

# Bride Price and Dowry: A Biblical Response

Exclusively Mainland Southeast Asia, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka

Randall J. Hillebrand

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This book is dedicated to my four children,  
Elya, Jeremiah, Luke and Tabitha whom my wife and I love very much!  
May Jesus always be your first love!

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## Introduction

Why is this document necessary?

While on a trip to Mainland Southeast Asia, my wife and I learned about the difficulties people have in this part of the world who are obligated to pay bride price and dowry. Many are poor and by having to do so places an extraordinary burden upon them, to such an extent that in some countries the inability to pay can result in various hardships and terrible consequences. For this reason, I was asked to address this topic from a biblical perspective. This was my goal -- to study, examine and write an analysis of this issue for the countries, which are the focal point of this book.

My personal experience

Having grown up in America and living the past 14 years in Ukraine at the time of this writing where neither bride price nor dowry are obvious practices, this made this topic challenging for me. Though there are minority groups located in both of these countries who practice them, this is not a familiar topic to me or many in these countries. Yet while considering these practices I asked myself a question which made this topic more relevant to me. In America, it is customary for the bride's family to pay for the wedding while the groom's family pays for the wedding rehearsal dinner, which takes place the evening before the wedding. This dinner is for the bride and groom's families and those who will participate in the wedding. The question I asked myself was, "Why is this our custom?" As I investigated this issue, I learned the following:

"The tradition that the bride's family pay for the wedding is derived from the notion of a dowry. In the past, when women weren't allowed to live on their own, work outside the home, or own property, an unmarried daughter was a considerable burden, especially on families living at or near the subsistence level. To remove this burden, her family would pay a man to marry her. The money also helped cover the expenses of setting up the new home and helping the man become more productive so he could support an extra mouth with his labor." (Does the Bride's Father Always Pay for the Wedding?, 2015)

It was surprising to find out that the tradition which played a part in my own marriage and in the marriage of my eldest son goes back to a dowry custom. This custom is now changing in America where the trend is moving toward both families sharing the wedding costs equally.

Geographical location

Since I was asked to address this topic for a country located in Mainland Southeast Asia, I decided to look at the customs of dowry and bride price in that region, including India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. From my research it is obvious that the practices of India has had a great influence in parts of Asia, especially in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Therefore, this book will summarize,

analyze and refer to the practices of Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam.

#### Intent of this book

This book was not written for the general population in these countries. Instead it was written for a very specific group of people, those who consider themselves to be evangelical Christians. My desire is to have them – the Church in that region of the world -- rethink this issue from a biblical perspective in contrast to a cultural one. If they as a group hold to biblical standards, the hope is that they – as salt and light – will influence those around them; and as a result, their societies and cultures will change. This will never occur however unless the Church itself makes changes first.

### Terms Defined

The terms “bride price” and “dowry” are defined differently depending upon the source. Though bride price is always defined the same, dowry at times is used in a broader sense and sometimes used to speak about bride price. In this book the terms will be defined as follows:

- Bride Price

This consists of money, property, or wealth transferred by the groom’s family to the bride and/or her family. The amount is generally agreed upon by the families or their representatives (Dowry, 2015).

- Dowry

This consists of money, property, or wealth transferred by the bride’s family to the groom and/or his family. The amount is generally agreed upon by the families or their representatives (Dowry, 2015).

- Dower

This consists of money, property, or wealth given by the groom or his family or the bride’s family to the bride at the time of marriage, which is under her ownership and control. The dower will be for her use in the case of divorce or death of her husband (Dowry, 2015; Anderson, *The Economics of Dowry and Brideprice*, 2007); (Dasgupta, 1991).

### Research

#### Brief history of bride price and dowry

“The custom of brideprice dates back as far as 3000 BCE. The ancient civilizations of Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Hebrews, Aztecs, and Incas all used brideprice (Quale, 1988)...Brideprices are most prevalent in Africa; more

than 90 percent of sub-Saharan societies traditionally made such marriage payments (Murdock, 1967; Goody, 1973)... The dowry system dates back at least to the ancient Greek city-states (800 to 300 BCE) and to the Romans by around 200 BCE” (Anderson, 2007).

### Biblical references

Although the Bible gives no examples of a dowry being paid as defined in this book, the custom of bride price is recorded. However, some Bible translations use the word dowry instead of bride price. The context of the passages nevertheless makes it clear that bride price is meant. The following is a list of these passages with a brief summary of each:

- Genesis 24:52–53  
Upon the agreement that Rebekah would marry Isaac, Abraham’s son, Abraham’s servant gave Rebekah, her brother and mother articles of silver and gold and garments as gifts.
- Genesis 29:15–20,27-28; 30:26; 31:41  
Jacob made an agreement with Laban to work seven years in order to marry his daughter Rachel. After being deceived by Laban, Jacob served him a total of fourteen years for both of his daughters, Leah and Rachel.
- Genesis 34:1-4,12  
Shechem, a Canaanite, who raped Jacob’s daughter Dinah, desired to marry her. He promised to pay a bridal payment and give a gift to Jacob as he would desire.
- Exodus 22:16–17  
In the Law of Moses if a man seduced a virgin who was not engaged and had sexual relations with her, and they were discovered, he was obligated to pay a bride price for her to become his wife. However, if her father refused to give his daughter to this man in marriage, the man was to pay the father money equal to the bride price for virgins.
- Deuteronomy 22:28–29  
In the Law of Moses if a man raped a virgin whom he was not engaged to, and they were discovered, the man was to give the girl’s father fifty shekels of silver<sup>1</sup> and she was to become his wife because he had violated her. This man was never allowed to divorce her. This was done as a provision for the woman, because for after being raped the chances of her ever being married were unlikely.

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<sup>1</sup> One shekel was equivalent to 10.52 grams (Ancient Jewish History: Weights, Measures & Coins of the Biblical & Talmudic Periods, 2015). In the New Testament period, fifty shekels of silver was the equivalent of 148 denarii (coins) (Unit Converter, 2015), one denarius being equivalent to about one day’s wage (cf. Mat. 20:2). The value of 50 shekels as of November 18, 2015 was \$240.14 USD (Silver Gram Calculator Result, 2015).

- 1 Samuel 18:20–27  
King Saul who wanted to kill David, though not by his own hand, sent a messenger to offer him his daughter Michal in marriage. The bride price Saul asked was one hundred foreskins of the Philistines because he hoped David would be killed in this pursuit. However, David and his men killed two hundred Philistines and David gave their foreskins to King Saul in order for him to become his son-in-law.
- 1 Kings 9:16  
Pharaoh king of Egypt captured the city of Gezer, killing its inhabitants. He then gave the city as a dowry to his daughter who was King Solomon's wife.

As is evident, the Bible records bride price being paid as early as about 2000 BC during the time of Abraham. As was stated earlier, paying bride price dates back as far as 3000 BC in Mesopotamia. Since Mesopotamia was where Abraham was originally from (Gen. 11:26-32), it would be expected that he would have practiced bride price. These then are very old customs which are imbedded in many cultures.

#### Current situation

In the countries focused upon in this book, only two have laws regulating bride price and dowry. Whereas India (The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, 1990) and Bangladesh (The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980) have very specific laws with steep penalties (a prison term and a fine), research shows that these laws are not being enforced in either country. Cultural practices and traditions which are deeply rooted are difficult to uproot and overcome. This is also evident in the example of Vietnam after its reunification in the mid 1970's, which will be briefly discussed later.

As can be expected, even within one country the practices of bride price and dowry can vary from region to region and people group to people group. Therefore, the information presented here is not all-inclusive because comparative information for each country is not available. The purpose of this section is to provide a representation of the variety of practices across the region and a general understanding of them.

