

# SHOULD ADVERTISING SHOCK?

David J. Hagenbuch.  
Messiah College

**ABSTRACT:** *Shock advertising is a tactic of choice for some organizations despite its disputed efficacy and dubious ethicality. Through a focused biblical analysis, this paper identifies numerous examples of divinely-initiated shocking communication, which in light of Imago Dei might lead people to believe that they also have considerable liberty to use shock. Closer examination of biblical cases, however, suggests that organizations should only create shocking ads for very compelling reasons.*

**Key words:** Advertising, Shock, *Imago Dei*, Marketing, Ethics

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## INTRODUCTION

An ad aimed at combatting anorexia includes a full-body shot of a severely emaciated and nearly nude woman. An anti-smoking campaign depicts individuals "hooked" on the vice through pictures of actors with large, bloody fishhooks piercing their lips. An ad intended to draw attention to the plight of children born into poverty shows an infant with a cockroach climbing out of its mouth.

The advertising industry appears increasingly eager to employ words and images that startle audiences through their unexpected and graphic violation of social norms (Morrison, 2014; Singla & Sundrani, 2012). Meanwhile, these communication methods and content can substantively influence individuals' interpretations of the real situations the media portray (Chouliaraki, 2006; Curtis, 2012). Shock tactics can be effective at breaking through the commercial clutter and motivating target market members to take action they otherwise might not consider (Korieth, 2014). Research has often investigated shock in advertising, sometimes supporting its efficacy (Dahl & Frankenberger, & Manchanda, 2003) and sometimes not (Urwin & Venter, 2014); however, little attention has been given to the arguably more important normative question: Regardless of its effectiveness, *should*

shock be used? This paper explores this significant ethical issue conceptually, from a Christian worldview, by examining biblical examples of shocking communication. Although there are numerous cases of divinely-ordered shock throughout scripture, and despite our creation in the image of God (*Imago Dei*), this biblical analysis suggests that people should only use shocking communication for very compelling reasons and following the guidance of three key scriptural principles.

## WHAT IS SHOCK?

The aim of most advertising is to capture attention and gain interest, so what allows some advertising to accomplish these objectives in the extreme, that is, to be shocking? As the aforementioned examples suggest, shock advertising contains deliberate surprise, in those three cases, images that the viewer was not expecting to see (Javed & Zeb, 2011). However, many ads contain twists, or surprises, that generally would not be considered shocking. For instance, a recent Super Bowl ad for electronics retailer Radio Shack featured a litany of famous personalities from the 1980s pilfering the store. It was surprising and funny to see all of these former celebrities, together in one place, acting in such a

way; however, most people probably would not call this commercial shocking. One reason likely has to do with positive versus negative affect. Seeing their favorite stars from a decade-gone-by acting in a humorous way likely brought back fond memories and generated positive affect for most viewers. The surprise that shock generates, however, generally is not pleasant; rather it is undesirable (Parry et al., 2013). For instance, imagine that you are in a store shopping and suddenly you meet a friend whom you have not seen in years. You would probably say you were surprised to see him/her. Now imagine that you are sleeping at night and you awake to find the same friend standing at the foot of your bed. Now you are shocked. Shock is not good surprise; it is surprise that startles and unsettles (Parry et al., 2013). Just like an electric shock, advertising shock is at a minimum uncomfortable and quite often painful.

What turns a pleasant surprise into a shocking surprise is the violation of some significant social norm (Dahl, Frankenberger, Manchanda, 2003). Words or behavior that breach *important* societal conventions or values tend to shock people. For instance, using one's dessert fork instead of the salad fork during the first course of a formal dinner, or wearing white after Labor Day, may be considered breaches of etiquette, but few people would call these lapses shocking. On the other hand, a couple of years ago, a Super Bowl ad for a web hosting company showed a very beautiful young female model engaging in a long and sensuous kiss with a less attractive young man. This ad shocked many viewers because it violated norms for public display of affection and the pairing of individuals with similar levels of attractiveness.

A final criterion for shock involves its realism or believability (Castillo-Manzano, Castro-Nuño, & Pedregal, 2012; Viljoen, Terblanche-Smit, & Terblanche, 2009). For instance, if the aforementioned commercial had used cartoon characters instead of real people, viewers probably would not have perceived it as shocking. Similarly, individuals tend to interpret as less shocking ads that involve humor or that otherwise appear to be fabrications of reality. For instance, Animal Planet produced an ad for its annual Shark Week that involved a pretend live newscast in which rescuers prepared to release "Snuffy the

Seal," who had "washed up on shore injured and dehydrated," back into the ocean amid great fanfare. As a crane lowered Snuffy toward the water inside a large sling, a great white shark suddenly breached the surface by about 15 feet and made a quick meal of Snuffy. This turn of events certainly represented an unsettling surprise and one that violated a social norm: Americans are not used to seeing acts of predation. The shock value was relatively minor, however, as most viewers quickly realized that what they saw didn't actually happen; rather, it was the work of some talented special effect artists. Furthermore, the spot's tagline, "It's a bad week to be a seal," reinforced the ad's goal of humor over realism.

