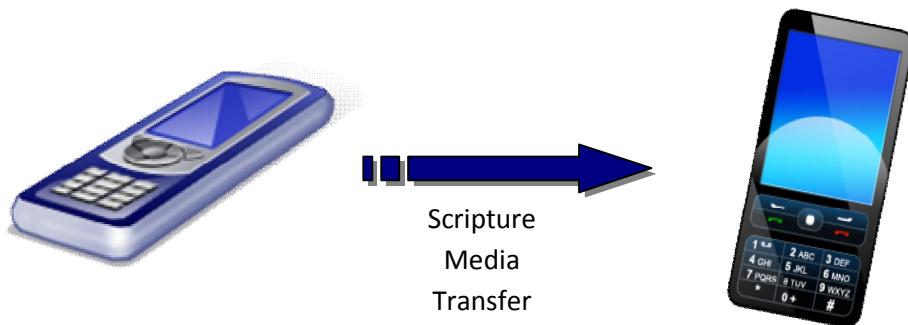

Between Friends: passing the Scriptures from phone to phone

Some implications of mobile phone technology for Scripture distribution¹

by Richard Margetts

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Do you remember the days when mobile phones were not much more than gadgets for making phone calls and sending text messages? Apart from a game or two, an alarm clock and a calculator, they were not designed to do much more. I suspect many of us still have such phones, but we only need to take a walk around the shops in our local town and the range of new phones available boast a wealth of built-in features: cameras, audio and video players, email, web browsers and radios. As always, technology gallops forward and prices see significant falls year after year. And it's not only your Nokia, Samsung, Motorola and iPhone brand names; Chinese models are bringing feature-rich phones at prices more and more people can afford.

Wherever you are in the world, sit with a group of young people, especially in urban areas, and it won't be much of a surprise to see a mobile phone. You'll often hear it too as they play some of their favourite music tracks to each other:

"I like that song," says one of the group. "Can you send it to me?"

"OK, sure," says his friend.

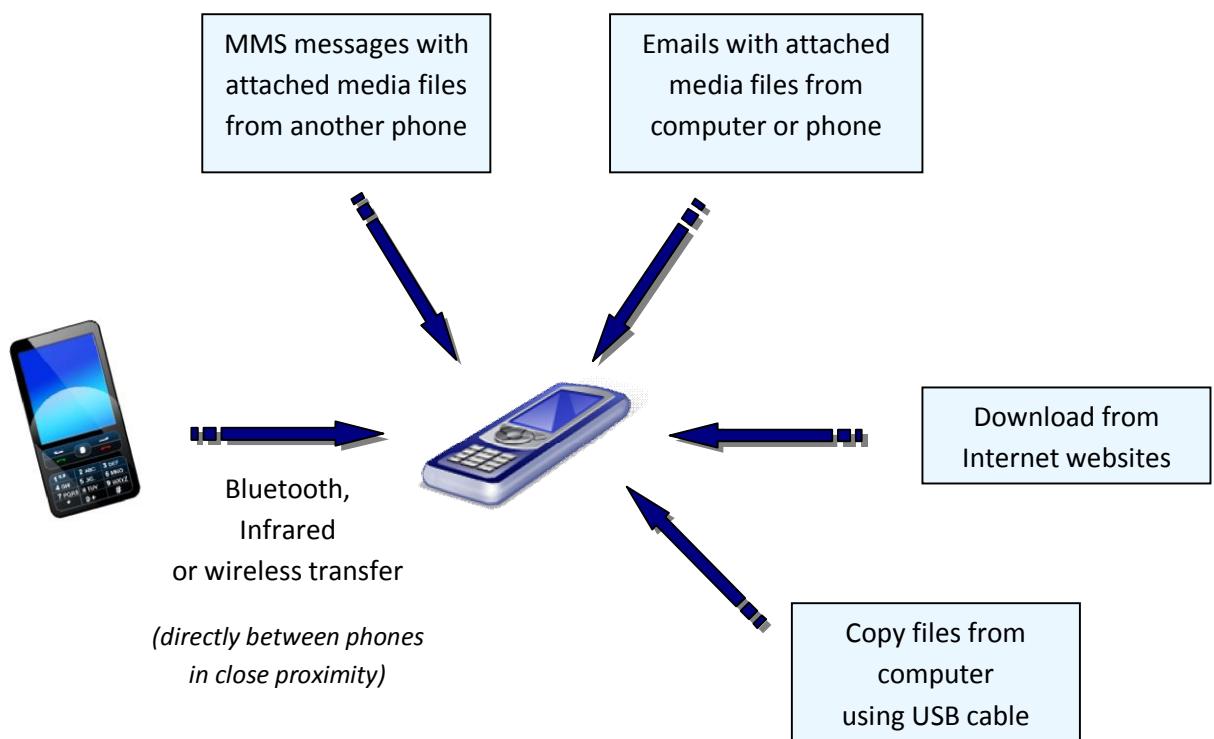
Using the Bluetooth² feature on each of their phones, they 'pair' their phones wirelessly, select the music file to send, and after a minute of data transfer the requested track is on the other's phone.

