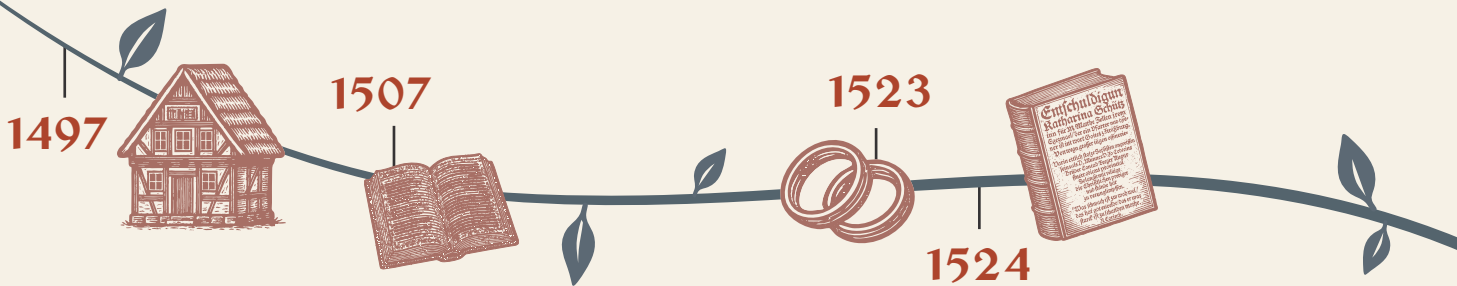


The female voice of the reformation

S.M. Reed

Many of the names that come to mind when we consider the Reformation—Martin Luther (1483–1546), John Calvin (1509–1564), Martin Bucer (1491–1551)—have one thing in common: they are male. Church history has a habit of erasing female voices, and the history of the Reformation is no exception. Women were also involved in the Reformation movement and their voices deserve

to be heard! One of the most notable was Katharina Schutz Zell (1497–1562), an avid writer. While some of Katharina’s writing can be found in various anthologies or online, the most comprehensive collection may be found in the book, *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in 16th Century Germany*, edited and translated by Elsie McKee.



early life

Katharina was born in 1497 to devout Catholic parents in Strasbourg, Germany. They valued social ethics and often criticized the wealthy aristocratic convents as hypocritical for not helping the poor.¹ Katharina struggled with her Catholic faith from early on, trying to “achieve” salvation but constantly failing. When she first came across the teachings of Martin Luther through some of his tracts, Scripture “opened” to her, and she finally understood God’s mercy.² She felt called by God to be a “fisher of people.”³

Ever since I was ten years old, I have been a student and sort of church mother, much given to attending sermons. I have loved and frequented the company of learned men, and I conversed much with them, not about dancing, masquerades, and worldly pleasures, but about the kingdom of God.⁴

MARRIAGE

Her initial plan was to never marry but to support herself as a weaver while ministering to God’s people.⁵ A visiting priest by the name of Matthew Zell (1477–1548) changed her mind. Zell was forty-five; Katharina was twenty-five. Zell preached Luther’s version of the Reformation, which Katharina already followed. He had a Latin education and many years of service as clergy. Nevertheless, he treated Katharina as an equal: “He much loved me and held me in great honor.”⁶

Luther had condemned the Catholic Church’s prohibition on clergy marrying, but there were still very few married clergy. Martin Bucer had been the first to marry in 1523; Later that same year, Matthew and Katharina followed suit. At the ceremony, both Katharina and Matthew took the Eucharist. However, taking the bread was forbidden for the clergy at the time, and drinking the wine was forbidden for lay people. Bucking tradition, both Matthew and Katharina took both the bread and the wine.⁷ This small act of rebellion foreshadowed much of their marriage and Katharina’s work to come. Katharina would later write about Matthew Zell:

He did not rule over or compel my faith; he also never put any obstacle in the way of my faith but rather much more he actively furthered and helped me. He granted and allowed me space and will to read, hear, pray, study, and be active in all good things, early and late, day and night: indeed, he took great joy in that—even when it meant less attention to or neglect in looking after his physical needs and running his household.⁸