So, what is shock? To synthesize the preceding discussion, shock is *deliberate and unsettling surprise that violates a significant social norm through words and/or images that appear real*. This definition resembles that of Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda's oft-cited study (2003), which described advertising shock as intentionally startling and offending due to the violation of social norms. The current study's definition, however, also incorporates the concept of realism, which appears to impact people's overall perception of shock; that is, individuals are more likely to interpret communication as shocking if it is believable, or seems realistic (Viljoen, Terblanche-Smit, & Terblanche, 2009). It also is important to note that what makes communication shocking can be either the message content or the method of communication, or both. Three biblical examples serve to illustrate:

- Nathan uses a story of a poor man's lamb to confront David about his adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11; 12:1-14). [shocking message content; not shocking communication method]
- God makes Moses' face radiant in order to show the Israelites a small reflection of God's glory and majesty (Exodus 34:29-35). [shocking communication method; not shocking message content]
- God uses a body-less hand to write a cryptic message on the wall of a banquet hall in order to foretell the fall of King Belshazzar and Babylon (Daniel 5). [shocking message content and shocking communication method]

Most importantly, the current, expanded definition and description of shock should prove useful in analyzing the ethicality of shock. First, however, this paper will establish an important broader context for shock advertising by highlighting the findings of key studies, beginning with shock's disputed efficacy.

### IS SHOCK EFFECTIVE?

As the preceding examples suggest, shock is an increasingly common advertising tactic (Parry, Jones, Stern, & Robinson, 2013). Among other reasons, easy access to digital media (e.g., YouTube) will likely spur even more growth in shock advertising. Almost anyone can create an ad and upload it onto a social media sharing site; meanwhile, regulation of such content seems to be loose at best (Barbagallo & Baschuk, 2013; "The open Internet," 2014). Consequently, considerable latitude exists for everyone from individuals to large corporations to create and utilize advertising shock.

Of course, the use of any promotional tactic tends to correlate with its efficacy. When something works, many organizations naturally want to take advantage of it, and shock advertising is no exception. The effectiveness of shock is not, however, a forgone conclusion, as the outcomes of actual campaigns and other research results are mixed (Parry et al., 2013). Given the nature of shock, it is not surprising that it walks a fine line between motivating people to act and alienating them (Klara, 2012). The one way in which shock appears to be most reliable is in breaking through the commercial clutter and grabbing attention, an outcome that Parry et al. (2013) found for both for-profit and non-profit organizations. Similarly, Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda (2003) discovered a significant increase in attention associated with shocking ad content.

However, advertisers are unlikely to consider an ad effective if it only attracts attention. It is in the latter stages of behavioral modification (creating desire and spurring action) where the results of shock advertising have been particularly mixed. Some shock *has* been effective at changing behavior. For instance GoDaddy's shocking 2005 Super Bowl commercial reportedly encouraged over 2.6 million people to visit GoDaddy.com, which led sales to increase from \$102 million in

2004 to \$200 million in 2005 (Draper, 2005). Thanks to its shock advertising aimed at the industrial rearing of farm animals, PETA saw measurable increases in its credibility paired with similar declines in that of the livestock industry (Scudder & Mills, 2009). Similarly, Spain witnessed fewer automobile-related fatalities after its use of shock ads aimed at irresponsible driving behavior; although it was uncertain whether these ads were any more persuasive than less-threatening ones (Castillo-Manzano, Castro-Nuño, & Pedregal, 2012). In addition to these real cases, experimental research has found shocking ad content to be associated with increased memory and positive behavior (Dahl, Frankenberger, & Manchanda, 2003), as well as greater cognitive elaboration (Huhmann & Mott-Stenerson, 2008).

