

God's Virtual Word

Using new technologies, Bible organizations now can reach more people than ever with digital—and often free—versions of scripture. But is this the good news traditional bible publishers were hoping for?

Among the Bhojpuri-speaking people of India, an accident left a man named Anil paralyzed and unable to walk. He was discouraged and even thought about suicide. One day Anil's family brought him an audio version of the New Testament, explaining that if he listened to it he would hear from God.

After hearing the story in John 5 in which Jesus cures a man who had been an invalid for 38 years, Anil called out to Jesus until he fell asleep. When he awoke he asked for his brother and said: "While I was sleeping, Jesus spoke to me! He said, 'I will make you well.' He said that I would talk about it, and others would listen and know my words were true." Anil then stood up and showed his brother he could walk.

Anil went to see his doctor, who could hardly believe Anil was walking. Since then, Anil's entire family has been baptized, and many have accepted Christ through his incredible testimony.

This is just one story of the lives that have been changed through the digital initiatives of Faith Comes By Hearing (FCBH). Through the Digital Bible Project, the nonprofit organization has developed a software called , which makes the Word available in text and audio formats in 542 languages—and counting—on the ministry's app and website.

"We think it's one of the most exciting times to be alive in human history," explains Troy Carl, the national director of FCBH. "As the Scripture commands in Matthew 24 and Matthew 28,

we are to take the gospel to the whole world—to every nation, tribe and tongue. Nothing can do that more effectively than the digital media that's being developed today.”

New Devices

In addition to mobile devices, FCBH is using other technologies to reach remote areas of the world. The Proclaimer is a digital player that can reach up to 300 people at once with God's Word. With a microchip containing the Scriptures in different languages, a rechargeable battery that lasts up to 15 hours, and a built-in generator and solar panel, it has enabled millions to listen to Scriptures. More than 290,000 devices have been distributed, with an average of about 100 people listening at each gathering.

Ricardo, a native of Peru, took over his father's witchcraft healing practice—until he came in contact with a Proclaimer in his language, Quechua.

“After listening to it for three months with my family and neighbors, I understood that witchcraft was a sin,” he explains. “What it says in the Acts of the Apostles changed my life. It was like a dagger to all my sinful ways.

“Now, I have been born again thanks to God,” Ricardo adds. “People come to me for healing, and I preach the gospel to them. Already, three of the families in my neighborhood have given their lives to Jesus.”

Like FCBH, Bible League International (BLI) is also taking steps to distribute the Word of God on a massive scale via technology. In the past 21 years, the nonprofit organization has trained and equipped more than 2.5 million local believers to lead people to Christ.

When BLI recently teamed up with the Digital Bible Society, the partnership produced a digital chip that gives people in countries where being a Christian is dangerous access to a

pool of resources that, in years past, would have filled entire libraries. Today, these assets can be contained on chips smaller than a fingernail—packed with the *Jesusfilm*, multiple Bibles, Bible study material, illustrations and graphics, songs, and more—on SD chips, microSD chips, CDs, DVDs, flash drives and hard drives.

“The most significant impact is that in a very short time we are in the process of and will alleviate the shortage of Bibles in the world—and not just Bibles, but discipleship material as well,” says Ken Allen, president of the Digital Bible Society. “Users who would not be able to go down to their local Christian bookstore now have access to materials. It’s becoming increasingly easier for people who have had no Christian resources to have significant resources.”

The two organizations are working on several different chips: a 4-GB chip that includes the resources mentioned; an 8-GB chip for pastors; and a 16-GB and 32-GB chip for church planters.

“We can reach more people exponentially through the use of digital media than just the printed resources,” says a BLI employee who works with program development for the Muslim world. “Whoever receives the chip or DVD has permission to reproduce it as long as it’s not for sale. It allows us to go into countries that are quite restricted.”

Although the chip will not be distributed officially until later this year, a group of former Muslims in Iran are already benefiting from this resource-rich material. A few recipients of the chip have led several of their community members to Christ and have even started a church—which exclusively uses the resources from the chip.

Digital vs. Print?

Such organic yet electronic dissemination of the Scriptures is what Orlando, Immersion Digital envisioned when it created the

GloBible. A digital alternative to the printed Word, the GloBible engages people more deeply with Scripture, allowing users to experience virtual tours of biblical sites, watch videos, sort content through different lenses (e.g., geographical or chronological) and more.

“We think Bible engagement and creating features that help you understand and make effective use of the Bible are very important,” notes Nelson Saba, CEO of Immersion Digital. “We focus a lot on what we call ‘Bible engagement.’”

With the increased accessibility these digital products offer—and their numerous digital-only capabilities—does this mean the era of printed Bibles is nearing its end? Though it seems logical that free access to the Bible on electronic devices would cause prints sales of the Word to plummet, many traditional publishers are seeing the exact opposite.