- Bangladesh

The giving, receiving or requesting of dowry (defined as a payment to either party of a marriage made to or by themselves or to or by their families) is forbidden by law according to the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980. Anyone found guilty of this law can face a prison term of one to five years, which may include the payment of a fine (The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980). However, the paying of dowries is still practiced. One source reported that the expected amount of a dowry has risen along with an increase of related killings over the decades. The source reported that from January through October 2009 more than 3,413

complaints were filed with the police regarding issues related to dowries where women were brutally attacked with acid thrown in their faces, they were beaten, poisoned and even killed when they or their families could not pay the dowry (Dowry, 2015). The current trend in Bangladesh is that the higher the level of education a woman has, the higher the dowry her family needs to pay to acquire a husband for her who has the same or higher level of education. Because of this, some families are limiting their daughters' education so that their dowry costs will be much less (Shahid, 2012).

The practice of dowry in Bangladesh greatly affects poor families, especially those with multiple daughters. Families need to take out loans, sell property, etc., to pay the dowry; and if the payments are not met, their daughters are often beaten and/or may be returned to their families. Due to this they may remain unmarried, causing shame and dishonor to their families. Dowry-related domestic violence is frequent and increasing, even including acid attacks upon women whose families cannot pay the dowry. In addition, many suicides are related to dowry (Alston, 2015). Dowry-related violence is more prevalent in poverty-stricken rural areas of Bangladesh. These payments can range from hundreds to thousands of US dollars which impoverishes families (Bangladesh: Dowry violence continues unabated, 2015).

- Cambodia

Cambodia does not have laws against the payment of bride price or dowry. The practice observed in Cambodia is paying bride price. The groom is also responsible to pay a part or all of the wedding expenses. The girl's family may demand a large bride price as proof of the man and his family's ability to support her. This is also a way for the girl to pay her parents back for her life and for raising her. A large bride price can put a huge financial burden on the groom's family. However, some families do not require that a bride price be paid if they believe that their daughter's future spouse will be a good husband for her (Mony, 2008).

One source in Cambodia reported that if a bride price is not paid, there will not be a wedding. This woman stated that in cities bride price ranges from \$3,000 to \$6,000 US dollars, and in the rural areas, the average is around \$2,000. Although in some cases where a bride price may not be required, there is still the expectation that the groom will pay an exorbitant amount (for example, \$5,000) toward the wedding expenses. Because of these expectations, the poor cannot afford a wedding and may end up simply living together. The only other option they have is to obtain a loan, which the family may then have to spend years repaying. In one case parents who were too old to pay the remaining portion of the bride price passed their debt on to a younger son who had to pay it before he himself could consider being married.

This source went on to say that boys are loved more than girls in this culture, and female babies are at times aborted. "They have an expression in Cambodia," she wrote, "Women are like cloth and men like gold." In other words, cloth is eventually thrown out while gold is cleaned up if tarnished. Women in Cambodia are not valued and can therefore be sold into sex trafficking, sell themselves into it, or they may sell their virginity for a high price. Women who are common-law wives have no protection from the men they live with; and if they have children and the father decides to take them, he will (Cunningham, 2015).

- India

In India, the offering or acceptance of bride price or dowry is forbidden by law according to The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961. Anyone found guilty of this law can face a prison term of not less than five years, including the payment of a fine (The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, 1990). Even though such a strict law is in place, the payment of dowry to a groom's family is still practiced, putting great financial strain on the bride's family. The payment may include cash, jewelry, a car, household furniture and appliances, and other items to help set up the newlyweds' home (Dowry, 2015).

In cases where the dowry payment is not considered enough by the man and/or his family, the wife may become the victim of psychological and physical torture, which can lead to suicide by hanging, poisoning or setting herself on fire. If the dowry is adequate, then she may be valued more highly by him and his family (Penn, Michael L. and Nardos, Rahel, 2003). The Indian police state that around 2,500 bride burnings and about 9,000 deaths due to dowry issues are reported yearly. These numbers are increasing at a rate of 1 to 2 percent a year (Chawla, 2010). Bride burning is when the wife is usually drenched with a flammable liquid and set on fire, resulting in her death. This is practiced in "Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and other countries located on or around the Indian subcontinent" (Bride Burning, 2015). In 2012, it was reported that 8,233 young women, many of whom were new brides, were killed due to dowry disputes. It is estimated that one woman dies each hour in India because of this issue (Nelson, 2013).

One source stated a father's perspective of daughters in India: "If I don't kill her today; tomorrow she will kill me financially or some one else will burn her for the sake of dowry." This source went on to say that it is estimated that one million female babies are aborted annually in India, because the birth of a female child is viewed as a curse. As soon as a girl is born, the father begins to calculate the cost to him over her lifetime (Dowry in Islam, 2015). Tragically, female infanticide is practiced because of the burden daughters bring to families by having to find them husbands and pay dowries; for if a woman does not marry she would be shunned for life (Penn, Michael L. and Nardos, Rahel, 2003).

- Laos

In Laos, a bride price is paid when a man's family visits the woman's home with gifts to make a proposal of marriage for their son. However, on the first visit another couple takes the place of the man's parents. This is done in case the woman's parents refuse the proposal of marriage since the refusal would cast shame on the man's actual parents if they had been present. If the first visit goes well, then a second visit is planned where the two families agree on the amount of the bride price and the wedding details. The purpose of the bride price is "to symbolically fill the physical and emotional absence of the" daughter who will be leaving her family (Laos. Lao Wedding, 2012). The general bride price paid to a woman's family in Laos is at minimum one gold coin (a baht) worth about \$300 US dollars along with the equivalent of around \$500 US dollars in cash (Understanding The Lao Marriage Dowry, 2015).

Another source stated that the bride price among the Hmong people of Laos may be as much as \$3,000 to \$10,000 US dollars. The actual cost is determined by the bride's value, which is established by whether she is the only daughter, her level of education and her reputation. Though in the past among the Hmong the higher the bride price paid, the more the woman was respected by her husband. This however no longer seems to be the case as the bride price now suggests that the bride has been purchased. This is implied in the Hmong language as the word for "to get" married means "to buy" (Step into the mind of an American Hmong woman, 2011).

The reasoning why bride price is paid is to compensate for the loss of the daughter and her work around the home, or for the mother who gave birth to her, raised and made sacrifices for her. Another reason given is for the unfortunate possibility of a divorce, at which time the daughter would have to return to her parents, and they once again would have to provide for her. Lastly, it may be given to show that the man who wants to marry a woman has the financial means to take care of her (Understanding The Lao Marriage Dowry, 2015).

Yet another source states that the payment of the bride price not only guarantees submission and hard work from the new bride, but it is also an insurance policy against divorce since the bride price may have to be refunded in such a case. Husbands may even feel the right to beat their wife after having paid a heavy price for her. The author of this document said, "I have personally witnessed a desperate Hmong daughter shouting in despair at her father when he finally returned her to her husband after she had spent several months back in her parents' family: 'You sold me!'" (Lemoine, 2012).

- Malaysia

Bride price is paid to the woman's family in Malaysia. The amount can range anywhere from \$50 to \$2,000 US dollars. This is generally given during the wedding ceremony, though some Indian-Malaysians do this at the engagement. Another gift of money is given to the woman during the ceremony before the priest as a token of faith and love from the groom. If the woman's mother is still alive, yet another gift of money is given as a "breast token" for her breastfeeding the bride when she was a baby. For wealthy Malaysians, the giving of the bride price is an extravagant affair with a procession of servants carrying the gifts for all to see (Dowries: Customary Wedding Gifts, 2015).

- Myanmar

In Myanmar bride price is paid. It is normal for a man to offer jewelry, property or money, or to pay all wedding expenses when asking to marry a woman. After signing a contract, the wedding can take place (Wedding, 2015). The bride price, which formerly was between \$500 to \$600 US dollars, has since increased (Mawi, 2015).