As suggested above, however, shock advertising also has *not* worked in many cases. For instance, shock appears relatively ineffective in persuading individuals to have their cancer symptoms examined (Bacon, 2013; "Do charity ads overuse," 2014). Likewise, ad campaigns such as that of Barnardo's mentioned at the onset of this paper, which featured cockroaches crawling out of infants' mouths, often seem counterproductive: only 11.9 % of respondents said that such ads led them to donate to the focal cause, 18.2% said the ads turned them off, 67.6% claimed that the ads did not make a difference, and 2.3% did not know (Bainbridge, 2003). Certain other research results also have cast doubt on the efficacy of shock. For instance, rather than creating buzz, some shock simply makes people uncomfortable (Berger & Chen, 2014), and that distaste may be especially strong among certain target market demographics, like women, who tend to be less appreciative of shock that combines humor and violence (Swani, Weinberger, & Gulas (2013). Similarly, individuals' ability to comprehend shock advertising messages may decline in cases of low product involvement (Huhmann & Mott – Stenerson, 2008).

### IS IT RIGHT TO SHOCK?

Whether or not it is actually effective, a wide variety of entities still use shock advertising. From large global corporations to small nonprofits, many organizations believe shock will move members of their target markets from awareness to action,

which as the preceding discussion has described, it sometimes does. While considerable research has addressed the efficacy of shock advertising, the literature says relatively little in terms of whether advertisers *should* use this promotional tactic. In other words, is it right to shock? A few have, however, raised this normative question.

For instance, Hyman and Tansey (1990) warned that “psychoactive ads” can arouse significant negative emotions, such as extreme anxiety and hostility, among certain vulnerable people groups. As a result, the study offered three prescriptions: 1) Carefully target the medium as well as the market; 2) Clearly label the ads in order to allow viewers to avoid them; 3) Do not use trick endings (pp. 110-113). LaTour, Natarajan, and Henthorne (1993) suggested that advertisers should adhere to practical ethical guidelines related to their use of fear appeals but did not offer specific standards or examples.

Parry, Jones, Stern, & Robinson (2013) found that people generally accepted nonprofit organizations’ shock more readily than that of for-profit companies; however, individuals considered it unacceptable for any organization to employ religious taboos and certain images deemed morally offensive. Neil Henderson, Chief Executive of St. Luke’s, a London-based ad agency, argued that nonprofit organizations have a duty to use shock advertising, given that these organizations need to make a large impact with limited budgets (“Do shock tactics have a place,” 2007). Jones (2002) and Dzamic (2003) questioned the use of unrelated, gratuitous shock advertising but supported the legitimacy of shock used responsibly and genuinely tied to a meaningful issue. Burgoyne (2008), however, questioned the motivation of even this latter category, suggesting that some non-profit shock campaigns are more concerned with winning creative awards than about advancing a cause.

Schenck (2006) proposed the idea of “Creative No-Fly Zones” in response to the belief that there is some shock that advertisers should never make because it is too extreme, or is otherwise unjustified; for instance, an Irish gambling company made an ad parody of the Last Supper that featured Jesus and the apostles playing poker. Likewise, a Volkswagen Polo ad featured a Middle-Eastern-looking actor who appeared to commit a suicide bombing. Just as there is

disparate opinion about the effectiveness of shock advertising, there is little consensus as to its ethicality. Furthermore, if certain shock is justifiable, as some suggest (Jones, 2002; Dzamic, 2003; “Do shock tactics have a place,” 2007), what makes it so?

## SHOCKING COMMUNICATION IN SCRIPTURE

Given that much advertising throughout the world, including in the United States, occurs in societies that are predominantly Christian, it is appropriate to consider the morality of shock advertising through the lens of a Christian worldview. For most Christians, such an analysis would involve some degree of scriptural exegesis. Of course, the biblical record predates mass media and, therefore, advertising. Still, that difference does not preclude an investigation of shock in other communication contexts, from which one can make inferences to advertising. As the following paragraphs reveal, the use of shock in the Bible is not uncommon. For instance, when Absalom, son of David, sought to usurp his father’s throne, he intentionally committed an extremely shocking act: At the recommendation of his advisor Ahithophel, they pitched a tent atop the palace roof and Absalom “lay with his father’s concubines in the sight of all Israel” (2 Samuel 16:15-23).

Since the purpose of this inquiry is not just to determine if shock was used, but whether it is moral, this analysis will focus on shock that appears to have been divinely appointed; that is, that God or Jesus directed in either the Old or New Testament. One might also note that this analysis is consistent with at least one specific approach from Chewning’s (2001) *Twelve Styles of Biblical Integration*, namely the ninth one, “Answered Questions Assimilated/Integrated.” In describing this particular approach Chewning says: “One of the incredible realities about the Scripture is that while it was written, and the cannon closed, hundreds of years ago, it possesses to this day all of the principles necessary to address the most complicated, modern ethical issues” (p. 21). Advertising shock appears to be one of those contemporary moral issues.

