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Technology and Christianity
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What technological innovation has had the greatest impact? How about an advance in transportation, such as the automobile, the railroad, the airplane? Or, would you point to a communication device, such as the radio, television, or telephone? How about an improvement in modern medicine? There are too many possibilities to choose.

So let's narrow the question. What technological innovation has had the greatest impact on Christianity? Perhaps the invention that changed Christianity most is one invented in the 15th century, namely, the printing press. Printing not only made books -- including the Bible -- affordable for many people, but it helped spread reading throughout the populace.

Picture the situation in Medieval Europe, before Gutenberg invented the printing press. Books were copied by hand. Making just one copy of Genesis took a monk two months at the pace of a chapter a day. So few copies of books existed. They were valuable and kept in churches, cathedrals, and monasteries. To gain access, a person usually had to pass through many gates and doors to the library, often deep within the complex.

Books were read there, in the religious setting, and could not be taken away for study. Such limitations did not really matter; most people who could read were priests or monks. Only a few, usually rich, lay people could read.

The printing press changed all that. Copies of books could be printed in the hundreds or thousands. This made them more affordable. Churches saw opportunity in the increased availability of books, especially the Bible and other religious works. They expanded education outside the bounds of the monasteries into schools more accessible to the public.

In England, the oldest schools accessible to its citizens are those sponsored by the Anglican Church. In France, the Catholic Church was running schools even in rural areas during the 17th century -- a time when anti-church, enlightenment thinkers pooh-poohed the notion of general literacy.

The alliance of religion, literacy and printing led to increased religious knowledge and understanding among church-goers. Early Protestant churches saw this as a boon. To make Scripture even more accessible, they translated it out of Latin into vernacular languages. Martin Luther composed a German translation in the 1500s, and John Wycliffe had produced an English translation in the 1300s -- even before the advent of print!

Martin Luther's dictum, "Scripture alone," emphasized the notion that the Bible was the sole source of truth. The desire of Protestants to know this truth encouraged increasing numbers to read. In colonial and post-colonial America, even communities on the frontier formed "Sunday" schools to teach children how to read so that they could read the Bible.

So, the printing press gave the general populace physical access to the Bible, and improvements in literacy gave people access to its contents. But what did the Bible mean? What meaning did Jacob's and Solomon's many wives hold for French citizens? How did David's divinely established monarchy relate to the increasing power of the English Parliament? What did Jesus' command, "Give unto Caesar, that which is Caesar's" say about the government's taxation policies?

If everyone could now read the Bible, could not everyone interpret it as they saw fit?

Potentially, yes, but in reality most readers were guided by their teachers. In medieval Catholicism, the Church was a powerful guide. Even after the dawn of printing, the Catholic church taught reading within the context of its own theology. Although early Protestant churches opposed that theology, they created appealing theologies to put in its place.

Indeed, it was often persuasive theological preaching drawn from the biblical text itself that attracted followers to Protestantism and led to their desire to read the Bible for themselves. Preachers attracted followers, and those who attracted sufficient numbers created new churches: Lutherans, Presbyterians, Quakers, and Methodists, to name just a few.

The theologies of churches such as these continue to guide the interpretation of most people reading the Bible even today. Yet the Protestant impulse to interpret for oneself remains strong. Individual Christians often debate Biblical meaning among themselves and with their priests, pastors, and religious leaders. Some people are so sure they have a new, correct interpretation that they form new churches.

The United States now has more than 300 official denominations, for example, and thousands of independent churches. All of this derives from the printing press, which made the Bible accessible to all.