

“They worship in our churches”

Turning rhetoric into practice

1 Peter 4:17 (NIV2)

“For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household (the church); and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?”

Eph. 6: 12

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”.

Where to begin the battle

It is our natural inclination when considering something like corruption to want to jump straight away into action and get on with practical ideas as to how to combat it. I would plead with you not to do this! Implementing ideas alone rarely yields the result we expect since the roots of corruption are deeply entrenched in society, human nature and the spiritual world. We will therefore briefly consider these roots before looking at “practical ideas”.

A number of approaches have been suggested from the secular world. No doubt these have helped increase awareness of what corruption is, in government and business, and that it is harmful. Yet the results are not very encouraging.

Speaking of previous government interventions, campaigns and business ethics’ seminars, one researcher writes, “that the campaign against corruption may be one of the final episodes in a redundant development intervention paradigm illustrating the weakness of the expert-led, sanitised, technocratic development process.

“It is simply an unwarranted assumption that even when they perceive the desirability of change people are not prepared to forgo the benefits that they get out of their corrupt behaviour. I would therefore criticize the proposal that increased transparency on the part of governments will help alleviate the problem, if accompanied by heightened community awareness”.

Something new is needed. The deeper social and spiritual roots need to be tackled at the same time and the social capital within the Christian community needs to be mobilized and utilized.

The root causes of corruption in South African society

The causes of corruption are extremely complex. Yet for it to be countered they need to be considered. Tucker and Khotseng (of European and Xhosa ancestry respectively) do this by each sharing our own perceptions.

In the case of South Africa, where so much seems to be focused through our cultural and racial identities, it seems wise when looking at the causes of corruption to take into account the differing cultural backgrounds of the authors and listen to their individual perceptions separately.

Khotseng shared that many are now asking: “Why is corruption so rife in the new democratic

South Africa? What are the roots of corruption?”

Many are aware of the paradox that, although there is great awareness of the need for responsibility and transparency amongst officials in government services, yet public officials seem to be becoming more corrupt, so much so that it is becoming a way of life at all levels and the secrecy behind which corruption hides is increasing all the time.

Khotseng sees two main causes for this:

Firstly, he suggests that some of those who were cheated, oppressed and prevented from being socially upwardly mobile during the apartheid era have developed a culture of entitlement. They believe that it is not wrong for them to cheat now, in order to acquire what should have been rightfully theirs, all along. The strongly assertive ideological affirmative action program implemented by the government may have further encouraged this.

The second cause may be the traditional cultural practices of gift-giving, the reciprocal granting of favours, clientelism, and almost expected compulsory showing of preference towards members of one's own family, clan or tribal groups by its members engendered by the generally admirable ethic of ubuntu. These factors have led to the creation of a society with a culture of impunity where corruption is equated with the path to wealth and status.

Tucker regards corruption as being the historic legacy of a South African settler or immigrant society. It became endemic in a South Africa where many settlers were historically far removed from the authority of the State, which allowed extensive, mainly unchecked, corruption under the rule of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC).

Under both the Dutch and British governments many immigrants came to South Africa to improve their lot, whatever it took to do so and no matter whom they exploited. This was exacerbated by the greed and corruption, on a vast scale, which accompanied the diamond and gold field rushes in the nineteenth century. Such propensity to corruption was not improved by “the notorious corruption of the Nationalist government”.

There is thus a general measure of agreement between both authors concerning these causes. The alarming finding is that all these causes have deep roots in our society. I say, “alarming,” because research, coming out of India (which is also a notoriously corrupt society) seems to indicate that once corrupt practices are established in an area or culture, benefitting the socially dominant, they are very persistent and difficult to eradicate. If this is correct, then it would explain the persistence of corruption at all levels of society in South Africa amongst all culture groups.

The sheer difficulty of combatting entrenched corruption becomes even clearer when two other “root” factors are taken into account. Church tradition rightly teaches Christians are in a battle against the flesh (human nature) and the devil (a spiritual power of wickedness).

The role of the flesh

The Bible teaches that all human beings have a propensity to be corrupt, and that most of us will be tempted to do so when given the opportunity. In fact, one of the reasons God established governments, as we have seen, is to keep the flesh in check by passing laws and then punishing crime. Without this government intervention and oversight, with good administrative accounting systems with the will to enforce sanctions, the flesh and the corruption it produces will run riot.

