

Women of the Reformation

By Barry McWilliams

Women had a most significant impact upon the Reformation, and the social changes that came about in turn changed the place and role of women in the centuries to follow. Two groups of women had decisive impact upon the Reformation – the royal women, and the wives of the Reformers.

In 16th Century Europe, 85% of the population were peasants living in villages of less than 100 people, 10% were Middle Class: merchants, tradesmen, townsmen, and the remaining 5% were either the Nobility or Clergy. Most of the wealth and power was concentrated in the latter. The average life span was 30 for men and 24 for women; anyone who reached 40 was considered old. Women had an average of 6 or 7 children, if they survived childbirth in an unsanitary age, and 40-50% of the children would die before the age of 12. About 10% of the men would never marry. About 12% of the women found themselves in convents – and often unwillingly – as that was a good way to get rid of unwanted female children. Apart from marriage or orders, there was little else for a woman than prostitution, though many nuns were treated as such by the so-called “celibate” clergy. Illegitimacy was frequent. In the upper classes though, a mistress often had a much better lot in life than a wife. In Northern Europe family units were centered around one married couple; in the South the household would often include a couple, and their married children and grandchildren as well.

Among the peasants, though pre-marital relations were frowned upon, getting pregnant was a frequent step towards marriage. Marital relations began with betrothal, and weddings were often delayed until pregnancy was obvious. Women had to care for children, houses, make clothing and tend livestock (which usually shared the house) and whole families slept in common beds. Women were subject to much abuse. Girls were marriageable at 12 and boys at 14. Among the middle classes, a woman needed a dowry, and that would often provide the start for a young man of ambition to establish his own business. Parental or Social approval was important. In the nobility, marriages were arranged for the benefit of the families (or nations) concerned by the parents, usually when the child was 6 or 7 years old. As a result those marriages were often loveless and filled with flirtations, illicit affairs and adultery. In France and Italy especially, such behavior was as fashionable as the immodest attire of both men and women. Divorce was unknown, but between the constant wars and famines and plagues and the high mortality rate, the loss of a spouse was quite common; and new marriages were quickly sought and entered into. And children oftentimes found themselves orphaned and passed from relative to relative. The impact of death on family life was just as great among the rich and powerful as it was among the poor.

Royal women had much to do with shaping the events of the Reformation era. One needs only consider Henry the 8th and his six wives (and the politics behind them); or Catherine de Medici and her daughters Elizabeth of Valois; and Marguerite of Valois; or Mary Tudor; Elizabeth I; and Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots to know that these women shaped history. But there are others too. Marquerite of Navarre and Jeanne d’Albret; who served the Huguenot cause in France, or Charlotte of Bourbon and Louise de Coligny in the Netherlands.

The other group of women who impacted that era and the centuries to come were the wives of the Reformers. The Renaissance church was filled with immorality at every level and celibacy contributed to this. But as the reformers married – the pastoral home became a model for society and gradually changed the culture of Europe. It is argued that the modern concept of marriage (based on mutual love rather than property) and the breakdown of parentally arranged unions came about as the result of the Reformation. We owe a tremendous debt to the wives of the Reformers.

Katharine Von Bora (Wife of Martin Luther) (1498-1552) A former nun, who escaped a Convent and arrived in Wittenberg in a wagonload of nuns. Martin Luther tried several times to marry her off – as he had done with the rest. But one courtship ended when his family found out she was a former nun. Another she refused because she did not like him. Finally she told Martin it was him, or Amsdorf (a committed bachelor)! Martin surprised everyone when (after consulting his parents who were overjoyed), he suddenly married Katie (who was 18 years younger) in 1525. Their 21 years of marriage life had some delightful surprises for Martin, much of it recorded in his Table Talk. Her quick tongue, humor, and stubbornness matched his. They had six children, four of whom survived childhood. She managed his home (actually the former monastery) which was frequently full of students, had a large garden and livestock, fished and farmed, and ran a brewery, and managed their money, as well as taking care of their extended household. Martin called her “My Lord Katie”. When he died suddenly in 1546, she soon found herself a refugee as armies turned her farm into a battlefield. She herself died as a result of a carriage accident.

Anna Reinhart (Meyer, Ulrich Zwingli) (-1538) Was a widow with 3 children when she married secretly Ulrich Zwingli 1522 (It became public knowledge in 1524). Together they had 4 more children. She was widowed again when Zwingli was killed at the Battle of Cappel in 1531 along with a son, brother, a son-in-law and a cousin. Bullinger took her and the children into his home. She died in 1538. One of her sons would marry one of Bullinger's daughters.

