

JOHANNES GUTENBERG

Johannes Gutenberg was born in Mainz, Germany, about 1400. His father was Friele zum Gensfleisch, a goldsmith. Johannes took his mother's last name for his own, following the custom that one son should carry on the mother's family name. His father's work included stamping designs on gold coins, and this may have given the boy the idea of printing from metal. After his father's death, he moved to Strasbourg in about 1430.

He worked as a goldsmith and maker of mirrors and also served as a policeman. In 1438 he became a partner in a block printing firm. During those years he experimented with wood and metal type.

Gutenberg, as you know, is famous for inventing the moveable type printing press. I didn't realize how famous he was until I saw a letter from Dr. James Dobson (Dec. 1999.) Dr. Dobson pointed out that the cable TV network A&E recently aired a series focussing on the 100 most influential people in the last 1,000 years. They interviewed various scholars, politicians, and theologians and sought to identify those people, good or bad, who impacted our world between A.D. 1,000, and 2,000. The list included such famous men as William the Conqueror and George Washington. Such famous women as Joan of Arc and Marie Curie. **On the list of the 100 most influential people of this millennium, Johannes Gutenberg was at the very top!**

Dobson observed that the invention of the printing press completely changed the way that information could be shared and disseminated for over 500 years. It signalled a dramatic shift from the isolated city-state mentality to the interactive global culture that we have today. Others who impacted our world, from Martin Luther to Adolf Hitler, are in Gutenberg's debt.

Gutenberg probably didn't realize that his invention would play a part in bringing down great earthly kingdoms and empowering the common man. His focus was spiritual. The reason he devoted his life to the development of printing was that the Word of God might be made available to the people of God. Please consider his impassioned words:

"God suffers in the multitude of souls whom His holy word cannot reach. Religious truth is imprisoned in a small number of manuscript books, which confine instead of spreading the public treasure. Let us break the seal which seals up holy things, and give wings to truth, in order that she may go and win every soul that comes into this world, by her word, no longer written at great expense by a hand easily palsied, but multiplied like the wind by an untiring machine. . . Yes, it is a press, certainly, but a press from which shall soon flow, in inexhaustible streams, the most abundant and most marvellous liquor that has ever flowed to relieve the thirst of men! Through it, god will spread His word. A spring of pure truth shall flow from it; like a new star it shall scatter the darkness of ignorance, and cause a light heretofore unknown to shine amongst men."

The primary fruit of Gutenberg's labour for the Lord was a three-volume, Latin version of the Holy Bible. It was completed in Mainz in 1455. It is known as the Gutenberg Bible, the 42-Line Bible, or the Mazarin Bible. Since the Bible was in Latin, Gutenberg first printed a small 32 page Latin Grammar that the Bible might be understood. The Bible, however, was the focus of his efforts and was the first major work to be produced on his press. Historians believe there were 200 Gutenberg Bibles printed, but only 47 are known to exist today. Most are torn and tattered, but three "perfect" copies have been found, one of which is in the Library of Congress.

Someone has praised the power of the printed page with these words: *"The printed page never flinches, never shows cowardice, it never is tempted to compromise, it never tires, never grows disheartened. It travels cheaply, and requires no hired halls. It works while we sleep, it never loses its temper, it continues to work long after we are dead. The printed page is a visitor which gets inside the home and stays there. It always catches a man in the right mood, for it speaks to him only when he is reading it. It always sticks to what it has said and never answers back. It is bait permanently left in the pool."*