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“Technology and Christianity”
Paul V.M. Flesher

What technological innovation has had the greatest impact on Christianity? We might want to point to the radio or TV, or maybe the airplane or automobile. I would argue that the invention that changed Christianity most was invented in the 15th century, namely, the printing press. Printing not only made books, especially the Bible, affordable for many people, but helped spread literacy throughout the populace by giving them something to read.

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. Few copies of books existed. They were valuable and kept in churches, cathedrals and monasteries.

To gain access to a book, a person usually had to pass through a cathedral’s 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 of the few people who could read were already 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.

Church organizations expanded education outside the bounds of the monasteries into schools more accessible to the general public. In England, the oldest schools accessible to its citizens are those sponsored by the Anglican Church. In France, the Catholic Church ran 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 churchgoers. 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, while John Wycliffe had produced an English translation in the 1300s, even before the advent of print! His translation influenced later English translations, including the King James Bible.

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 firsthand encouraged increasing numbers to read. In colonial and post-colonial America, even communities on the frontier formed “Sunday” schools to teach children and adults to read so that they could read the Bible.

So, the printing press gave the general populace physical access to the Bible; 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.

Because early Protestant churches opposed Catholic 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 enough 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 of the Bible that they form new churches. The United States has over 300 official denominations and thousands of independent churches. All of this springs from the printing press, which made the Bible accessible to all.

Flesher is a professor in UW’s Religious Studies Program. Past columns and more information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds. To comment on this column, visit http://religion-today.blogspot.com.