

DAVID ROBERTSON

# What Would Jesus Post?

A **BIBLICAL** approach to **ONLINE INTERACTION**

Foreword by Nicholas Baines, Bishop of Leeds

1 My people, hear my teaching,  
2 I will open my mouth, and I will  
3 I will utter hidden things, things from of  
4 things our ancestors have told us  
5 We will tell the next generation

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# Foreword

Christians are called by Jesus himself to be salt and light in a complex world. The thing about salt is that, as a refrigerant or fertiliser (in first-century Palestine), it gets absorbed by the meat or soil and loses its identity; it gives up its life for the sake of that to which it is committed.

But, how does this apply to a world now dominated by the internet with all its promise and threat? How should Christians get stuck in to a world of communication over which they have little control, but from which they cannot afford to withdraw? What might it mean for Christians to shed light in a medium that gives licence to a massive amount of darkness?

The first thing to note is that Jesus cared less about his own 'cleanliness' than he did about contaminating his world with grace, generosity, honesty, mercy and love. If he didn't worry about getting dirty, then neither should his people. This is a relief because engagement with the online world is not a precise art, and cannot be controlled. Getting stuck in means taking a risk, learning from mistakes and exploring opportunities as well as questioning challenges.

The second thing to note is that the key to online engagement is the recognition that it involves conversation rather than preaching. If you preach a monologue, you will find only the converted listening online; conversation invites challenge, dispute and hearing views we might not like. But, that's the nature of the beast, and we should not kid ourselves that we are being heard just because we have said or written something.

All of this underlies this helpful book. Rather than urging that good Christians shun a frequently dodgy medium, David Robertson offers straightforward and wise advice for those who wish to reflect on what Christian engagement looks like. ‘Humble, hospitable and generous’ is more than the title of a chapter; it summarises what Robertson wants to encourage. Every individual will need to work out what their engagement might look like, but this book offers some guidelines for keeping us generally on track.

**Rt Revd Nicholas Baines**

Bishop of Leeds

# Introduction

## The way it is

The idea of the internet as a network, or ‘web’, of connected computers all using the same ‘protocols’ to communicate with each other (regardless of the different software being run on each machine) was first developed in the 1960s. Tim Berners-Lee created the World Wide Web as we know it in 1990, and in 1995 the first Internet Service Providers (ISPs) made it accessible to the general public. By 2010, it had become ubiquitous in every aspect of contemporary life – so, in a few short years the internet changed... well, what?

The world? No.

Before the internet, the world was a mixture of the great, the good, the indifferent, the bad and the ugly. The internet has changed the way in which human beings access the world and contact each other, but the technology (tech) has not created a utopia. The world is the same as it always has been and the internet reflects this. Go online and you will find that the great, the good, the indifferent, the bad and the ugly are all just one click away.

Because of the rapid development of the internet, we live in a broadly three-generational tech-culture. The older generation are ‘tech-immigrants’, many of whom don’t speak the language of the new ‘online land’, still prefer to operate in the ‘offline’ culture of their past and think in the ‘offline language’ of their earlier years. The middle generation are ‘tech-assimilators’ who have integrated into the online land, language and culture (which they understand and appreciate, and can interpret for the older generation). The younger generation

are ‘indigenous’ to the online land; it is where they live, how they think and their culture. This three-generational tech-culture is neither race- nor language-dependent, and while there are individual exceptions with cross-generational tech-attitudes, it applies generally to every nation, neighbourhood and family on the planet.

The question for Christian people is, in an online age, regardless of the generation to which we belong, which biblical principles shape our approach to online interaction?

## Digging deeper

The majority of British people will answer that question with another: ‘Why would the Bible have *anything* to say about the internet?’ After all, the Bible is a collection of ancient books and the internet is brand-new tech! How could the one be of any possible relevance to the other? Those same people, however, will access the world through the web, stare at their screens in horror and ask, ‘Why are people so horrible to each other? Why can’t everyone just be nice?’ At that point, they have just asked two of the most basic questions that exist – and the Bible not only answers them, it offers a solution that changes everything.

Paul wrote: ‘All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work’ (2 Timothy 3:16–17). The way human beings access information, products and services through the internet is constantly developing. The way we connect with each other and interact online has been transformed. Yet none of this has made any fundamental changes to human beings. We remain with our hopes, fears, aspirations, talents, flaws... (and the list goes on).

New tech never changes people per se, and history shows that it offers both opportunities and consequences. For example,

developments in transport, industry, printing, communications, media (you name it) have all provided opportunities, but have also come with consequences (such as the increasing global rich/poor divide and environmental pollution). Neither steam trains nor paperback books intrinsically changed human beings, but the opportunities they provided did, and in every age, Christians have reflected on new tech and asked, ‘How can we approach this new opportunity in a way that honours God and affirms others?’ The answer, of course, has been through a biblical approach, allowing the ‘God-breathed’ scriptures to address the human condition which bubbles away under, and through, the tech.

