

## God, Life, and Everything New Ads Stretching Us?

When I was working on my journalism degree at Indiana University lo these many years ago, I was required to take a course in advertising. The professor had worked several decades in advertising for Proctor & Gamble and believed in what he did. The more I learned about advertising, however, the less I liked it. Whenever I had to try to sell something, I could not find justifiable reasons for doing so. Nobody needed this garbage.

So now, when I watch TV commercials, it is with a jaded eye. The only sermon I have preached more than once is one about commercials. I take the story of the temptation of Adam and Eve in Genesis and line it up side by side with a commercial (or really, any advertisement).

Turns out this story follows the same pattern as most commercials: 1) gain the target's trust, 2) question their assumptions/values, 3) plant seeds of doubt about their self-worth, 4) offer a "solution" which will help them feel good about themselves again.

For those who don't remember, the Genesis story starts with the serpent chatting up Eve, nice and innocent. Next, the serpent questions Eve about why she doesn't eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. When she says that God told her she will die if she eats, the serpent says (and I paraphrase), "No, you won't die. If you eat, you'll be like God. but as it is, you are NOT like God; you're less than God, NOT all that you can be. Eat, and you will be good enough."

Compare that with, say, a Mountain Dew commercial several years ago. It had a young guy who had just drunk a Mountain Dew jump out of an airplane with only a snowboard, land perfectly on a snowy mountain, the speed down to jubilant crowds. Next it panned to a geeky guy drinking a Coke and playing Bingo. The voice-over went something like: Do you want to be a Mountain Dew guy or a Coke guy?

Clearly, you want to be a Mountain Dew guy, just as surely as Eve wanted to be better than she was.

So again, I look at commercials with a lot of mistrust.

This is true even with cutting edge commercials like the two that have been the talk of the country lately. Of course, I'm talking about the Cheerios and Coca Cola ad that aired during the Super Bowl but were making the rounds online well before that.

The Cheerios commercial has an adorable little girly and her father (who is African American) discussing the impending birth of a sibling. When the girl requests a puppy as well, and Dad says "Deal," Mom (who is white), raises her eyebrows as if to say, "We'll discuss this later."

Coke's commercial has a lot of shots of people singing "America the Beautiful" (which is *not* our national anthem, by the way) in several languages. One shot includes a presumably gay couple.

The outrage that these two commercials incited was predictable. How dare they show a mixed-race couple as if it were normal? How dare they allow *our* song to be sung in *foreign* languages - one of which was Keres the language of the Hopi, who are *native* American. And then, to show two gays? The horror!

Does this make Cheerios and Coke brave? Trail-blazing? Bastions of the liberal downfall of America?

No. It makes them pragmatic corporations (okay, Cheerios is a brand of a big corporation - General Mills - but you get the idea).

These corporations, focused on profit before bravery, have figured out that society has changed, and they are playing to it. It comes off as brave, of course, because it incites outrage. But, they know that the outrage is publicity (any publicity is good publicity), and they know that the bulk of society looks at the outrage with contempt - and therefore support the companies.

Having said that, it is a good sign that people of many languages are recognized, that gays are seen as vital citizens deserving the same rights others share, and that interracial couples are just couples.

There was a recent program in which children were shown the Cheerios commercial and asked what they thought. They all thought it was cute, and not one mentioned the mixed-race nature of the family. When it was pointed out to them, they responded with, "So?" And when they were told that some people were upset by the mixed-race parents, they all - regardless of their racial background - scratched their heads in bewilderment and asked, "Why?" Yes, society is changing.

So, I may be jaded when it comes to what motivated these commercials, but all in all, I'm glad that these markers of our progress are there.

Now if we can just progress past the rabid consumerism that makes ads viable.