Pastor Thang, a Burmese pastor of the Chin people, told me that a normal bride price is between \$1,000 to \$4,000 US dollars. Because many are poor in Myanmar, he said that this places a great burden on the new family. Although the man is given many years to pay the bride price, for those who are not able to pay, the woman's family may come and take her away with the children. It is then that the wife's uncle will be called upon to curse the man, leaving him alone without his family. He went on to say, that this is such a burden for the people of Myanmar that some Burmese women are trying to get legislation passed to have the bride price practice outlawed (Thang, Pastor, 2015).

One source on the topic of bride price among the Chin people of Myanmar stated that, the wife and children do not become a part of the husband until the bride price is paid. Thus the advantage of a bride-to-be's family not accepting a bride price is that if her husband divorces her, she has every right to leave with the children. If however a bride price is paid, the children will remain with her husband. In the same document the author also wrote that most of the people she interviewed felt that the practice of bride price connected the two families together thus preventing family decay and fragmentation. However, she said that though the paying of bride price may have good intentions, family members can manipulate things for their own profit (Mawi, 2015).

In regards to violence against women as a result of paying bride price, Pastor Thang said that this does take place in some tribes within Myanmar. He stated that because men pay for their wives, they look at them as possessions and beat them though they do not kill them. He

also said that polygamy is a problem in Myanmar as well (Thang, Pastor. Via email, 2015).

- Sri Lanka

Although Sri Lanka considered a law to limit bride price and dowry based upon the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act -- No. 28 of India, a law was never enacted. The purpose for contemplating the implementation of such a law was due to violence against women. It is claimed by the author of this proposal, Kaushani Pathirana, that such practices commercialize the marriage relationship and that the nonpayment of dowry has resulted "in harassment, violence against women, breakdown of spousal relationships and conflict with extended family." Though these things exist, she wrote that the "Sri Lankan judiciary has also not taken an effort to consider the matter of the legality or illegality of giving and taking dowry" (Pathirana, 2015).

In Sri Lanka both bride price and dowry are practiced, although dowry seems the most prominent according to Anderson (Anderson, 2014). Sri Lankans give an inheritance to all of their children, "in practice, fixed property such as land and the family home go to sons and mobile property such as cash and jewelry go to daughters, usually in the form of her dowry" (Sri Lanka, 2015).

As in other countries of the region, in Sri Lanka when dowry payments are considered inadequate, dowry-related violence can occur (Jayatilaka, Danesh and Amirthalingam, Kopalapillai, 2015); (Marikar, 2015). One source stated regarding Sri Lanka, along with India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, "The most common forms of dowry-related violence are battering, marital rape, acid throwing, wife burning, and other forms of violence. Perpetrators may also use methods of starvation, deprivation of clothing, evictions, and false imprisonment as a method of extortion. They often use violence disguised as suicides or accidents, such as stove or kerosene disasters, to burn or kill women for failing to meet dowry demands" (Dowry-Related Violence, 2010).

- Thailand

The practice of bride price is deeply rooted in the culture of Thailand. It honors the bride's parents for raising their daughter well. Due to the importance of financial security in the Thai culture, paying the bride price also demonstrates that the man is capable of taking care of his wife.

To begin with, 24-karat gold is given to the bride-to-be for the engagement; more is always better. The bride price itself is usually paid in cash with the price set very high, between \$2,800 to \$28,000 US dollars. The amount is based upon the woman's education, occupation and social background. A middle-class, university-educated woman is valued at between \$2,800 to \$8,500 US dollars. If she was

previously married and has children, the price dramatically drops. The bride price is usually symbolic in nature, given during the marriage ceremony and later to the couple once they are married to help them start their new life together (Dowry in Thailand, 2015). In some cases, a woman of high social standing may receive a bride price of \$300,000 (Bride Price, 2009), or even up to \$500,000 US dollars (Chomchuen, 2008).

In the case of the Tamils people in Thailand, they pay a dowry to the man's family, possibly giving items like expensive cars to their future sons-in-law. If they do not live frugally during their lives, the bride's parents may never have enough money to afford to have their daughter marry. The main goal of this dowry system is for the transfer of the woman's parents' house to her and her husband, the parents then having to live with much less if they do not otherwise have the means (Ranjit, 2000).

One book on marriage and family relationships reported that marital violence in Thailand is a problem mainly in the villages, seemingly related to bride price. The author stated that the men see themselves as superior to their wives, with the wives and children being submissive to their authoritative husbands. Thus, domestic violence is the main marital problem there (Chao, 2012).

- Vietnam

In Vietnam the bride price is reached after long negotiations. Whereas it was once a very important aspect of their culture, it is no longer as important and is more voluntary.

The communist government of North Vietnam tried to eliminate bride price and dowry payments in South Vietnam after the reunification of the north and south, however the policies that were successful in the north were not so in the south. As a result of increasing affluence, bride price once again became a more prominent practice, generally used as a means to fund the wedding banquet (Teerawichitchainan, Bussarawan and Knodel, John, 2011).

One source stated, "Evidence indicates that in some areas of Vietnam, the practice of the bride's parents asking for gifts from the groom's family have re-emerged. Demands for a 'bride price' may create tensions within the marriage and amongst the woman's extended family. The fact that the bride has been 'bought' by the groom and his family can result in her being viewed as a 'commodity' who may be forced to perform household tasks and subjected to various forms of psychological and physical abuse. Moreover, the newly married couple is responsible for 'repaying' the debts incurred by the husband's family in purchasing the wedding gifts, and the wife is often blamed as the source of the family's financial woes" (Bourke-Martignoni, 2001).

## Positive aspects of these practices

When researching this topic, merits of the bride price and dowry systems became obvious. From the different countries examined, below is a composite of the advantages of having such systems.

By paying bride price, it:

- can indicate that the man and his family are able to financially take care of the new bride (Understanding The Lao Marriage Dowry, 2015); (Bride Price, 2009)
- can demonstrate by the amount paid how much the man values his future bride, thus respecting her more (Traditional Hmong weddings and marriages, 2011)
- can show the potential bride's family that the man and his family are serious about the marriage (Makerere University Medical School, 2005)
- can show the future bride's family that the man and his family appreciate her parents, all of their efforts in raising her over the years and the related costs (Mony, 2008)
- is a way in which to help the future bride's parents since she will be leaving their home, and they will be without her and her assistance (Traditional Hmong weddings and marriages, 2011)
- helps secure the future for the bride in the case of her husband's death or of a divorce (Bride Price, 2009)
- is helpful to the new couple when it is given to them to help them begin their new life together (Traditional Hmong weddings and marriages, 2011); (Bride Price, 2009)
- helps bring unity to the two families who will be joined through the marriage and this gift (Birn, 2006)

By paying dowry it:

- can help secure a good husband who will care for the bride and provide a dowry in the case of his untimely death or of a divorce (Dasgupta, 1991); (Dower, 2015)
- generally results in a lower divorce and polygamy rate (Anderson, Associate Professor. Via email, 2015), possibly due to the fact that the bride and her husband are usually more closely matched (education, social status, financial status)
- can help the bride feel more accepted and respected by her future in-laws who have received a dowry (Leder, Chandramukhee and Stephanie, 2013)
- can bring unity to the two families who will be joined through the marriage and this gift (Birn, 2006)

## Negative aspects of these practices

In addition to finding merits to the bride price and dowry systems, negative aspects also exist. Before listing them however the point must be made that

the impact of these systems will affect differently the poor, middle-class and rich. For the rich, some of the negatives listed below are not an issue since they have the means to meet the requirements of either bride price or dowry. In the case of the middle-class, the impact will depend upon their financial situation and whether they are either profiting or obligated to pay. Understandably, the systems of bride price and dowry affect the poor the most. When considering the average income per capita in the countries focused upon in this book, the financial burden would affect the average family greatly in most of these countries. Please see the chart below.

