



The Power of the Print

The ragged little girl crept into the dimly lit church. She gazed forlornly at the ornate Bible, sitting on its pedestal of honor. Every week the priest read out of it... in Latin. Even though Master John Wycliffe had translated the Scriptures into English, many clergy still preferred Latin. She could never *hope* to understand. As her eyes ran over the masterfully decorated, painstakingly copied pages, she sighed and turned to go. Even if she learned to read, her father could never afford such a treasure. Made expensive by the years of labor that went into them, books were luxuries only for the idle rich, not serfs like her. But still...there was something about that Bible. She wanted to know, to learn more about the Savior in the hymns. Sure, she had to learn the catechism, but it wasn't enough somehow.

Though this is a fictionalized scenario, in the fifteenth century it could have been reality. "Commoners" were at the mercy of the clergy as far as interpreting the Word of God went. Even after the Bible was translated into English, books were rare and costly items. Illiteracy was a fact of life for many in the 1400s. That is, until Johannes Gutenberg began his work on the printing press around 1436. Culminating ideas from previous inventors, Gutenberg improved upon them by developing metal type and using paper as opposed to vellum to make books. The first book to be printed on the Gutenberg press was the 42-line Bible (or Gutenberg Bible) in the 1450s. Gutenberg's idea spread, and by 1499, printing presses had been established in more than 250 European cities.

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This had a radical effect on the economy; a booming paper industry was begun, and books were much more affordable when printed by machine onto paper. As a result, the number of literate book-owners increased dramatically. The spreading of ideas was made easy by the printing press.

During the Protestant Reformation, notable works such as Martin Luther's *95 Theses*, Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex*, and John Calvin's *Institutes of Government* had a powerful effect on the public because they were widely available as a result of the printing press. This enabled the people to read the arguments, decide about ideas, and support a belief. Many of the very documents published during the Reformation played vital roles in shaping the American Revolution.

In the period of history known as the Enlightenment, books by ancient Greek philosophers were found and printed, in addition to works by philosophers of that era. This resulted in many concepts about science and philosophy. Specifically, many of these ideas revolved around discovering truths about man. Influenced by these documents, many people were shifting from God-centered thinking to man-centered thinking -- in short, humanism.

Books have continued to play pivotal roles throughout history. During the Civil War, President Lincoln shook hands with Harriet Beecher Stowe (author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and said, "Is this the little woman whose book made such a great war?"

As you can see, the increased printing and distribution of books has had a widespread effect over the course of these historical events, which in turn have had an incalculable impact on the present.

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So why has the printing press played a key part in today's society? Because ideas, beliefs, and facts can be spread to so many through the printed word.

Even though there are numerous false theories that are published and believed as fact in today's culture (with tragic results), in the end, the book that has had *the* most impact on the human life and soul is the Bible. God, in His wisdom, has used the printing press as a tool to provide His Word to humanity. There have been more copies of the Bible printed and sold than of any other book in history. And that has the greatest result of all. *"For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12a). "So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty" (Isaiah 55:11a).*