In our experience, it is natural to think of languages like English or German as unifying forces that bring together millions of people living in different parts of the globe but using the same vocabulary and syntax to communicate. Although we recognize the existence of regional variations, especially in pronunciation but also in terminology, we nonetheless conceive of each of the principal European languages as being basically the same wherever people use it. People who speak English in India may sound different from those who use it in Texas, but it is the same language and if they listen carefully, they can communicate quite well. And – if they write it – there is hardly any difficulty at all.

But this has not always been the case. Prior to the printing press and only after a long period of time did these languages come to exist in a standard form, common to all who use them. Through most of the Middle Ages, regional dialects were so strong that it is probably better to think of families of English or of German rather than of simply one common tongue. Luther once remarked, for example, that people who lived just 30 miles apart couldn’t understand each other on account of using different dialects (TR 5, 6143; Besch 7). Significantly, however, the development from regional languages into standard forms coincided with the Protestant Reformation, and in places like England and Germany, the Reformation itself contributed to the process. But when we talk about the Reformation, we have to talk Martin Luther, whose contribution to the German language was extremely important. Indirectly, through the
English Bible translators, he was also influential upon the development of English tongue.

But before we discuss Luther’s contributions specifically, we need to say a little bit about the history of the German language. According to one German historian [Besch 2], in the early modern period those countries that had a highly developed political and cultural center were also likely to develop a common tongue on account of the influence of that center. In countries like England, France, and Spain that center coincided with the monarchy, court and bureaucracy, whose language functioned as a model for the use of the vernacular in other parts of the country. The cultural vectors, including language, radiated outward from the center into other parts of that community to create a high degree of linguistic unity. The language of the center functioned as a model for oral and written communication elsewhere. Local dialects and languages did not disappear, but they lost prestige as preferred vehicles for communicating in a public and formal way.

But such a unifying cultural, economic, and political center did not exist in every language area, most especially not in the German-speaking lands of central Europe. In these territories, the development of a unifying dialect was more complicated, and in the case of German, both the Dutch and the Swiss never did adopt the German dialect that came to dominate elsewhere. As they developed political institutions separate from the Holy Roman Empire to which the German-speaking peoples belonged, they also retained distinctive versions of the German tongue. Nevertheless, in the rest of the German-speaking territories a common language did develop and in these places, the role of Luther, especially through his Bible, was crucial.

Now, it’s true that by the time of the Reformation, some language consolidation had taken place. Regional German dialects
were in the process of development over large tracts of territory. The requirements of government and trade, especially the book business, were leading German readers in the direction of a common tongue. But Luther was an important catalyst in this process on account of his adopting for his work one of these regional common dialects with which to spread his message across the German-speaking world [OER s.v. “German Language”].

The particular dialect that Luther chose is not so important as the fact that he chose one. Nevertheless, his choice was a good one – the official language of his own prince, Frederick the Wise, one of seven electors in the empire, and of the emperor himself, Maximilian I. Luther’s own geographical situation in the middle of German-speaking lands was fortunate too, since the dialect employed there could more easily function as a bridge to other regions. [Besch 11] A Luther in the extreme north or south would have had a much tougher time developing a dialect that could be understood everywhere in German-speaking lands. So providentially, Martin Luther had at hand a language already suited for becoming a common German tongue.

But what then was the special role of Luther in this process? Just this, he employed this language in a creative and effective way in works that were printed and distributed in enormous quantities throughout the German-speaking territories. The Reformation was the first mass movement to take advantage of the printing press, and Luther used it with spectacular results. By printed works of every sort but especially by pamphlets, the catechism, and the Bible, Luther communicated directly with the ordinary people who embraced his faith and gradually his version of the German language also and made it their own.

That Luther’s language spread by the medium of printing is basic to understanding his influence. One can even say, that in the
beginning, the Reformation was more the creation of the printers than it was of Martin Luther. In a well-known remark about the power of God's Word, Luther explained how the Reformation had begun,

I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything. (LW 51:77).

But how did the Word do its work while Luther was drinking beer with his friends? By means of the printing press, over which Luther often had very little control.