World ranking of 185 countries (richest to poorest)	Country	Gross Domestic Product/capita* (Int\$)**	Data Year
46	Malaysia	23,338	2013
76	Thailand	14,394	2013
96	Sri Lanka	9,738	2013
124	India	5,418	2013
126	Vietnam	5,294	2013
129	Laos	4,822	2013
134***	Myanmar	4,752	2014
144	Cambodia	3,041	2013
148	Bangladesh	2,948	2013

Source: World Bank (2011–2014), based on actual data – (List of countries by GDP (PPP) per capita, 2015)

\* GDP/capita – Gross Domestic Product per capita is the average income of a person living in a country, dividing the country's total output by its population.

\*\* "Int\$" – "An international dollar would buy in the cited country a comparable amount of goods and services a U.S. dollar would buy in the United States" (What is an "international dollar"?, 2015).

\*\*\* The information listed for Myanmar is based upon estimations of projected data from the International Monetary Fund since it was not provided in the World Bank data for 2011-2014 (List of countries by GDP (PPP) per capita, 2015). The data between the two sources are comparable.

It is understandable that when families have such low yearly incomes and have to pay thousands of dollars for bride price, dowry and possibly wedding costs, it can be very expensive. This is why such systems can be so burdensome for so many. Below is a composite list of the disadvantages of such systems.

The bride price system can:

- make it very difficult for poor families, especially those with multiple sons<sup>2</sup>; by not being able to find wives for each or any of them, even impoverishing them (Anderson, 2007)
- make life difficult for families if they have to pay it over many years, possibly even having to obtain a loan which places a large burden upon them (Alston, 2015); (Cunningham, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> This is implied in the fact that poor families will not be able to afford multiple bride price payments ("The practice of dowry specifically affects the poor, and particularly families with multiple daughters" (Alston, 2015)).

- cause long engagements years in length if there is an inability to pay which can lead to physical intimacy outside of wedlock and the birth of children (Walker, 2015)
- cause the woman to be considered a possession, a slave who has few or no rights in the home of her husband and/or his family (Lemoine, 2012)
- make the husband feel superior to his wife because he had to pay a price for her (Thang, Pastor. Via email, 2015); (Bride Price, 2009)
- be a reason for harassment by the husband and/or his family as the wife is considered a possession of the family, which can be a catalyst for suicide (Alston, 2015); (Chawla, 2010)
- create greed if the future bride's family wants to profit from this transaction (SesapZai, 2012)
- cause bitterness if the bride price is not paid in full
- tempt couples to live together unmarried if his family cannot afford it (Cunningham, 2015)
- result in broken families when the woman and her children are taken from her husband by her family if he is not able to pay (Thang, Pastor, 2015)
- be a catalyst for polygamy (Anderson, 2007)<sup>3</sup> (for those with means) since another wife can be acquired with sufficient funds
- cause divorce (Anderson, 2007)<sup>4</sup> (for those with means) if women are considered a possession that can be disposed of

The dowry system can:

- contribute to child marriages which can leave women with low levels of education because the younger the girl is married, the lower the dowry expected, thus leading to a higher incidence of living in poverty and of spousal violence (Gerntholtz, 2015); (Shahid, 2012)
- make life difficult for families if they have to pay the dowry over many years, possibly even having to obtain a loan which places a large burden upon the family, sometimes even impoverishing them (Bride Burning, 2015); (Cunningham, 2015)
- cause long engagements years in length which can lead to physical intimacy outside of wedlock and the birth of children (Walker, 2015)
- make it very difficult for poor families, especially those with multiple daughters (Alston, 2015), by not being able to find husbands for each or any of them, even possibly impoverishing them (Anderson, 2007)
- cause greed when the man's family wants to profit from this transaction (Bhalla, 2014)
- cause greed when after the dowry is paid more money is demanded (Bride Burning, 2015)

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<sup>3</sup> "The use of brideprice has tended to correlate with polygyny (men have more than one wife) and also with the possibility of divorce. In contrast, monogamy is the norm and divorce is rare in dowry-paying societies. For example, brideprice is near-universal in sub-Saharan Africa, where more than 95 percent of societies are traditionally polygynous (Goody, 1973)" (Anderson, 2007)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

- cause violence against women if they are considered a possession by their husbands and/or his family (Anderson, 2007); (Chao, 2012)
- be a catalyst for beatings, torture, acid attacks, bride burning, poisoning and other forms of murder of the bride if the dowry is not paid or more money is demanded above the agreed upon amount from her family (Dowry, 2015); (Bangladesh: Dowry violence continues unabated, 2015); (Alston, 2015); (Chawla, 2010); (Does Dowry Improve Life for Brides? A Test of the Bequest Theory of Dowry in Rural Bangladesh, 2004)
- create an inappropriate motive to marry a woman who is considered undesirable (how she looks, social status, etc.) simply for the money (Sharma, 2004); (Shuani, 2015)
- be a motivation by parents for abortion and/or infanticide of female babies if they cannot afford one day pay a dowry for her (Bhalla, 2014); (Bhalla, 2014); (Dowry in Islam, 2015); (Anderson, 2007)
- result in an unmarried woman to be shunned by her community if her parents cannot afford to pay it, therefore shaming and dishonoring her and her family (Alston, 2015); (Four Sisters Kill Themselves Over Dowry, 2013)
- tempt couples to live together unmarried if her family cannot afford it (Cunningham, 2015)

## Biblical Response<sup>5</sup>

### Introduction

The goal of this section is to look at bride price and dowry from a biblical standpoint and attempt to apply appropriate scriptural principles to these issues. The obstacle however is that the Bible does not speak directly to this topic, which admittedly makes this a more difficult task.

One document on this subject from a Christian perspective, of which there are just a few, stated that the Bible agrees with the practice of bride price. However, although the Old Testament records this practice as a cultural norm, and although the Law of Moses in the Old Testament did require bride price to be paid in two situations (Exo. 22:16–17; Deut. 22:28–29),<sup>6</sup> nowhere in the New Testament are these practices recorded or commanded in regards to the Church.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, these are cultural issues. Yet for the follower of Jesus, cultural issues still need to be analyzed from a biblical perspective. If a cultural practice conflicts with or undermines truth presented in the Bible, the

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<sup>5</sup> Note that all Bible References quoted in the English version of this book were taken from The New American Standard Bible, Lockman Foundation, 1995. Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> See comments above under “Research,” “Biblical References.”

<sup>7</sup> One could argue that because Christ paid a price to redeem His bride the Church with His blood, a man should pay a bride price for his wife. However, regarding Christ’s death for His bride the Church, the application given to believing husbands in the New Testament is not to pay a bride price, but instead to love their wives as Jesus loves the Church, even being willing to die for them (“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her,” Eph. 5:25).

Church needs to discontinue it in order to live in accordance with biblical commands and principles.

As stated earlier, it cannot be denied that there are merits to the bride price and dowry systems. Desiring to know that a man is financially able to care for one's daughter, that he values her and her family, that he is serious about marrying her and wants to help her family financially are all good things. Equally, for those paying a dowry, concerned parents desire to use such a payment to secure a good husband for their daughter, knowing that with it they will be providing for her future, especially in the case of the death of her husband or a divorce. Also knowing that in addition they would be helping unify the two families through such a practice, thereby making their daughter feel more welcomed and accepted by her future husband and his family are positive things. No doubt when such a system is regulated, fair and beneficial for all involved, the outcome will be advantageous to both families. The problem is however that most of the research for Mainland Southeast Asia, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka shows that this is not always the case. On the contrary, in far too many cases the results of such practices are generally not beneficial; they instead are very disturbing.