Writing

*“It will be seen that
I have not acted
according to the
measure of a woman
but have done
faithfully and simply
according to the
measure of the gifts
that God through His
Spirit has given me.”*

This marriage brought about much controversy. Zell was officially excommunicated along with the other clergy who had married, but he continued to serve at the church in Strasbourg until his death years later. Katharina wrote and published her first official pamphlet to present her justification for their marriage titled, “Apologia for Matthew Zell on Clerical Marriage.” She argued it was better for clergy to marry as the unmarried were tempted to the use of prostitutes and abusing young girls.⁹

In response to the criticism of her first publication, Katharina wrote another defending her right to be heard. In it, Katharina never claimed equality.¹⁰ She wrote,

You remind me that the apostle Paul told women to be silent in church. I would remind you of the word of this same apostle that in Christianity there is no longer male nor female [Galatians 3:28] and of the prophet of Joel [2:28–29]: ‘I will pour forth my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy.’ I do not pretend to be John the Baptist rebuking the Pharisees. I do not claim to be Nathan, upbraiding David. I aspire only to be Balaam’s ass, castigating his master.¹¹



themes

Katharina wrote considerably on the topic of suffering, such as in her letter to the suffering women of Kentzingen, a German town near Strasbourg where protestants were experiencing persecution. She strived to understand the meaning of suffering, how to provide pastoral care, and how to live a gospel life even through hardship.¹² She relied upon the example of Abraham who had been willing to give up Isaac (Gen. 22), and she looked at Christ’s suffering and his words to acknowledge him before man that he might also acknowledge us before God.¹³ She saw suffering as a testimony to the watching world. In a letter to women who had lost their husbands, Katharina wrote that suffering should be seen as “special fatherly gifts sent from God.”¹⁴

For indeed to an unbeliever it would look strange that God should give such gifts to His children, whom He loves! Such an unbeliever would much rather not be God’s child, but a child of the world, which does not treat its children that way: the world disciplines its children softly and tenderly. It is true, as Paul says, that faith is not everyone’s thing (cf. Eph. 2:8) and the worldly, that is, the carnal person cannot understand what is godly. But the spiritual, that is, the believing person (cf. Rm. 8:5–8), understands that God deals marvelously, surprisingly, with His own, completely contrary to the world and its children. . . .

So I beg you, loyal believing women, also to do this: take on you the manly, Abraham-like courage while you too are in distress and while you are abused with all kinds of insult and suffering. . . . Then you also are blessed.¹⁵

key points

Two concepts were consistent key points for Katharina throughout her life and writings: *sola scriptura* and the daily ministry to the poor.¹⁶ Barred from formal education as a woman, she had to consistently make the most of what was available to her. She believed that a godly life was shaped and formed by the Word of God and set about to study it so that she could teach others.¹⁷ She also used inclusive gender language when quoting Scripture, which was ahead of her time. She had a very practical, down-to-earth writing voice threaded with humor and addressed real-life issues. There is great humility in Katharina's writing. Clearly, she had a high view of God, and God's grace extended to her. She saw herself as God's servant.

I am a daughter of Sarah who believed, one blessed of the Lord, a child of God, a bride and fellow heir of His Son Jesus Christ, a purified shrine and temple of God the Holy Spirit, a companion who shares with all the saints the good things of heaven in eternal life. That is my glory, honor, joy, heavenly pride, and glorying in God and Christ, not in myself.¹⁸

This humility did not hamper the authority in her writing.¹⁹ Her other publications include expositions on Psalms and the Lord's Prayer, and a four-volume book of hymns. It is likely she wrote even more which has been lost over time.²⁰

1550



Katharina was an influential Reformer and prolific writer, "one of the most outspoken women of the Reformation."