Since creation, God’s infinite power often has manifested itself in ways that human beings have considered *shocking*. Given the purpose of this

paper, however, it is important to distinguish shocking divine action intended for a specific physical outcome from similar action intended to communicate a specific message. For instance, God's directive to Noah to build a huge boat on dry land and the subsequent flood were shocking, but their purpose extended beyond capturing attention and changing beliefs; their express consequence was the physical purging of a sinful world (Genesis 6). In contrast, shock according to this paper's description does not produce an immediate physical outcome; rather, such consequences occur indirectly only after individuals decide to heed the shocking communication and take related action.

### **Research Method**

The methodology for identifying examples of shock in the Bible followed a two-phase process. First, the primary researcher conducted an independent survey of scripture, identifying examples of shock that God appeared to initiate, which were more purely about communicating a specific message than precipitating an immediate physical outcome. This examination benefited from the researcher having read the Bible from beginning to end about ten times over the course of approximately 15 years.

For the second phase, the researcher obtained professional input from four Bible scholars who worked at a Christian college in the northeast United States and who had the following credentials:

- Professor of New Testament and Greek, Ph.D.
- Professor of Hebrew Bible, Ph.D.
- Professor of Old Testament, Ph.D.
- Assistant Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Ph.D.

The primary researcher shared with these four Bible scholars the nature of the study as well as the 13 examples of shock he had already identified. He then asked them to offer feedback by way of critiquing the existing cases and/or recommending new examples, including the reasons for the shock. Over the course of about three weeks, the Bible scholars provided helpful input that involved thought-provoking on-line discussion among all parties and ultimately resulted in the identification

of thirteen new cases of divinely-ordained shock, culminating with a total of 26 cases: fifteen from the Old Testament and eleven from the New Testament. Table 1 summarizes each of these examples, while the following paragraphs elucidate several specific cases from both the Old and New Testaments respectively.

### **Old Testament Shock**

There are many Old Testament examples that fit the stricter definition of communication shock. One of the most stunning involved the prophet Hosea, whom God commanded to take an adulterous wife. Hosea complied by marrying lascivious Gomer, and in doing so they became a powerful metaphor for Israel's spiritual adultery (Hosea 1:2-3). Hosea's actions as a prophet and man of God would have been completely shocking, particularly in light of the seventh Commandment ("You shall not commit adultery," Exodus 20:14) and various laws from Leviticus demanding sexual purity (e.g., Leviticus 18). Perhaps even more shocking, after bearing two children for Hosea, Gomer resumed her unfaithfulness and God commanded Hosea to buy her back, which he did to serve as a symbol of God's reconciliation with unfaithful Israel (Hosea 3:1-4).

Another notable example of what seems to be God-directed shock involved the prophet Nathan and King David (2 Samuel 12:1-14). Someone needed to confront David about the sordid chain of events that began with him sleeping with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, whom David then had killed in battle (2 Samuel 11). In order to help David realize his heinous sins, Nathan told David a shocking story about a rich man who provided a lamb as a meal for traveler. Rather than taking a lamb from his own abundant flocks, however, the rich man took the only lamb of a poor man, which was like a child to him. David's reaction to the story was one of shock: "David burned with anger against the [rich] man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die!" (2 Samuel 12:5).

Moses witnessed firsthand God's shocking actions as much as any Old Testament person. For instance, the ten plagues that God levied on Egypt certainly were shocking (Exodus 7:14-11:9); however, like the flood of Noah's time, the plagues were intended to do more than just communicate a

message. One of God's direct goals was to break the Egyptians physically, financially, and emotionally so Pharaoh would let the Hebrews leave Egypt. As such, one should not consider the plagues as strictly shocking communication. What may fit with this paper's focus, however, are several other shocking actions that Moses experienced, which Exodus describes thusly: God spoke to Moses through a burning bush (3:1-10), God changed Moses' staff into a snake (4:1-4), and God made Moses' face radiant (34:29-35).

The Old Testament describes dozens of other miraculous and shocking acts of God. Like the flood and plagues, most triggered a direct physical outcome, for instance, the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14) and a great fish swallowing Jonah (Jonah 1 & 2). One more action to consider more purely as shocking communication, however, involved King Belshazzar of Babylon and Daniel. Belshazzar was holding a great banquet for his nobles when a body-less human hand appeared and began to write on the wall inside the banquet room—a sight that made the King's face turn pale and his legs weaken. After none of the King's wise men could interpret the cryptic message, the King summoned Daniel to reveal its meaning, which he adeptly did, providing further confirmation that God had executed the shocking communication (Daniel 5).

