

Paper or Pixels? Bible Publishing in the Print and Digital Age

[1.] Sean Harrison, Black Earth Group

Abstract

We are now several years into the ebook–smartphone–app revolution, and digital Bibles and Bible apps are becoming more and more mature. Yet print Bible sales are healthy and actually growing. Wasn't print supposed to be dead by now? What is going on? How can those of us who live at the intersection of the Bible, technology, and publishing make the most of the current environment? Digging into the strengths of both the print and digital mediums, we will explore some of the ways they can work together to provide enhanced encounters with God's Word.

About Me

[2.] **Tyndale House Publishers** (1997–2015): Print and Digital Bible publishing.

- NLT Study Bible: I was the general editor and blogger-in-chief, 2001–2009.
- Illustrated Study Bible (2014–2015)
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- <http://NLT.to> and <http://NLTinterlinear.com> (2009–2010, 2014)
- Workflow Tools and Systems to make publishing books and Bibles easier (1999–present).
- [3.] Tyndale Bible Ebooks (2009–2013)

[4.] **Black Earth Group** (2014–present): Helping publishers, authors, and others to simplify and accelerate the publishing process in both print and digital.

[5.] This summer Black Earth Group is launching an online book production service called **bookgenesis.com**. This service will provide authors and small publishers professional book production for print and digital.

Summary: I have spent much of my career not only at the intersection of the Bible and technology, but at the integration between print and digital Bible publishing.

[6.]Personal: I'm married to Lauran Bell, a stay-at-home inspirational speaker, painter, and salesperson. I homeschool our younger two daughters while the oldest is a music edu. student.

Credit to Keith Williams: Keith Williams is my partner in this talk. Keith wanted very much to be here with you again, but his wife is having a spinal fusion surgery this next week, so he put his priority on her over you. Good man. Keith is very much present in this talk, however, as he helped brainstorm and shape it from beginning to end.

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Overview: The Surprising Health of Print in (What We Thought Was) the Digital Age

Print is robust: The sales of print Bibles are as strong as ever. The **NLT** sold more print Bibles in 2014 than in 2013. Tyndale continues to sell more print Bibles year over year. Furthermore, the NLT's percentage of market hasn't grown substantially during that time: This is a general trend in print Bible publishing. It seems that print sales in general are growing.

Meanwhile, from where I'm standing, digital Bible publishing currently looks **stagnant**. We've done a lot of Bible ebooks, and we've put a lot of specialty and study Bibles into the app stores. The novelty of digital in itself has worn off, and people are judging products on their value, and they're not finding as much value in a digital Bible as they are in a print Bible. The sales of these editions always seem to be in the 10s and sometimes 100s rather than 10,000s and sometimes 100,000s. the ebook market as a whole has leveled off in the past couple of years, and the widely-seen percentages of market are 50% of fiction, 15% of non-fiction, and 5% of Bibles are sold as ebooks. People are finding a lot more value in the latest novel on the Kindle Reader or iBooks than the latest specialty or study Bible. Well, that's why you develop apps instead of ebooks, right? Sure, but from what I have seen the sales of individual Bibles on those platforms haven't been that great compared to print Bibles, either.

Now, I realize that app development has not been Bible publishers' greatest strength, so maybe it's our fault that we haven't done very well in digital formats. *Maybe*. But I think the real issue is that we have run up against the limits of **repurposing** as a strategy for digital Bible publishing. All of these products were designed for print, and they work really well in print. They weren't originally designed for digital, and they don't really work that well in digital. Readers aren't

stupid, and they can perceive good and bad **value** when they see it, and they're voting with their dollars.

An Example of the Current State of Bible Publishing: The Illustrated Study Bible

[8.]When Tyndale launched the **NLT Study Bible** in 2008, it was very important to us to launch a digital version at the same time, and that's what we did:

<http://NLTStudyBible.com> launched at the same time as the print Bible as a free digital companion to it. Crossway did about the same thing that year with the ESV Study Bible. Later, Tyndale published the NLT Study Bible as an ebook and in a couple of apps.

