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PDAS AND APOLOGETICS: USING TECHNOLOGY TO “ALWAYS BE READY”

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During the cross-examination period of our debate on purgatory, Father Peter Stravinskis, noted theologian and author of *The Catholic Answer* series of books, motioned toward my PDA with some level of irritation. “You’ve got your little gizmo there,” he said. “You can find it.”

Stravinskis’s irritation had been building during the course of our debate. I had been questioning him in the first cross-examination and had been quoting from his own works as I read from my PDA (I had scanned and loaded every response that he had ever published on the topic of purgatory). When he challenged me with a quote from Saint Augustine, a few taps of the screen provided me with a countercitation that was directly on the topic. A few moments later when he miscited Augustine, I was able to offer the actual Latin text of the citation, again from my PDA.

The modern Christian apologist has access to a tremendous amount of information. The information is so vast that no one can memorize everything he or she would *like* to have ready to share when the opportunity arises on a bus or airplane, or on campus or at work. Modern technology, however, has progressed to the point where it is now possible to carry considerable information in one’s shirt pocket or purse. Enter Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) — PalmPilot, Handspring Visor, Sony, and so on — the handheld computing devices that seem ubiquitous in airports and classrooms are now appearing in the form of cell phones as well! These miniature devices open up a whole world of possibilities for the apologist who wishes to “always be ready” in the digital age.

From Slow and Limited to Fast and Powerful. Those readers who have suffered through the first generations of PDAs know that for a long time you paid a fair amount of money for a unit that was slower than molasses in January and was severely limited as far as storage capacity went. The memory limitations of the first Palm units forced those writing programs for the Palm OS (operating system) to concentrate on *size*. Programs written for the Palm OS still tend to be significantly smaller in size (and often much less expensive) than their counterparts that are written for Microsoft-based platforms (such as PocketPC).

Today, however, the new units being offered by Palm, Sony, and others with the Palm OS have broken through the barriers of memory and speed. I carry the Palm Tungsten T3, which uses the Palm OS version 5.2. This unit is perfect for “front-line apologetic work.” It is quite small, has a high-quality, full-color (64k) screen, and uses the Secure Digital memory card, which is the size of a postage stamp, and yet it can hold up to one gigabyte. The increase in speed and the capacity to store fully functional programs, not just databases, on the memory extension cards has made the new units the perfect tool to provide me with the Bible, reference documents, and even the scriptural texts of various religious groups I may run into during my travels.

The increase in speed, however, has come with a decrease in battery life. Most units now are rechargeable, which offers some advantages, but it also results in more “cradle time” to keep them up-and-running. I carry an emergency “quick charge” device with a 9-volt battery in case I exhaust the PDA battery during a long day of flying, writing, or witnessing.

Finally, the great advancement in screen technology has helped with the readability of documents and texts on the Palm devices. Even someone such as myself who has passed the 40-years-of-age mark and

hence has to deal with the onset of presbyopia can adjust fonts to make texts readable in almost any lighting situation.

What Bible Software Do You Use? The first question people ask when they discover that I regularly use a PDA in teaching (and even preaching!) is, "What Bible software do you use?" A better question is, "Which *don't* you use?" I have more than one kind on my unit. I've tried a number of them, and my selection may not be suitable for everyone else. New competitors have entered the Bible software field of late, which gives users a number of options from which to choose. I currently have Olive Tree's BibleReader and the PalmBible installed and functioning on my system. The PalmBible basic program, like the BibleReader, is free. Both programs are attractive to me. OliveTree, however, has offered not only older Greek texts for a few years now but also the modern Greek text (Nestle-Aland 27th edition) and the Gramcord module, which defines Greek terms and parses Greek forms. Not long ago they added a basic Hebrew text as well. Others are catching up, but as with so many of these programs, once you invest in one, it is less expensive to upgrade and remain faithful to the program you already have than it is to switch to another and make new investments. You also become accustomed to the functioning of the program so that even if another program has a feature or two that might be better, the disadvantages of switching outweigh the advantages.

