

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	13
INTRODUCTION	15
CHAPTER ONE <i>Katie Luther:</i> A Life-Long Learner	21
CHAPTER TWO <i>Anna Zwingli:</i> A Downtrodden Disciple	45
CHAPTER THREE <i>Argula von Grumbach:</i> A Battling Believer	67
CHAPTER FOUR <i>Katharina Zell:</i> A Compassionate Co-worker	89
CHAPTER FIVE <i>Wibrandis Rosenblatt:</i> A Wonderful Wife	113
CHAPTER SIX <i>Idelette Calvin:</i> A Misguided Marriage?	137
EPILOGUE	161
NOTES	165

INTRODUCTION

I wonder how you feel about reading the stories of women who lived and died 500 years ago – that’s half a millennium! It all sounds a bit dull and dusty – all thees and thous – as well as old fashioned and irrelevant. After all, the world we live in is a very different place. In the twenty-first century we expect life to be fast paced and technological. The sepia-tinted past can’t really have much to say to us today, can it? Even the world of my grandparents’ youth seems incredibly distant – cars and planes were a novelty. We live in a time of great change. My parents can remember the excitement of seeing TV for the first time; when I was a child *colour* TV arrived; our children have never known a time without twenty-four-hour, multi-channel television – which can now be watched on a phone. We expect change. We expect new fashions in the shops season by season and every new gadget to be superseded in a matter of months.

How can looking back to the past help us in any way when so much has changed? Some changes are exciting. Others are unsettling. For all of us in the twenty-first century change is an incontrovertible fact of life – which can make life hard for us as Christians. When everything past generations took for granted is up for

grabs, how can we be sure which way to turn? When we face hostility for standing up for truths, which until recently were generally accepted, what do we do? How can finding about a load of women who lived 500 years ago, at the time of the Reformation, help us to live for Christ in the challenging and confusing world of today?

In many ways the sixteenth century might seem very alien. Tudor England might be familiar from costume dramas and bestselling historical fiction, but the old-fashioned language, elaborate clothes and court rituals don't seem immediately relevant to the way we live today. During that same period mainland Europe, where all of these women lived, can feel even more distant to us now. The European countries we are familiar with were a long way in the future. Germany and Italy were then patchworks of princedoms and city states. Latin rather than English was the international language – the language of the super powerful Roman Catholic Church, as well as of classical Rome, which many of the educated elite understood better than their own time. In Europe today church-going is a minority activity, and theological debate seen as a bizarre irrelevance. 500 years ago everyone went to church, and theological differences not only divided families but also led to bitter wars. In many ways the sixteenth century was *very* different to the twenty-first.

In some ways, though, it was not so different. The 1500s were years of enormous change too. Technology was changing the way people communicated. We have Twitter; they had the printing press, enabling new ideas to be spread to a mass audience rather than each book having to be painstakingly copied by hand. Like today new ideas were challenging age-old beliefs. For centuries the Roman Catholic Church had dominated virtually all aspects of life. Yet increasingly people were criticising not only the immorality and greed of the clergy but also the key doctrines of the church. The certainties of the past were being questioned, rejected and replaced by new and radical ways of thinking and acting.

The most important question in an age of early and often sudden death – namely, how to enter heaven – now had a new answer. One’s eternal destiny no longer rested on obedience to church teaching, performing certain good deeds and religious duties, and persuading relatives or paying others to pray for your soul. According to reformers such as Martin Luther salvation was a gift from God, bought at the price of His Son’s death on the cross. The implications of this simple biblical idea were revolutionary. There was no longer any need for a priest to celebrate the Mass on behalf of the people – everyone could have direct access to God through Christ’s once-for-all death on the cross. Priests or pastors did not have a hotline to God – He was available to all. Pastors were to teach

God's people, but *every* Christian had a valuable role to play in the church. Old values and assumptions were swept away. The Bible, and not church teaching, was to be the authority on how to please God. Compulsory celibacy for pastors and the superiority of the monastic life were questioned. Ordinary people were encouraged to read the Bible for themselves and to serve God in their everyday lives.

It was an exciting but terrifying time for many. Dealing with hostility and official opposition for standing up for biblical teaching is nothing new. Those who initially accepted the new teaching faced misunderstanding at best, death at worst. As time went by and the Reformation became established in some areas, the danger of military and political pressure from Catholic powers increased. To the ordinary sixteenth- (and twenty-first-) century anxieties of money, relationships, family and health were added persecution, insecurity and war.

Women also faced another familiar challenge. What did it look like to be a godly woman? How far were traditional models and attitudes applicable to a new generation? The challenge to live by the Bible rather than by following tradition or contemporary culture was the same for them as it is for us.

Unlike us these women had to work out what biblical womanhood looked like from scratch. There was no

older generation of godly women to provide wisdom and advice on being a Christian wife and mother – the assumption had been that becoming a nun was a woman’s high road to holiness. These Reformation women were pioneers, striving to put the Bible’s teaching into practice in their own particular times and circumstances. They were the ‘First Wives’ Club’ – the first generation of Christian women probably since apostolic times to seek to put the Bible into practice in marriage and family life. They were different women, with different husbands and family circumstances, with different personalities and gifts – Katie Luther was a wife, mother and businesswoman; Katharina Zell was a church worker alongside her husband; Argula von Grumbach was a writer, who used her gifts to defend the gospel; Wibrandis Rosenblatt – the wife of no less than four reformers! – was a caring companion and mother to a blended family; Anna Zwingli, living in difficult and dangerous times, had to deal with devastating bereavement; Idelette Calvin suffered ill health and a less than perfect marriage. Each of these women knew, or at least knew of, the others, and formed a network of friendship and support.

They each sought to apply the Bible’s teaching to their own particular situation – with much success, some controversy and a few failures. In a changing and confusing world they found that the only solid foundation was living a life built, as the reformers

would have put it, on Scripture alone, by faith alone, by grace alone, through Christ alone, giving God alone the glory.¹ We won't go far wrong if we follow their example today!

Clare Heath-Whyte

CHAPTER ONE



Katie Luther

1499–1552

A Life-Long Learner

As time goes by it gets harder to break old habits. Even as Christians it's easy to excuse ungodly behaviour because 'that's just what I'm like – I was born that way'. Whether it's a bad temper or a sharp tongue, extravagance or negativity, we can become so used to our unchrist-like personality traits that we

don't even expect to change. As a young woman Katie Luther was known to be difficult and bossy and was determined to get her own way; by her death she was revered as a model of Protestant piety. She was still feisty, hardworking and stubborn, but these qualities had been harnessed to serve Christ and His people. As she studied God's Word she allowed the sword of the Spirit to do its painful work – changing and moulding her to reflect God's likeness.

In 1525 in Wittenberg, Germany, Katharina von Bora married Martin Luther, the man who had stood alone to challenge the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and so had launched what we now know as the Protestant Reformation. Luther was one of the most famous, and infamous, men of his generation. He was adored by those who had accepted his teaching – those who had been set free from ritual and legalism to enjoy a relationship with Christ on the basis of God's grace alone. He was loathed by those who felt he was destroying the basis of Christian civilisation by attacking Roman Catholic doctrine. He was also a monk who had made a vow of celibacy. Whoever married Martin Luther was going to be thrown into the limelight. During her twenty-one years of marriage Katie¹ would find herself copied and despised in equal measure as she tried to show that it was possible to please God as a married woman fully involved with the world around her.