

History

Lesson 3 of an enquiry of 4 lessons

Printing, Pamphlets, and Peasants

Enquiry: What was Luther trying to achieve?

Mr Sellin



Printing

While hiding in Wartburg Castle, Luther translated the Bible into German. It was important that the local language was used (this is called the **vernacular**), so that more Germans would be able to read the Bible. Previously the Bible was written in Latin and read mainly it was only read by those who worked for the Church. Luther's German Bible was completed in 1534.

This process of translation was similar to the work of other **humanist** scholars like Erasmus. Erasmus believed that the true teachings of God were to be found in the original texts. These were written in Ancient Hebrew and Greek, so Luther had to translate into German from these very old languages. Due to the **printing press**, copies of the Luther Bible spread rapidly across Germany.



Pamphlets

Luther knew, however, that a vernacular Bible would not be read by the vast majority of Germans. They wanted to know God's teachings, but often could not afford, or even read, their own copies of such a large book. Therefore, small and cheap copies of Luther's key messages were printed and distributed in large numbers. These were called **catechisms**, and included basic overviews of Luther's beliefs. Readers were expected to memorise the most important parts. Luther even wrote a version for children!

Furthermore, Luther's fight against the Catholic Church was also represented by pictures. These were made by a printing method known as a **woodcut**, and often showed Luther violently throwing the Pope out of power! These illustrations proved popular among peasants in Germany.



Peasants

Peasants in Germany had experienced poor living conditions, low pay, and a lack of political power for many decades. This led large numbers of peasants to demand change. They made it very clear that violence was the method they would use in order to get their point across. Over 300,000 peasants joined the rebellion and there were nearly 100,000 casualties.

The peasants used Luther's message to **justify** their own violent actions. The peasants claimed that God was on their side. Luther, however, thought that the peasants were committing an awful crime. In his view, God had made them peasants for a reason, and to fight back against your rulers was to fight back against God's design of the world. He called for the peasants to be killed and for the rebellion to be stopped. The Peasants' War ended with their defeat in 1525.



Glossary

Catechism: a written set of beliefs designed to be memorised

Humanist: in the sixteenth century, someone who believed that true learning came from studying the original, ancient texts

Justify: to explain why you are doing the right thing

Printing press: an invention that allowed books and pamphlets to be printed and distributed

Vernacular: the local language, understood by ordinary people

Woodcut: a type of cheap printing used to make copies of illustrations



Comprehension Questions

1. Why was the Luther Bible written in the vernacular?
2. What invention allowed the Luther Bible to be distributed across Germany in great numbers?
3. Why were catechisms and woodcuts produced?
4. What was Luther's reaction to the Peasants' War of 1524-25?