This was especially true in the case of the 95 Theses. As all good Lutherans "know," the Reformation began when the Martin Luther posted them on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. Copies of the theses and a picture and model of the church are a part of our exhibit. But if you think about it for a moment, you realize that there must have been more to the story than that. For how did the 95 Theses get from the door into the hands of anybody outside of Wittenberg whose population was only a few thousand? At first, Luther himself had circulated a few copies in manuscript, but then some of his readers, without Luther's knowledge, had them printed in Leipzig, Nuremberg, and Basel. Originally written in Latin, they were also translated into German, printed up, and distributed to a wider audience. The result then was that within a few weeks they were all over Germany and beyond. What had begun as a dispute among a few theologians and church officials had become an international controversy on account of the printing press. One can safely say, therefore, that without the medium of print there would have been no Reformation. (Brecht 1:204-05).
Although still very primitive by our standards, printing had survived its infancy and by Luther's time printers were setting up shop all over Europe. In the 1450's, Johannes Gutenberg in the city of Mainz had developed the technique of printing by means of moveable type. And in our exhibit, we are displaying a facsimile of his first printed book – the Latin Bible. From Mainz over the next several decades, the new technology had spread throughout the continent, so that by the time of the Reformation there were nearly 250 printing establishments in Europe [OER s.v. “Literacy”], sixty of them in Germany alone [OER s.v. “Printing”]. For the most part, these printers were energetic businessmen, who would print both sides of a controversy if they would sell. But many of them were also intellectuals and interested in what they printed, and they discovered in Luther's works material that was worth reading but also publications that made money. Luther quickly became a best-selling author. Now, Luther himself did not profit monetarily from his publications since this was well before any consideration of copyright or other legal protections for authors. Besides, from Luther's perspective, the point was not to make money at all but to let the Word work – as it did, by means of the printing press. No wonder then that Luther once said that "Printing is the latest of God's gifts and the greatest. Through printing God wills to make the cause of true religion known to the whole world even to the ends of the earth" [quoted in OER s.v. “Printing”].

Of course, in order for printing to spread the Word, people had to be able to read. So what about literacy in the 16th century? How many people could read? Precise answers to this question are difficult because we lack good documentation for ordinary people's lives in this period. We can, however, offer some generalizations. First, people were more likely to be literate in towns and cities than they were in the countryside, simply because reading and writing were
more useful for trade and business than they were for agriculture. One historian [Edwards, *Printing* 38] has estimated that overall literacy in Germany at the outset of the Reformation was only 5%; but in the cities of the Empire it was 30%. A second observation is that men were more likely to be able to read than women because men led more public lives outside of the home than did their wives and mothers. Thirdly, as the Reformation advanced, so did literacy. In a kind of “chicken and egg” manner, literacy and printing went together. The more people could read, the more printers published to satisfy a literate public; but the more there was to read, the more cause there was for people to learn to read.

People do not normally develop skills like reading and writing—skills that take a great deal of time and effort to master—unless there is a good reason for doing so. But the Reformation provided such a reason, and that was access to important ideas, presented by authors as affecting one’s eternal salvation. Some of these ideas were a critique and rejection of current practices and church leaders; others were more positive presentations of Scriptural truth and doctrine. But in either case, people had good reason for being concerned with what the books and pamphlets were saying.

We should also realize that printing was capable of spreading beyond the strictly literate. In many instances, those who could read read aloud to those who couldn’t—at home, in the work place, and even in church. In England, for example, after English Bibles had been placed in the churches, we have the account of a young man, William Malden, who used to listen to men reading the Bible in the church sanctuary. In some places, apparently, such readers offered their services to the people as an alternative to the traditional services in Latin. This became such a problem that King Henry VIII felt compelled to issue an order prohibiting the Bible from being read “with loud and high voices in time of the celebration of the
holy mass and other divine services used in the church.” [Pollard, 263; Dickens 212-16]. Obviously, for some people, the vernacular Scriptures proved more worthwhile than what the priests were doing at the front of the church; and like William Malden, you did not need to be literate to understand what others were reading from these new Bibles.

Furthermore, printers and religious advocates realized from the beginning that print could be more than words. It could also include pictures, and if the pictures were clear enough, one wouldn’t have to read very well in order to get the message. The Luther exhibit has many fine examples of this. Perhaps one of best known is the “Passional Christi und Antichristi,” which is on display in the exhibit. Prepared by Luther’s friends, Philip Melanchthon and Lucas Cranach, the one a theologian and the other an artist, this work used both words and pictures, but even somebody who could not read the words could certainly grasp the point by the pictures alone. So, clearly, the influence of printing spread the ideas of the Reformation well beyond the strictly literate.