¹ This article is a longer version of an article which appeared in the journal *Scripture in Use Today* #18, September 2009.

"Cool, thanks! Got it! I'll have to share this with my friends at college as well."

In this way, passed between friends who then share it with their friends and so on, a music track or video can spread fast: no wires, no cost.

And Bluetooth is not the only method of file sharing. People can send media files to each other through the phone network, attached to emails or messages³. They can also download audio and video files⁴ from the Internet directly onto their phones, or copy them from a computer using a USB cable. On some phones, transfer to neighbouring phones can be done by Infrared or wireless network technology.



Many modern phones contain a slot for a memory card inside, allowing for the storage of several gigabytes of media (photos, music, videos).⁵

² "Bluetooth wireless technology is built into electronic gadgets and lets you talk and share information like voice, music, and videos wirelessly. *Bluetooth* technology sends information within your own personal space, which is called your Personal Area Network or PAN at distances up to 10 meters (33 feet)." (Source: <http://www.bluetooth.com>, accessed 4 July 2009)

³ These are known as MMS messages (Multimedia Messaging Service) as opposed to the text-only SMS (Short Message Service).

⁴ Audio files are usually MP3 files and video files are typically in the 3GP format.

⁵ With typical 5-minute music tracks, each 4MB in size, a 1GB memory card could store up to 250 tracks/songs.

Implications for Scripture distribution

So what does this mean for the distribution of God's Word? Especially when it comes to audio and video products, the mobile phone can be an effective method of getting the Scriptures to people... who then pass them on to other people... who then pass them on to other people...

But what are some of the implications of this? Here are some discussion starters as you consider the role of distribution by mobile phone in your context.

1. Who is your target audience?

Mobile phone users are only a subset of the local population, especially those who have (and who know how to use) the kind of Bluetooth-enabled, MP3-audio playing models. So who are these people? What other access do they have to the Scriptures, if any? What interest do they have in the Scriptures? What potential barriers might there be to getting such people to listen to and share the Scriptures with others? What kinds of things do they like listening to and watching on their phones? In what kinds of contexts do they listen: individually? among friends? in the family? What proportion of these people are literate? What language do they prefer to communicate in?

If you are planning ahead for the next five years, can you predict how the demographics of the mobile-phone owning population will have changed? (It might help to think *back* five years, to remind yourself of how dramatic the communications revolution has been. What kinds of people have phones today who didn't have them five years ago?)

2. What are the best Scripture products for the phone?

Among the most popular types of media shared between mobile phones are: music tracks (i.e. individual songs), photos and short video clips (from a few seconds to a few minutes).

So if you want to produce Scripture-based products that are in line with this and that people will want to share with their friends, you might need to think about:

- Scripture songs – Bible portions set to music, with good quality sound (as professional as possible).
- Short video clips – e.g. excerpts from a film, Bible stories, or modern-day sketches.

In addition, there are many other types of media products that you could distribute by phone, such as:

- Bible readings (especially dramatized, multi-voice);
- Bible stories, well narrated and/or acted out;
- Audio-text products (where people see the text on the screen of their phone and hear it read at the same time).

- Bible teaching by popular speakers (especially in Christian contexts).
- Background images with the text of a Bible verse.
- Scripture song ringtones.

If your target audience is the TV-remote control “change the channel every minute” generation, it might be best to keep the tracks short. People might be willing to listen to a half-hour long message on their phone when they are alone, but they are less likely to do so when they are with friends. A Bible reading would be better cut up into several shorter tracks rather than as a single file containing multiple chapters.

The type of audio product you produce for the phone might be different from what you put on cassette, CD or prepare as a programme for the radio. You will need to bear in mind the kinds of people in your target audience.

Scripture text can also be found on mobile phones, but it is less easy to share between phones than audiovisual media. There are additional copyright restrictions, font issues, and the screen-size of most current phones makes it rather awkward to read.

3. How will people get their first copy of the media files which they can then share with their friends?

Once a few people have the media files on their phones, the hope is that they will then want to share them with others. But how do you get the first people to download these files?