## **Pause for thought**

**If Jesus had access to the internet, what would he post? His parables? His sharp observations on hypocrisy? No one can say, but we can guess what he would share or retweet. He regularly quoted the scriptures, so the psalms would no doubt figure in his online feed. More than this, though, Jesus was ‘God with us’ (Matthew 1:22–23), which, in online jargon, means: God’s self-post to the world; God’s post-made-flesh; and he not only retweeted the scriptures, he inhabited them and fulfilled them (Matthew 26:56). What would Jesus post? The words behind the title on the cover of this book are there for a reason (Psalm 78:1–4).**

## **Joining the dots**

The internet exists only while computers are switched on. If power stations run out of sustainable fuel, and the electricity supply fails, so does the internet. If the natural resources needed to manufacture online devices are mined to exhaustion (for example, the silicone used for chips, the gold used for electrical connections on circuit boards, the lithium used to make batteries, and the indium used to coat touchscreens) the internet stops. The internet may appear to have a life which is independent from elements dug from the soil,

but it doesn't; in the sense that for it to exist it must consume the earth's resources, it isn't 'free'. For the near future, however, it is likely to remain and, providing new tech-elements replace those which are being consumed (and running out), our great-great-grandchildren will connect online too.

It may be helpful for those who are hazy about the internet to understand it as a 'land' or a 'town' which has:

- **Roads.** These are provided by Internet Service Providers (ISPs). Most people pay for 'toll-road access' by signing a contract, paying a monthly fee and using the router their ISP sends them to 'get them on the road'. Some people sign up for 'free' ISP access (providing they are happy to be advertised to all the time). Without an ISP, you won't be going anywhere on the internet, but once you are online, where you go is up to you, and search engines are like satnavs which direct you to the places you want to visit.
- **Private addresses.** These are personal 'locations' on the internet and you will have one or more address. It's where you 'live' online, and where you can be contacted.
- **Shops.** You can visit, browse, buy things, ask for clarification, talk to other customers (by reading their reviews and asking them questions), complain and generally interact.
- **Entertainment.** Where you go to watch movies, listen to music, read books and so forth.
- **Communications.** These include 'post boxes' for sending digital letters and 'phone boxes' for making digital phone calls.
- **Community spaces.** Online 'chat rooms' still exist where people can discuss issues or make friends in real time, but mostly, social media now provides both 'real-time' and 'when convenient' interaction.

- **Billboards.** These tend to be amateur websites (for example, church websites) which advertise their services and provide contact details. Like billboards by the roadside, you can look at what's on offer, but you can't go in and shop or interact; if you want to make contact, you have to 'write' or 'phone'.
- **A marketplace.** The online 'open arena' is the contemporary equivalent of the first-century 'marketplace' and it can be very busy, noisy, shouty and even scary.

A fundamental concept to understand is that the internet itself has no 'content' (any more than TV aerials contain programmes) and that every single 'place' on the internet is a website. When you are online, you are not looking at 'the internet', you are viewing a series of websites:

- Amazon, eBay, Ocado, the supermarkets, the banks, and *millions* more, are all websites. They are complex, professional websites, but they are still just websites.
- Google, Bing, Yahoo, Ask (and all search engines) – websites again.
- Netflix, iTunes, on-demand TV and all the entertainment providers – they are websites too.
- ISPs (BT, Sky, Virgin, TalkTalk and the rest) are accessed through their websites.
- Gmail, Skype and all the other email, texting, messaging and video-call facilitators – websites.
- Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Reddit, Flickr (and the plethora of social media sites) are all websites as well, just like your personal blog or your church website is a website.

Every single time you look at your device screen, you connect to a website of one kind or another. To express it at its most basic, imagine that your computer screen has two sides; you look through the front of yours, but your screen is connected back-to-back to someone else's; you look through your screen into theirs, and they look through their screen into yours.

Only the protocols which allow the internet to function are fixed points. Websites come and go and, while the major sites are likely to develop and remain, no website is eternal. Similarly, the devices we use to access the internet change over time. At the moment, we use desktop computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones to interact online, but that will no doubt change as new tech becomes available. While tech and websites come and go, however, the biblical principles which help us to steward our online interactions remain. They do not change – and *they* are the focus of this book. Resources abound to help those who wish to develop a church website or social media page, setting up profiles, privacy options, along with really useful, practical advice about dealing with technical difficulties<sup>1</sup> – but these matters are not the subject of this book. Here, the focus is not on the tech that allows us to interact, nor on the websites through which we interact, but on the people with whom we interact personally, and on how Christians might approach that interaction from a biblical direction.

