Free Android Software!

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Back in January, this column talked about the free software available for the iPad. For the past couple of months, we've shifted our focus from the iPad to an Android-based tablet – the Galaxy S Tab from Samsung. Now it's time to return to that most critical element of any compute platform – the software!

Software and "Openness"

In the January column, I also made the point that these day's computers are mass market products whose success is almost entirely determined by what everyday consumers can do with them. I used the Macintosh and Windows operating systems as an example of how the importance of a vibrant developer ecosystem is critical for the commercial success of any hardware platform. I claimed that Microsoft's platform was more "open" for software developer's than Apple's, and probably more importantly, Microsoft was very open to many hardware manufacturers to innovate with new computer products running Windows, so the market for Windows computers grew larger and became more attractive to software developers than the market for Macintosh computers.

In last month's column, I wrote about the advances Android has made in the marketplace. I talked about the innovative new hardware products being brought to market by many smartphone and tablet manufacturers. I'm guessing you're already aware that Google is much more supportive of giving developers freedom in writing for Android than Apple is for iOS (the iPhone/iPad operating system). We all have heard stories about developer frustrations with the process for submitting products to Apple's app store, or Apple's battles with Adobe and others who want to make it easy for developers to create cross-platform applications.

Those realities would point towards Android being a more popular platform for developers than the iPad/iPhone. Surprisingly, that's not yet the case. As of January, there were over 350,000 apps in the iPhone app store. At that time, there were less than 200,000 apps in the Android market (although that number has now crossed the 300,000 mark). I do expect Android apps to surpass those for Apple's products in the coming months. Already, many developers are writing for both platforms, and my personal experience has been that if there was an app I liked on the iPad, either the exact same app, or one that works

just as well, is available for Android.

Bible Software

Disappointingly, that hasn't been my experience when looking for Bible software. In my January column, I listed five free Bible apps I had installed on the iPad, and since then I added one more, so I could choose between Logos, Olive Tree, Laridian, YouVersion, Blue Letter Bible, and Crossway's ESV. Of these, only YouVersion and Crossway's ESV are available on Android. You may recall that I was a big fan of the Logos app, especially for the graceful way it handled cross-references. Sadly, the company doesn't appear to be close to releasing a version for Android. On their [website](#) they say "We're planning a version of Logos for the Android platform. It will likely be just like the [Logos for iPhone](#) application, with Android-specific interface as required. There is no additional information available about features or timeframe at this time." Sigh…

In the absence of Logos, I've installed six free Bible apps on my Android tablet: YouVersion, Crossway's ESV, CadreBible, Bible.is, CrossConnect, and DailyBible.

I use my tablet as my primary Bible on Sunday mornings for Bible readings and the sermon during worship, and for Sunday school. I'm not currently in a group Bible study, but I would like to use it during that time as well. I also have been using my tablet for my morning quiet time. In short, my tablet has become my primary Bible, although, when I'm home, I'm just as likely to pick up a "hard copy" version for quick references throughout the day. Given these uses, my primary needs are:

- Quick and easy navigation

- Integrated note-taking – both linked to a passage and easy to find independent of passage

- An integrated reading plan

- Easy access to reference materials (at a minimum, cross references, footnotes, and translation notes; optimally, also easy comparisons between translations and links to commentaries)

Sadly, none of the free products do a great job on this short list of requirements.

CadreBible is the most sophisticated of the products and may, by definition, check off each item on the above list. However, the product's rich feature set gets in the way of ease of use.

For example, the product supports a long list of translations. However, most of the translations must be purchased for an extra fee. When I first started using the app, I would choose the Library from the Tools menu to switch between translations which then required scrolling through the entire list of available translations. It is helpful that those that are installed are highlighted, but still, it took five clicks and lots of scrolling to change translations. Only later did I figure out that I could more easily click on the translation name

at the top of the window, see a pull down list of installed translations, and select the one I want. This reduced the effort to three clicks and minimal scrolling. There's yet another way that Cadre provides an even richer view. By clicking and holding on a verse, a new menu becomes available with a variety of tools for that verse, including adding a note, adding a bookmark, sending the verse as an e-mail, opening a commentary, and seeing a parallel comparison across all the installed books (translations and commentaries). By providing multiple ways to accomplish the same task, Cadre actually hurt my experience because I stumbled into the less friendly approach first instead of having to find the one easy way.

The app that has earned its way into my daily use is YouVersion. As with the iPad app, YouVersion makes available a broad array of translations, most of which can be downloaded to your device. Unlike Cadre, YouVersion has a very clean and crisp interface that is easy to figure out. I can easily add notes or a bookmark to a text, and YouVersion is focused on socially sharing notes if you so choose. I really like the way the app handles reading plans, making it easy to track your progress, and since it's all network connected, I even get e-mail reminders to encourage me when I'm not keeping up.

Bible.is and CrossConnect seem to be focused on providing an audio interface to the Bible, with limited additional functionality, while DailyBible is very focused on verse of the day and reading plans, and is a bit more cumbersome to use for general Bible reading. The ESV app is beautiful and solid, and the only one that has a rich set of cross-references, but the interface isn't as comfortable as YouVersion – I have to work too hard to figure out how to add notes or select a passage for action.

The two biggest disappointments with all of the free Bible apps available for Android tablets are their lack of graceful support for reference materials and the lack of support for two-column display. Even though the ESV app supports cross-references, reading a cross-reference requires jumping to that part of the Bible, and getting back where you were requires finding the History button and selecting your previous verse (three clicks). The lack of two-column display is likely due to current tablets being based on the smartphone version of the Android operating system. Hopefully both of these limitations will be addressed by future products (Logos – please come quickly).

It is my hope and prayer that these articles on tablets have been helpful to you in your daily walk with Christ. Whether it is the printing press, radio, television, personal computers, the Internet, or mobility, new technologies continue to advance our ability to know God through His Word, wherever we go.

Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler.net (http://hschooler.net), a social network for Christian families (especially homeschoolers) which is being built and run by three homeschooled students under Russ' direction.