

# I. Johannes Gutenberg (1406-68).

## *A. BOOK MANUFACTURE BEFORE GUTENBERG.*

Most books hand written in Latin, not the vernacular.

Books were hand-written and illustrated by monks. (Usually took a year to make one Bible).

Books were therefor exceedingly expensive.

The result was massive illiteracy.

## *B. THE MOVABLE TYPE PRINTING PRESS*

Gutenberg was born in Mainz, Germany between 1393-1406.

The invention of the **printing press** was the first revolution in information technology.

First Latin Vulgate Bible was printed in 1455. It sold for thirty gold florins, or about three years wages. Prior to that it took a monk an entire year to handprint and illustrate one Bible.

**About 48 copies survive.**

He built his First printing press in 1450.

His printing press accelerated both the Renaissance and the Reformation.

It greatly accelerated literacy.

It utterly changed the Medieval world.

By 1500, 50 years later, there were 1,000 printing presses in Europe producing over 1 million books annually.

This greatly encouraged literacy.

**Lessons:** Technology can be used for good or evil.

There is a connection between technological innovation and spiritual movements.

## II. Savonarola (1452-98)

In 1987 I was on the beach in Bermuda reading Van Passen's biography of Savonarola titled, *A Crown of Fire*. At the climax I burst into tears embarrassing my poor wife.

In 1992 Judy and I visited Florence, Italy. In the central square, unchanged for decades, we found a small brass plaque embedded in the pavement. It was dedicated to Girolamo Savonarola, one of the cities past heroes. It marked the spot where he was hung and his body burned.

"Here is where with his brethren, Fra Domenico Buonvicini and Fra Silvestro Maruffi, on May 23, 1498, by an iniquitous sentence, Fra Girolamo Savonarola was hanged and burned, this memorial has been placed after four centuries."

Knowing quite a bit about this man, and because he was a personal hero, I was deeply moved a second time.

Who was Savonarola, and why is he important to us?

**Girolamo Savonarola** was born in 1452 and died in 1498.

He was to the Reformation what John the Baptist was to Jesus. He was a forerunner, God's herald, calling Europe to repentance and faith.

When Savonarola died, Martin Luther was fifteen. Columbus and his Spanish friends were discovering the New World, and the printing press was up and going strong. The papacy, and the Roman Catholic church, was a moral and theological mess. Nineteen years after Savonarola's death Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the Wittenberg church door.

Savonarola's life and work was a clarion call to repentance. It prepared the church for the great doctrinal reformation to come.

Tragically, neither Catholic nor Protestant claims this man. Because he fearlessly and vigorously rebuked the Pope, because he called for moral reform at the highest levels, and because many Protestants identify with him, the Roman Church disowns him.

Because he was RC monk, many Protestants distrust him. Like most Protestants, however, he loved and preached the Bible, but since he was pre-

reformation, he did not clearly see justification by faith alone, so Protestant historians don't know what to do with him either.

But, I believe God claimed him, and in the end that is all that matters. He was a prophet. God anointed him with great spiritual power. He was one of History's epochal spiritual leaders.

Savonarola was a household name in sixteenth century Europe. His meditation on Psalm 51, written while being tortured at the end of his life, was a best-seller. It outsold Thomas a' Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, which at that time was a best seller in Europe, and it was still in print as late as 1958. His writings influenced Martin Luther. He also affected many other great men.

For example, Michelangelo was an apprentice in Florence during the prophet's ministry. When he first arrived in Florence, Michelangelo took the monk on guided tours of Florence's art. In his old age, Michelangelo, who attended his preaching, could still hear the sound of Savonarola's voice. It has been said that he painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel from his recollections of the Friar's sermons.

Savonarola's grandfather, Michele, a physician and a polymath, raised him. His grandfather just happened to be a student of the Bible, and his favorite character was John the Baptist—about whom he actually wrote a book.

Ultimately, Savonarola's passion for the scripture, which he got from his grandfather, was to be the secret of his great spiritual power.

Longing to preach, he joined the Dominican order.

For over seven years, he was a preaching failure.

In 1490, at age 37, the Dominicans transferred him to St. Marks monastery in Florence.

Although the city was a source of great learning and art, it was also cesspool of sexual immorality, political corruption, and godlessness.

The wealth and power of the ruling Medici family attracted artists like Michelangelo, Leonardo DaVinci, Rafael, Caravaggio, and Botticelli. In this great city they learned and practiced their crafts.

By this time Savonarola had died to his preaching ambitions. He had come to the end of himself. In the meantime, God was at work using his failure to transfer all his confidence from himself to God. It was a God-engineered emptying. Savonarola didn't know it, but he was now ready to be greatly used by God.