Yet is clear that this will to keep the flesh in check is lacking on the part of the South African government, as is pointed out by Chan, a fellow at Cambridge university, in his book, *Old treacheries, new deceits: Insights into South African politics* published in 2011.

He claims that Black Economic Empowerment, although a well-intentioned redress for the previously disadvantaged, has led to the formation of a privileged Black business class that

has unfortunately resulted in new chains of corruption. According to Chan, the patronage system of acquiring and keeping political power introduced with a “vengeance” [sic] by the current (Zuma at the time of writing) President is now entrenched.

Corruption is not only a symptom of sinful human nature, but further spiritually and morally corrupts the nature of those who practice it, gradually destroying their consciences, feeling others and ability to discern right from wrong.

Yet perhaps the most important result, in so far as Christians are concerned, is that the great King (God) of Psalm 82 will judge all who practice corruption, either here or hereafter. As one scholar recently commented from his study of Luke 12:13–21:

“The fight against [corruption]... requires the theological motivation that there is a God to whom humans are accountable... This differentiates a purely humanistic from a religious approach to fight covetousness. A humanistic approach to fight covetousness may be driven by the thought of accountability to other humans; the religious approach is driven primarily by the thought of accountability to God. The guilty person can escape humans, but definitely not God’s judgment.”

The role of the spiritual forces of wickedness

The Bible teaches (as quoted in Ephesians 6:12) that evil is not only rooted in society and human nature but in spiritual forces of wickedness that seek to control human actions and attitudes in order to destroy God’s plan of fruitfulness, productivity and development for us. These forces are far stronger and cleverer than we are. They are expert at manipulating us to unconsciously do their evil will.

They manipulate us in two ways:

One is by pulling the levers and pushing the buttons in our worldviews. Satan has positioned controlling demons at key places in our social structures in order to entrench and insert evil practices and attitudes in them. This applies to all societies be they European, African, Asian, or any other.

The other way they manipulate us is through tempting individuals to do wrong by putting thoughts into our minds, as Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Often the bait they dangle in our thoughts is that the wrong action will be to our advantage. Thus, they gradually destroy our God-consciousness and desire to obey Him.

The remedy for the spiritual roots of corruption

Make a decision

Both authors believe that the first remedy lies in South Africans choosing what kind of society they would want to live in.

The question must be asked:

Do we want to have a corrupt society, as in the Philippines? This is a society traditionally dominated by a culture of gift giving, reciprocity, and clientelism with extreme corruption, where political office is seen mainly as an opportunity to acquire wealth, a privileged life-style and upward social mobility.

Or do we want an efficient, honest and open society that rewards merit, where political office and government administration are seen primarily as a means of serving and benefitting society without undue enrichment?

Say ‘Yes’ to God’s gracious invitation for transforming fellowship

Yet even the choosing to do right is not enough. Speaking for myself (Tucker) I do not have the will to consistently implement my right choices.

That which I want to do, I do not; that which I want to do, I do not. It is only when I turn to

the One whom we celebrate at Easter; the one who was raised from the dead; that I find the will to do what I know is right.

If life is not received or experienced as a gift from God, contact with reality is ultimately severed and futility is the result. Unhelpful choices are made in reaction to relational, environmental and cultural influences and there is powerlessness to live according to moral values.

It is only the living hope of the new birth, as 1 Peter 1:3 makes clear, arising from the work of the triune God in restoring fellowship with God that releases unimaginable transformative possibilities in every individual who says, "Yes" to God's invitation for fellowship with him.

Transformation of the self becomes a reality. The Holy Spirit transforms the character, behaviour, and even the nature of those in whom he lives. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we are now freed to obey God's directions for life. Thus, sinful human nature loses its controlling power over us and we are free to not only choose to not be corrupt but are empowered to be so.

Find out how corruption is affecting people in our congregations by listening

As in Psalm 82, the people of God affected by corruption first need to be heard.

Probably the most effective way is for each congregation to do this by utilizing small groups of from 5 to 12 people, which focus upon their experiences of corruption. We need to listen to the leaders and the people about how corruption affects their lives, how they perceive this, and what their beliefs are concerning its practice.

The verbal data needs to be recorded under the guidance of a discussion leader and then analysed by leaders or researchers and then the information incorporated into the next step.

This approach is ideal for the purpose of seeking community driven solutions to the problems that civic and business corruption is causing. It may also help to bring to light the deeds of the darkness under the cover of which the corrupt love to act, as evidenced in Psalms 11 and 82.