One problem these nations face in modifying the detrimental affects of these practices is how ingrained they are in their cultures. This is seen by the fact that even where such practices are outlawed or greatly discouraged, they continue as is the case of India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Vietnam after its reunification. This desire not to change would hold especially true for those who are able to profit from these practices. Why change what is to one's advantage.

Another problem which complicates this issue is the condition of man's heart. As the prophet Jeremiah stated, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). One author noted that though the paying of bride price may have good intentions, family members can manipulate things for their own profit (Mawi, 2015). This is the problem with many things in life -- all involved are not concerned about the benefit of others, but mainly or solely for self.

As I stated in the beginning of this book, my desire is to have the Church in Mainland Southeast Asia, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka rethink bride price and dowry from a biblical perspective versus a cultural one. Although I would not expect true followers of Jesus to practice the darker aspects of bride price and dowry discussed in this book, I do believe there are those who call themselves Christians, who may be involved in some of these things, which is contrary to the character of a true believer. It is however prudent for those who consider themselves believers and yet practice such things to seriously consider the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 13:5 where he said, "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?"

If bride price and dowry practices are reformed within the Church, this will mean different things for different people. For some it will be to their advantage and for others to their disadvantage. Yet whatever the outcome for each individual believer, it is my hope that the church community will desire to honor Christ more than to gain personally from practices which dishonor Him. If it is the Church's desire to do this, it will eventually be to everyone's advantage as God blesses those who desire to do what is right.

## Biblical principles<sup>8</sup>

### Loving God and others!

Near the end of Jesus' life and ministry He was confronted by a lawyer of the Mosaic Law and asked, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (Mat. 22:36). Jesus answered, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Mat. 22:37-40). For the true follower of Jesus Christ, his love is to be focused first upon God and then upon others. By doing this a person will fulfill, or in other words live in accordance with the rest of God's laws. Why? Because when love is the essence of a person's conduct, this will benefit others by treating them as he wants to be treated.

What is love? The Apostle Paul defined it as:

"Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails" (1 Cor. 13:4-8a)

According to this definition, love is kind, it does not act unbecomingly or seek its own. Therefore, believers who practice these customs are to be careful that their actions manifest these characteristics. This is implied in Paul's letter to the Philippians where he wrote, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Php. 2:3-4)." Others and not self are to be the concern of the true follower of Jesus. When examining relationships and what transpires within them, these biblical truths should cause believers to ask themselves the following questions regarding their actions:

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<sup>8</sup> To correctly understand biblical principles, a passage must be interpreted normally (as any other piece of literature), grammatically (according to the biblical languages), contextually (as the writer intended it to be understood within his writing(s)), historically (within its historical time frame), and dispensationally (within the scheme of God's administration for mankind when written), and applied according to the writer's original intent.

- Am I doing this out of a love for God and others or for myself?
- Am I doing this with humility of mind, considering others as more important than myself, or from selfishness and empty conceit?
- Am I taking the interests of others into account or only my own?
- Am I treating others the way I would want to be treated?

Matthew 7:12 states, “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” In other words, treating people this way fulfills the fundamental teachings of the Mosaic Law and the Old Testament prophets. In the context of bride price and dowry, believers need to make sure that their actions are not harmful to others, but instead treating them as they would like to be treated.

### Loving the bride and groom!

When considering bride price and dowry within the context of love, it is important to take into account the future bride and groom. This can be accomplished by asking questions such as:

- How will this affect them, now and in the future?
- Will it be a burden upon them or help them?
- How can we be a blessing to them?

These are vital questions since the consequences of bride price and dowry can affect the couple both before and after the marriage. One problem which high bride prices and dowries can create before marriage is temptation. When it takes years for the money to be raised, the temptation for premarital sex increases, which can result in the birth of illegitimate children. Since this occurs in some African societies, some evangelical groups have set limits on the bride price amount so that this behavior does not continue within the Church (Walker, 2015).

Another concern of high bride price and dowry is the financial burden it can place upon the couple if it is their responsibility to pay off this debt after they are married. Adjustments in a new marriage can be difficult enough without the added pressure caused by increased and unnecessary financial burdens. Therefore, the parents of the bride and groom need to consider the words of the Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians. There Paul wrote that he did not want to be a burden to them, stating:

“Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; **for I do not seek what is yours, but you**; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?” (2 Cor. 12:14–15) (emphasis added)

Because Paul was responsible for bringing the Corinthians into the faith, they were his spiritual children; and as their spiritual father, he did not want to burden them financially after his arrival in Corinth. All he wanted to do was give and not to take from them, giving of himself fully. Thus, he did not seek what was theirs, but instead said that it is the parents' responsibility to save up for their children, not the other way around.

Consequently, when parents place large financial burdens upon their children by making them responsible to pay a large bride price or dowry, this is not fair to them. This is especially true when they are young and do not fully understand the extent of such an obligation or the consequences to which this debt will negatively affect them in the years to come. They simply desire to be married. It is therefore the parents' job to watch out for and protect their children and not to add an excessive burden to their lives, even if it is a cultural norm. Followers of Jesus are to act differently than the world in which they live. A further example of Paul is observed in 2 Thessalonians 3:7–9:

“For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example.”

Although Paul had every right to receive financial support from his spiritual children since he was ministering to them (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1-18), it was his desire not to do so and instead be an example for them to follow. Thus, he worked night and day so as not to burden them, but to teach them what it meant to work hard. This is a valuable and beneficial example for parents to set for their children as well.

#### Loving the parents of the bride and groom

To be fair however, children do have a responsibility to their parents. Paul did have the expectation that his spiritual children would care for him as he had this right as shown in the passage above (2 Thes. 3:7-9). Paul also made this known to the Corinthians that they had a responsibility to help him financially, though again he decided to forfeit this right (1 Cor. 9:1-18) as he did with the Thessalonians.

Children do have a responsibility to be a blessing to their parents, which is expressed in the context of supporting widows in 1 Timothy 5. In verse 8 of that chapter, Paul wrote, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” This verse applies to believing parents as much as it does to believing children. What Paul is saying here in context is that followers of Jesus are to provide for their family members who are in need. One who ignores the needs of his family, Paul wrote, has denied

the faith he claims to have and is worse than an unbeliever in his character and behavior.

Therefore, out of love children should help their parents where they can; they need to show their appreciation for them! Whereas Paul did not seek what belonged to the Corinthians, there was his hope that out of their love for him and his work among them that they would help him. Thus, when children can help their parents (especially if they are poor) with wedding expenses and their needs in the future, they have a responsibility to do so. This should be done out of respect and love for them and in appreciation for all they have done for their children over the years of their lives. They should not have an attitude of entitlement, but rather one of respect and responsibility.

### Loving others through generosity!

Oftentimes it seems that believers do not understand the advantages and blessings of being generous. Second Corinthians 9:6-7 states:

“Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

God loves those who give generously from a cheerful heart and is displeased with those who give grudgingly or under compulsion. The believer who gives generously with proper motives will be greatly rewarded by God. If this is the attitude one has when it comes to the marriage of his or her son and/or daughter, the motivation is correct, which is in contrast to a selfish motive regarding what one may receive.

Does this mean that to be generous parents have to spend a lot of money they do not have and go into great debt? No! Of course not, for this is not wise behavior. Proverbs 22:7 states, “The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower becomes the lender’s slave.” Parents can simply explain to their children how they are able to help them, how much they can give, etc., and then let their children decide how to proceed. Together, after prayer, they can make plans with what they do have as well as trust God for any other needs.

In conjunction, what questions should parents ask themselves who have the potential of receiving either a bride price or dowry from the family of their future son-in-law or daughter-in-law? Questions like:

- Will it be a great burden upon them?
- Will it take them many years to pay it?
- Will it become a burden to someone else if they are not able to pay it, such as to their other children?

