Women of Faith

Reformation & Early Protestant Era

Marilyn Boyer

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Introduction

What was the Reformation? To understand it properly, we must realize that prior to 1517, the Roman Catholic Church dominated the European religious landscape. The historical period known as the Reformation began when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. At the time, the Catholic Church taught that people must buy **indulgences** to obtain forgiveness. Luther claimed that forgiveness came only through God when one repented of sin. The Pope used indulgence money to finance the lavish construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther spoke out about the corruption of the Catholic Church he had witnessed.

Indulgences: Certificates that could be purchased to supposedly cancel some of their debt of sin

Martin Luther also taught that the Bible is the ultimate authority for the Christian faith and that salvation is a gift of God received through faith alone. He encouraged individuals to obtain personal copies of the Bible. Luther translated the New Testament into German, the language of the common man. He wrote many pamphlets to spread the truth to ordinary people. Johannes Gutenberg invented

the printing press in 1440, which helped broadcast Luther's message.

The battle for truth was on, and the Catholic Church condemned Luther as a heretic in 1521. The women we will learn about in this book lived during a time of great religious turmoil. The Catholic Church was fighting to retain control over the people. Kings and princes in places like Germany and England were tired of seeing their country's wealth flow to Rome in the form of church taxes. They wanted to gain more control over their own territories and legal systems, which made some of them receptive to the Reformed faith.

In the era leading up to and during the Reformation, women of nobility faced unique challenges. Marriages were very seldom about romance; instead, they were politically advantageous arrangements designed to expand territory, end wars, or solidify a family's political power. The women did not choose husbands, but they did hold special powers of influence.

Women of the nobility were well-educated and possessed a large degree of freedom to run their homes as they saw fit. Their husbands were often busy with political affairs at court or away at war. Wives had absolute freedom to manage the households in their husbands' absences. This allowed women to hold religious meetings, host and protect Reformed pastors, and even distribute Reformed literature.

Marguerite de Navarre, whose story is in this book, is a great example. She used her home to protect John Calvin, Jacques Lefèvre, and others, providing a safe haven for Reformed ideas. Royal women had the authority to require their many servants to attend religious meetings. A lady of nobility could appoint a Protestant minister to preach at the local parish under her control and thus influence an entire territory.

Many of these ladies used the power of the pen to spread theological truths. Some helped translate the Bible into the common languages, and some supplied the finances to have the Bible and Reformed literature printed. They often utilized their own financial backing to support families of exiled ministers or used their homes to provide for the needs of refugees.

During the Reformation, much of the education of children shifted to the home. Women of nobility chose men of the Reformed faith to teach their children. By choosing the tutors for their children, they ensured that the next generation of kings, dukes, and leaders were raised with Reformed convictions. They turned their households into schools where not only their children but also their servants and attendants were taught to read the Bible. A Protestant princess who married into a Catholic court often found herself acting as a mediator by preventing the persecution of the Reformed faith in her new home.

Catalyst: A person who causes change to happen quickly

Some Protestant women began writing their own histories, which shaped the narrative of the Reformation for future generations. This ensured their families' religious convictions were documented as acts of heroism rather than rebellion. You will be inspired by the women in this book as you see how they were **catalysts** to promote the spread of truth while looking well to the ways of their households. Some chose to give their lives rather than deny their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, such as Lady Jane Grey, who laid down her earthly crown for a heavenly one.

"Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him" (James 1:12).

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Katharina von Bora Luther

Mother of the Reformation

1499–1552

Katharina von Bora was born into a family of noble lineage in Germany. By the time Katharina, or Katie, was born, they had lost most of their wealth. After her mother died, she was sent to live in a **convent** as a nun. Martin Luther's writings were spreading throughout the land at that time and eventually found their way into the convent. As a result, life changed dramatically for Katharina.

Convent: A community of persons devoted to religious life under the supervision of the Catholic Church

She and some other nuns escaped from the convent and eventually Katie married Martin Luther.