## A way forward

You can read this book, if you wish, by ‘dipping in’ and reading the chapters in order of your interest, but be aware that the early chapters inform those that come later, and later chapters make more sense once the principles outlined in earlier chapters have been considered. Having said that, every chapter follows the same pattern, with the same headings:

- **The way it is:** outlines a particular issue or challenge.
- **Digging deeper:** considers a biblical understanding of the issue or challenge.
- **Joining the dots:** links the issue or challenge with either practical ‘real-world’ consequences, the overall biblical thinking, or with both.

- **A way forward:** points towards attitudes and behaviour that can encourage a biblical approach.
- **Pause for thought:** (which can appear under any heading) gives a different perspective to encourage reflection, discussion and a deeper understanding. In a teaching series, these could be used as illustrations.
- **The biblical principle:** suggests a Bible passage which expresses the biblical insight. The main topic of this book is the personal stewardship of online interaction, and biblical quotations are included throughout. Other biblical understandings contribute to this 'main stream', though, and further references nod in the direction of these related topics. You can read this book without pursuing any of them, or you can use them for further Bible study.<sup>2</sup>
- **Wisdom from the Psalms:** can be used for personal reflection, group prayer, or the basis of a liturgical response.
- **Some questions to think about:** can be used for personal reflection, group discussion or suggestions for practical application.

The intention is for this book to be as flexible as possible. Individuals can use it to think through their personal online interaction; parents and youth leaders can use it to help children and young people; groups can use it as a study aid; and church leaders can use it as a resource.

The sectional approach in each chapter also allows for easy revisiting. For example, if you want to go back and focus on the theology, head for the 'Digging deeper' section of each chapter; if it's the practical applications that are of most interest, go to 'A way forward'; if it's a resource for devotional material you are after, go to 'Wisdom from the Psalms'. Just be aware that reading each chapter in order will give the most rounded understanding of a biblical

approach to online interaction, and the sectional approach within each chapter is intended to help those who wish to use this book as a resource as they develop their own programmes directly suited to their local or personal situation.

And finally, before we move on to Chapter 1, we need to define terms. While some websites use the same jargon, others use their own. Depending on the sites you use (especially when it comes to social media):

- **You may be a:** customer, member, user, contact, friend, follower, pinner, circle (and who knows what else).
- **You will either:** post, tweet, pin, publish, snap; share, retweet, network; like, note, +1, follow, reblog, connect; comment, message, tag, hashtag (and that's before you invite, stumble, upvote, dislike or story).

Clearly, within the covers of this book, terms need to be agreed, otherwise, on each occasion, a whole list has to be used. Although Facebook and Twitter have coined the most ubiquitous terms, this book is not partisan in any way, so the terms used in the following pages will be as neutral as possible and not suggest a connection to any single company or website:

- **Post** means: add content, tweet, pin, publish, snap...
- **Circulate** means: share, retweet, network...
- **Approve** means: like, note, endorse...
- **Remark** means: comment; reply...
- **Message** means: mail, email, message, text...
- And... rather than using terms such as 'physical world' and 'virtual world' (or similar) the terms 'offline life' and 'online life' will usually be used. This puts the focus on the life, rather than on the 'world', and makes it clear that our focus is personal rather than objective.

## The biblical principle

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

ROMANS 12:2a

The internet provides a new opportunity to connect with other people, and leaves Christians with a choice – to be conformed to the online culture which, by default, has already established itself, or to look to God, through the transforming of our minds, and approach online life in a different way.

## Wisdom from the Psalms

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,  
the world, and all who live in it.

PSALM 24:1

## Some questions to think about

- 1 Which tech-generation are you? What online issues are of most concern to you personally? What issues concern you most about the other two tech-generations' online lives?
- 2 Do you think that your online life has been conformed to the online world, or transformed by God's renewing of your mind? Have you asked God to do this?
- 3 Make a list of the websites you regularly visit and interact with, and reflect on opportunities you have taken and opportunities you know you have missed. At the beginning of this book, what is your hope for your online life?

If Jesus had access to the internet, what would he post? And, as importantly, what wouldn't he post? This invaluable book asks intriguing questions of those of us who engage with the internet:

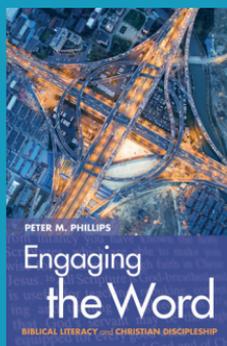
- Which biblical principles inform its use?
- How might Christians steward their online presence?
- What does it mean to be followers of Jesus in this critical area of our lives?

An indispensable read for today's Christian.

**David Robertson** is vicar of South Ossett, West Yorkshire. He has ministered in rural, suburban and urban deprived parishes and, as a graduate in Biblical Studies, he is primarily a Bible teacher. He has written several books, as well as daily Bible readings for BRF.

## Engaging the Word

Peter M. Phillips



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