

On the Reformation and the Conversion of a Wine Press

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The flash of insight which brought Johann Gutenberg (b. c. 1398, d. 1468) to his workshop to fasten his recently perfected movable type to a wine press sparked an explosion that shook the whole world to its foundations. At the time of the Reformation, the wine and oil press was a very common piece of equipment. A simple push on the lever forced a thick plate down to crush grapes or olives and squeeze the juice or oil out into a bucket. This type of press had already been modified in Martin Luther's day so that it could be used to squeeze the water out of a pulp mixture to produce a sheet of paper, but paper was of little value until a scribe had spent hours printing words one letter at a time upon that paper. Every book written until this time had been written by hand and was very expensive. The conversion of a wine press into a printing press made it much easier to copy books and was invaluable for the Reformation.

Some have even argued that the Reformation would have failed without the printing press. The child of God, however, knows that the life of the true church does not depend upon man's inventions but rather upon the gracious providence of God. The printing press in the hands of Martin Luther was a powerful means used by God for reform, but it was not the determining factor in the success of the Reformation.

The determining factor for every true reform is the pure preaching of the Word and the work of God in the hearts of men. Johann Gutenberg's invention changed the way books had been written for thousands of years. He developed a way to produce efficiently individual raised metal letters that could be coated with ink and stamped on paper over and over. He developed a way to lock those letters together into words, sentences, and pages which when coated in ink could print page after page with the flick of a wrist.

He also worked with a special ink mixture of chimney soot, turpentine, and linseed oil that printed sharp letters with no soaking and blurring. Together the new press and ink made an excellent printing press. The advantage of a printing press was obvious and Mr. Gutenberg took out a loan so that he could make enough type and suitable press to begin printing copies of the Bible. Each metal "page" of type probably took about one day to make, but once made, it could print thousands of copies on paper. His banker, however, was either a very impatient man or greedily sought the great profit of such a press because he demanded repayment before Mr. Gutenberg could pay back his debt. The banker then brought a lawsuit against him that landed the press in his own hands. Before being forced to give up his press, however, Johann Gutenberg managed to produce complete copies of the Bible known today as the Gutenberg Bible. The Bibles produced by Gutenberg's press were very high quality and much less expensive than the hand-copied versions. Thus demand for the Bibles and other material printed on the new press was very high.

Printing developed rapidly after Gutenberg set up his first commercial press in 1455, but it was Martin Luther who sent the presses into a blur of action. Luther did not immediately realize how valuable the press would be for his proclamation of the truth and was himself quite amazed at how quickly his 95 thesis had been reproduced and spread throughout all Germany. Unlike the Roman authorities who did their best to keep the written word out of the hands of the people and feared the effect of the press, Luther saw the press as an effective means for spreading the truth of God's Word to the people and began to use it extensively. When the reformers began to use the printing presses, the volume of material printed increased seven fold. The doctrines found on the pages that flowed from the first printing presses were powerful doctrines and produced a strong impact on the general population of Germany. When the power of *sola scriptura* and *sola fidei* was unleashed for the people, it inflicted heavy damage within the Roman Church and shook loose the bonds that held many of God's people in

the prison of popery. To a large extent, the printing presses under the use of the Reformers can be credited for unleashing this great power. Later on and still today, the ability to print ideas cheaply and quickly results in rapid development in technology and the lives of people. Though a very powerful influence, we must understand that the printing press alone, even in the hands of Luther could not have brought reformation to the church. The life of the true church does not depend upon technology. God has determined to use the foolishness of humble and simple preaching by men who may be very poor and ignorant of the latest technology to gather and preserve His church. True riches and power are found in the Word of God alone.

If Luther's pamphlets and translation of the Bible into German had not been followed by the pure preaching of the word, all the pamphlets and Bibles would have floated out of peasant chimneys. Some have argued that reformation would never have happened if it were not for the printing press. Though it is difficult for us mere men to understand how the reformation could have occurred without the printing press, the truth of Scripture noted in the previous paragraph teaches us that God gathers and preserves his church by the pure preaching of the Word. If Luther had had a computer and had published his 95 thesis on the World Wide Web, it still would have been fruitless without the pure preaching of the Word. If God had determined to bring reformation to the church without the printing press, the reformation would have occurred without the printing press. God determined, however, to govern the progress and invention of the printing press so that it would be used by Luther to bring true reform to the church. All history, every invention, and every ruler serves the purpose of God as He gathers His people from every tribe tongue and people. When we understand that God is in sovereign control, then it does not make sense to ponder whether or not the reformation would have happened without the printing press. All we can do by faith is glorify God for His mighty works in the earth for His people. Today books, magazines, newspapers, and junk mail is everywhere.

We have good Reformed literature in abundance, though it is now only a minute fraction of the total material printed today. Computers make printing and publishing nearly effortless in comparison to the days before Luther. Even so, the church is small and we can see that the church lives on only by the pure preaching of the Word. This does not mean we abandon technology as useless because God directs the production of computers and other technology also for the sake of His church. Knowing our God as sovereign in all things compels us to ask in prayer what God will have us do with the things He gives to us. Computers make it easier than ever before to get ones ideas into writing, but what is important are the ideas that are written.

The great writers such as Luther and Calvin were men of prayer. We too must be men of prayer as we work with words and develop the truth in our Churches. The written word is clearly vital to the pure preaching of the word. God gave His word to us in written form so that we can read it and ministers can exegete and preach it. Reformed people must recognize and appreciate the importance of the written word and spend much time with it. Our schools must put a strong emphasis on reading skills and writing skills. Further education in the skills of writing and publishing is very valuable.

We need people in our churches who read and are also able to communicate effectively with others in writing. Above all, the church needs people who are strong in faith. If faith is lacking, then all the reading and writing in the world is worthless. We can be thankful to God for faithful preachers because our faith comes by hearing the Word preached as we read in Scripture. "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!" (Romans 10:14-15).

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