Of course, printing was not a medium for Protestant literature only. Defenders of the old religion also employed it – pictures as well as words – as our exhibit demonstrates in the “Seven-Headed Luther” from 1529 by Hans Brosamer. This is a caricature of the Reformer as a heretic and rebel. It was accompanied a text by one of Luther’s opponents, Johannes Cochlaeus, who accused Luther of contradicting himself (that’s the reason for the seven heads). So Catholic polemicists, too, knew how to use the printing press, but in their case to counter the Reformation rather than advance it.

Nevertheless, it was the Protestant side that used the new technology more thoroughly and extensively to argue its case. During the first 25 years or so of the Reformation, Protestants produced about 6 times as many polemical works as did the Catholics. Luther
all by himself published more than all of his Catholic counterparts put together [Bagchi 198-99]. But why would this be so? Why would the Evangelicals so dominate religious publishing? For one thing, the two sides differed greatly over the relative importance of words in their respective religious systems. Right from the beginning, Luther and his fellow reformers appealed to the Scriptures in order to justify their criticisms of the religious establishment. Luther, for example, in his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* of 1520 (also a part of the exhibit), had insisted, "It is not right to give out as divinely instituted what was not divinely instituted. ...We ought to see that every article of faith of which we boast is certain, pure, and based on clear passages of Scripture."¹ Luther’s particular focus in this work was the sacramental system of the medieval church and he had subjected every one of the seven medieval sacraments to a rigorous examination on the basis of the Bible and found that there were only two, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The Word – the Word of God – therefore became Luther’s measuring stick for all religious questions.

His opponents, on the other hand, while not entirely neglecting appeals to the Scriptures, had at the center of their argument the authority of the Church. This meant that instead of reading the Scriptures to find the truth for themselves, pious Catholics should submit to the doctrines and practices of those set over them in the Church [Bagchi 210-14). One of the issues in the Reformation became, therefore, the relationship of the Christian people to the Christian Bible. At the Leipzig Debate of 1519, for example, Martin Luther told his opponent, John Eck, that “a simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it”

The next year – in 1520 – Luther wrote a pamphlet, his *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, in which he refuted the idea that church authorities had a monopoly on interpreting the Bible, insisting instead that “it is the duty of every Christian to espouse the cause of the faith, to understand and defend it, and to denounce every error” (LW 44:136).

Given these two ideas – that the Scriptures alone are the source and standard for Christian doctrine and practice and that every Christian is responsible for knowing and applying the Scriptures – it is not surprising that Protestant writers continually resorted to the press in order to persuade readers that their positions derived from the Bible and that eventually reading the Bible came to be characteristic of Protestant piety. One historian writes that as a result of the Reformation, “Protestants tended to own more books on a wider variety of religious topics than their Catholic neighbors and to use them differently. Protestants accepted the overwhelming authority of what they knew or thought was in a religious book” [OER s.v. “Literacy”].

But before they can be read, books need to be written; and during the Reformation period Martin Luther was a preeminent author of religious books. He produced a huge quantity of such works over the course of his lifetime; and especially in the first years of the Reformation, his printed works dwarfed those of everyone else. In the years 1518-1525, Luther published 219 different works in the German language. Admittedly most of these were pamphlets; but the next most published Protestant author was Luther’s one-time Wittenberg colleague, Andreas Karlstadt, with only 47 titles. In fact, Luther’s titles are more than the next 7 authors combined. Moreover, Luther’s 219 titles went through a total 1465 printings in this same period which was almost twice as many as the next 17
Protestant authors put together during this period [Edwards, *Printing* 26].

And if Luther is compared to his Catholic counterparts, the contrast is even more amazing. From 1518 to 1544 (less than two years before his death), Luther's German publications (not counting Bible translations) number 2551 printings and reprintings. During the same period, the German works of all the Catholic publicists number only 514 printings. In other words, Luther alone outnumbers them by almost 5:1 [Edwards, *Printing*, 28-29]. Mark U. Edwards, a well-known historian of the Reformation, estimates that over the course of Luther's entire lifetime, over 3 million copies of Luther's German works appeared in print as compared to only 600,000 for his Catholic opponents. And none of these statistics include Luther's German Bible, which was by far his most popular publication.

