E-Bibles:

Sharing Timeless Truth in a Timely Manner

Bob Dasal, editor-in-chief of Pulpit Helps *magazine in Chattanooga, TN, USA, says Bible software is a key to discipleship training in the new millenium.*

Bible study—whether on a computer, on a kitchen table, or beneath a shady tree—is about two things: God's Word and the Christian.

The late 80s and the 90s saw the birth and development of computer Bible study tools. Early developers saw computerized Bible resources as a way to make Bible study easier and richer. From those humble beginnings, the Bible study software industry has come of age. Today's programs are user-friendly and a tremendous help for the serious Bible student. Bible software for group study will become commonplace over the next few years.

The basic approaches

Most Bible software publishers have taken one of two approaches to Bible software. They are "user driven" or "program driven."

The "user driven" approach gives control of all functions of the program to the end user. It is comparable to a craftsman using a tool. The more skilled the craftsman, the better the results. A very popular example of this is the eBook concept. This electronic library approach follows the model of a research library. The eLibrary is a user-defined, expandable collection of titles that allows the user to search and compare texts on the basis of words, phrases, subjects and verse references. It is like a power tool and needs to be used with skill and planning. There are no real limits to this kind of software in that users can continually build their libraries according to their needs or interests. The *Logos Library System* (LLS) is an example of a "user-driven" software.

The "program driven" approach provides the user a standardized process. The program makes the decisions as to which books and articles will be viewed. This approach is much easier to use, just as building a piece of furniture from a kit is easier than designing and building a piece of furniture "from scratch." The kit is user-friendly because it is easy to use and predictable, but it can be limited in the number of available resources.

The traditional use of the term "Bible software" refers to the "program-driven" kit style of software. Even the packaging suggests the idea of a kit with words like "complete, everything you need in one box." The most widely known example of this "Bible-centric" style of software is the *PC Study Bible* from BibleSoft. This concept can be compared to a wagon wheel. The
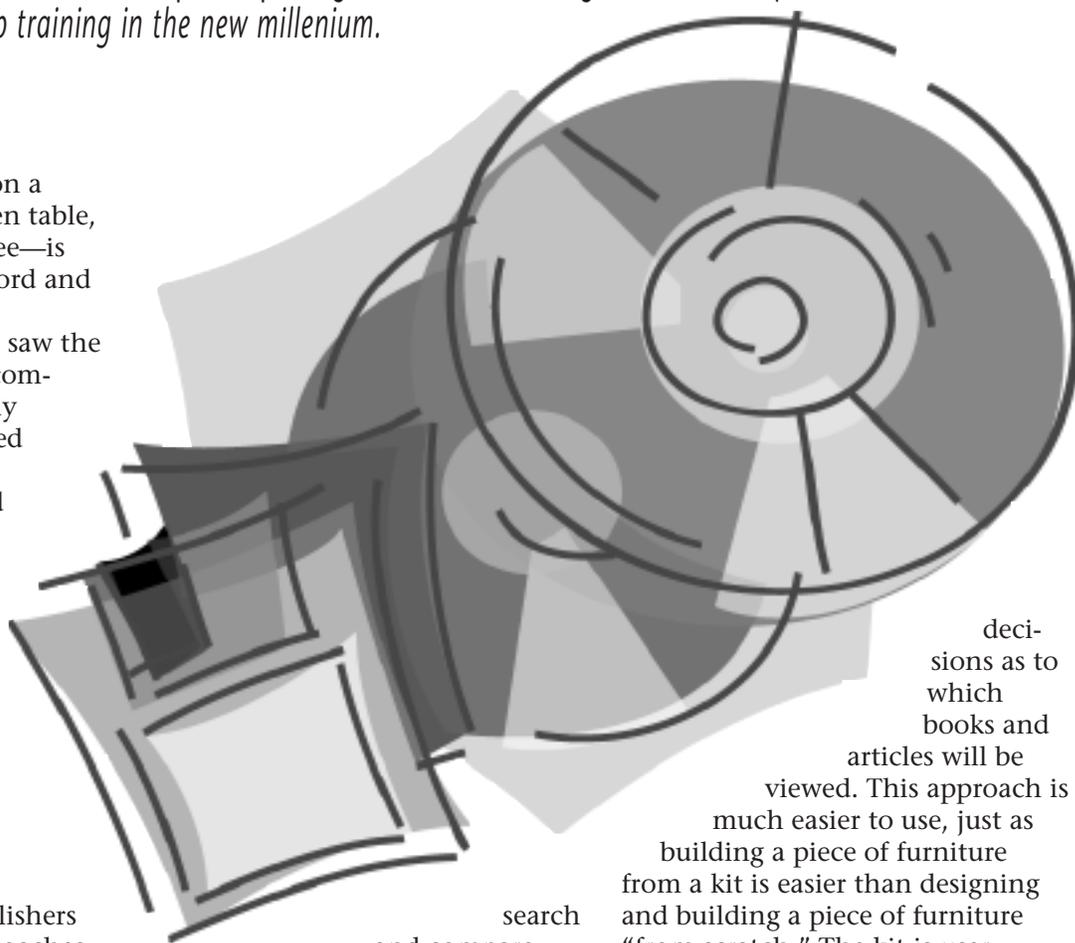
hub of the wheel, in the middle, represents the Bible. The spokes, branching out to the rim, are the other reference materials. The PC Study Bible is a good example of Bible-centric software because it actively, automatically, searches out all available reference material.

