

THE BIBLE AND CORRUPTION

Recently, I read an article and two editorials about political corruption in Argentina in the *Buenos Aires Herald*. The authors lamented the history of public vice: “From President Macri to the Kirchners and going back even further, conflicts of interest have been par for the course for recent national governments.” The editorials chronicle corruption by Peron (“ended up nationalizing corruption”), the dictatorship (“opened the doors to a systematic corruption scheme that trapped the following democracy”), Menem (“embezzlement of public funds,” “gun-running operations,” “bonus salaries to officials in his administration”), de la Rúa (“bribe ruling party and opposition senators”), Néstor Kirchner (“six corruption cases”), Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (“18 cases in her first term and 28 cases in the second term” and “eight additional corruption cases in 2016”), and the current President, Mauricio Macri, who ironically was “elected on a platform of ‘change’” and depicted himself as the anti-corruption candidate (allegations about Angelo Calcaterra and Nicolás Caputo, and a “favorable debt-cancellation agreement...over the management of the once-privatized Post Office”).

Natalia Volosin, who is working on a doctorate at Harvard about Argentine corruption, commented that “businessmen and bureaucrats understand that they all win if there is corruption.” She wrote: “...if you don’t have money, you don’t exist in politics...to buy judges, governors, journalists...you can’t do politics without dirty money from the private sector...you can’t do business without permits, privileges and access to things the state has....” Volosin explains, further, that the causes of corruption stem from the lack of an effective civic-legal infrastructure in Argentina. She mentions, for example, the lack of a “system of checks and balances” and “organizations that perform audits or controls,” an ineffective Public Ethics Law and Anti-Corruption Office, lack of government transparency, as well as unfair and incompetent tax amnesty programs.

So, I wondered: What does the Bible say about public corruption and the role of the evangelical? First, the Bible confronts corruption in all of its forms and effects with a diagnosis that is deep and broad, and a prescription that is personal, social, systemic, and eschatological. Second, the Bible provides many examples of social critique against corruption. A brief survey of the Old Testament prophets’ critique of corruption is instructive.

As representatives of the God who “loves justice” (Isa 61:8) the prophets served as covenant prosecutors, calling Israel back to compliance and restoration, and warning of judgment on the Gentile nations. The prophets ascribed a major source of corruption and disorder to greed. Isaiah described the “shepherds” of Israel as “dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough,” those who only seek their “own gain” (56:11). Jeremiah censured the king, Shallum, because his “eyes and heart” are motivated by “dishonest gain” (22:23). According to Jeremiah, the entire social fabric was saturated by systemic acquisitiveness: “From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain” (6:13; cf. 8:10). Jeremiah denounced economic impurity in the royal court and the practice of *corvée*: “Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor” (22:13).

The judicial system was full with scandal. Amos 2:6b-7a provides an example using common terms for poverty (the needy, poor, oppressed): “They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals [latifundia]. They trample [tax] on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.” If such abuse came to adjudication, the wealthy, who either retained positions on the court or bribed those who did, manipulated the judicial system to their advantage (not unlike today).

The prophets confronted economic impurity in the temple. Micah lamented the priests who “teach for a price” and prophets who “tell fortunes for money” (3:11b). Jeremiah “stood at the gate of the Lord’s house” and condemned it as a “den of robbers” (7:1,11; and so did Jesus [Mt 21:13]). Deceptive speech, injustice, oppression of the needy, violence, theft, adultery, and idolatry were practiced in its courts (vs. 4-9). Isaiah exposed the hypocrisy of fasting that condoned injustice, oppression, and neglect of the needy (58:6-7,10). Further, Amos recorded attempts to hurry through holy days to reopen the market (Am 8:5a).

Likewise, the lifestyle of the rich and famous was commensurate with their arrogance and greed. Amos decried the accoutrements of Israel’s corrupt upper class: “You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions” (6:4-6a).

In short, the prophetic critique focused on the cabal between ruler, priest, and merchant that constructed a cultural environment predicated on greed and lust for power, resulting in inequity and excess, sustained by systemic fear, violence, and oppression. Because of this, the prophets announced an array of punishments, decay, and disorder, as well as a call to repentance.

Finally, how should evangelicals respond to public corruption? First, we should critically engage the public sphere for the sake of the Gospel and common good. We should fulfill our prophetic calling in society as “salt” and “light,” and help build the social-ethical infrastructure that resists corruption.

Fortunately, we have many mentors and models to learn from throughout Christian history, such as, William Wilberforce (persuaded Parliament to pass the Abolition Act in England in the 18th century), Abraham Kuyper (early 20th century Prime Minister of Holland, theologian, and moral crusader), Center For Public Justice (“developing and communicating an integrated biblical view of political service and responsible government,” 1977), and Gary Haugen (founder of the International Justice Mission, 1997).

Second, evangelicals should embrace a bigger and broader Gospel that affirms Christian service in the public sphere for the common good. Churches should affirm callings, for example, in forensic accounting, criminal investigation, legal representation, investigative journalism, law enforcement, civil service, political leadership, and Non-Profit Organizational (NGO) management.

Third, ministry leaders should ask themselves: was there (or is there even today) and unholy “cabal between ruler, priest, and merchant”? The answer to this question could be restorative and enhance the credibility of the church. It would also promote healthy limits, as well as clarify what are the proper roles each entity should play in society.