

# What Missionaries Ought to Know about Bribes

Little about missionaries and bribes is readily available on-line, in printed periodicals, or in published books. The Bible is not silent on the issue of bribery, but Christians have written little about it. Missionaries living in countries where bribery is common discuss it among themselves, but only a few have put their thoughts in writing.

Most mission agencies have no policy or guidelines about bribery. Therefore, missionaries have to make decisions about bribes on their own or with the advice of a few colleagues in the absence of much relevant thinking and information.

## What is a “bribe”?

Two definitions of “**bribe**” are nearly always given in English. One is “anything given to people to persuade them to do something they would not ordinarily do.” The other definition is “anything given to people in authority to persuade them to do something wrong.”

People working cross-culturally may pay **transactional bribes** in which they give officials money to do what those officials should do without payment. Those same people may pay **variance bribes** in which they get people to do something illegal.

**Extortion** is demanding something from people by threatening some negative outcome if the demand is not met. Bribery offers favors or gifts but extortion demands with a threat. Bribery is when I

give you money for a certain outcome; extortion is when I threaten something harmful unless you give me money. Many transactional bribes are really extortion.

A **gift** is something which is voluntarily transferred by one person to another without compensation. Note that, unlike bribes, gifts involve no demands or expectations and are given voluntarily.

Like “bribe” *Shochad*, the Hebrew word most often translated as bribe, also has several meanings. In addition to bribe, it is also often translated as gift or reward. So, like the English word “bribe,” *shochad* has more than one meaning, meanings similar to those of transactional and variance bribes.

## What does the Bible say about bribes?

The Old Testament has much to say about bribes including a word, *shochad*, that is most often translated as “bribe.” However, although several bribery situations occur in it, the New Testament does not use the word “bribe” except in a few versions in one verse in Acts.

The Bible repeatedly commands God’s people not to accept bribes, and it repeatedly condemns people who do. This condemnation of bribes is clearly stated throughout the Old Testament which always says it is wrong to accept a bribe. In addition, refusing bribes is always right. Unlike accepting bribes, the Bible does not say it is wrong to give a bribe. In fact, it has several passages that encourage giving bribes.

Although the Bible mentions extortion less frequently than it does bribes, both the

Old Testament and the New Testament have passages about it. Some versions have more verses about extortion in the Old Testament, and other versions have more in the New Testament.

The Bible always condemns extorting from others, and the Bible always views the extorted person as a victim. Nowhere in Scripture is the victim told not to give in to the extortion nor does it indicate that the person who yields to extortion is guilty of any sin.

Of course, the Bible does not condemn the giving of gifts, as long as the “gifts” are not intended as bribes. People even brought gifts to Jesus himself.

## What does the law say about bribes?

In the 1970s investigations found that hundreds of U.S. corporations admitted making payments totaling millions of dollars to foreign officials, politicians, and political parties. In a rare show of unity the U. S. Congress unanimously passed the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) in 1977.

This law included both civil and criminal penalties for both corporations and individuals even when the bribery took place in other countries. Companies paid millions of dollars in fines and individuals served years in prison. By 1998 thirty-three other countries had passed similar laws and together signed agreements to combat bribery in business transactions.

Although this law prohibits most bribery, it contains an explicit exception to the bribery prohibition for “facilitating payments” for “routine governmental action.” It gives examples of such things as obtaining permits, licenses or other official documents; processing governmental papers, such as visas, and so forth. Thus, the law agreed on

by 33 nations forbids variance bribes, but not transactional bribes. Of course, just because they are legal does not mean that they are good.

Other countries and organizations have urged inclusion of transactional bribes as well. Parliament recently passed the United Kingdom’s Bribery Act 2010. This law specifically defines facilitation payments as bribes and violation may result in imprisonment up to ten years and unlimited fines.

No similar laws exist for extortion. Demanding money from people under threat seems to be illegal in virtually all nations. Extortion is practiced in many nations, but it is officially viewed as a crime.

## Reasons people cite to give or not give bribes

Missionaries come to different conclusions about whether or not they should ever give bribes. Here are some arguments in favor of giving bribes under some circumstances.

- Small-scale bribery is an accepted mechanism for legal transactions in many cultures.
- A “bribe” is really just a tip, a gift, or a donation.
- In many cultures missionaries can accomplish little without providing some financial incentive. In fact,
- They may not be able to get a visa to enter the country where God has called them to serve.
- The bribe provides additional income so the underpaid workers can support their families

Here are some reasons against giving bribes under any circumstances.

- When you pay, you help corrupt the one you bribe.
- Such bribery may have unintended social consequences, keeping a culture unstable.
- Paying shows a lack of faith in God to accomplish his purposes.
- Giving bribes sears the conscience of the giver.
- Your supporters may lose confidence in you if they find out you paid a bribe.
- Bribery may cause dissension on your team if others have different convictions about it.

## Other Considerations

Deciding whether or not to give a bribe is not simply a matter of lining up arguments for both sides and coming to some conclusion.

Here are some other things to consider.

- Intermediaries you hire may pay the bribes for you out of what they charge.
- Humanitarian aid may function as a bribe even if you did not intend it that way.
- Appropriate gift giving varies widely between cultures.

Even if you ask nationals about bribery customs, you may not be proficient enough in the language to ask the right question or to understand the answer. Your nonverbal behavior may not communicate to them, and you may miss what their nonverbal behavior is saying to you.

Even when learning the language from nationals, one may miss parts of the culture for years. Don Richardson illustrates that in *Peace Child* when the Sawi saw Judas as the hero when told the story of Jesus' death.

Finally, remember that Christians reading the same scriptures often come to different conclusions about a variety of topics. For example, some Christians totally abstain from alcohol, others drink it only at communion, others cook with it, and still others drink socially. Likewise, some missionaries do not pay anything that seems to be a bribe while others pay transactional bribes (extortion).

## What should one do?—And not do?

The best thing one can do is to take preventive measures to avoid being asked for bribes. One can cultivate relationships in culturally accepted ways such as writing thank you notes or giving people appropriate gifts.

If asked for a bribe, one can do a variety of things, such as reading the Word on bribery, asking God for wisdom, reading available material, consulting with missionary colleagues and nationals.

Of course, there are some things one should not do. For example, do not accept bribes, do not de-Christianize other missionaries who do give appropriate bribes, and never give a bribe to cover up something wrong.

Here is a series of four questions that may be helpful.”

- Stage 1: Is it a bribe, a gift, or extortion?
- Stage 2: Is this sinful?
- Stage 3: Is this legal?
- Stage 4: Are there other considerations?

*Missionaries and Bribes* is free at <http://www.missionarycare.com/ebook.htm>. This book expands each section of this brochure into a chapter between six and ten pages long, and the book may be downloaded free of charge.

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