**The Importance of the Printing Press for the Protestant Reformation: Edited**

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**Martin Luther's Publishing in Germany**

When Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church on October 31, 1517, he was calling for a disputation concerning indulgences. His action was not one of defiant vandalism; the church door was the church bulletin board of the day. However, Luther's request for a disputation went unanswered because the Ninety-Five Theses caused such controversy that today they are credited with beginning the Reformation. Due to the controversial nature of his handwritten document, Luther printed them in Wittenberg in Latin. In 1518, the German translation was published and during the course of the next two years an additional twenty-two German editions were printed. If it had not been for the efficiency of movable type printing for duplicating the document, his reforming work and influence on other reformers would have developed differently.

Before looking into Luther's use of printing, a preliminary concern is the literacy demographics of Germans at the time of the Reformation. In Germany, overall literacy has been estimated to be as low as five percent in rural areas, with the urban literacy peaking at thirty percent. Such circumstances raise the question, "How did the Reformation take hold in Germany if texts and reading were important for its success?"  One answer came from "Nürnberg, [where] as in other towns, it became the practice to read the books of Luther out loud in the market-place." Another way Luther's publications were used was as in Speyer, where the people were "described as having the books read to them at supper, and as making transcripts of them". A literate person, such as a doctor, lawyer, or teacher, would acquire Luther's latest pamphlet and then read it to crowds or households gathered for the purpose. Those who could read, read to others, and when there were literate persons in the audience they sometimes duplicated the publication by hand for distribution. The availability of printed works and manuscript copies in the vernacular motivated some of the illiterate to learn how to read.

Another preliminary aspect to consider is the size of the printing industry in Germany. Luther and the other German reformers needed sufficient printing equipment for the fullest distribution of their publications. The years between Guttenberg's first press and Luther's use of the technology in the 1520s brought a significant increase in the number of printing businesses.  Richard Cole has analyzed the industry's publication of works by Martin Luther and other Protestants, concluding that Germany dominated the industry with almost fifty identifiable printers of Luther's works in the 1520s printing in twelve separate locations...There are another seventy printers in various locations printing mostly Reformation tracts. Overall for the sixteenth-century, there are three hundred and ninety-one printers, eight hundred and ninety-four authors and one hundred and twenty-five cities....Eighty-two of the smaller locations where printers lived and worked have not been the subject of specific print research. The odds are overwhelmingly in favor of the contention that if a German printer published pamphlets especially in the 1520s, he published Protestant materials. What is often thought of as a war of pamphlets between the followers of Luther and the pope in Rome may be seen as a lopsided one.

Since Germany was the homeland of Guttenberg's technology, it would follow that the printing industry might see its greatest growth in the land of its invention. In all regions of Germany, a given purchaser could buy more books at lower prices and bring them into his study or library.  Luther's Germany was thus an ideal location for publishing because the country had enough printers to enable the greatest distribution of his writings.

With presses available and secondary ways of presenting his writings to the illiterate, Luther fed Germany with text after text. Richard Crofts has tabulated and charted the number of publications produced in Germany during the period beginning with 1521 and ending in 1545 with particular emphasis on Luther. The source of his information on German publications for his study was the Short Title Catalogue of Books Printed in the German Speaking Countries. The first table he compiled compares the number of printed works per five-year period, which included non-religious works, works by Reformers, and works by Catholics.  The period of 1521 to 1545 produced a total of 5,651 works with 30.2% published by reformers, 34.1% were non-religious titles, and 17.6% were by Catholics. In the first half of the same period, the reformers' works constituted an even greater proportion of the output with the reformers producing 46% of the works.(9)

Crofts's Table IV analyzes the period 1521 to 1545 on a year-by-year basis, with the publications distributed in three categories: Luther's percentage of the reformers' works, Luther's percentage of the total published works, and the percentage of Luther's works published in German.  What is staggering about the analysis is that in the twenty-five year period covered by the study, Luther's publications averaged 51.3 percent of the total reformers' works listed in the Short Title Catalog. The highest year was 1522 with 71%, and the lowest was 1540 with 22.2%. Luther's concern to publish in German is clearly seen because he averaged 88.6% of his works in German; the lowest level was 66.7% in 1538, and the highest was 100% in 1528, 1529, and 1542. Publishing in the vernacular was important to Luther and the other reformers because they appealed to the non-clerics and common people.

Two of Luther's greatest contributions to the Reformation were his German New Testament, which was published in 1522, and then the German Bible, which was completed in 1534.  Luther thought it was important to get the Word of God into the common language of the people, but widespread acceptance of his German translation was complicated by Germany's lacking a common tongue. At the time Luther translated the Bible, there were several dialects of the German language. Remarkably, Luther's translation of the New Testament not only provided a vernacular version of the Bible (his chief aim), but was also used to teach reading to the illiterate, thus promoting a unified German language. As with many other publications by Luther, the New Testament and then the German Bible were well received. One prominent printer in Wittenberg was Hans Lufft, who produced thousands of Luther's Bibles between 1534 and 1574.  Lufft even claimed to own the rights to Luther's German Bible when the reformer died in 1546, but Luther had not granted the rights to anyone.

Conclusion

The invention of movable type printing wrought a technological revolution in Europe. After more than sixty years of development and improvement, the printers of Luther's era were able to publish his books, pamphlets, tracts, treatises, hymns, and his translations of the Bible into German. He was proficient in his use of printing and the common presence of his myriad publications in the Germany of his era displays his productivity. However, as is often the case with new technology, there were challenges to its advancement. The publications were distributed in a Germany with literacy levels varying from five to thirty percent. The scribes, who depended on the old manuscript technology for their livelihoods, found reasons to disparage Gutenberg's wonder. Authors suffered from seeing their work poorly composed and edited by their own printers, but even worse was enduring the theft of their written works that were then published by opportunistic printers. Books were expensive and it was often found that the lower cost publications, such as pamphlets and tracts, had to be used even though their limited number of pages forced less than a satisfactory amount of content. Despite the problems, the printing press survived its first century of use and became the way that texts were preserved and communicated.

Finally, the following quote gives a sense of how greatly Gutenberg's wonder changed the West.  The availability of books increased so much with the advent of movable type that it could be said, "A man born in 1453, the year of the fall of Constantinople, could look back from his fiftieth year on a lifetime in which about eight million books had been printed, more perhaps than all the scribes of Europe had produced since Constantine founded his city in A.D. 330." Martin Luther embraced printing technology and efficiently used it for the distribution of his writings, but most importantly for his readers, the printing press provided the German Bible so that all could read the Word of God.

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**Reflection Questions to be addressed in a Group Exercise:**

* 1. What were the literacy rates in Germany on the eve of the Reformation?
  2. How did illiterate Germans learn the text of Luther’s writings?
  3. Describe the size and significance of the printing press in Germany in spreading Luther’s writings.
  4. Analyze the types of printed writings in Germany and analyze the significance of the numbers presented in the article.
  5. What impact did Luther’s writings have on the German language?
  6. Based on the information in the conclusion paragraph of this article, what were some of the problems associated with the printing press in Germany AND ultimately how did the printing press “change the West”