### **New Testament Shock**

Although considerably shorter than the Old Testament, the New Testament also contains many cases of divinely-ordered shock. In fact, its "shock-per-page ratio" might exceed that of the Old Testament. Again, this paper distinguishes shocking actions that precipitated a direct physical outcome from those that represented just shocking communication. For instance, the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, who sold some property and then lied about the money they received and gave to the Apostles, represented more than just a shocking message to other believers; their demise appeared to be direct punishment for their dishonesty (Acts 5:1-10). As above, therefore, the following examples focus on cases that represent more exclusively shocking communication.

One of the most memorable stories in the New Testament involves Paul's conversion from an aggressive persecutor of the Church to one of its

leading apostles (Acts 9:1-9). On the road to Damascus, Jesus himself appeared to Paul in a bright light and asked him "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Verse 4). This shocking communication knocked Paul to the ground and left his traveling companions speechless. Another leading apostle, Peter, also received some of God's shocking communication. The message to Peter came in the form of a vision in which he saw a sheet that contained various animals that devout Jews considered unclean for many hundreds of years. As Peter watched the sheet descend to earth three times, he heard God speak: "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat," and "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:13, 15). At first Peter resisted the directive, but he later realized the Lord's desire to extend His grace to everyone—Jews and Gentiles (Acts 10:9-38).

When Jesus was on earth, he performed miracles that ranged from turning water into wine (John 2:1-11), to calming a storm (Luke 8:22-25), to casting out demons (Luke 4:31-36), to healing the blind (Matthew 20:29-34). This analysis does not include most of these miracles, however, because the vast majority did more than just communicate a message. An exception, though, is the miracle Jesus performed when he and his disciples were returning from Bethany to Jerusalem and they came across a fig tree that had no fruit. Jesus cursed the fig tree and caused it to wither immediately. The apparent reason for this shocking act was to teach the disciples to have faith and believe in what they ask for in prayer (Matthew 21:18-22).

The New Testament records other acts of Jesus that also were shocking, though not miraculous. One of the most incredible of those actions occurred at the start of the Last Supper, when Jesus got a basin of water and a towel and proceeded to wash his disciples' feet (John 13:1-17). Such a dirty and lowly job was typically the work of a servant, certainly not of a group's Lord and Teacher, as evidenced by Peter's shocked response: "you shall never wash my feet" (Verse 8). Jesus continued the washing, however, and explained to the disciplines the purpose of his shocking act—to teach them humility and service.

Besides his actions, Jesus also often shocked others by what he said. People know Jesus, of course, for teaching his followers to love others (Matthew 22:39), including their enemies (Luke

6:27), and to forgive without limits (Matthew 18:21-22). These compassionate directives make it even more shocking, therefore, when Jesus said:

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' (Matthew 10:34-36)

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26-27)

Did Jesus really want family members to hate each other? No. He did, however, want everyone to understand that love for God was paramount, greater even than love for family members, and his use of hyperbole helped to drive home that point.

As the master teacher, one of Jesus's favorite pedagogies involved parables. In these short illustrative stories Jesus always chose subject matter that was relevant for his audiences. Many of the parables also included a shocking twist—something that the listeners did not expect and that probably made them uncomfortable or even angry. One such example was the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). To the Jewish listeners, the idea of passersby failing to stop and help a fallen traveler was unsettling. The notion that a priest and a Levite were among those who ignored the victim was even more disturbing. The fact that a Samaritan, a member of a race that Jews detested, was the only one to offer assistance was outrageous.

Speaking of outrage, Jesus sometimes expressed his own in even more direct ways. In order to call attention to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and other teachers of the law, Jesus often used shocking language: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the

inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean" (Matthew 23:27); "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33); "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Matthew 23:24). The fact that the words for gnat (*galma*) and camel (*gamla*) sound so similar in Aramaic added even more punch to the accusation (M. Cosby, personal communication, July 1, 2015).

A final set of Jesus's words symbolizes an important ritual that contemporary Christians sometimes take for granted but likely was very shocking when Jesus first gave the directive to his disciples:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.' (Matthew 26:26-28)

The allusion to cannibalism would repulse most people (e.g., see the shock and disgust expressed in John 6:50-66). To Jews whom the Law prohibited from even touching a dead body (Numbers 19:11-13), as well as from eating meat that contained blood (Leviticus 7:26), Jesus's description of the sacraments must have truly shocked.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

What can one conclude from the preceding investigation that set out to identify and differentiate instances of God-ordained shock found in the Bible? God shocks! Both the Old and New Testaments are replete with examples of shocking words and actions, divinely sanctioned. Many of those cases of shock served a purpose beyond communication of a message. For instance, Jesus's bringing Lazarus back to life certainly communicated God's power over death, but the miracle was also about meeting the needs of Lazarus' family at that point in time (John 11:1-44). Likewise, Jesus's clearing of the Temple communicated a very important message in a

shocking way, but that message is difficult to separate from the immediate purpose of physically sanctifying God's house (Mark 11:12-17). Similarly, probably the most shocking act ever involved God sending his Son to die on a cross (Luke 23, 24). The purpose of Jesus' death and resurrection, however, was not simply to communicate a message; it was the necessary divine action for human redemption and reconciliation.

