

MEFC Community Group Study Guide

For the week of May 12th-18th

As we're learning from Sunday's sermon text, women clearly play a significant role in our mission to be and make disciples of Jesus. This week, we have an opportunity to discover the ways that women were mission-critical to the 16th century Protestant Reformation. Read and discuss this excellent article in your family or with your community group.

“Five Lessons From Reformation Women”¹

By Rebecca Vandoodewaard

Women who lived during the Protestant Reformation can give us a unique perspective on the Christian life. They didn't teach from pulpits, but they did teach from printing presses, throne rooms, and hospitable homes.

Here are five things we can learn from these mothers in the faith.

1. The Power of Jesus

In a German convent, Katharina von Bora read a rebel monk's writings on justification by faith alone. At some point, the gospel brought her from death to life. The rest of her life produced service to her husband (Martin Luther), children, church, and Lord. We're so used to her story that it no longer stuns us. The fact that Luther's condemned writings got into a convent demonstrates the Word's power: it can go anywhere and do its work. Institutionalized error does not stop Jesus.

Nor is a nun's unbelieving heart an obstacle: People indoctrinated in lies from childhood can have their eyes opened to see truth. The power of Jesus also gave Katharina strength to overcome a lifetime of worry, tight finances, morning sickness, weeds, and laundry—real difficulties in their own right. United to Christ in salvation, Katharina's work was evident through her incredible work for the Protestant church. Jesus does the same thing today, making his strength perfect in our weakness.

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-lessons-from-reformation-women/>
Accessed 5/10/24 @ 10pm.

2. The Sacredness of the Pastoral Office

As the Reformation shook Europe, one significant social effect was the closure of many convents. A large chunk of the female population suddenly had to find new places to live, new occupations, and new relationships. As monasticism died in Protestant lands, two things happened concurrently: women lost the church office they once occupied as nuns, and they gained spiritual equality with men. Suddenly, there were no ecclesial roles for women (which had often been given to those considered good enough or rich enough). Instead, *all* Christian women enjoyed the benefits of membership in the priesthood of believers.

While roles of ecclesial authority—such as pastor or elder—were open only to men, the priesthood of all believers created respect for women and opened doors medieval Catholicism had closed. Marie Dentiere and [Katharina Zell](#) published theological works based on Scripture. [Anna Bullinger](#) and Margarethe Blaurer did crucial poverty relief. [Anna Zwingli](#) and [Katharina von Zimmern](#) served on a city council.

Women also had new relationships with office-bearers based on a revived reverence for the pastoral office. Because these ministers derived their authority from God’s Word, not Rome, women could have a true and genuine respect for pastors as they taught. The Reformation fundamentally changed the relationship between women and the church by opening lay ministry to all women, and by giving them faithful shepherds who cared for their souls in biblical ways. It’s a good reminder for us as the church struggles to clarify gender roles today.

3. The Necessity of Self-Denial

Our culture fosters self-indulgence. We’re so immersed in comfort it’s difficult for us to see the extent of it. The labors of Christian women in the 16th century helps clear the fog. Why was the church so fruitful in that time? Why did busy mothers write theological works and host hundreds of people? Why did abused queens volunteer to wage wars? Why did women make stands that led to death? Because they understood [John 3:30](#): “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Personal fulfillment wasn’t on the radar. In fact, self-denial matured these women to the point that they could daily die to self—giving up position, money, personal safety, and even people they loved in order to serve Christ’s church. Everything was subservient to the larger mission.

This is why someone like Katherine Willoughby could walk away from estates and position when keeping them meant denying Jesus. Without a similar

Spirit-enabled self-denial, we won't mature in the faith, and we'll be stunted in our fruitfulness. By taking up their cross and following Christ, Reformation women were able to do the good works God had prepared in advance for them ([Eph. 2:10](#)). In our comfort-driven culture, they serve as an example for us to follow.

4. The Authority of Faithfulness

One interesting thing about Protestant women in the Reformation era is that few had “careers” or “ministries.” Single ones, like Margarethe Blaurer, were devoted to their siblings and guests. Married ones worked hard as wives and mothers. Formal roles outside the home weren't common among Reformation women. However, almost every single one had a massive impact outside the home—whether in writing (like Argula von Grumbach), fighting a war (like Jeanne d'Albret), raising children (like Louise de Coligny), or getting good legislation pushed through (like Catherine d'Bourbon).

Their faithfulness in small things was well known. As wives, mothers, home managers, parishioners, hostesses, and friends, they were leaders and role models. The same is true today. As we serve faithfully in a variety of ways (whether or not our work is seen by others), we influence God's church. Small acts of daily faithfulness build a life of integrity and credibility.

5. The Urgency of Obedience

Sixteenth-century Europe didn't change because three or four intelligent men wrote new theological works. Europe changed because ordinary believers made use of the ordinary means of grace. Women devoted themselves to the public preaching of the Word, right use of the sacraments, prayer, private study of the Word, fellowship with other believers, and fasting. They opened their homes for worship services, facilitated church plants, attended worship without fail, distributed Bibles, funded seminaries, and prepared carefully for communion.

The visible church is only as holy as the sum of its parts. Programs won't achieve institutional sanctification—medieval Catholicism proves this point. Holiness, on the other hand, will change the world. If we want the church in our day and age to flourish, more committees or Christian books or leadership strategies aren't the answer. Worship is. Careful participation in the Lord's Supper is. Prayer meetings are. When God's people are made useful by these ordinary means, ordinary people light up the darkness.

That's what happened 500 years ago, and it can happen again.