

## **BNEXT Writer's Guidelines**

Pastors, church leaders, and church members sometimes ask us, “Can we produce our own materials from time to time to supplement the BNEXT resource collection? And if we write such materials, can you make them available to the entire BNEXT network?” The answer to both of these questions is an emphatic “yes.” In fact, if you or members of your staff or congregation write materials that fit the needs and standards of the BNEXT catalogue, we may offer the writer of such materials (or your church, if you prefer) payment for the right to make these materials available to our growing association of churches.

### **The Need**

We are currently developing a team of well-known and respected authors and theologians to expand our BNEXT study guide catalogue. At the same time, we recognize that many pastors, associate pastors, and other church staff and church members are gifted writers and are in the unique position not only to write BNEXT studies, but to use and refine them in their ministry contexts. For this reason, we are always looking for good writers within congregations around the country, to help us meet our goal of expanding our catalogue to include quality study guides on every book of the Bible and on most topics of relevance to the Christian life.

### **The Guidelines**

Each of our published study guides was crafted with the following guidelines in mind. If you wish to write for the BNEXT ministry, please study these guidelines, and note how they have been used for our current BNEXT studies. Also, if you are looking for a particular book or topical study that has not yet been produced, informing us of your interest may motivate our production schedule accordingly.

### **The Target Audience**

The BNEXT study guides are to be written with a broad spectrum of church-goers in mind: from young adult to older adult, theologically astute to new Christian, Reformed and Covenantal to Arminian and Dispensational, high school graduates to advanced in education, and from lovers of deep contemplation to those who wish for immediate application.

The task of impacting this target audience is not difficult. People from all these persuasions are able to read the newspaper. The Bible, which is our focus, has better news than anything else coming off the press, and it is written, for the most part, on the level of a local newspaper — it is written for the common person. In like manner, our aim is for each BNEXT study to be easily understood, personally and intellectually challenging, and relevant to daily life of a broad spectrum of Christians. Writers should minimize the use of weighty theological terms or phrases when simple explanations can be given. The goal is not to impress — but to bless — the reader. Avoid Christian clichés. Our hope is to draw in babes in the faith, not to turn them off. Yet, we also want to challenge even the most mature Christian with timeless truth and application. Specific suggestions for crafting the commentary and questions are below:

### Guidelines for Writing the Commentary

1. The commentary length should be between 1,500 and 1,800 words.
2. Study the relevant Scripture text thoroughly. Let the text guide the commentary.
3. Find the main point of the text, and two to four supporting sub-points.
4. Write logically, with an introduction, a body, and a conclusion...much as one might develop a sermon. Provide an opening that will catch the reader's interest, and a closing that connects with the opening idea.
5. Develop a catchy title that summarizes the main point of the commentary. Write with a thematic flow, providing section breaks and sub-titles that summarize each sub-point.
6. Find a balance in writing between:
  - Observation, interpretation, and application.
  - Textual exegesis and supportive reflection.
  - Presenting the facts and explaining or illustrating.
7. Strive for a style that is crisp and personal. Move from the Scripture text, to explanation, to daily living.
8. Use, but don't overuse, illustrations and/or quotations; make sure they fit with the flow of logic, and are not distractions. Write to capture the imagination with color and imagery, not just doctrine and fact.
9. When using a quotation or illustration, provide footnoted sources. Even if the final published version does not show our sources, we will retain the source data in case it is ever challenged.

10. Our studies are packaged in series. When naming a series, find a theme for the series that will be supported by the central idea of each commentary. The series theme should be worded to draw reader interest. Series of three to five weeks are generally most useful. If writing a longer series, design it so that it can be used in parts or segments if needed.

### Guidelines for Writing the Questions

1. Study several BNEXT studies to gain a sense of how many questions to write and how they are typically formatted.
2. Questions should be written to tie to the text and commentary.
3. Note the three sets of questions, and the emphasis of each:
  - **Personal Devotion:** These questions should be devotional in nature. Imagine yourself alone, before the Lord, in prayer and Bible study, and write questions that would feed your soul.
  - **Group Discussion:** These questions should be discussion and interaction oriented. Picture yourself in a small group and write questions that would make for a dynamic small group discussion. Questions should draw people out and encourage them to share deeply without embarrassing them.
  - **Digging Deeper:** This set of questions blends the flavor of the first two sections, as it may be used either personally or by a small group that needs more material. This set is generally written to be more thought provoking or challenging.
4. Questions should include emphasis on observation, interpretation and application, with a weight toward application.
5. When the commentary and sermon are geared to cover a significant section of Scripture, it is generally best for the questions to follow the flow of the whole text, such that a person doing all three sets would cover the whole Scripture section, from beginning to end.
6. Provide a minimal amount of cross-referencing; generally select about 70% - 80% of the references related to the immediate text with about 20% – 30% of the references drawing readers into other portions of scripture. These percentages may vary significantly from time to time due to the nature of the study. If it is topical, one may have no choice but to pull from many parts of the Bible. If the study is textual and covers a meaty section, it may be advantageous not to

wander from the immediate text. The goal is to familiarize students with the whole of God’s Word while not intimidating or overwhelming new believers.