In contrast, this study's 26 biblical examples represent shock that God seemed to intend more exclusively for communication. These cases are the ones most critical for determining the ethicality of contemporary shock advertising because advertising is communication. As Table 1 shows and in light of this paper's definition of shock, the researchers identified the specific reason why each case represents shocking communication (column 4). Similarly, the researchers ascertained for each example the shock's specific motive (column 5). Although these interpretations are subjective, the four Bible scholars' input affirmed the judgments. Also, while other examples of shocking communication likely exist in both the Old and New Testaments, this study provides a large representative sample of such cases.

On one level, the reasons for using shock appear to be very different and to defy comparison. Further analysis, however, reveals at least one common thread—God's use of shock in scripture was never gratuitous. That is, when God decided to use shocking communication, the reasons were always compelling ones, for instance: individuals' relationships with Him, persons' moral development, and the fate of entire people groups. In contrast, the contemporary examples of shock advertising that this paper has cited tend to involve much less significant purposes. Likewise, other anecdotal evidence shows advertisers using shock for reasons such as selling website hosting services and snack foods.

Just as this paper's main scriptural analysis produced numerous examples of divinely-ordered shocking communication, the Bible also provides principles that suggest limitations to our use of advertising shock. The most relevant of these principles are personal purity, edification of others,

and social safeguarding. One should note that these three principles reflect those that the Pontifical Council for Social Communications identified nearly two decades ago in its treatise on advertising ethics: truthfulness, the dignity of the human person, and social responsibility (Foley & Pastore, 1997). What follows is an explication of these principles as well as a description of how shock advertising may violate each of the three in terms of self, others, and society as a whole.

### **Impure Communication**

The Bible calls for purity in every area of people's lives including communication, which includes truthfulness and freedom from deception, for example:

- "The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception" (Proverbs 14:8).
- "The Lord detests the thoughts of the wicked, but those of the pure are pleasing to him" (Proverbs 15:26).
- "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14).
- "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8).
- "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth" (1 Corinthians 13:6).
- "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Philippians 4:8).

These verses and others suggest that purity in actions, words, and even thoughts is critical for Christians. As several of the examples near the beginning of this paper illustrated, however, shock advertising tends to employ words and images that are violent, sexually explicit, vulgar, or otherwise impure. Therefore, one should consider immoral any advertising that violates purity in communication.