The Great Document Storage Debate. I carry the texts of all of my major published books on my Palm. Accessing large amounts of information such as that used to be painfully slow. Now, digital expansion cards provide high-speed access to Word documents through programs such as WordSmith and Documents To Go. Modern versions even provide on-screen fonts that match desktop computer fonts, which is important while carrying documents that contain original-language information relating to biblical texts (e.g., what you would need to have regarding John 1:1 and Jehovah's Witnesses, or Isaiah 43:10 and Mormons). Given how easy it has become to obtain usable, accurate optical character recognition (OCR) software, it is relatively easy to convert key passages from written resources to a readily usable format on a PDA.

Another valuable tool is Adobe's Acrobat Reader for Palm, which reads Portable Document Format (PDF) files. A tremendous number of documents are available as PDF files (a very common format on the Web), and programs exist to convert word-processing files to PDF files. This provides yet another readable format for not only documents but also entire books on the PDA. I carry a single memory card filled with nothing but books from Spurgeon, Edwards, and numerous other writers that have been converted to PDF files. With this kind of resource, you can always have good and edifying books to read no matter how long you might be delayed at the airport!

Examples of PDA Usefulness. I travel around the nation, and I am often asked to speak on various topics on very short notice. Since 9/11, Islam has been a hot topic, so I purchased the Qur'an in Palm Book Reader format (I purchased Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* at the same time). I even spent a few moments on a flight creating a list of bookmarks referencing the key passages relating to the Trinity, Jesus, and Christians in general. I have since used those bookmarks many times, all to the great benefit of groups large and small.

Such traveling likewise requires that I use "plane time" to work on notes for talks or debates. I carry a very sharp, very small, yet fully functional keyboard so I can use my PDA even when seated behind someone who cranks his seat all the way back (an action that renders any normal laptop utterly useless when seated in coach). The complete interchangeability of WordSmith with Microsoft Word enables me to continue working on projects even at 37,000 feet. I generally use a free-standing mp3 player to carry digital recordings of previous debates or talks given by my opponents; indeed, I have the capacity on my Tungsten T3 to listen to mp3s while traveling.

A Christian apologist who works on the front lines passing out tracts at events sponsored by pseudo-Christian religions faces many quandaries. One has to do with which resources to carry (and how to keep from developing a backache in the process). The PDA offers tremendous assistance in this area. For example, at the LDS (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Mormons) Easter Pageant in Mesa,

Arizona, this past spring, I carried only my Tungsten T. I assembled it so that each of my two Bible programs were set to particular passages of Scripture that I wanted to discuss, using the King James Version. (One could assemble an entire set of bookmarks to follow a preplanned presentation on any number of biblical topics relevant to Mormonism.) I loaded specific LDS scriptural references (e.g., Book of Abraham chapter 4 and Doctrine and Covenants 130:22) in TealDoc, a good document reader program. I also loaded a useful set of quotations from LDS leaders in WordSmith. During the evening, I beamed my "business card" to an LDS missionary so we could continue our conversation electronically. (Palm OS devices allow you to "beam" documents, data, etc. to another device through an infrared port.) Later in the evening, as I was sharing with a group of Mormons, an elderly LDS man asked about how to get home, so I fired up Mapopolis and gave him driving directions. All this was done using the Tungsten T.

Using Technology to God's Glory. PDAs were first designed to provide a calendar, datebook, and general scheduling information, and they continue to function quite well in those areas. With the advancement in their capacity and speed, however, they have become a valuable tool to the believer who wishes to be prepared to provide a solid apologetic response no matter where he or she might be. They are especially attractive to those who find themselves "on-the-go."

If you run into me during my travels, make sure to beam me your card!

— James R. White

URLs for programs noted in this article:

<<http://www.palmone.com>>

<<http://www.olivetree.com/handheld/Palm/PalmBible.html>>

<<http://palmbibleplus.sourceforge.net>>

<<http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>>

<http://www.bluenomad.com/ws/prod_wordsmith_details.html>

<<http://www.dataviz.com/products/documentstogo/index.html>>

<<http://www.tealpoint.com/softhome.htm>>

<<http://www.mapopolis.com>>