2009 I met Debra, and around the same time had the opportunity to set up an energy



▶▶ consultancy business with two Malaysian colleagues. I was also invited to a meeting with a group of high-profile Christians who wanted to work on the area of corruption. This had various outcomes, one of which was an analysis of the biblical position on bribery to include in my theological teaching for business people. Part of that development was a seminar on 16th April 2011 to put together a biblical framework for dealing with corruption.

Before we look at the framework I should mention two more points. One is that I had recently completed the Henry Blackaby study book, *Experiencing God*,¹ which emphasises John 15:5, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.' I realised that, to engage with corruption, it would be essential for me to act according to God's purposes, methods and timing. We must be clear: fighting corruption is a dangerous business. People die in this industry², and threats, intimidation and harassment are common. Also, people in



Patrick Wong, who died²

Malaysia have been trying to stand up against corruption for over 20 years. There is, in reality, little that one person can do about such massive forces. It is only in the power and protection of God that real change is possible.

The second factor is the problem of sin.

It is interesting for me as a Westerner to live and work here in a developing country where the pillars of democracy are still weak and in some cases very damaged. The printed press here is Government-owned and cannot be trusted; likewise to a large extent the judiciary and the police. Elections are heavily influenced by 'money politics', where outright vote buying is commonplace: witness last year's election in Sarawak where the Chief



Abdul Taib Mahmud

Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud, regarded as one of the most corrupt political figures of the region, was re-elected, much to many people's amazement. Here in this developing country, the reality of human sinfulness is evident all around. In Europe and the USA it is easy to believe in the goodness of human nature because our history, long-standing Christian values and democratic institutions, put in place over hundreds of years, have been successful in curbing humanity's excesses through well-established structures of accountability and justice. Here, without these safeguards, human nature in its unpleasant reality is much more in evidence.

To deal with corruption effectively, a realistic concept of sin must be developed. This is the crux of the matter. Corruption is caused by human beings; how then can we understand this phenomenon fully, in order to deal with it? Corruption occurs across all cultures, nations and times. It appears in the Old Testament, in the medieval period in Rome, in UK in the 18th Century and in numerous countries today. It is not enough to think that 'people are basically OK' as one of our interns, recently graduated and arriving from the UK, remarked recently. Taking hundreds of millions of dollars (sometimes billions) from the state, when the poor are denied fundamental needs like a decent education and health care due to 'lack of funds', is a perverse thing to do. There is



▶▶ something in human nature we must be very careful about, and understand in its full depth, if we are to be successful in combating its effects. Secular humanism has no currency in this culture: it is easily recognised for the naive idealism that it is. Only with theological depth can we reach into the darkness and illuminate the cause of this global evil.

Since theology is the study of God, we should start with what we know of God and work from there. To be successful, dealing with corruption must be done God's way and according to his methods and purposes. The men and women wishing to take on this difficult challenge must be made aware of this from the start. This is the testimony of the brave people whom I worked with and interviewed to put the framework together. For them, entry into the arena was first and foremost a step of faith to begin a new journey with God. One of my sources, Dr Nehemiah Lee, is CEO of a construction company



Dr Nehemiah Lee

supplying concrete walls for road development. He took his English name (which the Chinese do here) from the Old Testament character. He set out determined to avoid corrupt means in securing contracts, and nearly lost everything. However, the Lord provided, he survived and is now doing well. Another source, Lee Hwa Beng, was put into a massively corrupt port development, where a RM4.6 billion (US\$1.5 billion) scandal had emerged, to try and clean it up.³ When I first visited his home, there was an armed guard stationed outside since his life was under threat. These two, and others, made clear that their work and survival was a matter of God's

grace. So, with their help, and some others, including Bishop Hwa Yung, author of *Bribery and Corruption: Biblical Reflections and Case Studies for the Marketplace in Asia*, we worked



Bishop Hwa Yung

out the framework as a practical, biblically-based guide to Christian people being called to engage in fighting corruption.

The Theological Framework

The framework begins with God. God created the heavens and earth, and humanity in his image.⁴ All things are his and everything comes from him. This is a foundational statement to make it clear that God is powerful, the source of all, and has ultimate jurisdiction over all things.

We then note that God is active in extending his authority here on earth by his power. He is not a distant God, the God of Deism, but rather the God revealed in the Bible: strong, active and working powerfully to achieve his purposes: the coming of his Kingdom.⁵

What is the nature of that Kingdom? It is a Kingdom of justice, truth and righteousness.⁶ These qualities reflect his very being, and are non-negotiable. This Kingdom has come, is coming, and will come, with its completion at the Eschaton. This is what God is working towards, and he calls us to join him.