By means of the printing press, therefore, and the preaching that flowed from those who read and assimilated Luther's message, Luther became the fountainhead of the Protestant Reformation and quickly achieved a dominant place in the German-reading public. Luther also carried out his words with heroic actions in defying the pope and the emperor for the sake of God's Word. In the eyes of many, he quickly became a prophet of the last times, someone especially appointed by God to return His Church to the saving truth of the Gospel [Kolb 27-31]. Luther's Reformation reputation, therefore, also fueled the demand for his works and contributed to the influence of his ideas among the German-reading population. The woodcut by Hans Baldung Grien in our exhibit captures the feelings of many Germans about Martin Luther, a man inspired by God to speak and act as he did.

It is not all surprising then that Luther's Bible became a massive best-seller when it first began to appear in 1522. And given its
success as well as Luther's reputation and the popularity of his other works, it is natural that the German dialect in his writings should have influenced greatly the development of a common German tongue.

Although Luther had published a few translations of biblical material before 1522, it was not until he was at Wartburg Castle that he actually undertook the project that would last him the rest of his life, putting the Word of God into the language of the people. As we discuss his Bible translation work, however, we should note that Luther did not do this all by himself but worked at it in collaboration with his colleagues at the University of Wittenberg. Nevertheless, he was its driving force and the one person more than any other responsible for its accomplishment.

Contrary to what a lot of people think, there were German Bibles before Martin Luther, at least 14 printed editions, but all of them were based on the Latin Vulgate. What Luther wanted was something different – and better – a Bible based upon the original languages and translated into a German idiom that ordinary Germans could understand. And by the time he undertook this work, unlike his predecessors, he had access to printed editions of both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament as well grammars and lexicons, and Latin translations and philological commentaries to help in understanding.

Up until 1521 and the time of his great confession before the Diet of Worms, Luther was unable to undertake this translation work; but afterwards, when his prince, Frederick the Wise, had him taken off to the Wartburg for safekeeping, Luther had the opportunity to tackle the task. Beginning in December, 1521, with the Greek New Testament, he had completed a German translation when he returned to Wittenberg in March of 1522. With the help of Melanchthon and others, the work was revised and then transmitted to
the printers for publication in September 1522. A facsimile of this "September Bible" is a part of our exhibit as is also a picture by Cranach of Luther in the disguise that he wore at the Wartburg.

The September Bible was a remarkable achievement. A large book (folio size) of 222 pages, it included not only the German text of the New Testament but also Luther's introduction to the New Testament, prefaces to many books, and copious marginal notes to explain the text. It is illustrated by 10 initial letters, and 21 woodcuts, prepared by Cranach's workshop, for the book of Revelation. At least a couple of the woodcuts were controversial in that the whore of Babylon and the dragon are wearing the pope's crown!

The book was not cheap. An unbound, undecorated copy sold for half a gulden. This represented about 2 weeks wages for a baker; and with that same amount, one could buy two butchered sheep or more than 70 dozen eggs. For the first printing they prepared as many as 5000 copies, and yet it sold so quickly that its Wittenberg publisher produced another edition in December of the same year. Meanwhile, in other parts of Germany, other printers got into the act, so that in just over three years (September 1522 through 1525), about 43 different editions of Luther's New Testament were printed and over 80,000 copies. Although many of the additional printings were in smaller and cheaper formats, they were not inexpensive, so that these numbers are extraordinary. No other publication of the period came even close [Edwards, *Printing* 125-26].

And of course, this is only the beginning. With the New Testament published, Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues turned their attention to the Old Testament, which was published in parts as they became available, the Pentateuch coming out in 1523 and the last of the prophets in 1532. Only in 1534 did a complete Luther Bible finally appear. As the facsimile edition of this Bible in the exhibit demonstrates, it was a magnificent achievement. Beautifully
printed and illustrated, this work opened up God's Word to the German reader as never before. Here the pious layman could read the entire narrative of God's revelation from the story of creation all the way through the book of Revelation with its visions of the end times. And when he didn't understand something, he had Luther's prefaces and notes to help him.