Some Bible software developers have taken the "user-driven" and "program-driven" concepts and blended them. *WordSearch*, from iExalt, and *QuickVerse*, from Parsons Technology, are examples.

Publishing in the new millennium

In the past, print publishers feared book sales would diminish if they published the material in an electronic format. Fortunately for all, this has proven not to be the case. The reality has been an increase, not decrease, in book sales. As a result, some predict more publishers will turn to electronic formats for their Bible products.

Dale Pritchett of Logos Research Systems, says, "As the Bible software industry comes of age and reaches full maturity, Bible software will be as common as hardcover books. For Bible study that extends beyond a single Bible, the electronic library will fill the same function as the traditional paper-based library. Instead of software companies licensing individual titles from publishers, the publishers are licensing the "viewer" software from the software companies and producing their own electronic titles." Pritchett believes "the future brand names will be publisher names, not software companies."

Randy Beck of iExalt (*WORDsearch*) believes "the immediate future of Bible software is to get a critical mass of the printed resources in a standard electronic form. Today, electronic media accounts for less than 25 percent of all English language Bible reference material sold. When you consider the huge advantages of the electronic form for any reference work, it's obvious that there will be a dramatic shift from print to electronic media within the next decade. It will be like the shift from LPs to

CDs in the music store. The change will not be triggered by more gee-whiz features in Bible software, but by increased awareness of the advantages that are already there, plus the certainty you can get anything you want in electronic form."

Impact on Bible product development

Scott Musser, President of HeavenWord, Inc., states, "Most print publishers create a book as an island unto itself—as a separate entity. Their editorial effort only ensures internal consistency. There is almost no effort now to make it consistent with other works for electronic library use. Software people put a Band-Aid on it with global searches, fuzzy searches, and so forth. The good news is that in the future we'll see substantial moves toward re-purposing content. Also, we'll see software begin to use hundreds of megahertz [of computing power] to work smarter for users, pre-scanning content for relevant and unique materials. We'll also see faster, more efficient, "give me the bottom line" text browsing." Scott Musser emphasizes the need to maximize the computer's ability to present content in ways that are unavailable in the print version.

John Bryant, executive vice president of BibleSoft (*PC Study Bible*) expresses a different point of view. He believes "the burden of finding information should be on the program itself. No matter what passage of Scripture you are viewing, the software should automatically offer you all of the information in its library that relates to that verse. No searching should be required. We've always viewed Bible software as more than a "look up" tool. It's a "place" where people study."

Bryant stresses end-users want the ability to contribute to their Bible study library. The simplest form of this is a study note. Just as one might write a thought, a question, or a cross-reference in the margin of a print Bible, Bible study programs allow the user to attach notes to Bible passages. However, Bryant believes in the future these "electronic" study notes will be

more flexible and useful, in the following ways:

1. Users will be able to edit their note, adding new thoughts or correcting mistakes;

2. They will be able to search their notes;

3. They will have the option to "copy and paste" quickly to add text or images to a study note from other reference books in their libraries; or

4. They might place a hypertext link in a study note so that they can "jump to" the related reference. This could be a Bible reference, the name of an article in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia, or even a *Strong's Concordance* number.

5. Users will be able to turn their study notes "on" to display them or "off" to hide them.

BibleSoft provides an authoring system to users allowing them to add their own reference material in a way that fully interacts and integrates with the PC Study Bible library.

Conclusion

Not everyone agrees on the direction that the industry is headed. However, with capable people giving input into the whole, the end-user will benefit with a better choice of products, quality and price.

Today's student of the Word can take advantage of study tools unavailable to any other generation of Christians. Preserving and proclaiming Biblical truth continues to be a crucial part of the Christian faith, and central to evangelical publishers' missions. Publishers worldwide can take advantage of new technology to publish the Gospel to the ends of the earth.❖