This fall, Tyndale is launching the **Illustrated Study Bible** in print only, with no digital edition. **[9.]**This product is so visually engaging that developing a good digital edition seems very difficult to do well. The brutal fact is that, as much as I love digital Bibles, it would be hard to justify the great expense of time and/or money that would be required to make an excellent digital product from the Illustrated Study Bible. And for which platforms? Perhaps the only one worth doing is a specialized iPad app, except that the iPad is not the darling device that it once was, and there is a lot more fragmentation in the marketplace. So for now, it's print only.

[10.]That is really a stunning business decision, don't you think? But I believe it is a sound decision.

[11.]Another thing that is interesting about the *Illustrated Study Bible* is that it is a **four-color** Bible with large blocks of bold colors and a combination of inks. This Bible could not have been published five years ago. The **bleed-through** of the inks would have been very bad on any Bible paper, and **color registration** issues would have made some of the text in these design pieces very hard to read. But the papers have improved, and the technology of press now makes it possible to keep the colors much more in registration. So this Bible is now possible, and I expect to see more like it from other publishers.

[12.]What we see with this is that digital Bible development is not a magic bullet to increase user engagement, and it cannot be an afterthought in the product development process. We've done that for the past decade, and it's time to move on. Now, we've reached the point where we realize the right approach to product development is to develop print-native editions and digital-native editions. Content is not an undifferentiated substance that flows unhindered into any form. I don't say that ~~THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE~~, but I do say that **The Form Defines the Art**. Writing

for the print Bible page is different than writing for the digital Bible window, and in both cases what you write depends on the design of the page and the shape of the frame. Perhaps we will learn how to develop for both at the same time in an integrated way. But that will require us to understand the strengths of both, and be experts in the methods of publishing both.

[13.]It seems that what we need to do is to get smarter about three things: (1) We need to better understand exactly what the **strengths and weaknesses** of both print and digital Bibles are, and find ways to capitalize on the strengths of each while avoiding the weaknesses of both. (2) We need to do a better job of harnessing the strengths of digital publishing in the **product development** process. After all, all Bible content and product development is now digital, but we're still primarily thinking in terms of the print publishing cycle. We can do better. **[14.]**(3) We need to better understand people's preferred **usage patterns** for Bibles, and work on developing **integrated physical and digital products** that follow and enhance these usage patterns. Apple is onto something very significant in releasing the Apple Watch — not because watches are that interesting, but because they are developing an understanding of something about the integration of digital and physical products.

Strengths of Print

[15.]Print has **stability** and **permanence**, it has **simplicity** and **physicality**, and it provides **context** with **immediacy**.

When people buy a new Bible, they pretty much already know how to use it, and they will be able to use it the same way for as long as they own it. There is no need for a software update, or for a subscription. They don't have to worry if it will work on the new computer system. Once they have mastered the basics of navigation, which can be learned in a few minutes and can be aided by the use of tabs, they will always be able to use a Bible, any Bible, that they happen to pick up. — Can the same be said of any two Bible apps?

In a given Bible, the print **page design is fixed**. Many people have testified that the shape and arrangement of text on the page in their primary Bible becomes familiar to them over time, which helps them to find passages and to remember the Bible text itself. This visual memory of the arrangement and design of the Bible text is very important to people. It is one of the key reasons that our parents and grandparents would keep and use the same Bible for decades, and if they needed to replace it they would get the exact same edition if possible. I wonder if this is one of

the reasons that Cambridge Bibles are such perennial best-sellers: If you buy one of the standard Cambridge Bible editions, the same edition will most likely be available 50 years from now. — Can the same be said of any digital Bible app?

We are now designing spreads, not individual pages. A spread holds a lot more content and visual information than most digital screens (except for the very large and expensive retina monitors that graphic designers use — we can't design products for that size of screen yet! Graphic designers are a small share of the Bible market). The user can engage the whole spread in a single view, or “zoom in” on a small piece of it. The experience with a print product is **visually immersive and complete**.

