

DIALOGUE: BE ASTONISHED!?

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Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder!
Because I am doing something in your days-- You would not believe if you were told.
(Habakkuk 1:5 *New American Standard Version*)

I am grateful for Dr. David Hagenbuch's survey of the Bible record on the question of using shocking advertising messages. His article is an example of how Bible study by a business scholar can go deeper than the use of a few Bible texts to prove a point. The article presents an organized method of research into the Bible record. The article has raised my awareness that the volume of biblical data to study for this issue may be greater than we at first thought. It fueled my curiosity regarding what other insights the Bible may offer on this question.

Dr. Hagenbuch's conclusion suggests the need for "further analysis and discussion." I agree. The purpose of this response is to offer further considerations and questions that seem relevant to this discussion. The more complicated the ethical issue, the more we need to engage in community conversations about it rather than attempt to resolve it alone. Accordingly, the article contributes to the interpersonal dimension of the ethics process by evaluating sections of the Bible, offering questions for consideration, considering contemporary understanding of this marketing tactic and by modeling one approach by wrestling with the ethical issues. After reading the article, I was less of a fan of shock advertising than before. After further reflection regarding the Bible record and researching specific disturbing examples of shock advertising, I find this approach to marketing communication even less attractive.

We sometimes desire a simple answer to complicated ethical questions. The article offers a good example of the level of ethical complexity that some business decisions can take on where there are competing values or goals, multiple and divergent impacts, ambiguous consequences, the intangible and tangible nature of impacts, and the moral obligation to remain truthful and faithful.

I am considering the prospects of using this debate in an undergraduate classroom. I have

mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, the debate this topic sparks might be quite vigorous. On the other hand, who knows where the conversation might take undergraduate students. Some students might offer for consideration specific details of shocking advertising. Such details could be disturbing to some students depending on the specific shocking advertisement cited as an example. As a Christian professor, how should I address this? Should I save such a discussion for graduate students? Should I attempt to conduct a discussion but carefully control what examples are used for illustration? This moral question seems as challenging as the moral question posed in the article.

The article aims to distinguish "divine action intended for a specific physical outcome from similar action intended to communicate a specific message." The justification for this distinction might have been made stronger before employing it. One could argue that at a deeper level any action intended for a physical outcome is itself a form of a message. Further, it seems artificial to attempt a separation between the physical outcome of an action and the message that is given in the action. As the old saying goes, "Actions speak louder than words."

THE BIBLE RECORD ON SHOCK COMMUNICATION

Nowhere does the Bible explicitly forbid using shock actions or shock messages. Even though we can find examples of shock communications in Scripture, some of which were initiated by God or by his inspired prophets, nowhere does the Bible explicitly state that this method is required. Shocking events recorded in the Bible do not, by themselves, suggest that this method was or should be common. One might argue that it was the unusual nature of shocking events and shock messages which played a part in community

memory of the narratives which eventually influenced the Bible writers to record these events.

Shock in the biblical narratives is sometimes used to warn people of danger. Some of the shock narratives in the Bible seem to consist of physical actions or verbal messages of prophets given in response to the economic dimension of life having become out of balance and destructive of the other dimensions of flourishing life. Prophets delivered other shocking messages because of the injustices perpetrated on vulnerable people. Still other stories report highly unusual events, some of which might have been frightening or startling.

I detect three business-related narratives recorded in Scripture where shock may have been an element in the story. For this reason these deserve consideration. First, one day Jesus encountered a demon-possessed man that he healed. The healing resulted in the death of a herd of 2,000 swine, a result that must have had dramatic economic consequences (Matthew 8:25-34; Luke 8:27-37). The reaction of the people suggests that they disliked the results of this event. In this narrative not only was the healing of the demoniac shocking but the destruction of the swine also may have been shocking.

Second, Acts 8:9-24 records an example of how someone may have used shock for commercial purposes. It might be argued that this Simon, a magician, used shock or, at the very least, surprise for personal gain. The reader gets the impression that Simon's use of magic was contrary to beliefs of members of the community of faith.

Third, Acts 16:16 tells of someone who used a slave girl to tell fortunes for commercial gain. The writer of Acts seems to take a dim view of this. Some might assume that fortune telling can be shocking to some people depending on the nature of the fortune. The Apostle Paul is annoyed when she draws attention to him. He puts an end to her work by casting out the demon. Paul is flogged because of the economic loss that, in the mind of the slave owner, he had caused.