Let’s consider the words of the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:13-14,

“For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the *statement*, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

In application, though one may have a cultural right or freedom to accept a bride price or dowry payment, believers must be careful that they do not use this as an opportunity for the flesh; in other words, for their sin nature (e.g., being greedy, desiring control, status, etc.). Believers must make sure that by their actions they are serving one another, loving their neighbor as themselves and not putting others into bondage. Paul said in Galatians 6:7-10:

“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.”

What we sow so shall we reap, therefore we need to be careful how we treat others. Consequently, we are to good to all people, especially to believers. When we live in this way, we will reap the good which we have sown.

Along these lines, Paul also said in 1 Corinthians 10:23-24:

“All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.”

Although many things a person can do may be lawful, they may not edify him or others. In other words, ultimately it may not be advantageous. Therefore, we are not to seek only what profits us if it negatively affects others. These things are to be avoided. Be generous!

### Loving what is right!

This brings up another issue, that of those who are involved in bride price and dowry practices where either or both are illegal. In such a case, a believer should not participate in these, thereby breaking the laws of their country. Paul wrote in Romans 13:1-7,

“Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for

good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor."

Authority is from God, having been established by Him. Followers of Jesus are to pay their taxes and customs because this is the way they support the governing authorities who are ministers of God who rule over them. Since they are ministers of God, followers of Jesus are to obey their authorities. Those who do not obey them disobey God Himself who established them. When obedient believers submit to their authorities, it brings praise and not wrath from them; and they do not sin against their conscience. Therefore, when the governing authorities state that being involved in bride price and dowry is illegal, then it is not to be done! To be involved in illegal activity is to sin against God and one's conscience.<sup>9</sup> James 4:17 sates, "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin."

#### Loving righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness!

Followers of Jesus must also be careful that they do not allow the bride price or dowry process to tempt them in covetousness and greed. In the Ten Commandments God said, "You shall not covet..." (Exo. 20:17); or stated another way, you shall not passionately desire what belongs to others. To covet things or the position or status of another which will one day pass away is of no value to the believer (cf. 1 John 2:15-17), for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God (Luke 16:14-15). Coveting, as well as greed, can cause inappropriate behavior and negatively influence one's character. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (Mat. 6:24)

Regarding the related issue of greed, the Apostle Paul also warned his readers about the consequences of the love of money. He said:

"But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation

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<sup>9</sup> Note: What are believers to do when their government tells them to do things, which are in opposition to the Bible? They are always to obey the higher standard, which is the Bible. When doing so one needs to remember the words of Paul to Timothy, "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).

and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.” (1 Tim. 6:6-11)

Desiring bride price or dowry payment for the purpose of increasing one's comfort, wealth, status, power, control, etc., are inappropriate reasons. As Paul said, the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil. Followers of Jesus are to love people, not money and the things which they hope to gain from them. Instead, they are to be godly and content, satisfied with what they have. Why? Because the things they have are from God. To not be content is to be dissatisfied with God and His provision. Thus the attitude of Habakkuk, which he expressed in Habakkuk 3:17-19, is of great value to the believer.

“Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' feet, and makes me walk on my high places.”

When followers of Jesus desire to become rich, it can destroy them and lead them away from the faith. This is why Paul tells his readers they are to flee from and not pursue riches as it can ruin them. Conversely, they are to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. As a person strives after these qualities, he will find contentment.

### Loving to help others!

When contemplating the issue of wealth, please consider the words of the Apostle Paul where he instructed the Corinthians about giving. He said in 2 Corinthians 8:13-15,

“For *this* is not for the ease of others *and* for your affliction, but by way of equality--at this present time your abundance *being a supply* for their need, so that their abundance also may become *a supply* for your need, that there may be equality; as it is written, “He who *gathered* much did not have too much, and he who *gathered* little had no lack.”

In this passage, the Apostle Paul had written to the Corinthians about a collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem in which they were participating. Paul was letting them know that their giving to the poor was not for the purpose of causing themselves affliction while lessening the suffering of others. On the contrary, their giving would help those who were in need at the present time so that in the future when the Corinthians might have need, those whom they helped would then help

them. This would result in equality, neither having too much nor too little – all having no lack.

This attitude of sharing was the mindset of the early church in Jerusalem as seen in Acts 2:44-45, “And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.” What a beautiful picture of believers helping one another by not looking out just for their own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (Php. 2:3-4). Please also note the words of the Apostle Paul which he spoke to the Ephesian elders:

“In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (Acts 20:35)

### Loving people rather than pomp and circumstance!

Another point of discussion related to marriage, bride price and dowry is the wedding celebration. Too many times these events are extravagant and costly, with the result of going into debt. Therefore, what should a Christian wedding be like? It is to be a:

- special event
- day of celebration
- time when a couple is united for life
- time when God is asked to bless the marriage
- day for friends and families to come together to witness and celebrate this union

What is a wedding not to be like? It is not to be:

- a competition with the wedding celebrations of others
- a time to flaunt what one has or wants others to believe he has
- an occasion which places someone in debt for many years

These practices are not a wise use of money, nor do they please God. Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 4:2, “In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.” Followers of Jesus need to be wise stewards of the things which God gives them, including their financial means.

Imagine for a moment a situation where the parents of the future bride and groom come together and agree to share the expenses of the wedding, as they are able, and not require a bride price or dowry. Imagine that they each give what they can afford and do not go into debt nor put their children into debt, their goal being to help them begin their life together without burdensome demands. If the parents of both the bride

and groom would show such love and care, one would hope and expect the result to be the unification of these two families.

Also as discussed earlier under, “Loving others through generosity!,” parents can simply explain to their children how they are able to help them, how much they can give, etc., and then let the children decide how to plan for their wedding. Together, after prayer, they can plan how to work things out with what they have and/or with what God might further supply. Parents and their children need to work together to make the wedding a blessed and affordable event where the focus is not pomp and circumstance, but rather on honoring God and the couple being married.

I realize that no one wants to be in a situation where he appears cheap to those invited to the wedding. What others may think is probably the biggest deterrent to families doing things in an affordable and reasonable manner. Yet there are ways to avoid these feelings by being more concerned about doing what is prudent and God honoring. One could have a smaller wedding and a guest list of just relatives and close friends. A couple could also provide a nice meal for their guests and not spend money on other less important things, but just bless their guests for honoring them by attending their wedding.

Each couple should decide what is most important to them and then prayerfully decide how to make their wedding a God-honoring, affordable event. Focusing on who and what is important rather than on what is not practical can make everything much easier and less expensive in the future. Also, remember that we have a perfect God who can help us work all things out for good! Please remember and know that God loves us and has good things in store for us and our children (cf. Rom. 8:31-32). James wrote, “You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (Jam. 4:2c-3). Let us ask with proper motives in order to receive His blessings!

## Cultural issues

### Within the Church

Whether a church, groups of churches and/or denominations apply the biblical principles presented, they will obviously be blessed. However, there are situations when unbelievers will be involved in this process as well.

First, the Scriptures are clear that followers of Jesus are to marry only other followers of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14-15). There is to be no exception to this. That being clear, there will be situations in which two believers desire to marry one another, one from a believing family and the other from an unbelieving family. What is to be done then if the believing

family desires to follow biblical principles and the unbelieving family does not, maybe desiring a large bride price, dowry or extravagant wedding?

In such a case my recommendation is that after prayer and fasting, the believing parents speak to the unbelieving parents and explain how they are able to help financially, their desire to help the couple begin their marriage without debt, and their desire to work together with them in making these things a reality. As well, the child from the unbelieving family could speak to his or her parents and ask them not to demand a high bride price, dowry or extravagant wedding. If they agree, then give God thanks. If they do not agree, then the believing family should continue to pray about this with the couple and their church, asking God what He would have them do. He is a great God who can do great things! If the unbelieving family will not budge in their demands, then the believers involved will have to decide what concessions they can make in order for the marriage to be possible. In the case where both families are unbelievers and the two who desire to be married are believers, they with their pastor and church should pray and seek God's guidance. Afterwards they can ask their families, maybe with the assistance of their pastor, to show them favor by not expecting a high bride price or dowry if any, and/or an expensive wedding.