He began to lecture in the Monastery Garden on the Book of Revelation. God came down, and that made all the difference.

Within a few weeks the only seating left was on the garden walls. Such was the demand for his preaching that his superiors finally moved him to *The Duomo*, the huge cathedral, still standing in downtown Florence. Fifteenth century churches did not have pews. People stood, and ten thousand people could stand in the Duomo to hear the prophet speak.

Soon the Duomo was full. So the authorities built scaffolding to accommodate the crowds. His message was not one to which men are naturally drawn.

Like John the Baptist, (His favorite Bible hero) it was a message of repentance and self-denial. The Bible was always his subject. It, not tradition, was his ultimate authority.

He preached justification by faith alone.

“It is untrue that God's grace is obtained by pre-existing works of merit as though works and deserts were the cause of predestination. On the contrary, these [works] are the result of predestination.”

He fearlessly proclaimed the need for contrition, warning men of God's coming judgment. He urged the citizens of Florence to confirm their repentance with deeds consistent with repentance. He was a prophet who often predicted the future. Nothing but the presence of the Living God can explain the results. One biographer writes:

“The Cathedral could no longer take in the multitudes streaming in from far and near... Wooden galleries had to be erected inside the cathedral in the form of an amphitheater to accommodate the crowds. Even this enlargement proved

insufficient...It was a bewildering sight to see that mass of people coming with jubilee and rejoicing to the sermon as to a wedding feast.”<sup>1</sup>

The experience of Bettucio was not unusual. He was a profligate. He was a non-Christian. Friends drug him into the Cathedral against his will. Here is how an eyewitness described his encounter with Girolamo:

“As soon as Savonarola mounted the pulpit everything changed in Bettucio...He could not tear his eyes away from the preacher. His mind was captivated, his conscience was touched by the Friar’s words, and, he says: ‘At last I knew myself to be as one dead rather than living.’”<sup>2</sup>

Bettucio gave his life to Christ and never looked back.

Florence was experiencing revival. It is one of the first recorded revivals since the days of the early church.

Sometimes, the people were so overwhelmed by the reality of their sins that Girolamo had to wait for their weeping to subside before he could continue. At least ten times the Monk responsible to transcribe Girolamo’s sermons was so overcome by God’s power and presence that he broke down in weeping and could not continue transcription.

Jacob Burckhardt, a fifteenth century historian, was the first person to coin the term “renaissance” to describe this movement. About Savonarola he writes,

“The instrument by which Savonarola transformed and ruled the city of Florence was his eloquence. Of this, the meager reports that are left to us, taken down on the spot, give us evidently a very imperfect notion. It was not that he possessed any striking outward advantages, for voice, accent, and rhetorical skill, constituted precisely his weakest side...The eloquence of Savonarola was that of a commanding personality...*He himself held his own eloquence to be the result of Divine illumination.*”<sup>3</sup>

What was the effect of the monk’s preaching? Florence was skeptical. Florence was licentious. Florence was proud. But it became a city of belief, a city of repentance, and a city of humility. The city was transformed. They began to

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<sup>1</sup> *A Crown Of Fire*, Pierre Van Paassen, Scribner, 1960 pg. 173, Italics mine.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pg. 185

<sup>3</sup> *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Jacob Burckhardt, Vol II

feed the poor. The populace returned to church enthusiastically. They purged the government of corruption, and sang hymns in the streets. It is one of the remarkable events of church history.

Through the preaching of Savonarola God showed that the negative aspects of the Renaissance were impotent before the Holy Spirit's power.

Savonarola was a prophet. In his teens, he foresaw that he would die a violent death in Christ's service.

Alexander VI was pope. It was the low point of the papacy. He was a member of the Borgia family. They were known for their immorality, and typical of a member of the Borgias, he had numerous mistresses and illegitimate children. Alexander VI was opulent. He was sensual. He was greedy. He did not in any way represent Christ. He was in an incestuous relationship with his beautiful daughter, Lucretia.

As Savonarola's moral and spiritual influence grew, not only in Florence, but throughout Italy and Europe, a confrontation with the Borgia papacy, and its corruption, became inevitable.

With great courage, Savonarola publicly challenged Alexander to repent of his immorality. He even called him "the representative of Satan, rather than Christ."

Finally, the little friar had gone too far. Alexander leveraged the immense power of the papacy, put the courageous monk through a mock trial, tortured him for 30 days, and hung him before a huge throng in the main square of Florence. Savonarola suffered all this with great courage and dignity. The religious establishment had successfully extinguished a "burning and shining light" in the heart of both Florence and Italy.

### **III. Erasmus (1466-1536), The Prototype Liberal...**

Born between Savonarola and Luther.

