

The inimitable Paul (Philippians 3:4b-14)

He has the most obvious authorial voice in the New Testament.

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In 2003, I played the apostle Paul on *The Ark*, the internet's first reality competition show, sponsored by the Christian humor website Ship of Fools. It was a *Big Brother*-esque elimination game, in which 12 biblical characters lived as avatars on a kind of ark, with animals (even a T-Rex!) in the hold and a crow's nest where characters could chat with God. Every few days, the watching community took a vote, and one of the avatars walked the plank.

In addition to playing strange games and engaging in staged controversies, characters were supposed to keep a diary. In Paul's diary, I decided to write a third epistle to the Corinthians. I had to be funny but also stay true to my character. Fortunately, Paul has the most obvious authorial voice in the New Testament, and it was easy to do riffs on his braggadocio ("If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more, blah, blah, blah...") and bossiness. More challenging was staying true to Paul's essential conviction: that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has transformed everything—not only Paul himself but the entire creation.

Although I tried to make Paul a great evangelist, and although the funny folks at Ship of Fools were being as cutting edge as they could in making Christian faith fun and relevant, I'm not sure that either the jokes or the attempts at serious Christian messaging actually reached anyone. Probably the folks watching a livestream of pixelated avatars banging around a pixelated ship, speaking in typed-in quote bubbles, and doing religious improv at dial-up speed were the usual suspects: devotees of Ship of Fools, friends and family of the people playing the various biblical characters, and us, the actors behind the avatars.

Recently, as I went digging back through the text of 3 Corinthians, I realized that nothing I wrote or did on *The Ark* could possibly be as effective as the words written by the actual apostle Paul. Because I could never write anything as wonderful as this: "One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."