Prior to Luther's death, 12 more editions of the entire Bible appeared in Wittenberg. In addition, between 1522 and 1546, there were at least 22 official editions of the New Testament; and outside of Wittenberg, more that 250 editions of the Bible and portions thereof appeared during the same period. It has been estimated that during Luther's lifetime a half a million complete Bibles and parts of Bibles were printed in the German tongue [Kooiman 178]. It's no wonder then that Luther's German influenced the development of the German language in this period, for it seems that everyone who could read German was reading Luther's German during these years!

Of course, there were those who did not like what they read, and so, as was true of Luther's other works, his German Bible also received criticism. In fact, one of his critics, Jerome Emser, even published his own version of the German New Testament as an alternative to Luther's. Well, actually not so much an alternative as another edition of Luther's, since instead of doing his own translation, Emser simply revised Luther's version on the basis of the Latin Vulgate, but the result is still mostly Luther's German. In Catholic territories too, therefore, they were reading Luther's German idiom. [Greenslade 107]

Although the critics of Luther's translations were not especially convincing in their own times, they did move Luther to write in defense of his translation efforts, and in so doing, he provided insights into his thinking about the task of Bible translation. One of
the criticisms, for example, had to do with Luther's departing from a literal translation of the Latin. Besides the fact that he was translating from the originals, Luther was not interested in a translation into stilted and unnatural German. He wanted one that ordinary people could understand. This is what he said:

We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how we are to speak German....Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the market place. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them. [LW 35:189]

This principle was an important one for Luther. In defending his translation in particular instances, he continually raised the question, "What German could understand something like that?" as if to say, why translate at all if your reader will not comprehend the message? For Luther, translating the Bible was for the purpose of communicating God's Word and that required clear, natural German. [LW 35:189, 190, 191]

A good translator, therefore, had to be an expert in two languages – the original and his own! Luther described his translation process for the Old Testament in this way:

[The translator] must see to it – once he understands the Hebrew author – that he concentrates on the sense of the text; asking himself, "Pray tell, what do the Germans say in such a situation?" Once he has the German words to serve the purpose, let him drop the Hebrew words and express the meaning freely in the best German he knows. [LW 35:213-14]

Given the demands of such expertise, it's clear that not everybody can be a successful translator. But Luther certainly was. He knew his Hebrew and his Greek – and he knew his German, as the success of his Bible through the centuries demonstrates.

Since I personally am not a native German-speaker, I will not presume to comment on Luther's style, but here is the opinion of
another, Martin Brecht, author of the definitive biography of the Reformer. Brecht writes:

[The] place [of Luther's Bible translation] in literature is solely the result of the masterful linguistic and theological achievement reflected in the translation itself....The Bible spoke clearly and directly to Luther in the situations of his own life, and he did what he could to transmit that to others. He conceived of the gospel more as an oral message than as a literary text, and this was why his translation took on a spoken character that is picked up by the ear. This led him to select forceful words, succinct expressions, and simple declarative sentences. [Brecht 2:49]

The result then of Luther's skill, reputation, and the printing press was a Bible that the German people bought and read, a Bible that helped to create a single German language.

Of course, for Luther himself, linguistic unity was hardly the point. He wanted a Bible in the language of the people so that they might learn from it all about Christ as their Savior from sin. That was its purpose. In his preface to the September Testament, Luther described its contents with these words:

It is the message of the true David, who has struggled against sin, death, and the devil and has conquered them. For this reason all who were imprisoned by sin, afflicted by death, and overpowered by the devil have been released, justified, revived, and saved without any merit of their own. Thereby he restored peace to them and brought them back to God. Of this they sing, give thanks, and praise to God and are eternally glad, at least if they believe it firmly, and stand fast in the faith. [Kooiman 127]

On account of this message and Luther's faith in it, he was moved to translate the Bible. And we can be glad that he did even if we are not ourselves German-speakers, because Luther inspired others outside of Germany to follow his example, including William Tyndale who is the source of our own tradition of English-language Bibles. But Tyndale and his Bible are a topic for another speech. So
let me conclude this one by saying thank you very much for your attention, and I hope that you’ll enjoy our Martin Luther exhibit.
Works Cited


