

The Reformation in Europe during the 16th Century was one of the most important epochs in the history of the world. The Reformation gave us the Bible – now freely available in our own languages. The now almost universally acknowledged principles of religious freedom, liberty of conscience, the rule of law, separation of powers and constitutionally limited republics were unthinkable before the Reformation. The Reformers fought for the principles that Scripture alone is our final authority, Christ alone is the Head of the Church and Justification is by God's grace, on the basis of the finished work of Christ, received by faith alone.

Some influential developments which preceded the Reformation:

- **"The Black Death."** The Bubonic plague wiped out over one third of Europe's population.
- The **invasion of Muslim Turks** who swept over the Balkans and even reached the gates of Vienna.
- There was also **a massive influx of pagan Greek humanistic writings** (as a result of the fall of Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire). This led to a renaissance of pagan humanistic thinking.
- There was **widespread corruption** of the Roman Catholic system with superstitions and un-Biblical doctrines taught and with positions in the church for sale – open to the highest bidder.
 - People were also encouraged to *"buy salvation"* with the sale of **Papal Indulgences**.
 - The invention of the **printing press** and the printing of the first book (**a Bible**) in **1456**, by Johan Gutenberg, was one very positive development, which made possible the rapid dissemination of Reformation doctrines.

The Waldensians

The **Waldensians** were a dynamic Gospel movement, which was started in 1177. **Peter Waldo**, a wealthy merchant, had the Gospels translated into French and organised a Society to present Biblical truth. The Waldensians desired to study the Scriptures and to be faithful to Biblical principles in all areas of life. They were eager for a more consistent walk following the example of Christ. These

"poor men of Lyons"

went out in two's and boldly proclaimed the Word of God throughout Southern France, Northern Italy and Switzerland. After the Bible was placed on

The Index of Forbidden Books,

by the Council of Valencia in 1229, the Papacy began to viciously persecute the Waldensians. Many thousands were murdered.

The survivors fled the Southern Alps of western Piedmont and flourished there. Under relentless attack, the Waldensians became resourceful soldiers and effectively resisted the tyranny. The persecution of the Waldensians only ended in the 17th Century when Oliver Cromwell of England intervened vigorously on their behalf. The Waldensians survive in the Northern Italy to this day – the oldest Protestant church in the world.

The Power of Printing

The invention of the printing press played a key role in mobilising the Reformation. Without printing, it is questionable whether there would have been a Protestant Reformation. A century earlier, Wycliffe and Hus had inspired dedicated movements for Bible study and Reform. But the absence of adequate printing technology severely limited the distribution of their writings. As a result, their ideas did not spread as rapidly or as far as they could have done.

Luther translated the Bible into German. (The New Testament was on sale for a week's wages by 1522 and the Old Testament by 1534).

By the end of his life, Martin Luther had written over 60,000 pages of published works. Yet he said that he would rather *“all my books would disappear and the Holy Scriptures alone be read!”*

Martin Luther recognised the power of printing to mobilise grass roots support for Reformation. Luther wrote prolifically – more than 400 titles, including commentaries, sermons and pamphlets that attacked Catholic superstitions and abuses and which promoted Biblical doctrines. In the first three critical years after Luther posted the 95 Theses in Wittenberg, from 1517 to 1520, Luther published 30 pamphlets and flooded Germany with 400,000 copies. By 1523, half of all the printed works in Germany were Luther's works.

Luther understood that books and pamphlets speak long after the preacher has left the pulpit. Luther described printing as: *“God's highest and extremist act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward.”*

John Foxe, the 16th Century author of the *“Book of Martyrs”* wrote: *“Although through might the pope stopped the mouth of John Hus, God has appointed the Press to preach, whose voice the pope is never able to stop...”*

In 1517 there were about 24 printing centres in Europe. Wholesale booksellers had also developed distribution centres and hundreds of itinerant book salesmen crisscrossed the continent to make these publications available.

Luther’s writings dominated the market and were far and away the most popular. Martin Luther could be described as a pastor, preacher, teacher, theologian, professor, composer and Reformer. But perhaps his greatest achievement was the German Bible.

When his New Testament in German was published in September 1522, it created a sensation. Five thousand copies were sold in the first 2 months alone! It was the first time a mass medium had ever impacted everyday life. And it was affordable – even to the poor – for but a week’s wages! Almost everyone in Germany either read Luther’s translation, or listened to it being read. It formed a linguistic rallying point for the formation of the modern German language. Its impact in restructuring literature, arts and culture was so awesome that King Frederick the Great later called Luther *“the personification of the German national spirit.”* Even today, nearly half a millennium later, Luther is still considered *“one of the most influential people who ever lived.”*

Luther’s Bible translation inspired and guided similar translations of the Bible into local languages in Holland, Sweden, Iceland, Denmark and England. One of the many ways Luther left his mark was the order in which he placed the books of the Bible, to which we adhere to this day. Before Luther, there had been no uniform arrangement. Luther’s translations particularly guided William Tyndale in his translation of the Bible into English.

Luther has sometimes been described as the world’s first great journalist. Why did his writings succeed in changing history? Firstly, he wrote in the common language, instead of in the scholarly Latin – which was only understood by the educated elite of society. Secondly, Luther mastered the use of broadside pamphlets, which were cheap and easy to read, and thirdly, he

used some of the finest illustrations and woodcuts of the times to make his message understood even to the semi-literate.

Luther showed the way and other Reformers continued his work of using print technology to mass produce Scriptures and Reformation publications. By God's grace, the Printing Press provided the spiritual weaponry needed to make the Reformation succeed.

“If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, then I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Him. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.” Martin Luther

Dr. Peter Hammond