It is suggested that the initial target group be 'clergy', who subsequently extend it to groups within their congregations. A by-product of this approach is that it will almost certainly serve to raise awareness of the problem, form anti-corruption community attitudes, and even produce creative, culturally sensitive grass-root solutions.

Those who worship in our churches must themselves reject corrupt practices

We must get our own house in order. In South Africa the majority exist in an oral culture. Thus, there should be great power in prophetic preaching in addressing the apparent lack of righteousness as it manifests in a context of corruption in our society. This preaching by using the information provided from listening must be specific, contextual and relevant.

It should reveal without excusing it that corrupt governmental and business practices do actually destroy the foundations on which a nation is built. When those in power depart from God's will for justice, public power can no longer be sustained.

Thus, there is no one to enforce the trust needed: trust between the government and the governed; trust between merchants so that they can trade and practice commerce and business without having to take expensive precautions against fraud; and trust by all that the rule of law will be upheld.

Stiglitz, the 2001 Nobel Prize Winner in Economics writes: "What makes business systems work, by and large is trust ... In recent years, in failed societies, we see disastrous consequences for the economy of the breakdown of trust."

Corruption diminishes trust in government and leads to people trying to avoid taxes and other government dues. It also adds to a general legitimisation of criminality. If they can "get away with it," why not me!

Finally, it must be pointed out that judgment begins with the church! 1 Corinthians 6:10 (Amplified Bible) indicates that “extortioners” will not inherit the kingdom of God.

An extortioner is one who obtains something, especially money, through force or threat, such by using bribery and intimidation.

The warning is that if someone considers himself a Christian but constantly extorts bribes, or offers them, then that person may well not be a real Christian and thus will not have the eternal life found in God’s kingdom. A warning that perhaps many worshippers need to hear.

Spend time in praying together

When we read through the psalms, we encounter many where the author of the psalm asks God to deal with his enemies and the enemies of Israel in prayer.

Like the psalmists we must also learn to move men through God by prayer. Our enemies as we have seen are primary the spiritual powers of wickedness who are too great for us to defeat by ourselves. Christ defeated them on the cross.

So, in prayer we enforce and actualize that victory on earth, when and where and how He wills. As Paul writes, at the conclusion of his well-known passage on spiritual warfare, in Eph, 6:17, “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.”

It is in response to requests verbally asserting God’s power and promises, given in the bible, that God is moved to save us from our overwhelming spiritual enemies.

Believe that the God’s church has the power to transform society in the face of opposition

Yet many leaders are silent. Why is this?

Perhaps this is due to the fact that they do not see that churches have the responsibility to engage in the struggle against corruption by raising ethical awareness about corruption.

Perhaps this is due the tremendous pressure most church leaders are under to only preach what their congregations want to hear and, often, to conform to the mores of the social structures and culture in which they live.

Perhaps it is due to a wrong interpretation of the traditional teaching of ubuntu that leaders and elders must be respected and not criticized. Perhaps this silence is due to fear.

Indeed, Ramphela in two recent speeches has stated that fear is preventing many South Africans from speaking out against corruption. Other leaders are often tempted to despair about being able to change anything (as the psalmist was in Ps 11). “What difference can I make?” The answer is “much!”

The bible promises that the church has the power to curb evil in society. In 1Cor 15:57,58 we read

“He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.”

It may take time, years or even generations, but the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, and created it all, lives in the church and can curb evil in society as individual lives are changed and society and government comes to accept its God-given biblical ethical standards.

Believe that God wants to use ‘people power’ and has empowered us to be used

Many who suffer the effects of corruption consider themselves powerless victims. They suffer the natural feelings of inferiority and shame.

Our conclusion is that the church needs to be given hope that the God who sees the problem has (also) already provided the resources within the community to deal with the problem.

This is God's world and He has been active in our communities from the beginning of the world.

Congregations therefore need to ask, "What resources has God planted within our community or congregation to tackle corruption?" and then, "What can this community do by itself to achieve its own goals and dreams?"

The triune God has especially been at work in the community of the church, in which he lives (Eph 2:19–22).

Brueggemann (1997: 668, 670) describes Israel's preoccupation with the temple in the Old Testament. It was a focus for their faith and actualised for them the reality of God's presence amongst them, motivating the psalmist to lift his eyes to the temple in Psalm 11 to get in touch with the presence of God.