In print, the **contextual relationship** among the elements on the page or spread, and between this page and all the other pages, is **implicit and physical**. Navigation and usage have an immediacy and physicality that are lacking in digital formats. On the printed page I can see this block of Bible text, and below is a block of notes about it. On the next or previous page there might be an article or visual aid or piece of art that relates to this passage. To go from Romans to 1 Corinthians, I know I have to go a very little bit forward. To go from 1 Corinthians to Psalms, I know I have to go a lot more backward, and that Psalms is almost always about halfway through the book block. If I see an article in the text, I generally know that the article relates to a passage that is close by or to a topic that is being addressed in that context. These things about print Bibles help me. (Actually, they help my wife even more. I use digital Bibles a lot more often than she does. When we are listening to a sermon together, she can usually navigate to any passage using her print Bible faster than I can when using most digital Bibles.)

Physical constraints are a feature that pushes us to create things that have permanence and very high value.

So, the strengths of print: permanence and stability, contextuality and immediacy, simplicity and physicality.

Strengths of Digital

[16.]As I look around this room, I am talking to a group of people who not only *know* the advantages of digital Bibles, but have *devoted their careers* to creating better and better digital Bibles and Bible study experiences. Here are friends from Logos, OliveTree, Miklal Software, Crossway Digital, the BibleOn team from 2K/Denmark, YouVersion, HolyBible.com, and others. What can I, a lowly Bible ebook and web app

developer, aspiring entrepreneur, and less-lowly Bible editor and erstwhile publisher add to that discussion? Here are my observations.

First, we should go ahead and enumerate all of the natural strengths of digital that everyone knows about so that we get that on the table. But while we do that, we need to ask, *Are there ways that we can do these things better?*

- **Searchability.** It is great to be able to search the complete Bible text.
- **[17.]Shareability.** I enjoy being able to post the text of a verse on Facebook or Twitter without having to type the whole thing. But one thing I want to know is, How much do people actually use the sharing features of your apps?
- **[18.]Portability.** I love it that I can read the Bible on my phone.
- **Deep, Integrated Semantic Data.** Using the Bible Word Study tool in Logos. Or being able to swing your mouse over a word and see precise, technical info about it. Double-clicking and having a definition or encyclopedia entry come up. Love it.
- **Choice and Customizability.** I can choose a Bible app that functions the way I like, and most of them have a variety of options for customization. Not only whether or not to display verse numbers, paragraphs, and red letter, but also which study Bibles, encyclopedias, and commentaries I want to have at my fingertips. Fantastic.

Next, things that have not been done as much in Bible publishing, but are natural strengths of digital.

- **Non-Linearity.** It is possible to create content that doesn't follow a linear flow. That's usually called a website, but that's not the only place where it makes sense to do that.
- **Integration of Media.** Text, images, audio, and video. There have been some stunningly good efforts do this, and a lot of really bad ones. The worst ones just slap a few videos into text. Better ones think through how best to **use the medium to carry the message**. There are still lots of opportunities to do this well, and to recapture for reading in digital environments some of the attention that so quickly drifts to YouTube and Facebook.
- **Dynamic Content** that's always growing and changing. Well, that's more of a *potential* strength of digital, but it has largely gone *unrealized*. In digital, it's

not very hard to create a pathway by which authors and editors can publish new content continuously. So far, we've figured out how to do this a little bit: We have blogs. But in a lot of digital environments, it's still surprisingly rare to tap into continuously-created-and-updated content.

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Question: Are there things that we haven't done, or done enough of, that would make sense in digital?

So, here are some things that I have wanted and have rarely or never had in digital Bible apps. Some of you are going to come up to me when I'm finished and tell me how your platforms provide these things. Others are going to tell me why these things won't work. I guess those are the occupational hazards that I am taking right now.

1. Highly visual, highly designed digital-native products.

For example: Digital Bibles that are like digital magazines (like FastCompany digital edition) or the Elements app.

