

Reformation
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Sixteenth-Century Figures Who
Shaped Christianity's Rebirth

Rebecca VanDoodewaard

An updated text based on James I. Good's
Famous Women of the Reformed Church



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Reformation Women

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For my mother and grandmothers,

who between them survived war, poverty, and new places,
raised orphans, educate children,
visited those in prison, care for the dying,
give generously to those in need,
wash the feet of the saints,
and pray for Reformation.

We know that man was not created or regenerated through faith in order to be idle, but rather that without ceasing he should do those things which are good and useful. For in the Gospel the Lord says that a good tree brings forth good fruit (Matt. 12:33), and that he who abides in me bears much fruit (John 15:5).

—Second Helvetic Confession, 1566

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PREFACE

What would Luther have been without his Katie? At best, he would have trudged along with his work, sleeping alone and depressed in the stinking sheets that he later described in a letter.¹ With his wife, he was energized, encouraged, and clean; he was able to better connect with other people, maintain his health, get feedback on his writing, and enjoy a pleasant home. Katie facilitated and furthered the Reformation.

Women are an essential element in church history. Just as Sarah, Deborah, Esther, and the New Testament Marys helped shape Bible history, so the women of the Reformed church have helped to make its history great. “Wherever true Christianity has emerged,” writes one historian, “there women have been found to pour their early and willing tribute.”² Often, as in the New Testament, it is the women who believe first and serve sacrificially. History bears this out repeatedly. Jeanne d’Albret, one of the queens in this book, once wrote, “If I wished to take the defense of my sex, I could find plenty of examples.” People who ignore or belittle the role of women, she asserted, “deserve only pity... for their ignorance.”³ Biblical Christianity values

1. Luther’s work kept him busy, and clean sheets were not a priority; he slept in one unwashed set for more than a year until they were “foul with sweat.” As quoted in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), 290.

2. Caroline Bowles, *Olympia Morata: Her Times, Life, and Writings, Arranged from Contemporary and Other Authorities* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1834), xiii.

3. Quoted in Nancy Lyman Roelker, *Queen of Navarre: Jeanne d’Albret, 1528–1572* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 421.

women and their contributions to Christ's church and society. Certainly our understanding of church history and women's potential fruitfulness will be much richer when we get to know these examples. There are three main reasons that the church today needs to meet these women and follow their examples.

First, women make up roughly half of a population, including Europe's Protestant population in the sixteenth century. And the women of that day were not just sitting around waiting for their husbands to do things: they were reading, writing, and ruling. They were teaching children, sheltering refugees, and balancing husbands. They directed armies, confronted kings, and rebuked heretics. Limiting our study of Reformation history to men limits us to half a history. Unless we understand at least some of these women's work and influence, we will have an incomplete picture of God's work during this century.

Second, feminist historians are interested in women's history. The University of Chicago Press has reflected this interest by publishing a series of the works of early modern women, including several Protestant women.⁴ While it is wonderful to have primary sources in modern English, feminist historians are casting these Christians as protofeminists. Marriages in which husbands respected their wives' intellectual abilities and churches that appreciated female gifts are presented as exceptions to the Reformed rule, when they are simply sample expressions of a widespread biblical complementarianism during the Reformation, as many of the marriages in this book show. Feminist reinterpretations of these women's lives and work are damaging the witness that these Christians left us. The church needs to retake its territory here.

The third reason the study of Reformation women is important is because the church is struggling to rightly understand and express biblical womanhood. We tend to think of our own time—this era of church history—as unique in its problem of sorting out women's roles. Different churches and denominations have different

4. Publication began in 1996; the series covers a wide range of figures.

approaches, but even for groups that are complementarian, there can be large differences and disagreements. But the church has dealt with this matter before: the Reformation was a period of huge social adjustment as Roman Catholic tradition dealing with women's roles fell apart under scriptural examination. Runaway nuns, female mystics, and powerful Roman Catholic queens revealed real issues confronting early Protestantism. As the church developed a biblical understanding of womanhood, Protestant women lived out the full scope and power of that womanhood. A range of personalities, abilities, and positions gives us a sample spectrum of what faithful, strong service to Christ and His church looked like then. These same principles and examples are invaluable for helping women today bear fruit within the broad boundaries that God gives us in His Word.

The subjects of this book are limited to women who are not household names in modern evangelicalism. Today, many Christian women are familiar with figures like Lady Jane Grey, but few know about Louise de Coligny. One of the goals of this book is to introduce today's Christians to believing women who helped form our Reformed faith but who are largely unknown now. Biographies of women like Katharine Luther are available, but biographies of equally influential and godly women are not, and the church needs them; these women form a large section in the cloud of witnesses.⁵ Women from this seminal century of Protestantism have much to teach us.