In fact, this mighty God, at work around us, calls us into a loving personal relationship ▶▶

▶▶ with him, that we might join him in his eschatological purpose.⁷ This is the nature of the relationship: it is not passive but active, with clear instructions (for example Matthew 28:18-20), resources, plans and power. When we abide in this relationship, we experience God at work in and around us, bearing fruit by his power.

The basis of this relationship is the Cross of Christ.⁸ It is through the Cross that we are made righteous in God's eyes and the Holy Spirit is able to work in and through us to the greatest depth. Without the work of Christ, God would by necessity have to keep his distance, since we in our sinfulness would be destroyed by his wrath. Through Christ, though, we can enter into God's presence and he can abide in us and we in him and, by his Holy Spirit, bear much fruit.

Holiness is therefore essential to our walk with God. We are called to be holy.⁹ We are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from ourselves but is a gift of God in Christ Jesus.¹⁰ However, holiness in our daily lives is what God requires of us. How should we understand holiness in the context of corruption? It is to walk in obedience to God, doing things his way and to his timing, and not allowing sin into our lives or stepping out of obedience. Both these are essential when dealing with corruption: the former to ensure we do not allow ourselves to become corrupt, and the latter to ensure we don't give up, nor move too quickly or in the wrong direction. Following God's direction is critical for this work.

What about sin? Sin can be defined as the abuse of power, given in trust, for selfish gain. This breaks God's holy law. Why this definition? Many are available. However, this goes to the heart of the matter: it is a question of power and abused trust. We see this first in the Garden of Eden, where God entrusted the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to Adam and Eve with the command not to eat of its fruit. However, they took it for themselves, in disobedience to God, for their own selfish gain, regardless of the consequences of destroying the relationship

of trust they had with God.¹¹ We see this repeated through the scriptures: people taking what they want to use as they like, for example with David and Bathsheba, the depressing list of rulers in Kings and Chronicles, and in people like the Pharisees who used their religious authority for their own benefit.¹² On this understanding, the definition of sin is closely connected to the definition of corruption, provided by Transparency International, as 'the abuse of entrusted power for private gain'.



David handing Bathsheba's husband Uriah the letter which seals his fate. From the illustrated manuscript The Très Riches Heures painted by Jean Colombe, 1485-9. The Musée Condé, Chantilly, Oise, France

Where does sin come from? From the heart, the very centre of human nature itself.¹³ Sin, evil and corruption are not incidental to humanity but form part of our core nature. It cannot be educated out of us, or laid to rest by material well-being. Many of the corrupt leaders across the developing world are highly educated, smart and articulate people. They certainly lack no material thing. Yet still they procure vast sums for themselves, and at the expense of the poor and downtrodden amongst their own people. This has always been the case and, unless and until the right corrective measures are taken, continues to be so. It is the social structures, not human nature, which changes. Next door, in Singapore, we have perhaps the cleanest and most law-abiding citizens in the world. When they cross the causeway into Malaysia, they are notorious for speeding, paying off the police to avoid traffic summons, and dumping McDonald's food wrappings out of the car window. Many of course don't do this; however it is clear that it is by and large fear of the consequences which hold them in check in Singapore, not some kind of angelic human nature. ▶▶

▶▶ We know the end result: sin and evil will be destroyed by God in his time.¹⁴ The final solution to the problem of evil is eschatological. However, sin and evil remain powerful and destructive in the meantime, and it takes much to overcome them. In other words we cannot be complacent and assume everything is fine, just because the end is assured. We must be realistic about the power of human sin producing evil, and the works of the Evil One.¹⁵ Spiritual warfare against the unholy triad of the World, the Flesh and the Devil¹⁶ must be acknowledged as having an essential place in our approach. In practice this means: taking practical precautions like keeping our personal details secret; praying for protection against spiritual and physical attack; and seeking God's guidance regarding the approach and timing, especially when dealing with the strongholds of corruption.¹⁷ All these things are real and have been witnessed by ourselves in our colleagues at various times and we must be wary of them.

What about bribery and corruption? Are these really sinful? Many business people regard bribes as just a cost of doing business in certain countries, like hotel accommodation, conference fees and air fares, and simply build the cost of the bribe into the contract price. After all, they argue, it is not they who are the problem: it is the public official demanding payment in order for them to secure the contract who is guilty. The biblical position, however, is clear: bribery and corruption, the use of gifts or influence to secure an unjust result, are expressions of sin and are unacceptable to God. There are plenty of verses to prove this, for example:

*Proverbs 17:23: A wicked man accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the course of justice.*¹⁸



Spiritual Warfare

*Archangel Michael defeating Satan, 1635
Guido Reni (1575–1642)
Church of Santa Maria della Concezione
dei Cappuccini, Rome.*

Isaiah 1:4: Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.

Hosea 9:9: They have sunk deep into corruption, as in the days of Gibeah. God will remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins.

Amos 5:12: For I know how many are your offences and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.