What about a case where a follower of Jesus desires to marry an unbeliever? In such a situation since the believer is going against God's Word, he is on his own and thus subject to the demands placed upon him by his culture. This is why it is so important for a believer to be obedient to His Heavenly Father, being under His guidance and protection rather than living in disobedience to Him. The result of such a believer's disobedience is usually realized and the heartache felt after the marriage, especially when children are born and stark differences in how to raise them arise. It is therefore better to abandon such a relationship before it gets to a point where the possibility of marriage is even considered.

### Outside of the Church

Although it is understood that the Church should function differently than the contemporary culture in which it is located (as they have different standards), the Church must remember to be sensitive when possible to the culture in which it exists. Since the goal of the Church is to win the lost to Christ, it is important that it act in accordance with the cultural mores when it is able, those which do not oppose or undermine the teaching of the Bible. To oppose everything the contemporary culture does for the sake of being different will most likely be unproductive. Please consider this model by which the Apostle Paul lived:

"For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though

not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.” (1 Cor. 9:19-23)

When acting within acceptable cultural mores, church members will be in a sense a Jew to a Jew, a Gentile to a Gentile, etc., thus relating to and creating more opportunities to win the lost for Christ.

In regards to bride price or dowry customs, churches need to determine whether these practices are in accordance with biblical truth. If they are, then believers should participate in them as a means to reach people for Christ. If they are not, then the Church has two options. The first is to modify the practice of bride price or dowry to meet biblical principles; this way believers can still be involved in their cultural customs with the purpose of reaching out to the lost. If however the practices are corrupt to the point that they cannot be modified to meet biblical standards, then the Church will have to adopt its own standards and practices. These however will be different than those of their culture, which may or may not be rejected by the culture. If they are rejected, there is the possibility that the contemporary culture would scorn and even shun church members for acting differently. This may be the price the Church will have to pay for doing what is honoring to God. This is why churches, when setting standards for new practices and policies, need to do so not for the purpose of being different, but for the purpose of honoring God. When this is accomplished, hopefully the contemporary culture will see the wisdom and benefits of these modifications and even adopt them. The ultimate goal in such a situation is expressed in the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:16, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” The world needs to see followers of Jesus treating each other with love, not using each other for their own desires. They need to see believers living the words of Jesus recorded in John 13:34-35,

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

## Singleness

Another aspect of this discussion, which I would like the reader to consider is the topic of singleness. There will be situations in churches where followers of Jesus will find themselves unable to marry due to a lack of finances to pay either bride price or dowry, or for some other reason. In such a case what should they do? One suggestion is that it may be God’s will that they remain single to serve Him. The Apostle Paul talks about singleness and its advantages in 1 Corinthians 7:7-9:

“Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

Paul was unmarried, which is what he was referring to when he said that he wished all men were as he. Yet Paul concedes that all men are not like him and able to live the single life. He realized that for some this may be very difficult if they burn with passion for the opposite sex, not having been given the grace to live unmarried (cf. Mat. 19:11-12).

As Paul continues in this chapter, he gives advantages of the single life:

“But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.” (1 Cor. 7:32-35)

The main advantage of the single life is the opportunity one has to give undivided attention and devotion to Christ. A single believer would not have to be concerned about the many things a married believer would, like how to please his spouse. He can focus his life on Christ without distractions. Although some cultures look down upon single men and/or women, even shunning them for this, the Apostle Paul is in sharp disagreement with such a viewpoint. He commends this life, wishing that all were single as he was in order to serve the Lord more fully. Paul even commends Christian fathers who keep and care for their single daughters at home who desire to devote their lives to Christ. Such a father, Paul says, does better than a father who gives his daughter in marriage (1 Cor. 7:36-38).

While some cultures look down upon the single life, the Church of Jesus Christ should not. Sadly, however, too many times it does because the Church has accepted cultural mores, thereby disregarding biblical truth. Consequently, the Church needs to rethink this issue in order to be in agreement with the Word of God, placing it above the culture in which it exists. Accordingly, individual believers, their families and the Church need not fear singleness, but understand that it may be God’s will for some within their churches. This is why Jesus said in Matthew 19:11-12 when speaking about marriage:

“...‘Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by

men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.”

Some were made eunuchs by men, some were born this way (which is a reference to those who do not have a normal sexual desire or to those born without the ability for sexual activity), and some decided to live the single life for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Those who are born as eunuchs or decide to live as eunuchs for God should not be rejected or continually pushed toward marriage by well-meaning people in the Church. On the contrary, they should be embraced, respected and honored for giving themselves fully to Christ. Please note that there will be 144,000 very committed single Jewish men during the Tribulation Period who will give their lives for Christ (Rev. 14:1-5). Their singleness like Paul’s will be one of the reasons, which will enable them to have an undivided devotion to Christ.

A follower of Jesus who does not have the means to be married and remains single should not view their singleness with discontentment, but rather as an opportunity to serve Christ wholeheartedly and undistracted. Such people will be rewarded eternally for giving their lives as a sacrifice and gift to God. Yet, in my more than 33 years as a follower of Jesus at the time of this writing, I have observed that when believers willfully give God their singleness, it may not mean that they will forever remain single. Sometimes God simply wants His children to lift up to Him in prayer their greatest desires and abandon them at His throne, these desires being subordinate in their relationship with Him. Once this is done, God, knowing that He is first in their hearts, may grant their request of a spouse. It may be then that God gives them the desire of their heart, for their hearts and His will be in sync, and their desire will be God’s desire. In contrast, when followers of Jesus act outside of God’s will, they often end up suffering as a result, because poor choices naturally bring negative consequences. Thus, obedience to God is always the best choice!

## **Conclusion**

The issues related to bride price and dowry are vast and deep due to the different cultures and variations in and among those cultures where they are practiced. In some cultures these systems work well because the financial burden is light and the results are beneficial. There are also cultures where these practices too often cause grief to many involved. The concern of this book is for those who are harmed by these practices. It is very apparent that in most if not all of the countries this book focuses upon, these practices negatively affect the poor, girls and young women and their families because an unnecessary financial burden is placed upon those who cannot afford it. It is also obvious that the results of these practices in these countries are frequently detrimental and even evil, things which are not of God and which followers of Jesus should never be involved. Aspects of these practices simply cause too much pain, too much poverty, too much violence, too much death and too much greed, and too often they devalue women and make them possessions to be sold, purchased and

owned. Although these facts have not and will not stop these practices in the world, they should however stop them within the Church of Jesus Christ. Why would parents who are followers of Jesus ever want to expose their child whom they love to such things? They should not! Instead, believers ought to apply the biblical principles presented here. These principles are reiterated below for your convenience.

