

Gerhard Mercator (1512-1594)

What can you see in the picture? It shows Gerhard Mercator holding his tools. One of his tools is a globe. Perhaps you have one at home. The other tool is a pair of dividers. Dividers are used for marking out and measuring distances. He used them to help him make maps that were very useful for sailors.



Mercator learned the Bible as a little boy. He learned to sing hymns. He learned to do beautiful handwriting. His teachers helped him understand that the Bible is true. This was a good beginning.

Mercator went to study at a University. Here he found something new. He was not taught from the Bible. He was taught the ideas of an old writer called Aristotle. Aristotle was a phil-o-so-pher. He had not read the Bible. Aristotle believed that the heaven and the earth had never had a beginning and would never have an end. Everything would just go on and on for ever. What does the Bible say? "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." The Bible says the earth and the heavens "shall perish". Perish means "come to an end." What should Mercator believe?

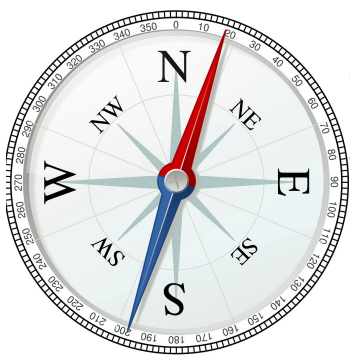
Mercator saw that the philosopher's ideas said one thing and the Bible said another. This made him doubt Aristotle and the other philosophers. He began to make his own inquiry into the things in the world around him. He found the Bible was true and Aristotle was wrong.

Mercator became interested in maps and travel. He gained learned how to make maps. He learned how to make scientific tools, too. Perhaps he made his own dividers. He heard about a great preacher, Martin Luther. Luther's preaching helped Mercator understand the Bible better. The government did not like Luther. When they found out that Mercator had been writing to Luther's friends there was trouble. They even put Mercator in prison. They could not find the letters so they had to let him go again.

In 1569 that Mercator a map that made him famous. It was a map of the whole world. The world is a round ball. A map is flat. It is hard to draw the round world properly on a flat piece of paper. Other map makers had used a circle represent the earth. Mercator used a rectangle. To do this he had to stretch out parts of the map. The parts at the top and the bottom were stretched. This made the places at the top and bottom take up more space than those in the middle. It looked strange. But it was a help to sailors.

Can you see some lines on the globe that Mercator is holding in the picture? They go right round the earth. They all pass through the North Pole at the top of the globe.

They are called lines of Long-i-tude. On Mercator's map, the lines of longitude are all



straight up and down. They do not bend round as they do on a globe or a circle. Sailors' maps are called charts. Sailors could mark out their course on Mercator's chart as a straight line.

Then they could set their compass for that course. They could not do this with the old kind of circle-shaped chart. With Mercator's chart they just kept to the course set by the compass. Then they would arrive where they wanted to go.

Sailors were grateful for Mercator's maps.