

The Devil and Dr. Foust

How the Gutenberg Bible was printed

The invention of movable type, by Laurence Coster, a native of Holland, in 1423 marks the beginning of modern printing. However, Coster himself did not achieve great success with his invention. His types were made from wood, which would not stand the pressure of the press.

In the employ of Coster was a young German by the name of John Gutenberg. After Coster's death Gutenberg returned to Germany, to the cathedral city of Strasbourg, where he began setting type on his own. He found the wooden type so impractical that he resolved to make types of metal. He began to experiment. Lead was too soft. He had little knowledge of metals and very little money. He preferred to keep the invention to himself, but he could not proceed without assistance. Finally he enlisted the cooperation of John Faust, a wealthy goldsmith of Strasbourg, whose knowledge of metals and liberal investments supplied the needs.

A Secret Project

In 1448 the experiments in type-making had advanced to a stage of development where Gutenberg was ready to begin printing. The first work undertaken was the printing of the famous forty-two line Latin Bible. Eight years were required to carve the metal letters and print the first edition. The work was done in Strasbourg, though the Gutenberg Bibles bear the imprint of Mainz, Germany. The first edition was completed in 1456.

Great secrecy was maintained while the work was going on. It was a new undertaking. By many it was believed that the Bible was not for the common people, and it was a risky undertaking to publish an unlimited number of copies. Besides, the type that they had made was an imitation of hand-printed letters, and it was the purpose of Gutenberg and Foust to sell these Bibles as hand-printed copies at the regular high prices. That this new art might be kept a secret, and the printers not be easily found out, is doubtless the reason why the first Bibles bore the imprint of Mainz instead of Strasbourg, and why the first books were sold in Paris, far from the place of publication.

A Creative Sales Idea

But when the first Bibles were printed, these enterprising pioneers in the art were confronted with another difficulty. How were the books to be sold? There were no book salesmen upon whom they could rely. During many years of experiment and labor much money had been invested in this work. They must get their money back. The books might be sold at a high price if the method of printing could be kept secret.

John Faust, who alone had invested in the undertaking, resolved to sell the Bibles himself. He could not trust the work to others. A quantity of these wonderful, newly printed books was sent to faraway Paris, and there he began his work.

With the keen instinct of the modern salesperson, he decided to head his list, if possible, with influential names.

The First Purchaser

Faust called first on none other than Charles VII, king of France. Having secured an audience, he showed his beautiful Bible to the king in his royal palace. It was printed on vellum, and contained six hundred and seven leaves [pages]. The king was delighted, and believing that he was purchasing the most magnificent copy of the Scriptures in existence, he paid eight hundred and twenty-five dollars for it.

This would seem to be a very high price for a copy of the Scriptures, purchasable now for as little as twenty cents; but considering the fact that it required practically a lifetime to print by hand such a copy, the price asked did not seem so great.

Pleased, doubtless, with the success of his visit, and that he had the name of the king at the head of his list, Faust next called at the palace of his archbishop, and introduced his Bible. The archbishop subscribed at the same price paid by the king, and Faust went on his way looking for other customers.

The Secret Revealed

A most interesting incident now took place, which gave a new turn to Faust's Bible-selling experience. This is related by Charles Coffin in *The Story of Liberty*, pages 75-77:

"The archbishop calls upon the king.

"' I have something to show you - the most magnificent book in the world,' says the king.

"'Indeed!' The archbishop is thinking of his own book.

“‘Yes; a copy of the Bible. It is a marvel. The letters are so even that you can not discover a shade of difference.’

“‘I have a splendid copy, and if yours is any more perfect than mine, I should like to see it.’

“‘Here is mine. Just look at it’: and the king shows his copy.

“The archbishop turns the leaves. ‘This is remarkable. I don’t see but that it is exactly like mine.’ The pages are the same, the letters are the same. Can one man have written both? - Impossible! Yet they are alike. There is not a particle of difference between them. ‘How long have you had this?’ the archbishop asks.

“‘I bought it the other day of a man who came to the palace.’

“‘Singular! I bought mine of a man who came to my palace.’

“Neither the king nor the archbishop knows what to think of it. They place the two Bibles side by side, and find them precisely alike. There are the same number of pages; each page begins with the same word; there is not a shade of variation. Wonderful! But the archbishop, in a few days, is still more perplexed. He discovers that some of the rich citizens of Paris have copies of Bibles exactly like the king’s and his own. More: he discovers that copies are for sale here and there.

“‘Where did you get them?’

“‘We bought them of a man who came along.’

“‘Who was he?’

“‘We don’t know.’

“‘This is the work of the devil.’

“The archbishop can arrive at no other conclusion. The Bible is a dangerous book. None but the priests should be permitted to read it. But here is the evil one selling it everywhere; or, if not himself in person, some man has sold himself to Satan for that purpose. He soon discovers that it is Dr. John Faust, of Strasbourg.

“‘You have sold yourself to the evil one, and must be burned to death.’

“Till this moment the great invention has been a secret; but Dr. Faust must divulge it, or be burned. He shows the archbishop how the Bibles are printed; and John Gutenberg has printed so many of them that the price has been reduced one half. The archbishop, the king, and everybody else are astonished. So Faust saves his life; but the idea of selling himself to the devil has gone into story and song.”

When Faust was arrested on the charge of being in league with the devil in making books, his room was searched, and many

copies of the Bible were found, "highly embellished with red ink - the reddest of ink, at that, which was supposed to be his own blood. The magistrate, on this ground, declared Dr. Faust to be in league with the devil, hence the tradition of the devil and Dr. Faust, or the printer's devil."

The Bible Movement Is Launched

This simple story of the invention of printing covers the first important steps in the development of modern printing, and in the world-wide distribution of literature.

The change brought about by the introduction of printing and the circulation of the Scriptures meant the breaking of the power of the church over the minds and consciences of men. The churchmen were alarmed. Their traffic was slipping from their grasp.

The popular demand for printed matter was chiefly for the Scriptures and for other religious writings. Considering the crude facilities of those early times, it is simply marvelous how rapidly the work of publishing the Scriptures progressed. The demand of the people was imperative. Printers sprang up everywhere.

Author Samuel Smiles writes: "It has been calculated (by Daunou, Petit, Rudel, Taillandier, and others) that by the end of the fifteenth century four millions of volumes had been printed, the greater part in folio; and that between 1500 and 1536 eighteen more millions of volumes had been printed. After that it is impossible to number them. In 1533 there had already been eighteen editions of the German Bible printed at Wittenberg, thirteen at Augsburg, thirteen at Strasbourg, twelve at Basel, and so on. Schoeffer, in his *Influence of Luther on Education*, says that Luther's Catechism soon ran to one hundred thousand copies. Printing was at the same time taking strides in France, England, and the Low Countries." (Samuel Smiles, *The Huguenots*, p, 28)

Well may the citizens of Strasbourg point with pride to the little island which is believed to be the site of the Gutenberg shop, and say, "That is the spot from which the light shown forth upon all the world."

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