Table 1: Analysis of Biblical Shock

No.	Shocking Communication	Reference	Why Represents Shock	Reason for Using Shock
1	God speaks to Moses through a burning bush	Exodus 3:1-10	bushes don't continually burn; fright of hearing God's audible voice	to persuade Moses to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt
2	God turns Moses' staff into a snake and turns his hand leprous	Exodus 4:1-9	fear of snakes; fear of leprosy	to give Moses signs to show others so they will believe that God has sent him
3	God makes Moses' face radiant	Exodus 34:29-35	fear of the Divine	to show the Israelites a small reflection of God's glory and majesty
4	Nathan uses a story of a poor man's lamb to confront David about his adultery and murder	2 Samuel 11; 12:1-14	a very distressing and abhorrent story	to move David to repentance
5	Isaiah walks naked in public for three years to illustrate Assyria's conquering of Egypt and Ethiopia and the exiling of their people	Isaiah 20:1-6	the shame of public nakedness in a culture that valued physical modesty	to warn Israel about relying on foreign powers
6	God instructs Jeremiah to not marry or have children	Jeremiah 6:1-4	very abnormal behavior for a man in ancient Israel	to warn Judah of the destruction that will befall it because of its sinful behavior
7	Jeremiah buys clay from a potter, makes it into a jar, than smashes the jar in front of the elders and priests	Jeremiah 19:1-14	a loud and startling action	to foretell the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah by their enemies
8	Jeremiah predicts that God will destroy the Temple in Jerusalem	Jeremiah 26:1-9	an extremely sacrilegious statement	to warn Judah of the destruction that will come upon it because of its sinful behavior
9	Jeremiah wears a yoke to symbolize Babylon's oppression of Judah	Jeremiah 28:1-17	troubling to see a person wear a device intended for beasts of burden	to foretell the suffering that Judah will experience at the hands of Babylon
10	Ezekiel lies on his left side for 390 consecutive days and his right side for 40 days, while bound with ropes	Ezekiel 4:1-8	a disturbing public spectacle that lasted for an extraordinarily long time	to illustrate the sin of Israel and Judah and symbolize the siege of Jerusalem
11	Ezekiel prepares his meals in public, cooking the food over burning dung	Ezekiel 4:9-15	a repugnant action	to symbolize the siege of Jerusalem
12	Ezekiel tells an allegory of Jerusalem's unfaithfulness filled with very graphic images	Ezekiel 16;1-63	some might call the imagery pornographic	to describe Jerusalem's spiritual unfaithfulness
13	Ezekiel tells a graphic metaphor of two adulterous sisters Ohohah and Oholibah	Ezekiel 23:1-49	an obscene story	to illustrate the spiritual infidelity of Israel and Judah and warn of Judah's fall
14	A body-less hand writes a cryptic message on the wall of a banquet hall	Daniel 5	a supernatural and frightening sight	to foretell the fall of King Belshazzar and Babylon
15	God tells Hosea to marry an adulterous woman	Hosea 1:2-3; 3:1-4	a very unholy act given Old Testament laws about adultery	to communicate God's displeasure with Israel's adulterous relationships with others
16	Jesus says that he did not come to bring peace but a sword and suggests that family members hate each other	Matthew 10:34-36	a violent statement and unbelievable command--to hate one's own family	to emphasize that one should love God above anyone else
17	Jesus curses a fig tree and it withers	Matthew 21:18-22	disturbing to kill a mature, healthy fruit tree and incredible to do so just with words	to teach the disciples to have faith and believe in what they ask for in prayer
18	Jesus lashes out at the Jewish religious leaders	Matthew 23:24, 27, 33	extremely harsh and critical language	to point out that their religious hypocrisy is hurting others
19	Jesus compares the communion sacraments to eating his body and drinking his blood	Matthew 26:26-28	seemed to be commanding cannibalism; even touching a dead body was unclean	to establish a ritual that will serve as a lasting reminder of his sacrificial death
20	Jesus refers to Elijah, who God sent to a widow in the region of Sidon, rather than to one in Israel (I Kings 17:7-24)	Luke 4:23-30	an especially offensive public reference in light of Jewish views of being God's chosen people	to teach that God is far more inclusive than the beliefs of many of the Jews would allow
21	Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan	Luke 10:25-37	very insulting for a despised Samaritan to show-up Jewish religious leaders	to show that everyone is your neighbor
22	Jesus states that if "this temple" is destroyed, he will raise it again in three days	John 2:18-22	upsetting to talk of the Temple's destruction and outrageous to suggest that a single person could rebuild it in three days	to answer the Jews' request for a miraculous sign
23	Jesus washes his disciples' feet	John 13:1-17	disturbing and humiliating for a rabbi to wash the feet of his followers	to teach the disciples humility and service
24	Jesus appears to Paul in a bright light and speaks to him on the road to Damascus	Acts 9:1-9	a frightening supernatural act with an extreme physical consequence--blindness	to convert Paul to faith in Christ
25	Peter sees a vision of a sheet with unclean animals and is told to "kill and eat"	Acts 10:9-38	inconceivable for a devout Jew to eat even one type of unclean food	to help Peter and others realize that God's grace is for Jews and Gentiles
26	Paul suggests that those stirring up dissent about circumcision castrate themselves	Galatians 5:11-12	a brutally graphic suggestion	to help the Galatian Church understand freedom from the law through Christ

## Causing Others to Sin

Given that one of the greatest influences on people is other people, the Bible directs believers to encourage and build up one another, which affirms the dignity of others while avoiding the opposite—causing them to stumble, or sin:

- “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).
- “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3:13).
- “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everybody in every way” (1 Corinthians 10:31-33).
- “But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin!” (Matthew 18:6-7)

Certainly these scriptural mandates suggest consistency with the previous ones regarding purity. These latter passages, however, press the requirements one step further. It is not good enough just to maintain one's own freedom from sin. Christians also must refrain from communication that might lead others to sin in thought, word, or deed. Shock advertising generally falls short of this standard; for instance, ads that contain sexually explicit images diminish human dignity and encourage people to think, or perhaps even behave, in ways that are inconsistent with a biblical sexual ethic.