In doing this, the psalmist is saying, "God is really here. He is my resource in whom I may take refuge and be empowered to act."

As the church, we have greater resources than the psalmists, since we ourselves are the temples of the Holy Spirit, in whom God dwells (1 Cor 3:16). God is not here in one location but here in every Christian and congregation.

We do not need to look upward but inward. God has resourced the Body of Christ with Spirit-filled members to whom he has given gifts. These gifts enable God to work powerfully and effectively through their service work, so that through the gifted-people transformation happens according to God's plan.

Use your vote

Discerning voting may be a lever for changing the attitudes of politicians and businessmen towards corruption.

The attitude of the political leadership will seriously change when they see that indulging in and permitting the corruption that hinders service delivery will get them voted out of office. The attitude of the business world will only change when they discover that greater profits are to be made in a society where corruption is not permitted, and as a consequence the work-force are better educated, healthier, and enjoy a higher standard of living through efficient service delivery.

Say 'No' to bribes:

When people are put in challenging positions and asked to pay a bribe, it is possible to stand up against this form of corruption and refuse to pay the bribe.

The zero-currency note is a practical tool that has been designed to help people demonstrate their refusal to pay bribes.

The project started in India, where, in 2007, the non-profit organisation, 5th Pillar, unveiled the "zero-rupee note".

Closely patterned after the nation's 50-rupee notes, these documents instead included anti-corruption slogans such as "Eliminate corruption at all levels" and "I promise to neither accept nor give bribes".

These zero-rupee notes were designed for use by Indian citizens who have been requested to pay bribes in order to obtain services that are legally free or who are hit with illicit surcharges on routine government transactions.

Such currency devices enable the citizen to register their opposition to the illegal request in a tangible form, "paying" the official with these valueless, alternative notes. This approach not only allows a citizen to register their protest against corruption, but also provides corrupt officials with a sign that efforts are ongoing to combat systemic government corruption and a reminder that laws against bribery exist.

This campaign has since been extended worldwide as the Zero Currency campaign.

Report any incident of corruption:

Transparency International's Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres provide free and confidential legal advice to witnesses and victims of corruption.

They offer a simple, credible and viable mechanism for citizens to pursue their corruption-related complaints, the centres empower citizens to stop corruption.

They also play a critical role in identifying corruption hotspots that demand reform or official action.

They harness the powerful, real life data gathered by the centres on the consequences and mechanisms of corruption, Transparency International engages in strategic advocacy to bring about systemic change in public policy and practice, and ultimately to challenge societies' acceptance of corrupt practices.

They work on corruption at all levels, from day-to-day bribery, to grand-scale corruption worth billions of Euros.

Cases cover a wide range of sectors from procurement and construction to the environment, defence to human rights, health to the judiciary and education to privatisation.

Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres reach people from all sectors of society. Clients range from the unemployed and vulnerable through to successful entrepreneurs. The centres' concept of linking individual cases with policy advocacy has resulted in positive change around the world.

- ***Join an anticorruption organization***
- ***Pay more to buy from a corruption-free company***
- ***Take part in a peaceful protest***
- ***Spread the word about corruption through social media***
- ***Sign a petition.***

Demand transparency:

Insist that all documents involved in government tender processing be made available to the public immediately the tender has been awarded.

Name and shame:

Demand that all government officials and parliamentary, provincial and municipal elected officials who have been found guilty of corruption be barred from employment or office for five years. That the government draw up a list of these officials for public scrutiny.

Conclusion

Let us not fail to climb through this window of opportunity. In South Africa the church is at the moment in a unique position, compared to many other developing countries, to make an effective intervention in order to combat corruption because of the overwhelming numbers who profess to be Christians and worship in local congregations.

But it is suggested that it begin with a theological reflection on the revelation contained in the scriptures.

This reflection brings the conviction that God expects his people, in particular, to be incorruptible in both government and business. Thereafter also to the conviction that he expects them to take action against corruption as individuals with the support of the congregations and the communities these congregations serve.

The answer to our problem in South Africa, we believe, is in the hands of the church not only since many who are corrupt worship in our churches but also because a large percentage of

the population who are concerned about corruption and are honest and incorruptible also
worship in our churches!
Church, let's do it.

Tucker/Khotseng article link:

<http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/download/1933/3758>

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