Here are some of the possible options:

- Transfer the files by Bluetooth from your own phones to the phones of some of your friends and encourage them to share them.
- Make the files available as downloads on an easily-accessible web page. For example, this could be a site which is found by typing keywords into Google relating to the local language and region. (In some areas of the world downloading large files to a phone is still expensive, although it should get significantly cheaper in the near future.⁶)
- Distribute the files on CDs or USB flash drives to a few key people in the local area.
- Send files by email to a few key people in the local area.
- Advertise on the radio and invite people to phone a certain number to get the files sent back to them attached to a message.

⁶ See O3b Networks, <http://www.o3bnetworks.com>, building a new telecommunications infrastructure to bring cheaper and faster bandwidth Internet access to most of the world.

- Invite people to come into the local radio station or church to have the files downloaded to their phone.
- Invite people to subscribe to receiving an audio file a week (e.g. a chapter of the Bible) to be sent to their phones.

4. Are there any copyright issues involved?

Although it is very difficult to police, the sharing of commercially produced music files between friends is usually illegal and a form of piracy. The music industry struggles to find ways of protecting their rights and to remind consumers that they should obtain their music tracks from authorized online stores.⁷

However, when you are the publisher of media products for phone distribution, you normally have the right to offer them under a free distribution licence, without asking for any payment. You can even positively promote such free distribution and tell people how to do it – for example using publicity slots on the local radio.

This is certainly the easiest way of going about things but do keep in mind the following:

- Translations of the Bible are usually copyrighted and so you will need to check if the same applies to any audio recording of that same translation. In some cases, offering free audio recordings to people and encouraging them to freely distribute them might break copyright law.⁸
- If you are encouraging free distribution of your music and Scripture media, and another local Christian recording artist or organization is insisting people pay for their music, it could be quite confusing for people to know what is right and to distinguish between the two. People might begin to expect everything should be free to share.
- Offering music for free and positively encouraging media file sharing by phone might harm the local Christian music industry, especially if it leads to lower sales of cassettes and CDs.
- Offering free distribution by phone has the disadvantage that you really have very little idea how many people are using it. It does not provide the same kind of statistics that come with simple CD sales or web downloads.

⁷ For example, the largest online music store is the iTunes Store : <http://www.apple.com/itunes>

⁸ Faith Comes By Hearing offers several hundred New Testament audio recordings for free download on its website (<http://www.faithcomesbyhearing.com>). For some of these it pays a royalty to the original publisher for every download. With this arrangement it is legal for a person to download from their site, but then they do not necessarily have the automatic right to share the files directly with their friends. Their friends are, however, free to go ahead and download the files for themselves.

Recently I spoke to the director of a Christian organisation who was about to release a cassette and CD of Bible-based songs using traditional musical styles. They have invested resources in the production of this and the sales of cassettes will help to recover some of those costs. I remarked to him how people will want to share around the music files on their phones, and wondered if the church needs to give more direct teaching on how sharing copyrighted music tracks is illegal and how it is a form of stealing.

“No, we shouldn’t say anything.” he answered wisely. “Lots of people don’t know that sharing music between phones is possible. If we tell them not to do it, they will then know that it can be done and might be tempted to do it!”⁹

Copyright issues with Scripture media distribution can be complicated but do need to be addressed.

5. How can mobile phone technology become an obstacle to people engaging seriously with God’s Word?

Technology comes with its disadvantages as well as its advantages. As well as providing exciting new avenues for Scripture distribution, mobile phones present us with potential obstacles for good Scripture engagement:

When the technology becomes a distraction, pulling us away from spending time with the Lord and his Word

Last Sunday I was speaking in a village church, encouraging the believers to make the most of the recently published New Testament in their local language. When I had finished, the pastor got up and further exhorted his congregation. He identified two major obstacles getting in the way of people taking time to read the Scriptures at home: the television and the mobile phone!

It is ironic that the very technology that gives us new opportunities for providing Scripture access is also the technology that can distract us from taking the time to engage with Scripture.

For example, in a paper urging Christians to inhabit the world of the ‘digital natives’ in order to encourage Scripture engagement, Mark Brown describes technology’s distracting effect:

With so many things demanding our attention we are experiencing what Linda Stone, calls ‘Continuous Partial Attention’, which Stone describes as being motivated by a desire not to miss anything. Stone notes, ‘...we feel most alive when we’re connected, plugged in and in the know. We constantly scan for opportunities—activities or people—in any given moment. With every opportunity we ask, “What can I gain here?”’

⁹ An illustration of what the apostle Paul is referring to in Romans 7.7-8! “*I would not have known what sin was except through the law... But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.*”

At Bible Society New Zealand in response to the appalling Bible engagement rates amongst Christians we wanted to find out, 'Why don't people read their Bible more often?' The overwhelming reason is that people are distracted, their attention drawn to other things as they scan their environment.¹⁰

As people share content freely between phones, believers need to be conscious that some media content could not only be distracting, but could also be harmful to their faith.