## Biblical Principle List

PRINCIPLES	BIBLICAL REFERENCES
<b>Regarding Love</b>	
➤ Love the Lord your God with all your heart	Mat. 22:37
➤ Love your neighbor as yourself	Mat. 22:39
➤ Love one another fervently from the heart	1 Pet. 1:22
➤ Love is how we are to serve another	Gal. 5:13
➤ Love is kind	1 Cor. 13:4
➤ Love does not act unbecomingly	1 Cor. 13:5
➤ Love does not seek its own	1 Cor. 13:5
<b>Regarding Family</b>	
➤ Children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children	2 Cor. 12:14-15
➤ Children out of love should be a blessing to their parents	Eph. 6:1-3; cf. 1 Tim. 5:4
➤ If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever	1 Tim. 5:8
<b>Regarding Others</b>	
➤ I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation even if I have nothing	Hab. 3:17-19
➤ Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit	Php. 2:3
➤ With humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves	Php. 2:3
➤ Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others	Php. 2:4
➤ In everything treat people the same way you want them to treat you	Mat. 7:12
➤ You were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another	Gal. 5:13-14
➤ Work hard and help the weak	Acts 20:35
➤ Be a good example and model to others	2 Thes. 3:7-9
➤ Do good to all people, especially to the children of God	Gal. 6:8-10
➤ Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you	Eph. 4:32
➤ Encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing	1 Thes. 5:11
➤ He who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully	

for God loves a cheerful giver	2 Cor. 9:6-7
➤ All things are lawful for me; but let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor	1 Cor. 10:23-24
➤ Help those who are in need	2 Cor. 8:13-15; cf. Acts 2:44-45
<b>Regarding Government</b>	
➤ Obey the laws of your government	Rom. 13:1-7; cf. 1 Pet. 2:13-14
➤ The one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin	Jam. 4:17
<b>Regarding Greed</b>	
➤ You shall not covet the things of others	Exo. 20:17
➤ The love of money is a root of all sorts of evil	1 Tim. 6:6-11
➤ It is more blessed to give than to receive	Acts 20:35
<b>Regarding Responsibility</b>	
➤ It is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy	1 Cor. 4:2

As stated earlier, the Church needs to consider its contemporary culture. Believers need to determine whether they can participate in their cultural mores in a manner that does not oppose or undermine the Bible. If they cannot, then they need to either modify the current system to conform to biblical standards or develop practices which are in agreement with biblical principles. This is vital. True followers of Jesus need to make sure that they are not contributing to the problem, but instead are a part of the solution creating better lives for their families, themselves and others; this being especially true for those who are oppressed and afflicted by these practices. Fittingly, the Church must follow the words of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:8-9:

“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. **The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you**” (emphasis added).

On the contrary, let us not live as the Pharisees to whom Jesus spoke the following:

“... ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. ‘But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.” (Mark 7:6b-8)

May God bless and guide you as you consider how to make decisions, which honor and glorify Him regarding these issues.

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## About the Author

Randy was raised in a Catholic home in the United States. During his childhood he began to question the existence of God, and in his early adult life considered himself an atheist. Later, as a result of people speaking to him about Christ, he began to question his beliefs. He read the New Testament and portions of the Old Testament while considering the claims made about Jesus. After understanding that Jesus was who He claimed to be, Randy understood that there had to be a God. It was at this time (August 18, 1982) that he placed his faith and trust in Jesus Christ as his Savior.

In the Chicago area Randy was the interim pastor of two small churches, which needed assistance and was involved in jail ministry as well as evangelism to the homeless. He later served as the senior pastor of the Bark River Bible Church in Michigan for over eight years. He ministered as an associate of Bible Related Ministries for 10 years (1990-2000), an organization which assists churches in need of help, ranging from providing pulpit supply to pastors, to helping mediate church disputes.

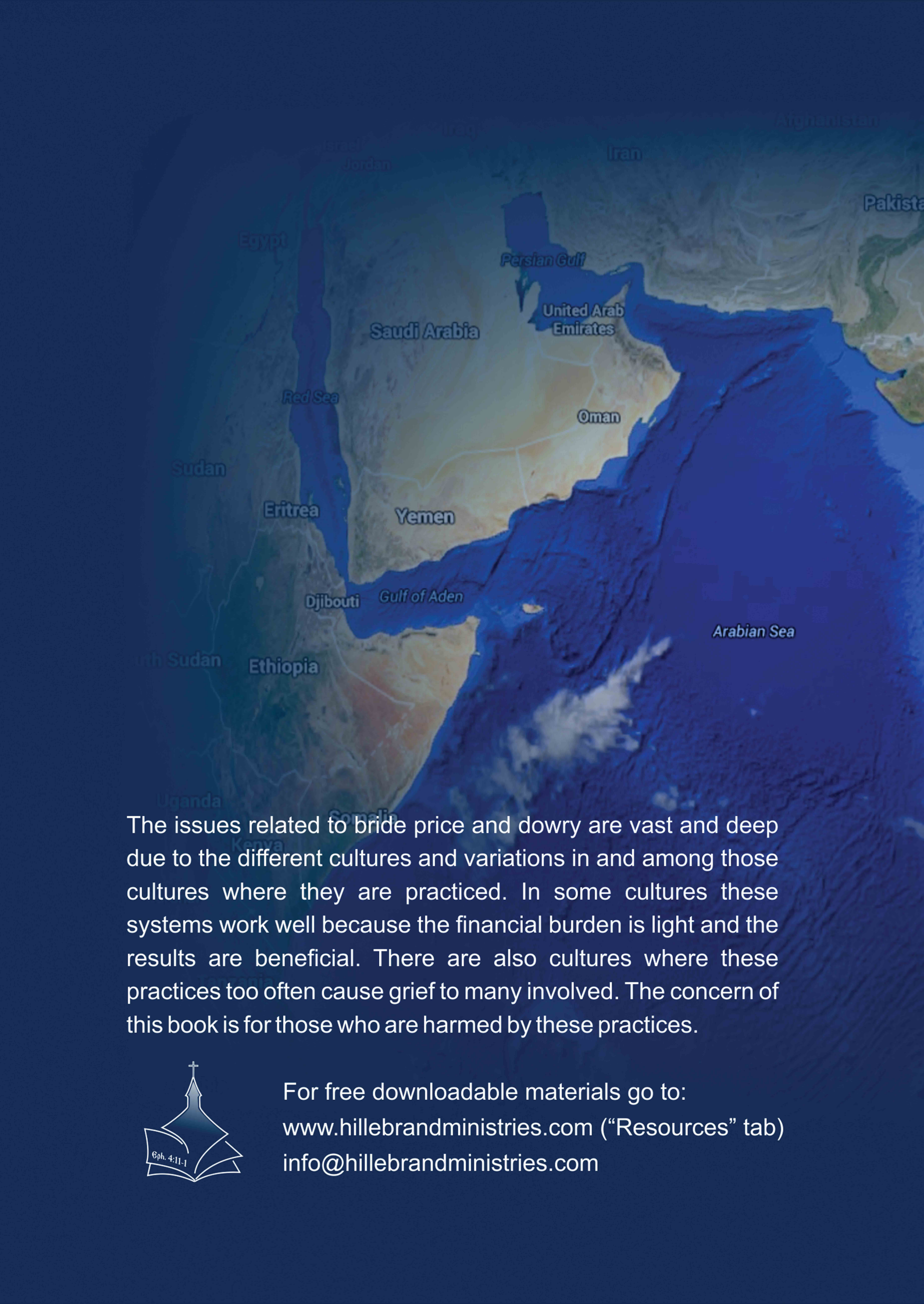
Randy and his wife Annette serve the Lord in Eurasia, and at the time of this writing live in Kiev, Ukraine. Besides Randy's writing ministry, he and Annette are involved in training and assisting church leaders and women where they Lord gives opportunity. They have four children.

Randy's educational background includes a degree in electronic technology, a Bachelor's degree in Bible and a Master's degree in Ministry, both from Moody Bible Institute, Chicago, Illinois.

Randy's other works include:

- Building a Dynamic Church
- Evangelism: How to Mobilize Your Church
- Persecution: A Biblical Perspective
- Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage: A Biblical Perspective
- Various tracts on different topics

These publications are available for download at: [www.hillebrandministries.com](http://www.hillebrandministries.com)



The issues related to bride price and dowry are vast and deep due to the different cultures and variations in and among those cultures where they are practiced. In some cultures these systems work well because the financial burden is light and the results are beneficial. There are also cultures where these practices too often cause grief to many involved. The concern of this book is for those who are harmed by these practices.



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