Germany, France, and England give us the largest number of Reformation women. Other countries did have their Reformers and female martyrs—even countries like Spain saw women convert out of Roman Catholicism—but their influence often died with them.⁶ Some areas of Europe, like Scandinavia, had Protestant queens or

5. An excellent biography of Katharine Luther is Ernst Kroger, *The Mother of the Reformation: The Amazing Life and Story of Katharine Luther*, trans. Mark E. DeGarmeaux (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013).

6. Roland Bainton's volume *Women of the Reformation: From Spain to Scandinavia* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), illustrates the paucity of strong, Reformed figures available and the lack of information on the women whom we do know existed.

noblewomen, but there is not enough available information about their lives or work to include them in this collection. The countries where the Reformation had a strong, Calvinist influence and an established Protestant church left the greatest record of influential women, so three countries contribute most of the figures.⁷ Because England's Reformed women, like Jane Grey, are better known, Britain's contribution in this volume is limited to Katherine Willoughby.⁸

Many of the women in this book came from noble or royal families. Those who did not had famous husbands who brought them along into recorded history. The disproportionate number of noble and royal women compared with commoners simply results from the lack of literacy and influence that the lower classes—especially women—had in the sixteenth century. No doubt there were women who furthered the Reformation about whom we do not know because they did not have the ability or time to leave records of their lives.

Despite often being rich or royal, these women are a diverse group, with different personalities, nationalities, abilities, and family backgrounds. Many began life wealthy; some were poor. Some did what they were raised to do; for others, rebellion against their upbringing was the beginning of faithfulness. Many had wonderful marriages; others suffered because of their husbands. One was single. Some died old and full of years while a few died young. But several characteristics are common to all these believing women.

7. Reformation women in the Netherlands were usually German or French princesses and are not considered here as products of the Dutch Reformation, though they contributed to it.

8. For a biography of Jane Grey, see Faith Cook, *Lady Jane Grey: Nine Day Queen of England* (Darlington, U.K.: Evangelical Press, 2005). Some evangelicals see Anne Boleyn as a Reformation figure: see, for example, J. H. Merle d'Aubigne, *The Reformation in England* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 2:191, 263. Although she was at the heart of the events that shifted England away from Roman Catholicism and introduced several Protestant writings to the court and country, there is little evidence that she was converted; Anne spent much time in her last days confessing to Catholic clergy and took the Mass before her execution. Eric Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2004), 353–54, 356.

First, they were devoted to the Protestant church. It was the core around which their lives revolved. Sometimes their contributions were direct: issuing edicts, writing theological works, and establishing congregations. Others found themselves in a position to bring reform indirectly by supporting husbands, reviewing book manuscripts, sheltering refugees, and educating children to carry on the work. Regardless of how it was done, they devoted their lives to the establishment and growth of a biblically Reformed church.

Second, if they were married to believers, they were devoted to their husbands' work. Many of these women married men who brought about, shaped, or advanced the Reformation; in supporting them, these wives facilitated the work of preaching and pastoring that they were unable to do themselves.

Third, they were given to hospitality. The level of hospitality these women practiced is almost unheard of in the West today. Groups of orphans, refugees, visiting pastors, and many others crowded their homes and lands; all were fed, clothed, and encouraged. The generosity these women displayed was sacrificial in terms of energy, time, and finances.

Fourth, the women in this book stewarded their intellectual abilities. Some were given excellent educations as children; others were self-taught. All of them worked to understand Scripture and theology, reading, discussing, and corresponding with theologians to do so. This was no ivory tower experience. Instead, education was a means of using God-given intellect in order to bear more fruit. These women also worked to educate younger siblings, children, or orphans in their care; they knew that they were raising the next generation of political and theological leaders and equipped them accordingly.

Last, they were brave. Once they saw the right course of action, they obeyed, even in frightening circumstances. Facing angry monarchs, assassins, persecutions, exile, and other challenges with fortitude seems to have been standard. Some of them may have been princesses, but there were no princess complexes. Real femininity is strength—a uniquely feminine strength that is tough *and* ladylike.

Their unusual deeds stand out to us: fleeing in disguise, preventing war, enduring persecution, and resisting arranged marriages. But it is often their everyday faithfulness that was most formative for the church—husbands supported, children taught, saints sheltered, Bibles read and distributed. Few women today have the opportunity to command an army, but all believing women can be faithful in the mundane, obeying in their own circumstances. Perhaps that is the more challenging and daunting call. It is the example of everyday faithfulness changing families, churches, and nations that makes these women's stories so valuable for us today.