1562



a powerful influence

Though Katharina never formally preached in a pulpit setting, she preached with her life. She was moved by the social gospel and lived accordingly, opening the parsonage to anyone in need, including refugees and traveling clergy.²¹ She believed the relief of the poor was a Christian duty.²² She took in and cared for a disabled nephew for many years²³ and regularly visited the local prison to minister to the prisoners there.²⁴ She was well-known for her compassion toward others and took that compassion to the city government to advocate for better treatment of the poor and homeless.

Upon her husband's death in 1548, she had the opportunity to speak at his funeral. She encouraged people to hold to her husband's teaching and to Christ. In her eulogy, she stated:

Christ has power to save us from sin, death, and hell, and to give us eternal life. In Him is all salvation, and in no other creature or work in Heaven and earth, for no one comes to the Father, or dares to think of coming to Him, except through this living Son of God, who should be honored as the Father is. ²⁵

Katharina Schultz Zell deserves to be remembered as a deacon, as a pastor, and as one of the foremost pastoral theologians of the 16th century. She demonstrated a “fearless pursuit” of the Christian life.

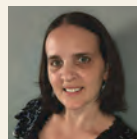
conclusion

Though a layperson, Katharina was an influential Reformer and prolific writer,²⁶ “one of the most outspoken women of the Reformation.”²⁷ Her writings provide a unique perspective into a time of great change within the church. She was friends with Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Martin Bucer, and maintained regular correspondence with them.²⁸ As such, their writings may have been directly or indirectly influenced by hers. Some say she helped to establish the basic tenets of the Protestant Reformation,²⁹ and inspired the French theologian Marie Dentière (1495–1561).³⁰

Katharina died on September 5, 1562, at the age of seventy-five. Historian Charlotte Methuen declared, “Katharina Schultz Zell deserves to be remembered as a deacon, as a pastor, and as one of the foremost pastoral theologians of the 16th century.”³¹ She demonstrated a “fearless pursuit” of the Christian life.³² Katharina had a “deep conviction that a believer’s whole life must be understood as a proclamation of Christ.”³³ Though she didn’t read Latin or have formal training, Katharina should be recognized as a great theologian in her time. She lived out the roles of preacher and pastor through her life and actions. Anyone interested in learning more about the Reformation, church history, or theology would do well to read her works.

Notes

1. Elsie McKee, editor and translator, *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in 16th-century Germany*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 3.
2. Charlotte Methuen, “Preaching the Gospel Through Love of Neighbor: The Ministry of Katharina Schultz Zell,” in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 61, no. 4 (2010): 712.
3. Methuen, “Preaching the Gospel,” 712.
4. Christina Langella, “Katherina Schultz Zell,” *Women of Christianity*, November 15, 2011, womenofchristianity.com/katherina-schutz-zell-by-christina-langella/.
5. Joshua J. Mark, “Katharina Zell,” *World History Encyclopedia*, April 15, 2022, www.worldhistory.org/Katharina_Zell/.
6. McKee, 188.
7. Mark, “Katharina Zell.”
8. McKee, 188.
9. McKee, 74.
10. Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld, “Katherina Zell,” in *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1987), 183.
11. Quoted in Langella.
12. Methuen, 720.
13. Methuen, 721.
14. Methuen, 721.
15. McKee, 50–52.
16. Susan C Karent-Nunn, “Review of: ‘The Life and Thought of a 16th Century Reformer’ by Elsie McKee,” in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 52 no. 1 (2001): 143.
17. Methuen, 724.
18. McKee, 212.
19. McKee, 25.
20. McKee, 33.
21. Mark, “Katharina Zell.”
22. *Ibid.*, 13.
23. McKee, 24.
24. Mark, “Katharina Zell.”
25. *Ibid.*, 107.
26. Karent-Nunn, 143.
27. Tucker, 182.
28. Langella.
29. Mark, “Katharina Zell.”
30. Mark, “Katharina Zell.”
31. Methuen, 728.
32. Karent-Nunn, 144.
33. Methuen, 722.



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