

Faith Pulpit

The Value of Bible Software for Ministry, Part 1

Never before has there been a more exciting time to study the Word of God. Resources that at one time were available only to a few privileged people are now available to anyone with a computer. Over the last two decades, Bible software has made incredible leaps in providing students of the Word of God with powerful tools for exegesis. Both of us have used Bible software programs extensively in our education, teaching, and church ministries. Barely a day goes by when we are not using our respective research programs for classes, sermon and lesson preparation, scholarly research, or simply for devotions. Without equivocation, Bible software has greatly enhanced our ministries and enabled us to study the Scriptures more efficiently.

This article falls into two parts. First, we hope to demonstrate the value of Bible software for pastors and students. We will discuss some benefits and cautions pertaining to Bible software, including what you can and cannot expect to accomplish with a research program. Second, we will briefly present our respective programs that we use and recommend Accordance (Prof. Little) and BibleWorks (Dr. Brown). While it is impossible to review every feature of these programs, we will try to give you a taste of what these programs can do. It is our goal to help you decide whether Bible software might help you fulfill your ministry more effectively.

Why Use Bible Software?

Benefits of Using Bible Software

(1) Efficiency. The number one reason why every student of the Word of God should invest in a Bible software program is that it saves time. Anyone who knows how to do solid exegesis is aware that it takes a lot of time and energy. Good pastors and teachers really do labor in the Word (1 Timothy 5:17). Using quality Bible software does not cut this process short, but instead enables pastors to do exegesis in a more efficient manner.

(2) Accessibility. Closely related to efficiency is the benefit of accessibility. Most pastors who have taken Greek and/or Hebrew own lexicons, concordances, grammars, and dictionaries (or at least they should!). The reality is that while they have these volumes on their shelves, it is difficult to use them regularly. Bible software enables you to access the best exegetical resources with the ease of pointing, clicking, and dragging your mouse. Tasks that might take hours manually are suddenly reduced to minutes electronically. Research programs integrate lexicons and dictionaries right into the text, encouraging you toward deeper study. This kind of user-friendliness encourages the exegete to use better sources. In addition, a quality program will add to your library some of the more essential exegetical tools that you may currently lack.

(3) Proficiency. Pastors and missionaries should invest in a Bible program because it enables them to keep studying the biblical languages. All too often, pastors come back to Faith and confess that they no longer possess the ability to read Greek or Hebrew. After investing countless hours of study in these languages and a small fortune in tuition and books, they find themselves asking, “Was it all for naught?” Why do college and seminary graduates forsake their study of the languages? The reason is often that using and maintaining the languages consumes too much time and energy. A powerful program such as Accordance or BibleWorks can help students of the Word maintain or even revive their biblical languages skills.

(4) Portability. This final reason does not apply to everyone, but nevertheless demands attention. Because Bible software can be loaded onto a laptop, it is possible for ministers on the go to study and exegete virtually anywhere. Imagine missionaries on the deputation trail far from a study or library preparing sermons with the very best exegetical tools at their disposal. If portability is important to you, it is worth noting that several commentary sets and dictionaries are available in electronic format with some Bible programs. We will say more about this later.

Cautions in Using Bible Software

(1) Bible software cannot replace language study. Nothing can replace a real knowledge of a language. We do not want someone to be deceived into thinking that buying a quality Bible program can somehow replace the study of Greek or Hebrew. Those with little or no language training can benefit from Bible software. Without first-hand knowledge of the biblical languages and training in hermeneutics and exegesis, however, Bible software in the hands of a novice can actually be quite dangerous.¹ The bottom line is that these programs will be more useful to those who have had at least a year of Greek or Hebrew than it will be to those who have not.

(2) Bible software may deter language proficiency. Ironically, while a Bible program can be an excellent aid, it can also become a crutch, hindering students from learning biblical Greek and Hebrew. Because it is so easy to parse verbs, decline nouns, and translate inflected terms using Bible software, students may come to rely on their program instead of going through the rigors of learning the

language. Learning a language is hard work, and for most students Bible software may become a temptation that can cut the learning process short. For this reason, the language instructors at FBBC&TS are cautious about how students use Bible software during their first year in Greek and Hebrew.

There is often a direct correlation between one's proficiency in the biblical languages and the time it takes to prepare for sermons and lessons (see chart). The more proficient you become in the languages, the more time you will ultimately save in preparation. Conversely, those without any language training often spend less time in preparation simply because they do not use any Greek or Hebrew tools. Those with some training (e.g., first year Greek or Hebrew students) usually end up spending more time in preparation; they see the value of using the original languages but are not yet capable of using them efficiently. Most language students get "over the hump" of competency sometime during their second or third year of language studies. There is no way that Bible software alone can produce this kind of proficiency.

(3) Bible software promotes electronic books rather than printed books. While the electronic format of books has some appeal, both of us prefer reading books in print rather than on the computer. As a result, we will both continue to purchase commentaries in book form. The current trend with some software programs, however, is to publish commentaries and dictionaries in electronic format. This is true especially of Logos, the other well-known Microsoft Windows-based Bible software program. Since the design of BibleWorks and Accordance is more for exegesis, they provide mostly exegetical reference tools rather than a complete library.² Another potential problem with purchasing books in electronic format is that technology and media are continually changing. Programs that "read" electronic books are always improving and could eventually render certain electronic formats obsolete. We seriously doubt that books in print will ever go the way of eight-track tapes.

(4) Bible software requires a certain level of computer literacy. We have both noticed that some people who purchase Bible software never take the time to learn how to use it. No matter what program you choose, you need to realize that it will take some time and effort to grasp how to utilize effectively each program's capabilities (as is the case with any computer program). Some pastors will inevitably never use Bible software simply because they have a limited aptitude in using the computer, or perhaps because they would feel uncomfortable changing their study habits. Make no mistake, there is a learning curve for using any Bible software. In fact, we are still discovering new ways to use our respective programs.

Works Cited

1. For examples of typical exegetical mistakes see D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*. 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

2. For a helpful and technical discussion of various Bible software programs for Windows, see H. Van Dyke Parunak, "Windows Software for Bible Study," JETS 46 (2003):465-95. He concludes that "Logos Library is the leader for users whose primary need is access to recently published electronic books," but that "for serious students of the original languages, the robustness, speed, and flexibility of BibleWorks' searching capabilities make it the clear choice" (495).

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