The Early Years

Katharina was born to Katharina and Hans von Bora on January 29, 1499. The family lived near Lippendorf, a town south of Leipzig, Germany. When Katie was only five years old, her mother became very sick and died. Later that year, her father remarried. Less than a year after that, her stepmother made the decision to send Katie away to live in a convent to become a nun. The nearest convent was in Brehna, 30 miles from her home. Katie never lived with her father or brothers in her childhood home again.

Life in the Convent

Life in the convent was difficult. It was a life of rigid routine. The Roman Catholic Church taught that it was more praiseworthy to become a nun than to get married and raise a family.

Nuns spent many hours each day trying to win favor with God by **chanting** and praying to departed people considered by the Catholic Church to be saints or martyrs. The nuns were instructed that by sleeping in hard beds and wearing scratchy clothing, they would earn favor with God. All the nuns were required to raise food for

Chanting: A form of vocal prayer using repetitive singing of hymns or texts

the convent. They were indoctrinated to believe that they must work their way to heaven. They did not know that the Bible taught that they must trust in Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross, which paid for their sin. Only church leaders had access to the Scriptures and the truth of God's Word.

When Katie was nine years old, she was moved to another convent at Nimbschen, Germany. Here she met her father's sister, Aunt Magdalena, a nun in charge of the convent hospital. Aunt Lena was kind to Katie and taught her many things that Katie relied on throughout her life. She learned how to care for sick people by making herbal remedies. Although Katie was diligent in following all the rituals of the convent as instructed, including praying for the souls of the dead, she felt a growing emptiness. She knew that all her efforts were not drawing her closer to God.

The Teachings of Martin Luther

When Katie was about 18 years old, all of Germany was astounded to hear about a young **monk** named Martin Luther. Like Katie, Martin had spent many years faithfully trying to earn favor with God. He was shocked to realize that the pope, who had just built a magnificent church in Rome, was now trying to

Monk: A member of a religious community of men typically living under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience

raise money to pay for his **extravagance**. People were told that if they cared about their deceased loved ones, they must buy **indulgences**.

The Catholic Church taught that the dead went to a place called **purgatory** to be punished for their sins. But if their loved ones bought enough indulgences on their behalf, perhaps they would be released to heaven sooner. The church also taught that one must try to earn forgiveness from God by doing good works while on earth. Martin was tormented with the thought that he would never be good enough to earn forgiveness. Martin had learned Latin, and because he lived in a monastery, he was among the few fortunate enough to have access to the Bible. He began to read the Bible whenever he could. In the pages of Scripture, he learned that forgiveness for sin came only through Jesus Christ, who died on the cross, taking upon Himself the penalty for sin for all who would believe. He realized good works could never save anyone, only faith alone in the Son of God.

Extravagance: Lack of restraint in spending money or using resources

Indulgences: Grants by the Church that supposedly reduced the temporal punishment for sins based on the premise that the Church has the authority to forgive sin

Purgatory: A place or state of suffering inhabited by the souls of sinners who are being purged from their sins before going to heaven

On October 31, 1517, Martin nailed a document with the **95 Theses** on a church door in Wittenburg, Germany. The Theses exposed the corrupt practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther felt compelled to free people by speaking the truth contained in the Scripture. Martin wrote books and pamphlets, and soon the **Reformation** was born and spread throughout the country.

The pope was very upset and declared that Martin Luther was an enemy of the church. Undeterred, Martin began translating the New Testament into German to give everyday people access to God's Word.

