**“Women of the Reformation”**

**Psalm 46, Romans 1:16-17**

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**October 30, 2022/Reformation Sunday**

This weekend, as many celebrate Halloween, some Christians (like us!) will remember another holiday—one that marks *the Protestant Reformation.* On October 31, 1517, *Martin Luther* challenged the Roman Catholic Church’s theology of salvation and sacraments, thus initiating the religious movement that became known as *Protestantism.* On the Sunday before October 31, Lutherans (and many Presbyterians and Congregationalists) recall these events in worship.

Although the United States was a solid majority Protestant nation for most of its history, Protestantism, particularly in its “mainline” or “mainstream” expressions, is now a distinctly minority religion. The once commanding 2/3 Protestant majority has slipped to about a third of the population (due to sweeping demographic changes in recent decades), with many who are part of Protestant churches unsure of the meaning of the word, the origin of their traditions, or the basic insights of Protestant theology. Many people eschew the term itself, favoring more generic religious language to describe their faith, wondering if a 500-year-old argument about Catholic theology and the Bible has anything to do with today’s world.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Dawn DeVries, a theologian at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Virginia, put it this way:

*“Perhaps it is because we live in a much more ecumenical time, and it seems in poor taste to celebrate the occasion that led to a tragic division among Christians. Or perhaps the Reformation obsession with sin and grace – the terrors of conscience before the judgment seat of a holy God and the reassuring word of justification by faith alone – doesn’t preach in our time. In some ways, it is hard to find people now who spend a lot of time worrying about hell and divine wrath or the quest to find grace through confession and penance.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

However, it is worth remembering that the 16th century in Europe was an era with *many similarities to our own.* Society was going through upheavals because of *new science and technology* that was upending daily life. There was *political instability*, *war,* and *armed rebellions.* Thousands of people were being forced to flee as *refugees* to escape the violence. The church in both East and West had struggled for centuries to exert its power in secular politics. There was *economic inequality* and *crushing poverty*, exacerbated by *natural disasters* and *social violence.* It was an anxious time, a time when everything seemed up for grabs.

Not surprisingly, many people believed *the end of the world* must be at hand. Apocalyptic preaching captivated people’s minds, anticipating the horrific final battle between good and evil that would destroy the earth and usher in the Kingdom of God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It was in this *milieu* that a young Augustinian friar named *Martin Luther* began to have some *serious doubts* about the theology he had learned in university and about the practices of the church to which he had devoted his life to fulfill the rash oath he had made to God in a life-threatening emergency. It was in the crucible of the concerns of his time that Luther eventually heard again the radical meaning of the gospel as good news for his contemporaries.

The Presbyterian Church, of course, arose in the second generation of the Reformation, and we look to the Genevan reformer *John Calvin* and his Scottish disciple *John Knox* as our founding fathers.

But have you ever asked yourself: *What about the women of the Reformation? Why do we only hear about a handful of male leaders of this important religious movement? What was going on with the other half, the female half, of the population during this tumultuous and life-altering time? Who were the female leaders of the Reformation? Why is it that most of us have never heard of Katharina Von Bora, Elizabeth von Brandenburg, Elizabeth von Braunschweig, Argula von Brumbach, Marie Dentière, Katharina Schütz Zell, Ursula Yost, Marguerite de Navarre, Jeanne d’Albret, Renee’ de France, and Olimpia Morata?*

Unfortunately, theological inquiry with *a gender perspective* has been slow to unfold in Reformation studies, but in recent decades scholars have discovered materials that have identified women in different roles and thus diversified the group of participants in Reformation history.

For example, the only woman’s name on the Reformation Wall in Geneva is *Marie Dentière.* Marie could be described as an early feminist. She was unabashedly and openly Protestant once she had left her monastic life and married a fellow reformer. Her confidence as a writer and her feminist and Protestant convictions are evident in her address to Queen Marguerite, the older sister of the French king and a known supporter of humanists and evangelicals (the Protestants).

Writing in the midst of the turmoil of the Genevan reformation, the expulsions and returns of John Calvin and William Farel, and the initial implementation in the city of the Reformed beliefs and practices, she called a female audience to action with her eyewitness account and her female-centric interpretation of Scripture. Like so many women before her, she argued from the point of emergency: turbulent circumstances made it necessary for the benefit of the Christian faith for women to transgress the artificial boundaries set up by humankind.

