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A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Editorial

CHRISTIANITY GOES TO PRESS

THE title of this editorial is also the title of a very interesting little book by Professor Edgar J. Goodspeed, which was published in 1940 by the Macmillan Company of New York. It reminds us of the significant place that *publication* has played in the history of the book, and especially in the history of Christian literature, from New Testament times on; and of the important part that has been played by book publication in the advancement of the church's mission. The church has always been a worshipping society, a singing society, a preaching and teaching society; it has also been in a truly astonishing degree a publishing society.

It is, of course, one thing to write a book, and another thing to get it published. Many ancient books, especially religious books, were never intended for publication. The Egyptian Book of the Dead, for instance, was written for the express purpose of being placed in tombs, for the guidance and help of the dead man in the world of the dead. Many liturgical texts were reserved for the priests who were charged with the due performance of the rites of religion, and could not be published without profanation. The laws were not published until a relatively late period in the development of societies, and the act of publication marked a radical change in the whole character of the society.

The earliest Christian writings were not books, but personal letters—the letters written by St. Paul to the churches which he had founded—and they were not intended for publication, but for reading aloud in the presence of the church to which each was addressed. It never occurred to the great apostle that the churches of Jerusalem or of Antioch would want to read his letters to the Thessalonians, much less that they would be translated into hundreds of languages and read and studied for nineteen centuries to come. But some time before the end of the first century, his letters were collected, and published as a collection, and widely circulated throughout the growing Christian communities of the Roman world. Publication gave them a wide and lasting influence on Christian life and thought, and made them instruments by which Paul continues to instruct and inspire the whole church of God to this day.

It is probable that the first Christian book ever to be published was the Gospel according to St. Mark. It was almost certainly put together about the year 70, and it is evident that it was published at once, and circulated as far as Syria and Palestine within a few years of its first publication. Like all ancient books, it was copied by hand, by skillful scribes, perhaps working in some great scriptorium where fifty copyists would take down the text as it was read to them. It is even possible that the copies were made not on

rolls, like the Jewish scriptures and most ancient books, but on books made of quires of folded sheets, leaf upon leaf; certainly the leaf-book, or *codex*, was invented by Christian scribes and was used for the publication of the Christian writings for many years before it was adopted by the publishers of classical literature. Before the end of the second century, the four gospels were being published together within the covers of a single book, as had already been done with the collected letters of St. Paul; and the time was not long until the whole New Testament, and then the entire Greek Bible—the Old Testament along with the New—would be published in the form of a single large book.

Nothing is known of these early Christian publishers who prepared the first editions of the New Testament writings. Their names have not been transmitted to us, and our knowledge of their activities and methods is derived wholly from the remnants of their publications which have survived and from what we know of the book trade in the first centuries of the Roman Empire. The first of the great Christian book publishers known to us is a certain Ambrose, a wealthy citizen of Alexandria in Egypt, who was converted to the catholic faith (from the sect of Valentinus) about A.D. 212, by the greatest theologian of the time—indeed, one of the greatest of all time—Origen. Out of his ample resources, Ambrose engaged a staff of writers to take down Origen's lectures in shorthand, and a large number of calligraphists to make copies for distribution. A few years later, Ambrose made a formal contract with Origen, who was now resident in Palestine, for the publication of his commentaries on the Scriptures. No ancient writer had ever enjoyed such facilities for the publishing of his works; and thanks to the zeal of his publisher, Origen contributed probably more than any other single person to the victory of Christianity over paganism.

The debt of the church to its publishers is no less great in the twentieth century than it was in those early times. Indeed, the printing press has made possible the multiplication of copies on a scale and at a price that could never have been imagined by the men of the ancient world, when every copy had to be made by hand—to say nothing of the fact that papyrus and parchment, the principal materials of ancient book-making, were infinitely more costly than our finest papers. To-day, the greatest publishing houses of the world are putting their resources at the disposal of the church, providing us with a limitless supply of Bibles, prayer books, and hymn books; and making available to all men everywhere the fruits of devotional meditation, of Biblical scholarship, of theological investigation and of all the manifold labours of administration, evangelism and pastoral care. By them the whole life of the church is enriched and its mission furthered; and not least, the unity of the church is promoted as the gifts of one are put at the service of all.

F. W. B.