95 Theses: Statements that are put forward as premises to be proved

Reformation: A religious movement in the 16th century aimed at reforming the Catholic Church

All-Saints Church where the 95 Theses were nailed to the door

Katie Hears the Good News

News of Luther's teachings soon began to seep into the convents. Many nuns were appalled and would not accept the teaching that their good deeds could not earn them salvation. This, after all, was what they had dedicated their whole life to obtain. Katie, however, wondered. When she was 24 years old, she and 11 other nuns secretly acquired some of Luther's writings, which were strictly forbidden. They realized the Bible made no mention of nuns or monks, and getting married and raising children was not considered less holy. Katie realized why she had felt so empty in trying to work her way to God's favor. The nuns secretly wrote to Martin Luther requesting that he help them to find a way to escape the convent. To help a nun break away would be punishable by death, but Martin felt it was his Christian obligation to find a way to help them. Martin had a friend, Leonard Koppe, who was a fish merchant. Koppe made regular deliveries to the convent with his wagon full of barrels of fish. Carefully, they devised a plan to be carried out on Easter evening.

The Escape

Leonard Koppe enlisted the assistance of his nephew and a friend who helped the nuns to climb over a high wall in the middle of the night. They slogged through a muddy ditch that surrounded the convent. Here, Koppe was waiting with his covered wagon, which he used to transport his fish barrels. The

nuns climbed into the back of the wagon, most likely hiding between the empty fish barrels. A tarp kept them hidden from view. One historian in 1600 wrote that Koppe rescued the girls "from the convent with particular cunning and agility, as though he were bringing out herring barrels."[1]

The path they followed was bumpy and rough as they rode through fields and woods to avoid main roads. The wagon rattled on all night long until they reached Koppe's hometown in the morning. Here, three of the nuns departed to return to their families. The other nine rested briefly before climbing back in to continue to Wittenberg that evening. On arriving, they were met by Martin Luther, who had been praying that God would grant them a safe journey.

Luther felt responsible for assisting the women in finding good homes. He even suggested husbands for them. Katie first lived with the Reichenbach family and then with the Cranach family. She loved the welcoming, lively households, so different from the solitary life of the convent. Katie became very close to Mrs. Cranach, who treated her like a daughter. She taught her how to cook, care for the children, sew, and manage money. Katie delighted in being able to read a German Bible and attend church on Sundays, sitting under the teaching of Martin Luther.

A Husband for Katie

Luther was now a professor of theology in Wittenberg. Many former monks were among his students. Martin

Luther helped all nine nuns to find husbands, except Katie. He suggested a suitable pastor to her, but Katie would not have him. She questioned his character. While explaining this to a friend of Martin's, she revealed that she would consider marrying Martin. Martin had not planned on marrying, but he did respect Katie. She had strong opinions and wasn't afraid to voice them. He acknowledged that her opinions were usually aligned with his. "He respected that when she had read his words, she believed them so much that she left her life as a nun. She believed that theology meant something, not just in theory, but in real life."[2]

Martin decided to ask Katie to marry him. On June 13, 1525, the couple got married. In August, Martin wrote to a friend, "My Katie is in all things so

Wedding of Martin Luther to Katharina von Bora

obliging and pleasing to me that I would not exchange my poverty for the riches of Croesus."[3]

Setting Up Housekeeping

Katie moved into the "Black Cloister" with Martin. Called the Black Cloister because of the color of the clothing of the monks living there, it was a large building used by the university as a dormitory for as many as 40 students. Inside were large lecture halls and ample living space. However, Martin had been the only one living there with his dog, Clownie, and one other man. The building was in disrepair and the garden was overgrown with weeds. Martin had very few dishes, and he had not even changed his bedding during the year!

Martin Luther

Katie took over the management of the buildings and grounds, which was a daunting job! Katie cleaned and scrubbed and repaired and always had a plate of warm food for Martin's supper. She was a cheerful wife and looked forward each evening to studying

the Scriptures under Martin's tutelage. Katie rose early every day to run the large estate. Martin coined the nickname "Morning Star of Wittenberg" because his wife was often up before the sun. Katie raised pigs, chickens, geese, ducks, pigeons, and even bees. Her garden was massive, and she grew a large orchard of apples, peaches, pears, and grapes. She also grew magnificent flowers.

