

FACES OF THE REFORMATION

JOHANNES GUTENBERG

Born: 1395? | Mainz, Germany

Died: 1468 | Mainz, Germany



Gutenberg's invention helped spread the ideas of the Reformation to the masses

COULD JOHANNES GUTENBERG HAVE KNOWN WHEN HE FIRST CONCEIVED THE IDEA OF MOVEABLE TYPE that it would contribute to the spread of the Reformation and the Renaissance and lead to the education of all levels of society? One might question his presence in the “Faces of the Reformation” series. But considering that his presses printed not only Luther’s 95 Theses but also the papal indulgences that sparked Luther’s polemic pen, it seems fitting that he should be included.

Gutenberg was born about 1395 as the son of a metalsmith, and he became acquainted with the printing business at a very young age. His invention of the moveable type press made the mass production of books a reality that would change the world. By 1450, his new invention was operating. As with most new ideas of this scale, the road was not smooth. In 1546, Johann Fust, Gutenberg’s financial backer, won a lawsuit against him regarding repayment of the funds. Gutenberg’s employee and son-in-law, Peter Schöffer, testified against him. Before this lawsuit was finalized, Gutenberg had printed a Latin Bible that contained 42 lines of Scripture per page. This “42-line Bible” is known as the Gutenberg Bible. The press for the Bible, Gutenberg’s masterpiece, along with a second book containing only Psalms, was lost to Fust in the court case. The Psalter was published after the court case with no mention of Gutenberg; only Fust’s and Schöffer’s names appear as the printers.

Gutenberg never really bounced back financially from losing his press to Fust. He set up another printing press and continued to print, but because he did not put his name in the books and papers he produced, it is not known how much was produced as he competed with his old press shop. In 1465, an honorific title was bestowed on Gutenberg in recognition for his invention. This was accompanied by a salary that supported him until his death three years later.

Gutenberg is often thought of as a contemporary of Luther, but in fact he died 15 years before Luther was born. In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he declares that “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (EPH. 2:10). The stage was set for the coming battle between Luther and his followers and the pope and his supporters.

The Reformation has often been called the war of pamphlets. Pamphlets, the quickest and most economical form of printing with moveable type, had been around for decades before Luther started to employ them, but the volume of pamphlets increased as much as one-thousandfold in the first few years after Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the church door. Printing shops sprang up all over Germany, and many came to Wittenberg like moths to a flame. Even the artist Lucas Cranach partnered in a printing business there.

Gutenberg’s invention made books more obtainable for the first time in history. The book that helped codify the German language and that was used as a tool in teaching reading was Luther’s German Bible. For the first time, Germans could read the Scriptures in their own language at a cost that was within reach for the common man.

Surely Gutenberg would have been amazed at the world-altering events that resulted from the works planned in advance for him to do.



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