She wrote: *“For what God has given you and revealed to us women, no more than* *men should we hide it and bury it in the earth. And even though we are not permitted to preach in public* *in congregations and churches, we are not forbidden to write and admonish one another in all charity … For until now scripture has been so hidden from them. No one dared to say a word about it, and it seemed that women should not read or hear anything in the holy scriptures. That is the main reason, my Lady, which has moved me to write to you, hoping in God that henceforth women will not be so scorned as in the past.”*

You see, Marie Dentière wished to *negate* misogynist interpretations of women’s place in Christian history and absolve women from unnecessary guilt for the ills of the Church. She wished to demonstrate from the Scriptures the Christian responsibility falling on women in particular and articulated a startingly feminist call with a biblical foundation for women’s emancipation.

Marie chose not to hide her talent. She offered a unique perspective—and a chapter of her own—to the Genevan Reformation. She also articulated a particular theological vision and utilized a biblical hermeneutical lens that drew from her experience as a woman.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In a similar way, Argula von Grumbach, one of the most visible women in Germany to write on behalf of the Reformation, was like Marie Dentière in Geneva, a Protestant lay pamphleteer who never doubted her prerogative to address theological issues. Born into an educated and aristocratic family, Argula internalized and applied in her life the reformers’ two central principles: the priesthood of all believers and the primacy of the Scriptures as the sole authority. And she drew her authority to interpret Scripture from the first principle.

For instance, her first epistle, from September 1523, to the University of Inglostadt, went through 14 editions in two months (29 in twelve months) and made her the most famous female Lutheran and a best-selling pamphleteer. She was a “best-seller” of formidable proportions … Her letters became an occasion for her to state her Lutheran Christian beliefs, defend her (and other women’s) Christian rights, and show her impressive knowledge of Scripture.

The stimulus for her writing, in this instance, was the *“Affair of Arsacius Seehofer.”* Seehofer was an 18-year-old student at the University of Inglostadt, in Bavaria, who had Lutheran sympathies, where Protestant activities were forbidden. In fact, the Bavarian Court had decreed it illegal to discuss or even own Protestant literature.

In December 1522 Arsacius received a warning, his house was searched, Protestant materials were found, and the boy was imprisoned (three times) and forced to renounce Luther’s teachings. He was about to face the burning reserved for heretics, but his father’s intervention moved the case from the bishop’s jurisdiction to that of the state, which was satisfied with a public recantation.

Nobody came to Arsacius’ defense publicly like Argula. What was happening to Arsacius she considered unbiblical, unjust, and a manifest abuse of power. Outraged, Argula wrote a candid, yet carefully articulated letter to the university and its rector and council and challenged them to demonstrate to her (and the public) of exactly which heresy Arsacius was guilty. She reminded the gentleman of the youth of the boy: *“For you have forgotten one thing: that he is only 18-years-old, and still a child. Others won’t forget.”* God will not forget, declared Argula, but *“God will look merciful on Arsacius.”* Furthermore, she pointed out, *“a disputation is easily won when one argues with force, not Scripture.”*

You see, Argula was compelled to action by God and by the injustice she witnessed. She founded her argumentson the primacy of the Scriptures, supporting her case with over 80 quotations and clever rhetoric. And she may have been inspired by Luther’s words about the necessity for women to preach the gospel when men are silent. She boldly demanded that the university men should not only listen to but also respond to her personally.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Friends, I share this with you because the *heart* of Protestantism is the courage to challenge injustice and to give voice to those who have no voice. Protestantism opened access for all people to experience God’s grace and God’s bounty, not only spiritually but actually. The early Protestants believed that they were not only creating a new church, but they were creating a new world, one that would resemble more fully God’s desire for humanity. The original Protestant impulse was to resist powers of worldly dominion and domination in favor of the power of God’s spirit to transform human hearts and society. Protestants were not content with the status quo. They felt a deep discomfort within. They knew things were not right. And they set out to change the world.

As Diana Butler Bass has put it: *“It strikes me as interesting that those who followed the teaching of the new reform movement did not come to be known as “Reformists,” rather the moniker that stuck was “Protestant.”  Luther and his associates were protesters rather than reformers—they stood up against the religious conventions of the day, arguing on behalf of those suffering under religious, social, and economic oppression. These religious protesters accused the church of their day of being too rich, too political, in thrall to kings and princes, having sold its soul to the powerful. The original Protestants preached, taught, and argued for freedom—spiritual, economic, and political—and for God’s justice to be embodied in the church and the world.*

It is time to put the protest back in Protestantism.”

1. Diana Butler Bass, *Putting the Protest Back in Protestant,* Patheos, October 28, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dawn DeVries, *Is Celebrating and Studying the Reformation Still Valuable?* The Presbyterian Outlook, October 25, 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation,* Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA, 2009, pp. 123, 124, 125 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., pp. 62, 63., 65, 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)