

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA # 157

Dearest Grandchild,

Today's letter will come a little early as Granny and I are leaving for Sophie's wedding in Virginia. It will be about Johannes Gutenberg. As you know, he is famous for inventing the moveable type printing press. The Chinese had printing presses long before Gutenberg, but they printing pages with carved blocks of wood. Gutenberg made printing much more practical by inventing moveable type that could be rearranged and used over and over again.

Gutenberg was born in Mainz, Germany around A.D. 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. Another factor that influenced his life was the fact that he was wealthy enough to hire a scribe, buy a book, and go to school. As a young child he made his own copy of the 32 page Latin Grammar known as the Donatus and gave it to a friend who was too poor to buy a book or go to school.

In 1438 he became a partner in a block printing firm. During those years he experimented with wood and metal type. I didn't realize how famous he was until I saw a letter from Dr. James Dobson many years ago (Dec. 1999.) Dr. Dobson pointed out that the cable TV network A&E 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. **They honoured Johannes Gutenberg by placing at the very top of the 100 most influential people of this millennium!**

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 such a prominent 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 the world. 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 the small Latin Grammar that he had copied as a child. Without this, the Latin Bible would have been useless. 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."*

Please do not take for granted the privilege of being able to own and read the Bible. Gutenberg and others gave their lives to make it possible. May his life inspire you to also give your life in service to God!

I love you,

Grandpa Boyce