7. The questions should all be based on Scriptural truth, though some may call for discussion and reflection on a truth already explored. Do not overwhelm the reader with too much Scripture reading, yet keep the study Scriptural. See already-written BNEXT samples for examples of this balance.
8. Begin the first section (Personal Devotions) with a question that allows the reader to reflect on the commentary, such as, “What challenge or insight from the commentary really stuck with you?” The goal of this first question is to assure that they took the time to read the commentary.
9. Begin the first question in the second section (Group Discussion) with a call to reflect on the pastor’s sermon and especially on the personal study questions. For example: “What thought from the pastor’s message or from the Personal Study questions would you like to discuss more fully?” The goal is to encourage group members to listen to and reflect on the sermons, and most especially to take time before the small group meeting to answer the Personal Study Questions.
10. Avoid open-ended or wandering questions that miss the point of the text. For example, on John 3:16, don’t ask, “Why do you think God had a son rather than a daughter?”; or, “If God had a daughter do you think He would have given her also?” Better: “What do you think it was like for God to give His son? What is the most costly thing you remember giving for the sake of another in need?”
11. Don’t ask questions that can be answered with a simple “Yes,” “No,” or “Maybe.” Encourage the reader to think and write, by following key questions with phrases like “Explain,” or “Why or why not?”
12. After you have written a set of questions, set it aside. Later come back and answer them all yourself, looking up each Scripture text. This is the only good way to get a feel for whether the questions really work, and for how much work is required to answer the questions.

## Testing of Materials

When editing material, we encourage several editing stages, examining: content, flow, diction, grammar, consistency, and tightness, to create clean, active writing. Each published BNEXT study is not only carefully edited, but tested through several cycles of use, comment, and further editing. Still, we cannot claim that any lesson in our catalogue is perfect, and your feedback is appreciated. If you are able not only to

write but also to use your material and to solicit group feedback, such material will be one step closer to potential publication.

### Alternatives to the Full BNEXT Study

Our surveys have found that small groups and individuals, who have experienced the BNEXT handouts, prefer receiving the full BNEXT guides on an on-going basis. Nevertheless, there may be practical reasons that a pastor or congregation will opt to produce simple sermon inserts in place of the BNEXT studies. For example, during the summer months, a pastor may prefer to decide on sermon topics from week-to-week based on suggestions given from the congregation. Or, on special occasions churches using this integrated program of discipleship may prefer to create personalized in-house material. Some congregations, in fact, may prefer to use the BNEXT material only two or three times per year.

If for any reason BNEXT handouts will not be used, the option of producing a bulletin insert with a reduced number of questions and with little or no commentary takes much pressure off of churches creating their own materials. Such an insert provides continuity for small groups that continue to meet; it also gives opportunity for individuals to continue connecting their personal study and prayer time with the sermons being preached on Sunday mornings. These inserts are easy to produce, as described below.

### Insert Format

There are unlimited possibilities as to how one might format an abbreviated *BNEXT* insert for the worship bulletin. The simplest approach is simply to create several questions for a one-sided insert. The guidelines found above for writing questions in the full *BNEXT* format can also be applied for writing in this abbreviated mode. However, it should be remembered that such an insert will be used for both personal and small group study, and that its questions should include a blend of “Personal Devotion” and “Group Discussion” questions.

An enhanced option is to include questions on one side of the insert, with an open page for sermon notes (or with a sermon outline) on the reverse. Examples of each follow.

## Questions for Personal and Small Group Study

*These questions, which will replace the weekly BNEXT handout through (provide date to help small groups in their planning), are designed to help you bring the topic and focus of this Sunday morning's sermon into the rest of your week.*

1. Read Habakkuk 1:1-4. Here the prophet questions why God allows evil to run rampant in the life of His people in Judah. Describe Judah at the time of King Manasseh (2 Kings 21:1-18; 24:1-7). What were some of the evils that led to the eventual downfall of the nation?
2. God told Habakkuk that He would answer the evil in Judah by the coming of Babylon (Habakkuk 1:5-11). What further questions would this raise in your mind? What questions does this raise in the prophet's mind (1:12-2:1)?
3. God next answered Habakkuk, explaining that Babylon too will receive judgment for its sin (2:2-20). This seemed to settle the matter in the eyes of the prophet (3:1-19). Does the knowledge that God will ultimately judge all evil settle the matter of the existence of evil in your mind? Why or why not?
4. If you could directly address God, as did Habakkuk, and directly receive answer from God at this very moment ... what questions would you most want to ask Him? How do you think He might answer?
5. We all have doubts. Is it sinful to doubt? What should we do with our doubts (Mark 9:24; Romans 10:17; Hebrews 10:35-38; Habakkuk 2:4-1)? In times past, how have you overcome doubt?
6. Read again Habakkuk's conclusion (Habakkuk 3:17-19). What do these verses say to you personally? Pray for your faith in God to become more like Habakkuk's.

### Sermon Notes | Habakkuk 1-3

Sunday, (insert date)

“WHY?”

*Why do you make me look at injustice; why do you tolerate wrong; why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?—*

*Habakkuk 1:3; 13*

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*Questions are provided on the other side to help you bring the message of the sermon into your personal or small group study.*

## Sermon Notes | Habakkuk 1-3

Sunday, (insert date)

“WHY?”

Option #1

God Isn't \_\_\_\_\_

*Why do you make me look at injustice? — Habakkuk 1:3a*

Option #2

God Isn't \_\_\_\_\_

*Why do you tolerate wrong? — Habakkuk 1:3b*

Option #3

God Isn't \_\_\_\_\_

*Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? — Habakkuk 1:13b*

Option #4

God Is \_\_\_\_\_

*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights. — Habakkuk 3:17-19*

*Questions are provided on the other side to help you bring the message of the sermon into your personal or small group study.*