

"Gutenberg and the Reformation" Study Guide by Pastor Dixon
Behind the Book(s): A History of How Our Bible Came to Be Series
Fourth of Four Presentations ~ Winter 2023

Overview

"In the beginning the universe was created. This has made a lot of people very angry and has been widely regarded as a bad move." ~ *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams

Was the invention of the printing press a godsend and catalyst to the Reformation movement? Or was it "a bad move" that set the world on a course towards information (and misinformation) overload? Yes.

When the Mainz goldsmith Johannes Gutenberg invented his printing press in the middle of the 15th century, he had no idea what direct and indirect consequences would follow. The press made possible the unbelievably rapid, uniform, and relatively inexpensive reproduction of texts that previously had to be copied out by hand. This was the necessary technological foundation for the new field of textual criticism, an essential intellectual component to the Reformation movement. The printing press drove the development of vernacular language discourses. No longer did the world need to read Latin to participate in discussions about major political or theological issues. Important works were being written in French, German, and English for audiences who had not trained at Oxford, the Sorbonne, or Bologna. It allowed Martin Luther's ideas to spread further and faster than any previous would-be reformers (e.g. Hus or Wycliffe).

The press also made possible (and popular) the new medium that would come to be known centuries later as "the opinion piece." It made it possible for non-experts to "do their own research" and select sources produced by authors less rigorous but more friendly to their cause. The press whetted and satisfied the growing appetite for rhetoric and propaganda, and helped popular movements explode, sometimes violently.

Oh, and it also helped common Christians read the Bible for the first time in history. We'll explore this complicated history together this week!

Scriptures

Mark 7:7-9 - Jesus responding to Pharisees critical of the disciples' failure to keep to dietary traditions: [Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus said] "'In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition...You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!"

2 Timothy 3:16-17 - A verse commonly used to encourage lay Christians to read the word of God and find it sufficient;

"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

Questions

- There is no such thing as a completely independent mind. We all participate in networks of information sharing. We all put our trust in some authorities. Who or what do you trust to help guide you when you confront big questions, and how did you decide to trust that person/institution/tradition?
- A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Have you ever had the experience of reading something in the Bible so confusing or troubling that it shook your relationship with Scripture or even your faith? Many early modern scholars and ecclesiastical readers were worried about just that, and cautioned people against the dangers of unsupervised Biblical study. What would you tell those authorities?
- Have you ever had a young person in your life challenge what you understood to be a principle of your faith? What was your response? Or were you ever a young person asking hard questions in church? What response did you get? When two people disagree over the interpretation of scripture, it's easy for the older or more powerful person to resort to the naked assertion of authority ("because I said so!"), but that might be as much about their anxiety as their faith. The gospel is a powerful and calming message. How can we share it best in a way that's truest to its spirit?