When the technology replaces serious reading, meditation and engagement by something rather less-demanding

For those who already have access to Scriptures in other ways, in a printed book for example: how will mobile phone distribution of Scripture-based products affect the way they engage with the Bible?

As well as giving them new ways to interact with God's Word and to share it with others, we need to be aware that the medium itself can shape the message - and that the medium can change the way the hearer interacts with the message. So we need to ask: is there a point at which we could be accused of going too far in pandering to the cultural desire to have everything in bite-sized user-friendly – even entertaining – packages? Could we be promoting a form of laziness which prevents people from committing themselves to sitting down to read and meditate on the Bible day-by-day? Are we just trying to make Bible engagement less-demanding for a fast food and leisure-oriented society? And if so, what effects could this have?

There is increasing debate on the role of new media in changing the way we think, learn and how it is affecting our ability to concentrate. The CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt, expressed this concern during a recent television interview:

I worry that the level of interrupt, right, the sort of overwhelming, overwhelming rapidity of information – and especially of stressful information – is in fact affecting cognition, it is in fact affecting deeper thinking. I still believe that sitting down and reading a book is the best way to really learn something. And I worry that we're losing that.¹¹

Reflecting on this, John Dyer from Dallas Theological Seminary writes:

...in our attempts to be relevant and "speak the language" of the culture, we sometimes forget that today's mediums influence a core part of being a Christian – loving God deeply with our minds. In our fervor not to fall behind technologically, we sometimes end up being more excited about a technology's

¹⁰ Brown, Mark. 2009. *The Bible in the Digital Space*, downloaded from <http://brownblog.info>.

¹¹ Charlie Rose Friday Night, 6 March 2009. Interview with Eric Schmidt, from the transcript (http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/10131#frame_top), accessed 4 July 2009.

potential than those outside the church. Instead of falling behind in *implementation*, we fall behind in *understanding*.

We do well to use websites and new media to reach people for the Kingdom, but we must remember to keep our identity as a people of the book, however irrelevant that might be.¹²

None of this is to say that we should avoid new media for Scripture distribution. On the contrary, we must embrace it and use it enthusiastically, making the most of the opportunities it offers in our ever-changing world to increase people's exposure to God's Word. But in doing so, we need to be aware that Scripture *access* does not equal Scripture *engagement*. People can have all kinds of clever Bible-content audiovisual media on their phones, but if they do not take time to engage with it seriously, it is not much better than a dusty Bible lying on the shelf.

The challenge, then, is to produce 'engage-able' Scripture products that will make people stop and think, reflect, meditate, discuss, respond and worship. And at the same time, we pray that God would lead them to respond to his truth.

6. What are the most positive aspects of using mobile phones for Scripture distribution?

Increased access to the Scriptures

Scripture distribution on mobile phones will put the Word of God into the hands of many people who have never heard it before and who might not otherwise get the opportunity to do so; hence it is a great tool for getting the Scriptures to those who do not know the Lord, including:

- those who prefer oral communication, whether primary oral communicators (those who have not learnt to read or to read well) or secondary oral communicators (those who can read but much prefer to listen/watch than to sit down with a book);
- those living in regions which are closed to other methods of Scripture distribution but who have increasing access to mobile phones;
- the younger generation – often hard to reach by traditional Scripture distribution methods;
- those who would never be able to afford a computer or the latest iPod media player, but who can pick up a cheap feature-rich phone from their local market.

¹² From <http://doneteatthefruit.com/2009/03/google-ceo-on-internet-learning-vs-book-learning/>, accessed 4 July 2009

New ways of engaging with the Scriptures

The mobile phone opens up the possibility of getting the Bible into contexts in life where God's Word was rarely heard before, for example:

- In groups of friends, watching, listening, sharing and discussing together what they have on their phones.
- Listening intently to a chapter of the Bible in your own language while all alone in the quiet of the early morning (far more easily and more discreetly than ever before).
- Listening to long passages while you travel or go about your day-to-day activities (as you would listen to a radio).
- Passing on Scripture materials to interested friends near and far – at little or no cost. No need for them to own a computer – they can have it on their phone.

Conclusion

Today's mobile phone technology presents us with exciting opportunities to explore new methods of Scripture distribution, getting God's Word into the gadgets people carry around with them everyday and everywhere they go. May the Lord give us the wisdom we need to use it well.

This document is available for download at: <http://www.scripture-engagement.org>

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