This is very difficult: The value has to be there for users, and the revenue has to work for the publisher. Creating in digital what we do in print usually requires huge resources, and people don't find the value there.

What would need to change in order for beautiful, engaging, digital-native Bible products to start paying off? I see two big parts to the answer:

- a) We need a **product-development pipeline** that bypasses the print publishing development and business cycle. Up to now, every Bible content development project that I have been involved in has been designed first for print, with repurposing for digital as an afterthought. This leads us to write and edit and design things with long development times and slow reader feedback cycles, and we create them in the shape of what makes sense on the page rather than in digital networks.
- b) We need an **app platform** that is really smart and deeply well-designed to carry a wide variety of Bible content in aesthetically (both visually and functionally) beautiful way. People will be enthusiastic about using an app like that. Up to now, Bible apps have not achieved the visual and functional aesthetic potential of, for example, Flipboard or the FastCompany magazine app.

If we have these two things, I believe beautiful digital-native Bible products will start paying off: The costs will be lower, and the faster feedback between the author/publisher and the readers will create a virtuous cycle of engagement from both sides that results in more Bible content of higher quality with better sales.

[20.]2. Better Semantic Search

Excellent semantically-augmented search that integrates Bible and supporting content. The search in some of your apps is too slow. Also, I get way too many hits. There needs to be a way to rank search results more intelligently based on relevance and other heuristics such as the context from which I'm searching. Also, search needs to more than word-stemming and automated semantic markup. Perhaps this is part of the reason why the *Thompson Chain Reference Bible* still sells very, very well: It provides something that digital search still haven't fully caught up to.

Excellent search is a very hard and very deep problem. What's more, most users don't care about that, they just want it to work better than it does. What could be easier than putting in a search term, matching it to content, and giving relevant results, right? But we know it's much, much harder than that. So please, keep working on that. Make it faster. Make it better.

[21.]3. Subscriptions

In digital, I don't need to own the library. Instead, I want to subscribe to a content service that will give me access to a lot of the content that I want, and will continuously improve the content offerings on my dime. Then, some of those things that I've used from the library I will want to buy and own; when I do, I want to ensure that my ownership is permanent and secure.

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Integrating Print and Digital: Developing an Approach to Bible Publishing that Makes the Most of the Strengths of Each Medium

The goal is to build print and digital Bible tools that complement rather than compete with each other. Here are some pointers in that direction.

1. Find Ways to Enhance the Best Usage Patterns for the Bible by Integrating Print and Digital Products

AppleWatch: a thing that integrates with a computer and with the physical world.

Moleskine and LiveScribe came together to create something that integrates the paper product and the digital product. Together they can create something that is better than either could do independently.

What do people *do* with the Bible that could be done in both print and digital, side-by-side? Underlining, highlighting, notetaking, journaling, searching, reading, — What else?

Some Ideas

- LiveScribe Bible with digital content tie-in.
- A LiveScribe notebook that recognizes Bible references in your written Bible notes and journal and integrates them with a Bible app, so that the notes you write in your physical notebook are automatically synced into your Bible app.
- WordLens: Rather than doing translation on the fly, do something like search or digital enhancement.

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2. *Develop a Digital-Native Ecosystem for the Development and Immediate Publishing of New Bible Content*

3. *Create Opportunities for Print Bible Publishers to Select / Curate / Refine from the Best of What is Published in Digital*

4. *Bible Software and Bible Publishing Need to Be Much More Closely Joined*

Work to integrate digital access with print purchase. That way, customers can buy once or buy once plus upgrade, then use anywhere. That way, users can enjoy all the benefits of both platforms.

Instead of publishers and digital Bible software developers being competitors, how can they have more productive and closer partnership relationships? How can they become co-creators? Right now the relationship usually doesn't go beyond a license agreement, and the revenue models make it difficult to do some of the things that I have proposed.

A real partnership between a print publisher and a software developer.

[24.] Both print and digital have strengths. There's a lot we can do to make use of each and to integrate both, and that's what I'm on about. **Thank you**