

# A TXT 4 2DAY

SIMON JENKINS



**SIMON JENKINS** is an editor, speaker and writer who has an MA in theology and education. The founder and editor of [ship-of-fools.com](http://ship-of-fools.com) and editor of Christian Aid's portal website, [fish.co.uk](http://fish.co.uk), his books include *The Bible from Scratch* and *Windows into Heaven: the icons and spirituality of Russia*.

**THEY LOOK LIKE ANY OLD FLIP-FLOPS. BLUE, RUBBERY, AND WITH THAT ANNOYING BIT YOU HAVE TO SQUEEZE BETWEEN YOUR TOES.** But take a stroll along the beach, and with every step your feet will be witnessing to the Good News, because the raised pattern on the sole of the right flip-flop has the word "Jesus", while the left flip-flop reads, "loves you".

As the sales blurb says: "While the words disappear as the sands shift and the sidewalk dries, these footprints leave the greatest impression on the soul!"

Ship of Fools magazine ([www.ship-of-fools.com](http://www.ship-of-fools.com)) has been lampooning evangelistic flip-flops, the Talking Tombstone, Jesus the Hot Air Balloon and a host of other dubious religious products ever since we set sail on the internet on April Fools' Day, 1998.

Soon after our launch, we were dubbed "the *Private Eye* of the religious world" by *The Daily Telegraph*, and although humour and satire are at the heart of what we do, it's not the whole story. Our aim is to stir up "Christian unrest" through journalism, entertainment, popular theology and online community.

Because of our unorthodox approach, we're reaching an audience that is crucial for the future survival of the Christian faith: people who have a phobia about church but are curious about God; people who prefer their religion disorganised; people who have ditched Christianity but still hang around wondering if anything good can come out of their experience.

With more than three years worth of online adventures behind us, we've learned a lot about how communication can work on the still-new medium of the internet. Three big themes have emerged for us: entertainment, community and experimentation.

The entertainment theme is easy to cover, but a lot of Christian websites miss it. In the words of sociologist Neil Postman, we are living "in the age of showbiz". All our communication has to be framed in the context of entertainment, and especially if it's appearing on the small screen.

So rather than lament shortened attention spans and soundbites, we regard them as a creative challenge: how do we communicate in our culture, which prefers to receive its information as entertainment? How do we use post-modern playfulness and irony in the way we communicate? We've had an excess of fun in answering these questions!

Our second theme, community, has been a real eye-opener. My background is in the world of book and magazine publishing. And in fact, Ship of Fools started life as a small-circulation print magazine back in the late 1970s, just after I'd finished studying theology. So when we launched the website, I thought it would mostly be a case of "translating" what we had done in print onto the Net.

The big surprise was that our readers were extremely responsive – much more so than readers in the medium of print. In the early days we were bombarded with email. After three months, we started a bulletin board so that our readers could start talking to each other, rather than just to us, and an online community was born.

We now have 10 bulletin boards and a total membership of more than 1,500 people, with four administrators and 22 board hosts to encourage discussion, keep things on track and help settle disputes. This makes us one of the largest and liveliest Christian discussion spaces on the Net.

But it's more than discussion. This is a virtual community, complete with its own public spaces, arguments, traditions, recurring jokes, house rules, small groups and gossip – plus an unplugged life, too, with people travelling to meet each other, and a handful of couples falling in love and getting married. I was best man at a wedding of two "shipmates" this summer.

Like any community, the best sort of communication happens not from the centre outwards, but around the edges, as people talk and become friends. And this is where theological and biblical education happens, as people debate what they do and don't believe, sharing their ideas, experiences and honest doubts, talking about subjects which would be problematic in a local church or in a Bible study group.

Last year we ran a series of discussions on a then new book by Stephen Parsons called *Ungodly Fear*, which investigated the abuse of power in churches. We published online extracts from the book and invited visitors to the site to share their own experiences and reflect theologically on the problems. The debate attracted over 1,000 contributions on financial, sexual and emotional abuse and showed how the Net can facilitate detailed and responsible discussion of issues as no other medium can.

Our experience of being a community sometimes raises the question of whether Ship of Fools could ever be regarded as a church. The last time we put this question to the vote (in 1999), a surprisingly high 44 per cent of respondents said yes. Currently the only "online ►

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► churches” I know of are spoof websites such as The Church of the Blind Chihuahua – and I find it surprising that no one has yet made a serious attempt to convert their online community into online church. This is something we’re now seriously considering.

Aside from entertainment and community, our other big theme has been experimentation. Earlier this year, I heard about a church pastor from Frankfurt who ran the world’s first mobile phone text-messaging service. The service took place in a church, but young people out on the streets were able to participate by receiving messages, which I think creates interesting possibilities about integrating worship into everyday life.

As a result, we ran an online competition for the best version of the Lord’s Prayer in text message form. The task itself was not easy. The traditional version of the Lord’s Prayer is 372 characters long, so whittling it down to the 160 characters of a standard text message meant cutting the prayer by more than half but without losing anything important.

Out of a strong field of over 100 entries, a history student at York University came up with the winning entry, which read;

dad@hvn,ur spshl.we want wot u want&curth2b like hvn.giv us food&4giv r sins lyk we 4giv uvaz.don’t test us!save us!bcos we kno ur boss,ur tuf&cur cool 4 evalok?

One entrant (a vicar from North Wales) took a refreshingly cavalier approach to the task, sending in an extreme shortcut with his 48-character prayer ...

Hi Fr., Mat 6:9 – 13 again pls. Cheers. c u in ch.

Like many Ship of Fools projects, the Lord’s Prayer text message competition was very media-friendly. All four national tabloids splashed the story, the *Daily Mail* leading with the headline: “Lord’s Prayer rewritten to bring the Church up 2 d8”.

At this year’s Greenbelt festival, we ran another text message project called Matins & Vespers, where people could receive micro-liturgies on their mobiles every morning and evening, with prayers, readings and suggestions for action delivered via text messaging.

My feeling when we were putting this project together was that the whole thing could be rather trivial, but I met youth workers at the festival who use text messaging with their young people both in and out of church services and find it highly effective. After Greenbelt, I received the following email from a young Greenbelter:

“I was really sceptical beforehand, but these messages were wonderful reminders to pause and pray, to do something practical, to find space. They flew into the phone and were with me all day. They were unobtrusive but powerfully active in the way they stopped me rushing about and gave me reason to pause.”

Our latest adventure is a new bulletin board, just launched, called Kerygmania, which has the subtitle, “the Bible and why it doesn’t apply to me”. This board will give contributors the chance to raise and debate specific texts from the Bible, and will also provide a rolling commentary and discussion on readings taken from the Revised Common Lectionary.

We believe that this will be a major resource for visitors and community members alike, and the beauty of it is that it is informal and open to contributions from experts and non-experts alike. Judging by the initial response (100 contributions in 48 hours), there is great demand for ventures such as this.

For someone like me, raised on books, magazines and other “dead tree” items, the internet and the converging new media offer amazing opportunities for communication and community if only we’re prepared to experiment and take risks.

It’s communication, but not as we’ve known it. It’s better than we’ve known it, far better. This is an exciting time to be alive. ■