Wilibrandis Rosenblatt (first wife of 1) Ludwig Keller, 2) Johannes Oecolampadius of Basel, and second wife of 3) Wolfgang Capito, and of Martin Bucer) (1504-1564) The daughter of a knight who was frequently off fighting the Emperor's wars, she has the undeserved title of the Merry Widow of the Reformation having married four reformers in succession. But then she was widowed three times. Her first marriage to humanist Ludwig Keller lasted by two years, widowed at 22 in 1526 with one child. Her second was to a much older and sickly Oecolampadius who left her a widow in 1531 with three more children. Her marriage to the grieving Wolfgang Capito produced five more children before his death in 1541. Her fourth husband, Martin Bucer left her a widow for the fourth time in 1549 with two more children plus one adopted child. He had fled to England with his family. She managed to return to Strasburg with her family, but then had to relocate to Basel where a son was studying theology. Plague would take her there in 1564, where she was buried beside her second husband. Her home was described as one of hospitality and because of circumstances frugality. At different periods of her life, she was left to care for the large family alone, and had to care for her own sick mother at the same time.

Katharine Schutz (Wife of Matthew Zell of Strasburg) She is called the "mother vicar of pastor's wives", she was 20 years younger than her husband. She had two children who died as infants – and bore the burden of childlessness for most of her life. She married in 1523, and ministered as a team with her husband (though she considered her role as similar to that of "Balaam's Ass", Bucer thought her "a trifle imperious".) She developed women's ministries and published a book of Psalms for women to sing. She was constantly entertaining, including such personages as Calvin. She took a leading role in organizing relief for 150 men exiled from their town for their faith, and wrote Scriptural encouragements to the wives and children left behind. During the Peasants' War, she organized Strasburg to deal with 3,000 refugees for a period of 6 months. She traveled frequently with her husband, unusual in that day. She showed tolerance and concern for Anabaptists and made frequent visits to those who were imprisoned. She was widowed in 1548, and spoke at his funeral. Bucer sent her to Basel to recover from her grief in the home of Myconius, and then to Zurich. She returned to Strasburg as the Interim was imposed on Strasburg by Charles V. She hid Bucer and Fagius in her home for several weeks, until they could escape to England. Her health failed, but not her zeal. In 1558 she cared for a Magistrate stricken with leprosy, and a nephew with syphilis. She gave an address at a funeral of a wife of a follower of Schwenckfeld shortly before her own death in 1562.

Elizabeth Silverstein (First wife of Martin Bucer) (- 1541) An ex-nun, they married in 1522, and soon paid the penalty with his being forced to flee to Stasburg in exile. Their home was quite happy and constantly showing hospitality – in a city that was always packed with refugees. Martin Bucer was quite a match-maker encouraging his fellow reformers to marry – including Calvin and Capito. They had 13 children, of which only one survived the plague of 1541, which also brought about her death. Knowing she was dying, she called Willibrandis Rosenblatt (Capito) whose husband had also recently died and asked her to marry Martin and take care of him.

Katharina Krapp (Wife of Philip Melancthon) (-1557) The daughter of the Mayor of Wittenburg and the wife of a Scholar, she and Philip Melancthon had 37 years of happy marriage together, and she bore him four children. She loved rollicking company, and it seems Philip even welcomed the distractions to his academic work. She kept him well fed in his words "stuffed like a sausage." Both people of generous and impulsive natures – it is wondered who did the finances. When his daughter died at 25, leaving four children, they took them into their home. When she died before him, he was away and grief stricken, though he followed her just a couple of years later.

Idelette de Bure (first wife of 1 } Jean Strodeur, first wife of 2 } John Calvin) (-1549) When John Calvin decided to marry, he put together a committee in Strasburg (where he had gone in exile from Geneva) to find him a wife. Their attempts failed several times. Finally he noticed the widow with 3 children of a former Anabaptist he had converted. Their marriage would last nine years, though they both were frequently ill. Further complications arose from family members of his that did not like her, producing periods of family strife. One child of theirs died while an infant and she miscarried another. In the process, Calvin, who spoke little of his married life, was deeply touched. Their relationship softened his heart as a pastor. When she died, he did not remarry, though he would return to Geneva for fifteen more years of reforming work.