For Thomas Nelson, print Bible sales have actually increased. That’s not just good news for Gary Davidson, Nelson vice president and Bible Group publisher, it’s also proof that digital and printed versions of the Bible can coexist—the format isn’t limited to just one or the other.

“The more access people have to the Word of God, the more they’ll crave it and want to get more in tune with it,” Davidson explains. “You can have something in your hand electronically, but there’s also something to be said for that Bible that has the leather cover, or just the ability to have that where you can take notes.”

In fact, Davidson believes Bible study resources are a key for publishers’ future success. Nelson recently launched an app for *The Word of Promise*, a full text-and-audio dramatic Bible. Though the app offers a free, entry-level version, the full version, which includes study notes, must be purchased.

“What we have and will continue to have is the added value of study notes ... to help people through the Scripture, not just

read it. That's why the study Bible market and commentary market is so strong. People need help when they're reading through the Scripture."

Crossway, which publishes the ESV Bible, also offers digital versions of the Bible in addition to print. It distributes God's Word via mobile devices, e-readers and websites. Though the company's print Bible sales have also gone up since the advent of the digital age, Crossway Chief Operating Officer Geoff Dennis says there are multiple factors.

"We wouldn't want to make a one-to-one correlation between digital and Bible sales increase, but we would want to say it's a contributing factor," Dennis says. "It hasn't hurt our sales at all to have a digital Bible on a variety of devices. In fact, I would say it's had a significantly positive impact on exposing people to our translation."

Zondervan has also seen increased print Bible sales, despite giving away Bibles for free on mobile devices and e-readers. The company teamed up with Biblica and YouVersion in February and gave away 1 million digital Bibles in 400 hours to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the King James Version.

"We're selling more Bibles, and I hope that means people are reading them more," says Zondervan's Senior Vice President and Publisher Chip Brown. "People [who] are using Bibles digitally also like print."

Digital technologies and partnerships have also been key for rising Bible sales at Tyndale House, which is why company representatives are quick to point out the danger of seeing other publishers as competitors.

"I think it's really important that Christian publishers don't view each other as the competition, but that we embrace technology and again join forces as the body of Christ with Christian publishers and ministries that are called specifically in certain areas," says Jeffrey Smith, director

of Bible marketing at Tyndale.

The publisher of the New Living Translation works with a number of partners and makes the translation available on applications, e-readers and websites.

“The explosion of digital allows the consumer to decide for themselves which translation is best for [them],” Smith explains. “It makes God’s Word come alive, and they can experience it like never before.

“The more people that can get access to God’s Word, the more people can read it. The more people read it, the bigger difference it will make in our world and the body of Christ. We need to be united in the body of Christ right now.”

Gina Meeks is an editor with Charisma. Having grown up in the digital age, she enjoys learning about and using new technology.

iEvangelism

How smartphones are helping win souls



In the world of mobile technology, everything is changing—fast. This year, for the first time, shipments of smartphones and tablets exceeded those of desktops and notebooks. Of the 5.3 billion cell phones worldwide, 1 billion were acquired between 2008 and 2010.

“Computing is moving onto mobile,” said Google CEO Larry Page in August when he announced the company would acquire Motorola Mobility to beef up Google’s popular Android mobile brand.

Today’s phones provide everything from apps to books to GPS to TV. And the mobile shift means that the little handheld device

has the potential to become an enormous platform from which the church can virtually tell the world about Jesus.

Campus Crusade for Christ is one of many ministries seizing the opportunity. In 2009, challenged by the question, "Why hasn't anyone designed a smartphone app for sharing the gospel?" the organization developed God Tools, an app that puts evangelism tools literally at users' fingertips. It comprises four popular Crusade booklets, including *The Four Spiritual Laws*, that offer a simple gospel message and teach about the Holy Spirit. Once downloaded, it works without an Internet connection.

Youth With A Mission, through its ministry Indigitech, has developed the GodPod Touch for evangelists embedded in indigenous cultures. Part of a product line called Gospel Gadgets, the mobile device looks like an iPod Touch but stores evangelistic videos for sharing the gospel in nearly 40 languages.

At First Baptist Church in Edmond, Okla., QR-code technology is being used like street art to send messages to local college students.

"Students were scanning the codes as fast as we were spraying them onto the sidewalks," says associate pastor Kevin Pruitt. "The code jumps their cell phone right to our mobile page."

Smartphones equipped with scanner software can read the square QR (Quick Response) images to pick up encoded information.

With the number of smartphones expected to reach 2 billion by 2015, some Christians believe the church is on the cusp of a historic new era in evangelism powered by mobile technology.

Says blogger Tim Jore of missions-minded Distant Shores Media: "The worldwide rise of mobile phone technology is the greatest opportunity for the advance of the gospel since Gutenberg's press."

–Jimmy Stewart