

A Response to “Storytelling, the Bible, and Marketing: An Ancient Framework for Modern Practice”

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It is with great pleasure that I thank Keith Quesenberry for allowing me to humbly add my thoughts in response to his article, “Storytelling, the Bible, and Marketing: An Ancient Framework for Modern Practice.” The author makes a well-documented case for the use of Freytag’s Pyramid (Freytag, 1863) as a framework for today’s marketing, demonstrating the utility of this model by applying it to famous Bible stories. Quesenberry’s (2019) assertions include that Freytag’s Pyramid can, and should, be used in marketing messages and branding efforts. In this response, the author will extend Quesenberry’s argument to offer a critique of Freytag’s Pyramid, the benefit of emotional appeals and stickiness, and the call to create messages that produce action in both the Christian context and the business world.

While Freytag’s Pyramid (Freytag, 1863) has been applied to literature for over a century, using it as a creative template may force great storytelling to conform to its five-phase model (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement). As Quesenberry (2019) states, the basis of Freytag’s Pyramid is Aristotle’s three-step process of simply having a beginning, middle, and end that relate to one another. Lien and Chin (2013) support the idea of storytelling as an effective way to convey brand value through attaching affective reactions to memory. However, in their research, they noted that the simpler the story, the more likely the hearer would relate to it. They advocated for the use of “slice-of-life” within the context of storytelling and advertisements (Lien & Chin, 2013).

Slice-of-life mini stories can be used to reach a mass audience and convey the emotional appeals necessary to gain action from that audience, i.e. purchase a product. Freytag’s Pyramid was originally created to fully analyze the works of William Shakespeare (Freytag, 1863). While this model is useful for that purpose and others, it is also understood that storytelling must be relatable to create the connection that the consumer must have with the brand to create value in that person’s life (Akgün, Keskin,

Ayar & Erdoğan, 2015). Looking toward literary devices as a guide can help format storytelling, in the marketing context. At the same time, there must be a relatable element to inspire action. This could be to solidify a relationship, educate the consumer, create a belief, or purchase a product. These stories might not have a defined climax or denouement but might have a continuous storyline that brings value. Consider the “Mac vs. PC” campaign, which was meant to educate the audience about what Mac could do (Nudd, 2011). The use of visual storytelling was critical in this campaign, but there was arguably never a denouement. Each advisement ended, never stating the action to take. The advertisement was for branding purposes and the action was implied. It was simply a series of comparisons between a Mac user and a personal computer user. Freytag’s Pyramid does not account for such visual elements that are seemingly effective in many of today’s marketing messages, where there is not always a conclusion per se.

This same truncated format can be seen in the biblical context with the book of Proverbs. Many of the proverbs are snippets of information and advice that were collected for the reader to gain inspiration or meaning (Swindoll, n.d.). While some proverbs have stories and direct advice to future generations, some leave readers to interpret the meaning and posit how it applies in their own lives.

Heath and Heath (2010) discuss the need to have “stickiness” in one’s content and storytelling. To engage the consumer in these affective means for emotional recall, the story has to be able to stick and become meaningful to the hearer. This can be done through emotional appeals. Freytag’s Pyramid (1863) does not directly speak to emotions or the emotional appeal. Quesenberry (2019) incorporates this aspect of storytelling when discussing the commercial “Puppy Love” by Budweiser. Quesenberry (2019) discusses the “emotional rollercoaster” that is used to draw in the audience, demonstrating this particular element of storytelling outside Freytag’s model.

The seven emotional appeals that are used in marketing and advertising include humor, music, scarcity, reason, emotion, sex, and fear (Intrepid Web Studio, 2017). Throughout the “Puppy Love” commercial, the audience feels the emotions that are conveyed through the use of music and visual storytelling, as there are no words spoken in the commercial. While the audience is engaged in the emotions they feel during the commercial, they are left with a positive impression of the brand associated with it.

This is actually a different approach from biblical storytelling. The Bible must convey emotion exclusively through the written word and cannot rely on musical or visual cues to signal emotional change. Using the same examples as Quesenberry (2019), Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:4-3:24) and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), both employ strong emotional language. In the story of Adam and Eve, we see the emotions of the story conveyed by both parties, and understand the feelings behind them. God was angry with Adam and Eve, they felt no shame at their nakedness before the fall, and after it they were cast out of paradise, never to return.

The emotional messages are, of course, dependent on how one reads the passages. When one reads something, one can infer the extent of the emotion. However, when one sees the story through a richer medium, less interpretation is required. One can feel the empathetic transfer of emotional contagion from the actors to the audience. This transfer of emotions from one group of people to another through modeling or visual cues is well-based in psychological research (Barsade, Coutifaris, & Pillemer, 2018). However, in the written word, there is no such modeling. Rather, one’s interpretation of the text and the emotions that are conveyed can be muddled by word choice, the reader’s attitude, or her frame of reference (Liang, Xie, Rao, Lau, & Wang, 2018). For example, Genesis 2:25 states that Adam and Eve felt no shame in their nakedness prior to the fall. Shame in different cultures and ages could evoke a variety of emotions. It may even lack a specific meaning, including likening shame to guilt (Luoma, n.d.). With one word having multiple meanings or even lacking a specific meaning, the emotions that the word “shame” might evoke within the reader can be quite different.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is intended to convey to the reader, among other important lessons, that our heavenly Father will welcome us with love if we admit our sin and come back to Him. However, the rejoicing that the father portrays at the end of the story could be envisioned in different ways. This author always envi-

sioned the father screaming to the world. However, in many cultures, pride and rejoicing are often expressed by quiet acceptance. Quesenberry (2019) is absolutely right to quote William Bernbach on the need for the audience to feel the message in order to inspire an action.

Quesenberry (2019) also makes a solid point when it comes to the storytelling of TOMS shoes. The method was simple. Tell a meaningful story about your product that can empower your brand advocates to tell the story on your behalf. Through conveying the brand meaning and empowering others to tell the story for the brand through word-of-mouth, TOMS experienced mass market success. However, the TOMS message often leaves out the “what’s next?” question of just doing business with those that are creating a positive impact and inspiring others to get involved. This phenomenon generated the term “slacktivism” throughout the social media space, meaning advocating for something by doing as little as possible (Seay, 2014). The consumer of today wants to feel that the companies they do business with are involved in some legitimate level of social activism (Chamberlain, 2018).

This is a very important research question that could be addressed in the biblical context, following Schmidt’s (2011) *Christian Atheist: Believing in God But Living As If He Doesn’t Exist*. The younger son’s role in the parable of the Prodigal Son ends with his being accepted and celebrated. For Christians, however, one’s story should not end with acceptance. It should be a radically life-changing experience with an increasing repertoire of stories to tell. Once a person becomes a Christian, she must seek to understand her role in God’s kingdom, not how conveniently God can be fit into her life.

Quesenberry (2019) states the need for more research in the parallels of biblical storytelling and marketing, and this author agrees. There are many aspects that marketers can draw from the Bible to help create better stories for their customers and improve brand loyalty. However, more research could also be done in the aspect of applying marketing principles to the Bible’s own story. The Great Commission encourages all Christians (including Christian marketers) to tell the story of God’s redemptive plan and lead others to salvation. Karns (2002; 2008) has published literature to help Christian marketers. However, researchers in the marketing discipline can definitely do more to help grow the Kingdom of God. Is this through better storytelling? It is a better device than many others; that much has been demonstrated. Thank you, Dr. Quesenberry.

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