Dr. Hagenbuch refers to the Absalom story as an example of shock (2 Samuel 16:15-23). One could argue that Absalom used this action as part of his campaign to undermine his father's authority, something which the Bible considers wrong. While I don't disagree with the selection of this story for analysis, the writer of the story in 2 Samuel does not tell us the impact this action had

on the people. As with other stories, we must infer the likely nature of the impact based on human experiences that we know about. This, it seems, is at times a necessary dimension of studying the Bible when searching for its guidance for business. For example, Moses does not tell us the impact on the people from Arron's miracle with his staff (Exodus 7:12). I imagine that it could have been one of shock, though perhaps not as shocking as the death of the first born sons. Jeremiah's message about serpents coming to kill them could have shocked the people (Jeremiah 8:14-17). At other times Jeremiah's actions may have been shocking, actions that were intended to give a message or draw attention to the messages he was trying to give. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery (Genesis 37:23-33). Given how much the ancient Hebrews valued family loyalty, certainly this must have been a shocking event, perhaps one which could have brought shame to Jacob's whole family once the truth came out years later.

Other Bible passages record the reaction of the people to the event. Jacob hears the news that his son Joseph is not dead but alive! This news stuns Jacob (Genesis 45:26). Boaz is startled when he finds Ruth asleep at his feet in the middle of the night (Ruth 3:8). The disciples see Jesus walking on the water of the lake and are afraid (Matthew 14:26-27). Perhaps we can interpret their fear as a response of shock. Jesus' appearance to the disciples after his resurrection startles them (Luke 24:36-37). Peter gets out of prison with the help of an angel and knocks at the door of a home where the disciples were gathered. The servant Rhoda answers the door and reports to the group that Peter is at the door. They think she is crazy (Acts 12:3-16).

Other examples of responses that might fit in the category of shock include the following: The naming of John the Baptist (Luke 1:59-65) and the healing of the paralyzed man (Luke 5:18-26). During Daniel's visions from God the impact of the apocalyptic images had a dramatic physical effect on him that I conclude is one of shock (Daniel 7:15, 28; 8:27; 10:8, 16). One day Jesus raised a man from the dead, and the impact was one of great fear among the people (Luke 7:12-17). Given the symptoms associated with experiencing the judgment of God, we could argue that the "day of the Lord" – the day of judgment – is a day of shock especially for those who do not believe in

God or a day of divine judgment (Isaiah 22:5; Zechariah 14:13; Revelation 6:16).

Summarizing the symptoms of what might have been shock as mentioned in the Bible, I see the following interrelated categories:

- Paleness of skin (Daniel 5:6-10; 7:28; 10:8; Joel 2:1-6; Nahum 2:10)
- Weakness; exhaustion (Ezekiel 21:7; Daniel 5:6; 8:27; 9:21; 10:8, 16; Nahum 2:10)
- Trembling (Exodus 15:14; Deuteronomy 2:25; 1 Samuel 14:15; Job 4:14; Daniel 10:10; Isaiah 2:19; Jeremiah 23:9; Amos 3:6; Habakkuk 3:16)
- Alarming thoughts (Daniel 7:15, 28)
- Emotional anguish (Exodus 15:14; Esther 4:1-4; Job 15:24; Psalm 48:4-7; Isaiah 13:8; Daniel 10:16; Joel 2:1-6)
- Panic (Psalm 48:6; Isaiah 22:5; Jeremiah 49:24; Lamentations 3:46-48; Zechariah 14:13)
- Fear (Isaiah 21:3; Jeremiah 51:46)
- Distressed spirit or faint spirit (Ezekiel 21:7; Daniel 7:15; Jeremiah 8:17-18; Lamentations 1:22; 5:15-17)
- Wailing (Exodus 12:30; Esther 4:1-4)

These symptoms bring to mind a question that deserves to be part of the conversation: Given the nature of some events (e.g., Peter unexpectedly getting out of prison; Jesus' resurrection from the dead; the graphic details in Daniel's visions), is there any way to completely avoid shock in some situations?

Other elements of the biblical record should be considered also, namely, the grand themes of Scripture which reflect the character of God to be emulated. To this I turn next.