Originally, most of these chapters were a series of articles written for a denominational magazine in the late Victorian era. A publisher later collected the articles and sold them in one volume, *Famous Women of the Reformed Church*. Author James Isaac Good prefaced the book with his hope that “the lives of these Reformed saints will stimulate the ladies of our Church to greater interest in our splendid Church history, and to greater activity as in missions and the practical work of the Church in which they already excel.”⁹ Here, Good's work has been revised, expanded, and corrected to make the stories of these remarkable women accessible for today's church.¹⁰ Any unattributed quotes are from his work. Because many of the women married more than once, I have used their maiden names or commonly accepted name forms in chapter titles for clarity.¹¹ Each

9. James Isaac Good, preface to *Famous Women of the Reformed Church* (n.p.: Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1901).

10. This volume has removed many original chapters and added a chapter on Katherine Willoughby in order to give readers a more balanced collection of formative but lesser known individuals from the sixteenth century.

11. Because most of the women in this book were married more than once and often had titles, various authors use various names. For example, Charlotte, whose maiden name was Arbaleste, first married a man named de Feuqueres, then one named de Mornay, but is often referred to in primary sources by her second husband's title, du Plessis. To complicate things, women in high-ranking families were often related, so that someone's maiden name could be someone else's first or second married name. To try to avoid confusion, modern scholars usually identify women by their maiden names, sometimes hyphenated with married names, or by royal titles.

chapter is a biographical sketch—an introduction to a woman who could be the subject of an entire book. Hopefully, these chapters whet our appetites for more about the female saints who have gone before us.

Several people deserve thanks for their help in producing this volume. My grandmother gave incentive to start when she said that another book project would keep me out of trouble. Laura Ladwig and Kim Dykema at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary went above and beyond the call of librarian duty, working interlibrary loan wonders. Dr. David Noe kindly translated some Latin; Stephanie MacDonald answered questions about French. Dr. Todd Rester translated the Bucer-Blaurer letters into English. Paige Kamp read the manuscript and had helpful thoughts and criticisms. My parents and sisters gave encouragement, feedback, and design help (thanks, Mary!), and my children sweetly showed interest in another project. Without my husband, this book would not have developed: he gave me Good's book in the first place, brought home other volumes and peanut butter cups, directed me to sources, answered questions about the sixteenth-century church, listened to anecdotes, and for a few months often ate pizza for supper so that these women's stories could become better known. Thank you, Bill!

INTRODUCTION

The sixteenth century changed Europe and consequently the world. Transformations that came as a consequence of new spiritual clarity touched every aspect of life, from politics to preaching to parenting. Because the chapters of this book focus on specific women exemplifying this change in everyday life, major events, documents, and figures are briefly explained here to provide a larger context.

Germany and Switzerland

When Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door in Wittenberg in 1517, Germany was a collection of dozens of small states and city-states under the oversight of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Initially all Roman Catholic, a few princes converted to Lutheranism, making it the religion of their regions. Charles V remained Roman Catholic throughout his life, putting the young Protestant church under sustained pressure until 1555, when he legalized Lutheranism with the Peace of Augsburg. Despite socio-political conflict that was sometimes expressed in revolt or battle, Luther, along with men like Philip Melancthon and Martin Bucer, worked to teach, protect, and expand Christ's church throughout the states. Reform was also costly for German princes, personally and politically. One of these, Frederick III, sponsored a local professor to write the Heidelberg Catechism.

South of Germany in Switzerland, Ulrich Zwingli began preaching in 1519. Like Luther, he saw not only corruption but also theological error in the Roman Catholic Church. Reform spread

through the Swiss cantons, bringing military conflict and the battle that killed Zwingli. The man who took his place as pastor was Heinrich Bullinger; he authored the Second Helvetic Confession, which became one of the standard documents of the Reformed church in countries throughout Europe.

France

Ruled by absolute monarchs, France quickly turned against the Reformation, exiling, then executing, people who refused to recant their Protestant faith. John Calvin was one of the exiles. He became a Reformation colossus, shaping Protestantism by his theological works. Either in person or by letter, Calvin was also a friend and counselor to many Protestant women, including royals.

Though several firstborn princesses converted to Protestantism, France's Salic law allowed only men to rule. The only French king who claimed Protestantism was Henry IV, and he renounced Calvinism for Catholicism in a highly political move that grieved his believing sister. Despite that, he did issue the Edict of Nantes in 1598, which gave the French Reformed, or Huguenots, religious liberty that outraged the pope. While the Edict did decriminalize Protestantism, it outlined restrictions on the Huguenot church and confirmed Roman Catholicism as France's official religion.

