

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA # 37

Dearest Grandchild,

In today's letter I want to tell you the story of Johannes (John) Gutenberg. He is the inventor of the moveable type printing press and therefore played a major role in making it possible for you to have your own personal copy of the Bible.

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.

In the 15th century, Latin was the language used by the educated and governing classes throughout Europe. The most widespread grammar used for teaching Latin was written in the 4th century by Aelius Donatus. He was the teacher of Jerome who translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin. "Books", in this day, were actually "manuscripts". This word means "written by hand". Gutenberg's father payed a scribe so his son could study a "manuscript" of the Donatus. Johann, however, had a friend who was too poor to afford the services of a scribe. I am told that young Johann copied that precious book by hand himself and gave it to his friend. After his father's death, he moved to Strasbourg in about 1430 where he worked as a goldsmith and maker of mirrors. He 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 we have already said, is famous for inventing the moveable type printing press. He took some existing technologies and some of his own inventions to come up with the printing press in the year 1450. His invention of "moveable type" was unique. Rather than use wooden blocks to press ink onto paper, Gutenberg used moveable metal pieces. Using the old method you could only print 40 or 50 pages per day. With Gutenberg's press you could print thousands of pages.

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 focusing 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. Now, for the first time, middle class and poor people could afford books. The major reason, however, he was obsessed with the printing press, was so that the Word of God could be available to the people of God. He was so focussed on the printing press that he declined to marry his betrothed and 1437 was sued for "breach of promise of marriage". The jilted young patrician was Ennel zur eisernen Tür of Strasburg.

As proof of his spiritual focus, 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.”

In 1448, Gutenberg borrowed 800 guilders from local financier Johan Fust so that the long process of printing of the Bible could continue. By December, 1452, as he was unable to pay his debt, a new agreement was drawn up making Fust a partner. In 1455, Gutenberg was sued and Fust took over the business. Gutenberg did not have a copy of the “Gutenberg Bible” in his hands until months after it came off the press. As long as the Bible was printed, however, perhaps it didn’t matter.

The first major production of the Gutenberg press was the Bible itself. No expense was spared to ensure that it was of the highest quality. It was published in three volumes and came off the press 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 (the Donatus) that the Bible might be understood. The Bible, however, was the focus of his efforts and, as we have said, 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. Johann Gutenberg died in poverty in 1468. He was buried in a Franciscan church which was later demolished.

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.”*

In one of our earlier letters I told you of the book “Men of Science, Men of God” by the late Dr. Henry M. Morris. In this small book Dr. Morris listed 101 pioneers in every field of scientific discipline who were both men of science and men of God. Your Christian faith is not a hindrance, it is a help.

I love you,
Grandpa Boyce