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

Micah 7:3: Both hands are skilled in doing evil; the ruler demands gifts, the judge accepts bribes, the powerful dictate what they desire—they all conspire together.

How are we to deal with corruption? It must be overcome, but it begins with God in his power.¹⁹ Recognising that it is God's power which really does the work is essential. Our task then is to serve God diligently in the work he has called us to, trusting in his power to work in his way. For example, we look for the unusual coincidences which indicate that God is at work around us: meetings, conversations, strokes of 'good luck' which open the door to new opportunities. This requires a degree of prayer as we ask God to show us his ways. It also occurs in God's direct provision. For our unit of our anti-corruption NGO, the right staff seem to come along when we need them, often willing to work for minimal wages (or nothing at all) to serve with us; or our first client paying a large sum of cash up-front without preconditions, which gave us our seed corn funding. You can usually tell when the Lord is at work: things happen ▶▶

▶▶ almost by themselves. Of course we then have to work hard to make the most of the opportunity, but with God, the impossible is made possible and, for our unit, it has come together remarkably easily.

We also note that we are the Body of Christ.²⁰ When we work as God intends us to work, we should expect to encounter other members of the Body doing their duty, acting in this area of God’s will. Indeed, we also encounter people from other faiths, or even no faith at all, in God’s economy. Another of my staff, a self-proclaimed atheist, decided to return to Malaysia, despite having a good job and prospects in the UK, in order to join the fight, at the time we needed her skills and experience. At present she would deny that this was the Lord’s work. However, the Lord provides, and personally I believe in his ‘common grace’ and that his power is not restricted only to those who acknowledge his name.

We must now tackle a difficult area, namely the question of redemption. How should we deal with those who benefit from corruption, but who will suffer severe personal consequences when our mission to eradicate the problem is successful? From my experience I have to say, people willingly engaging in corruption deserve whatever happens to them. However, we are told that God loves all people and we are called upon to do the same.²¹ Is there a role for redemption in the work that we do? To answer this question I find Millard Erickson’s discussion on God’s love and justice very useful.²² Erickson points out that God is one, a unitary being. He cannot be divided into subsets or smaller parts. In our context this means that his love is just and his justice is carried out with love. They cannot be separated. A false dichotomy

has sometimes been created, suggesting that to satisfy one, the other must be compromised. With God, this cannot be the case. Love without justice is mere sentimentality; justice without love is harsh retribution and falls short of true justice. We must hold the two together for each to be authentic.

Furthermore, within a narrow confine, for example my dealings with a corrupt official, one might think love requires me to be ‘nice’ to him and let him off the hook, perhaps with a stern warning. But is this love as God would exercise it? We must bear in mind that for God, love does not consist of indulgence but rather the work of redemption towards Christ-likeness, through conviction of sin: repentance, sanctification and glorification. If the perpetrator is given only a light warning, and then, lesson not learnt, continues to sin, is God’s work of bringing his kingdom of truth and justice advanced or held back? It is clearly the latter. Likewise if others see a light sentence they may be drawn into sin in the same manner. Therefore the appropriate punishment and sanctions necessary to deal with human evil should be used. If the perpetrator genuinely repents of what they have done and seeks to make amends²³ then as Christians we should recognise that we are all saved by grace and draw him into the community fighting the evil, along with appropriate safeguards. In the absence of clear fruits of repentance (not just mere words), punishment should proceed as in any other case.

However, our priority of sympathies should be with the victims of corruption, not the perpetrators. Reflecting the justice of God, it is right and proper that those engaged in corruption and benefiting from it pay a high price. Corruption destroys people: lives, hopes, careers, ▶▶



Repentance

*Jonah Preaches to the Ninevites (1866)
Gustave Doré (1832–1883)*

▶▶ families, communities, even entire countries. When a building collapses due to the structure being inadequate for the stresses, the result of corruption, is it not right and just that those who lined their pockets with the money that should have gone into the concrete and steel pay full price for this?

It may be the case that instances of petty corruption are carried out because the official's salary is so low that he cannot afford to live without extorting bribes. These 'facilitation payments' are common in developing countries. In this case, what is really needed is a review of the civil service payment structure, along with the tax collection system, to stop the milking of funds into private pockets. It is hard to blame someone for extorting a few dollars from a rich westerner to have their passport stamped when they need it to feed their family that evening. However, these payments are effectively blackmail, regardless of the motive. Some are small, but many involve many thousands of dollars, for example containers of goods held up in Customs till a 'processing fee' is paid – in cash, no receipt. One of our clients had a consignment of calendars held at the Thai border in December. The driver was told they would be impounded for three months unless a 'clearance fee' was paid. The consignment was worth thousands of dollars, plus likely loss of the client; his driver was instructed to pay. When the numbers grow large, and it becomes a matter of greed, not necessity for survival, it becomes less forgivable and punishment is a righteous necessity for justice.²⁴