England

Henry VIII was an unlikely candidate to bring reform to England. But God used his lust for power, women, and wealth to split with the Church of Rome and make Protestantism England's official religion. For Henry, it was a political move that gave him total power, a male heir, and the confiscated wealth of British monasteries. After Henry's death, his only son, Edward VI, ruled. In six years, Edward's Reformed beliefs changed England's form of worship, promoted evangelical thought, and gave Protestant pastors prominence. Bishops like Thomas Cranmer and Hugh Latimer—true believers who valued the Word—were encouraged to preach and write. England became a safe haven for French, Polish, and other Continental refugees fleeing Roman

Catholic persecution. But Edward died young, and Henry VIII's great niece, the evangelical Lady Jane Grey, succeeded him, ruling for only nine days. Henry's Roman Catholic daughter Mary dragged the country back into medieval Roman Catholicism, executing so many Protestants that she is known as Bloody Mary. When she died a few years later, her half sister, Elizabeth I, ended the persecutions with her long reign of religious moderation.

Spain and the Netherlands

In the sixteenth century, Roman Catholic Spain was rich and powerful, throwing the weight of its growing empire against the small Protestant church. A few years before Luther began teaching, Spain had finally driven Islam out of its borders and was determined to do the same to the new "heresy." Sometimes it did this through political pressure, strongly pushing marriage or other agreements to keep the balance of power on its side. Sometimes it opposed reform through military confrontation or occupation. Always it used the Inquisition within its borders: intimidating, torturing, and executing to stamp out anything not in line with conservative Roman Catholicism.

The Netherlands was a place that Spain occupied. Philip II of Spain, Bloody Mary's husband and Charles V's son, pushed the Low Countries hard as they turned to Protestantism. High taxation and open persecution were chosen means to break Dutch revolt against Spain's rule. Guido de Bres, a Dutch theologian who wrote the Belgic Confession to explain Protestant beliefs to the Spanish, was one of the martyrs under Spain's occupation. But as so often happened in this time, God turned larger Roman Catholic plans on their head.

William the Silent was a Roman Catholic prince when Charles V made him governor of the Netherlands. Seeing Roman Catholic cruelty made William question Spain's position; by 1580 he had converted to Calvinism and openly declared himself in opposition to Spanish occupation. In the war that followed, William was assassinated. His son Maurice continued the fight against Spain, winning greater independence for the Dutch. During his rule, a synod met at Dordrecht to deal with theological controversy caused by

the rise of Arminianism. The document produced by the synod, the Canons of Dort, became a confessional standard throughout much of continental Europe, along with the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism.

Conclusion

Reformation did not come easily to Europe, but the Lord used a group of faithful Christians that was often small and powerless to bring salvation to many people walking in darkness. They faced many obstacles and deprivations, but the Lord gave them pastors who truly loved their people, fellowship with each other that crossed national borders, and the opportunity to read His Word through vernacular translations. Theological divisions existed within Protestantism, sometimes leading to fractured congregations and relationships—even countries—but this did not prevent biblical truth from transforming a continent.

Anna Reinhard

At the top of a Swiss lake, Zurich straddles a river. In 1518 it was the economic capital of the Roman Catholic cantons recovering from a series of wars with France, Italy, and other neighbors. That year Ulrich Zwingli arrived in Zurich and took up his duties in the cathedral. Like Calvin's wife, Idelette, Anna Reinhard was a pious widow when her future husband arrived in town as the new priest. Anna's home was not far from the parsonage in Zurich.

We are not sure of Anna's birth year, but it was likely 1484. Her father was a middle-class landlord. We know nothing about her youth, except that she was beautiful and that a young man in town, John von Knonau, wanted to marry her. But John's father had chosen another bride for him. The von Knonau family was among the oldest and most prominent in Zurich. John's father was proud of his family and wanted his son to maintain his position in the aristocracy, so he sent John to the court of the bishop of Konstanz to be educated. While John was there, his father chose an Austrian daughter-in-law of noble birth. But John had already decided. He preferred a Swiss commoner to a foreign noblewoman.

John and Anna secretly married in 1504 at a village chapel in Zurich. When John's father found out, he was furious. He forbade John to enter the house and disinherited him. Anna's husband now had to make his own way. In 1511, he was elected to the city council despite his father's efforts to prevent it, then became an ensign in the Swiss army, going to Italy to fight in the wars against France in an effort to support his family. After several campaigns he returned in