OTHER QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Dr. Hagenbuch offers a set of decision tree questions derived from the analysis of the Scripture record of specific cases of shocking communications. This is helpful. In addition to the specific narratives, Scripture writers collectively present several dimensions of God's character which some call the grand themes of the Bible. Accordingly, we can add the following questions for consideration based on selected grand themes of Scripture:

1. *Cosmic conflict*. Does shock communication foster freedom within boundaries? If so, it is permissible. This is a tricky point since shock, by its nature and its dramatic impact, may limit freedom.
2. *Cosmic conflict*. Is the use of shock advertising an attempt to exploit, coerce or manipulate and thereby undermine freedom? If so, it is not permissible.
3. *Creation*. Will shock communication contribute to or undermine the process of God restoring his image in people who are impacted by the shock? This may be a debatable question.
4. *Holiness*. Will shock advertising be an attempt to intermingle right doing with wrong doing? If so, it is not permissible.
5. *Shalom*. Will shock advertising tend to emphasize one dimension of human flourishing and well-being both individually and as a community (i.e., the economic success of the company using shock advertising) above other dimensions? If so, shock advertising is not permissible.
6. *Justice*. Will shock advertising be fair to the recipients? Will it take unfair advantage of someone? If shock is used for the purpose of coercion or manipulation, or if it takes advantage of someone, it is not permissible.
7. *Truth* (faithfulness in action). Will the use of shock advertising encourage people and communities to be faithful to the principles of a flourishing life (Ten Commandments) when tested by time and circumstances? If so, it is permissible.
8. *Wisdom*. Will the use of shock advertising be destructive of relationships? If so, it is not permissible.
9. *Loyalty* (loving kindness). Will shock advertising encourage loyalty in relationships? If it results in discouraging loyalty, it is not permissible.
10. *Redemption*. Will the use of shock advertising harm some people while it brings others to an action that the advertiser desires? If so, it is not permissible.

Several additional questions need to be part of the community conversation. These include the following:

- Marketing professionals have a challenge in communicating about their products and services. The message they intend to give may be different from the message that is received once it filters through the perceptions of the recipient. Given the intensity of shock advertising, is it possible that shock advertising carries a higher risk of unintended negative consequences when compared with other types of advertising messages? If this is true, shouldn't this concern caution against using shock advertising?
- Is shock like beauty and fairness, i.e., in the eye of the beholder and depends on perception? If so, is it ever possible for the advertiser to know when a shock advertisement is harmless or harmful? What responsibility, if any, does the firm using shock advertising have for "care" for those who are harmed as a result of the shock ad but whose identity is not known to the advertiser?
- If shock is used for a good cause and few other communication methods are accessible, but the shock is harmful in some unintended way, is shock advertising still permissible?
- What is the nature of harm that shock advertising causes? How significant is this harm from a one-time experience? How significant is the harm when there are repeated experiences?
- The article claims that God's use of shock was never "gratuitous," meaning that God always had a compelling reason to use shock. But, isn't the judgment that a compelling reason exists subjective depending on the value that the person is trying to follow or the goal that is trying to be achieved? It seems that this subjective nature of what is compelling begs the moral question at stake.
- It might be possible that "shock," like violence, is merely one point on a continuum with other approaches. Should the intensity of the shock in the shock advertisement

match the intensity of danger or the intensity of the impact of the product in meeting the needs of consumers?

- Can we use an argument from utilitarianism, namely that more good than harm comes from the judicious use of shock advertising. Under some circumstances a shock ad may have an impact, but how willing is the firm to forego revenue and profit in order to avoid harm that the shock does?
- Where might the marketer turn to obtain wisdom from others? Should the marketer ask leaders of other firms that have used shock ads how they managed the societal backlash?
- Can shock ads be targeted via media that does not subject others to the negative impact or harm that the shock ad might cause? Even if sophisticated targeting methods are used, to what degree will the firm be able to prevent harm to some who receive the ad?
- After a serious attempt to let Scripture infuse the decision-makers' heart and the community conversation, there may be some situations where the morality of using shock messages is ambiguous. In these situations how is the faithful Christian marketer to manage residual ambiguity regarding what is right and wrong?

GOSPEL MESSENGERS USE OF SHOCK

Finally, the question that the article poses regarding the ethics of shock messages might be applied to the ethics of spreading the Gospel, as well as to Christians conducting business. For example, Christians have been known to use shock in conveying the Gospel. Preachers sometimes describe in graphic terms the agony of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the Cross or the agony of the damned and the horrors of the lake of fire. Some charismatic evangelists are gifted in "shocking" the emotions of persons attending a preaching service, the emotional shock perhaps bordering on emotional manipulation. Are these uses of shock moral? Is it sufficient merely to say that if the motive is pure ("for the sake of the Gospel"), the action is permissible? It seems that reasonable alternatives to shock messages exist for those preaching the Gospel.