## Societal Desensitization

Beyond the influence that any one ad may have on an individual or certain others, there should be concern about the cumulative impact that advertising has on society (Foley & Pastore, 1997). This concern holds particular relevance in the context of shock advertising. More specifically, one might question whether shock in advertising

and other media sacrifice social responsibility and instead desensitize society to illicit communication. As can be expected, the Bible denounces societal acclimation to sinful cultural mores:

- But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways. Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel and said, ‘Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their forefathers and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died.’ (Judges 2:19-21)
- They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the Lord had ordered them, ‘Do not do as they do,’ and they did the things the Lord had forbidden them to do. They forsook all the commands of the Lord their God and made for themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sorcery and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger. (2 Kings 17:15-17)

Again, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications' essay on advertising ethics with its three principles of truthfulness, the dignity of the human person, and social responsibility (Foley & Pastore, 1997) reinforces this paper's suggestion that all advertising should edify self, others, and society. Although these standards are well within the reach of most advertising, they present a particular challenge for shock advertising, given its inherent tendency to employ offensive content and objectionable methods of communication.

Given the moral constraints that scripture suggests for its use, perhaps, shock should be the unique domain of the divine. However, a rational argument built from the analysis so far might

suggest that if God uses shock, it must be moral; therefore, it is acceptable for humans to use shock, possibly including shock advertising. A key supposition of this argument is the notion that humankind is created in the image of God. There certainly is strong biblical support for this belief, for instance:

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

The *JBIB* often has given thought-provoking treatment to *Imago Dei*, particularly in its most recent issue. For instance, Brown (2014) argued that part of being God's image-bearers meant pursuing *spontaneous order*—a trait not typically associated with the character of God; yet, Brown suggested: "I submit that such orderly and efficient spontaneity actually reflects the image of a Creator, and His nature stamped upon mankind" (p. 76). Moreover, looking beyond any single article or issue of the *JBIB*, the idea that humans are created in God's image represents a "basic assumption" of the *JBIB* (Smith, 2014, p. 5).

But to what extent does *Imago Dei* allow human beings to emulate divine action? Following God's lead seems to work well for negative injunctions. For instance, God does not lie (Titus 1:2), so Christians, created in God's image, should not lie. Similarly, Jesus never murdered (Isaiah 53:9), so Christians made in the likeness of Christ, should not murder. However does the inverse of this idea also hold? That is, should Christians really do everything that God does, or that Jesus did? Even though God created us in His image, some behaviors seem to reside uniquely in the realm of the Divine. Of course, God alone is worthy of worship (Exodus 20:3-6), so no human being should seek such adulation. Also, for example, the Bible repeatedly reminds us that God judges humankind (e.g., Job 21:22; Psalm 75:7; 1 Peter 4:5; Revelation 6:10). Likewise, Jesus has authority to judge (John 5:27, 30; Romans 2:16; 2 Timothy 4:1). God, however, specifically tells

humans not to judge others (Matthew 7:1; Luke 6:37; Romans 14:10; James 4:12). If there are other actions reserved exclusively for God, could shocking communication be one of them?

Given this study's analysis of biblical shock and its consideration of the scriptural guidelines related to edification of self, others, and society, it is difficult to conclude that human beings should never employ shock. This biblical exposition, however, suggests that if people do use shock it should be for very compelling reasons, as well as with serious consideration of the communication's impact. To that end, the following decision-making model may be helpful:

Q1: Are there other promotional tactics that could be equally effective or more effective than shock?

- If yes, consider using one of those alternatives.

- If no, continue to the second question.

Q2: Are there reasons for using shock that rise to the level of upholding a moral imperative or safeguarding an entire people group?

- If no, consider taking an alternate promotional approach.

- If yes, continue to the third question.

Q3: Does the shock uphold personal purity, edification of others, and societal well-being.

- If no, consider using another promotional strategy, or provide compelling support along the lines of Q2 to justify shock.

- If yes, still use shock judiciously.

## CONCLUSION

This paper purposed to move beyond the practical question of whether shock advertising is effective in order to contemplate the arguably more important normative question: Regardless of its efficacy, should advertisers use shock? Biblical analysis suggests that if human beings do create shocking ads, they only should do so for reasons of great magnitude, such as upholding a moral imperative or safeguarding an entire people group. Consequently, this judgment does not close the door on advertising shock. It does, however, significantly narrow the range of what advertisers and others should consider acceptable practice, while also inviting further analysis and discussion of this morally important issue.

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Dr. David Hagenbuch is a Professor of Marketing at Messiah College and the founder of [www.MindfulMarketing.org](http://www.MindfulMarketing.org), which aims to encourage ethical marketing. Before entering higher education, he worked as a corporate sales analyst for a national Christian broadcasting company and as a partner in a specialty advertising firm.