The Black Cloister became known as the Luther Haus. It was a busy place and soon housed as many as 30 university students. The Luthers entertained people who came to learn from Dr. Luther. Quite a few of their guests had fled persecution for their faith and were warmly welcomed. Katie's Aunt Lena fled the convent and came to live with them. Martin and Katie took in 11 orphaned children, including some of their nieces and nephews, providing them with an education as well as a loving home.

Luther's House

The Family Grows

On June 7, 1526, a baby boy was born to the couple. He was named Hans. On December 10, 1527, baby Elizabeth was born. Aunt Lena helped Katie with the children. Baby Magdalena (Lena) was born in May of 1529. In November 1531, baby Martin was born, followed by baby Paul in January 1533. Finally, on December 17, 1534, baby Margaret joined the family.

Katie and Martin were a great team working together to love and serve the Lord and His people. Martin wrote songs for his children to teach them truths about God. Each evening, the family would gather to sing praises to the Lord. Martin wrote a **catechism** as a tool to teach doctrine to his children. Katie told Martin, "Everything in this book is about me."[4] By this, she meant she was learning God's practical truths alongside her children. Martin translated the Old Testament into German, and Katie learned large portions of Scripture.

Catechism: A summary of the principles of Christian religion in the form of questions and answers, used for the instruction of Christians

Ministry Center

Katie and Martin opened their home to people when the **Black Death** ravaged the area. It was

Black Death: The bubonic plague, a bacterial disease spread by fleas on rats

very contagious, and many people died. During the Reformation, Martin became so famous that kings and queens from all over Europe would travel to visit the Luther family. Martin often had to travel, and Katie managed the estate in his absence. She helped to organize his many writings, working to get them published. Katie grew extra crops and raised more animals to provide for the great demands of their household. It was due to her careful management skills and industry that Martin felt free to carry on with his ministry and write without worry. When Martin felt discouraged from the criticisms of his bold stand for truth, Katie knew just how to cheer him on.

Sadness Comes

Martin was summoned to his hometown of Eisleben in the winter of 1546. He had been sickly, and Katie worried about him traveling. While there, away from his family, he grew very ill and died. Katie was devastated, but God sustained her. She continued pouring into the lives of others. She kept the Black Cloister open and hosted university students until 1552, when the Black Death again invaded Wittenberg.

Katie and the children left, knowing she would not be financially able to turn her home into a hospital

as she had done years earlier. She loaded her cart and her two children who still lived at home to travel to **Torgau**, about 40 miles away. Suddenly, something startled the horses, which caused the cart to rock and begin to tip. Katie jumped off, landing in a ditch filled with cold water. She hit her head on a rock, which immediately **paralyzed** her. Her children struggled to get her back on the cart and continued to Torgau to locate a doctor. Katie was confined to bed for three months, but she never regained her strength. On December 20, 1552, she went home to be with her Savior. Her six children had this inscription placed upon her tombstone: "ANNO 1552. 20 December: Here in Torgau Dr. Martin Luther's blessed bereaved widow Katharina von Bora fell asleep, blest in God."[5]

Torgau: A town located in Saxony, Germany, along the Elbe River, which played a crucial role during the Reformation as a center for Protestant activities

Paralyzed: To have no feeling in the body and be unable to move

Martin Luther was the main impetus driving the **Protestant Reformation**. Many times, he attributed his success to his wife Katie. She once declared, "I will cleave to my Lord Christ, as the **burr** to the cloth."[6]

Protestant Reformation: The 16th-century religious movement that fundamentally changed the landscape of Western Christianity

In 1532, Martin Luther had declared, "I love my Katie. Yes, I love her more than I love myself, that is certainly true; that is, I would rather die myself than have her and my children die."[7] Martin Luther could not have accomplished what he did without the help of his dear wife. Katie was an intelligent, competent helpmeet to her husband. By cleaving to her Lord Christ, she helped to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Burr: The part of some plants which contains seeds with little hooks on the outside so that they stick to clothes