One final word on the spiritual dimension of the calling to fight corruption. People who have stood in the breach testify to experiencing an exceptional level of grace during the battle.²⁵ Nehemiah Lee recounts how he walked away from a job worth several million dollars, at a time when his company needed the work, because of a requirement to bribe. He was at the final meeting with the contracts actually on the table ready to sign when the official closed the door and told him he wouldn't sign without a percentage of the contract as a kickback. Nehemiah walked away,



Lee Hwa Beng

despite having invested much time, effort and expense in the prospect. However, he later discovered the project ran into serious problems and lost money for the person who (presumably) used bribes to win it. Lee Hwa Beng was richly supported by his church, family and friends, and found God at work around him in all kinds of ways he never experienced before. We are called to be Christ-like and to share in his sufferings,²⁶ and that is what these, and others, found themselves doing. It takes great courage, but our God is powerful and faithful, and will provide for all our needs in Christ Jesus our Lord²⁷. With this thought, the focus of their reward was essential: it is in heaven, not necessarily here on Earth, in our lifetime.²⁸ It is to be greeted by our Lord as a good and faithful servant, and to have the reward prepared for us, which must be our focus and drive. The fact is, corruption works: that is why people do it. Doing business in a corrupt environment without corrupt means may not work. The guarantee of worldly success is not part of Jesus' promises, in fact, on the contrary, we are to take up our Cross, die to ourselves and the world, and live for him, in anticipation of the world to come.²⁹ Those who think that God will reward them with material success when acting in faith rarely last the distance: the cost in this lifetime is simply too great.³⁰

Those of Christian faith who are considering whether to engage in fighting corruption should therefore consider the biblical ▶▶

►► framework I have outlined. The full framework is available by emailing me at mark.lovatt@mbs.org.my. It is not complete or perfect. It is rather meant as a working tool, a means of orientating ourselves to God and his way of doing things so that we may carry out his work in the manner in which he would approve, and in which he is in fact

already at work. Ultimately it is his work: we are his instruments, with material hands, minds, arms and legs for him to achieve his purposes. When we understand and live by this view we become truly his servants. We work for his glory, which, by grace, will also be ours one day. ■

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- 1 Henry T. Blackaby & Claude V. King, *Experiencing God*, (Philippines: Church Strengthening Ministry, 1990)
- 2 *Malaysia Today* Weds 8th February 2012: <http://www.malaysia-today.net/mcolumns/47120-episode-2-the-murder-of-a-whistleblower>
- 3 *The Edge*, 30th April 2009: <http://www.theedgemaalaysia.com/political-news/13223-the-pkz-saga-in-brief.html>
- 4 Genesis 1; Genesis 1:26; Colossians 1:16
- 5 1 Corinthians 15:24: Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.
- 6 Psalm 97:2: Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
- 7 Blackaby, Units 1 & 3 particularly.
- 8 1 Peter 3:18: For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.
- 9 1 Peter 1:15-16: But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'
- 10 Ephesians 2.8.
- 11 Genesis 3:1-7
- 12 Matthew 23.13-14: Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.
- 13 Matthew 15:19: For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.
- 14 1 John 3:8: The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.
- 15 1 Peter 5:8: Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.
- 16 Cf. The Book of Common Prayer. This is a useful distinction I use for my theology lectures. Each source of evil requires a different approach to deal with it effectively: rebuking the devil, when in fact I'm watching the wrong material late at night on TV is unlikely to be effective.
- 17 C. Peter Wagner's book, *Spiritual Warfare Strategy*, is thought-provoking in this area. As an experienced missionary in South America he worked out his understanding of the Devil's schemes which, though controversial in some areas, has proved a valuable resource to me.
- 18 Proverbs 17:8 is problematic. It states 'A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it; wherever he turns, he succeeds.' This seems to give approval to idea of paying bribes. Points to note:
 1. The biblical texts almost universally condemn bribery; one verse is not sufficient to countermand that.
 2. The Hebrew word 'bribe' and 'gift' are often interchangeable, including this instance. If the word 'gift' is used, it changes the meaning. When first meeting one's prospective parents-in-law it is wise to take a gift; trying to bribe them may not go down so well.
- 19 John 15.5; 1 Peter 4:11b: If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.
- 20 1 Corinthians 12:27: Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.
- 21 Matthew 5:43-48: 43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
- 22 Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), pp. 323-325.
- 23 As with Zacchaeus the tax collector, Luke 19.1-10, esp. v 8.
- 24 Psalm 33:5: The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.
- 25 Matthew 6.25-27: 25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.
- 26 Romans 8:17: Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.
- 27 Philippians 4:19: And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.
- 28 Matthew 6:19-20: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.
- 29 Matthew 16:24: Then Jesus said to his disciples, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.
- 30 Matthew 13:21: But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Hebrews 12:3: Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.