14 years younger than Savonarola.

17 years older than Luther.

## **A. ANECDOTES**

Franciscans: “*Erasmus is Luther’s father, he laid the eggs which Luther hatched.*”

He was Europe’s greatest scholar. He loved books and reading.

April 1500 to his friend Jacob Batt, “*The first thing I will do when the money arrives is buy some Greek authors, and if any is left, I will buy food and clothes.*”

Erasmus has a Brooklyn High School, a Dutch university, several honorary awards, and scholarship programs named after him.

Erasmus had the first bestseller in history. *In Praise of Folly* appeared in over 600 editions and his book, *The Colloquies*, in over 300.

By 1530 20% of all books published were written by Erasmus.

He wanted the common man to be able to read the Bible.

“I would to God that the plowman would sing a text of the Scripture at his plow and that the weaver would hum them to the tune of his shuttle...I wish that all communication of the Christian would be of the Scriptures.”  
*Paraclesis*, 1516.

He wanted the people to know scripture, not for doctrinal clarity and accuracy, but for moral and spiritual improvement.

“God helps those that help themselves” *Adages*” 1500

## **B. LIFE**

Born in 1466 to a Dutch priest and an unmarried mother.

Bastards could not go to college or enter the ministry without a papal dispensation, which he got in 1506.

When both parents died in the plague he entered a monastery.

The Abbot, recognizing his intelligence, sent him to the university of Paris.

Although he never graduated from a University, he was eventually awarded an honorary doctorate.

He travelled to England to study at Cambridge where he first met Thomas Moore (1478-1535), a loyal Catholic, and many proto-Reformers. They all remained a life-long friends.

For the rest of his life he worked as an independent scholar, traveling in England (Cambridge & Oxford), France, and Italy, eventually settling in Basel, Switzerland.

Through gifts from benefactors, he became wealthy. At death he bequeathed his wealth to poor women.

He left 3,000 letters as well as numerous books.

He never married.

He was an extrovert with a powerful sense of humor. He made numerous life-long friends.

Most of his "friends" were Kings, Popes, and Cardinals.

### ***C. INFLUENCES ON ERASMUS***

Renaissance "humanism," 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries,

The slogan of the Renaissance was *Ad Fontes*, back to the sources.

The sources were the Greek and Latin classics. This meant a revival of ancient Greek and Hebrew.

### ***D. IMPORTANCE***

He was greatly used by God.

Erasmus became a Koine Greek specialist. In 1516 he produced a Greek NT.

Luther immediately bought a copy. The Reformation began the next year.

Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched.

Erasmus was a loyal Christian and a lover of the Bible. But he was a *devotional* scholar, not a theological scholar.

He disliked controversy, and because theological precision produced controversy and division, he was unwilling to go there.



He was deeply provoked by the immoralities and the apathy in the RC church.

He questioned whether marriage and confession should be sacraments, he questioned transubstantiation, and prayer to saints.

He liked the Reformation and the Reformers until he saw that their teaching was heading for schism.

In 1524 he published, *The Freedom of the Will*.

Packer and Johnston: “Free will in Erasmus sense of an inherent power in man to act apart from God, simply does not exist. Only God has ‘free will,’ for He is the only independent agent that there is.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1525 Luther responded with *The Bondage of the Will*.

Luther began by calling Erasmus’ *Freedom of the Will* a pile of human feces on a silver platter. Why so strident?

Because the Reformers saw this issue as central to the gospel. Without the bondage of the will grace was eviscerated from the gospel.

“Luther thinks of it (new birth) as a total renewal of corrupt nature by the Holy Spirit, which takes place when God ‘calls’ a man to faith in Jesus Christ and which makes him capable of good works for the first time. Having changed man’s nature, God now works in him according to his new nature, and good works result.”<sup>5</sup>

Of Erasmus Luther later wrote—

"He has done what he was ordained to do: he has introduced the ancient languages, in the place of injurious scholastic studies. He will probably die like Moses in the land of Moab...I would rather he would entirely abstain from explaining and paraphrasing the Scriptures, for he is not up to this work...to lead into the land of promise, is not his business...

His 1516 translation of the NT into Greek was his greatest work. It changed the Western World.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Johnston and Packer, pg 52

<sup>5</sup> *The Bondage of the Will*, Martin Luther, from the forward by J.I.Packer and O.R. Johnston, pg 53 (Revell, Grand Rapids, 1956)

It showed the Latin Vulgate and the Greek Manuscripts on opposite pages.

Luther read it with great joy. It exposed the numerous errors in the Vulgate. For example, the Vulgate translated the word for repentance into the word do penance.