

“Three Not-So Quiet Women of the Reformation”

Protestant Lecture 3 of 3

History is often unkind to those who play second-fiddle to those on the front battle lines. Who could name Joe Namath’s or Joe Montana’s linemen? How many first wives or vice-presidents of our 45 presidents can you recall? What are the names of the lieutenants and majors who led Napoleon or Washington’s soldiers into battle? Are such characters any less heroic than those who are written in the headlines of history? In much the same way, the Reformation has many noble heroines who get overshadowed by Luther, Calvin, and or England’s King Henry VIII. Today, in our third and final lecture celebrating the Protestant Reformation’s 500th anniversary, I’d like to look at 3 noble ladies who deserve to be remembered for their efforts unto the LORD Jesus Christ.

Those three, discussed now in chronological order are France’s Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549), Katherine von Borra of Germany (1499-1552), and “high priestess of early English Puritanism” Catherine Willoughby (1519-1580).

We begin with Marguerite of Navarre, the beloved and loving sister of King Francis I of France. She wed her first husband by arranged marriage at the age of 17, but by 26 was a widow. In less than a year she married a man she truly loved, King Henry of Navarre. Navarre was an independent kingdom just north of the French and Spanish border, the Pyrenees Mountains.

Marguerite was highly influenced by the Renaissance, and as such studied to become very adept in classical studies and languages. She read Dante in Italian, Plato in Greek, and later Martin Luther in German. She even translated Luther’s work on the Lord’s Prayer into French for the souls of others.

She herself was an accomplished writer, known best for her poetry. Even in her earliest poetry it is evident that she had become highly influenced by those who sought reform in Catholic France. One such poem addressed justification by faith and reads this way:

To you I testify
 That God does justify
 Through Christ,
 The man who sins.
 But if he does not believe
 And by faith receive
 He shall have no peace.
 From worry no surcease (cease)
 God will then relieve,
 If faith will but believe
 Through Christ, the gentle Lord.

Around 1531, a fierce Catholic Anti-Reformer named Noel Beda charged Marguerite’s poetical work the *Mirror of the Sinful Soul* as doctrinally deviant. This was an extended meditation on Psalm 51, that strongly

affirmed the Protestant idea that forgiveness came directly from, not through the sacraments of the Catholic Church. Marguerite writes, "When God pleases to justify the heart he confers the gift of faith by which one has knowledge of His goodness, wisdom, and power....No one can understand this save the one to whom the gift is given." Such words indicate a belief in both justification by faith and the predestination of the elect. In addition, she included a little rebuke to those who overly adored the Virgin Mary. She writes, "Take not offense, sweet Virgin Mary...I am of no mind to detract from your preeminence. But did not Christ say that he who does the will of God is his brother, sister, and mother?"

All was going fairly well for French Reform until in 1534 some Protestants went too far in what is now known as the Placard Affair. Two October mornings, October 17 and 18th, people all around Paris woke up to posters placarded all around the city calling the Catholic Mass a frightful blasphemy. One such poster made it onto the bedchamber door of Francis I. Before the day was out, six Protestants were burned as heretics, and then for the rest of his life, the offended Francis was hard toward Protestant Reforms. Up till then Marguerite could appeal to Francis to get a Protestant off a charge or escape a punishment, but her influence was weakened from that point on.

For example, in 1545, there was a great massacre of the Waldenses in southern France. This Christian religious movement predates the Protestant Reformers by a few centuries, but held common beliefs to those who were writing in the 16th century. Up till the early 1540s, Francis I had been lenient, but in 1545, he had 22 villages razed and thousands killed. When the new got back to the throne, both Francis and Marguerite were present. Francis laughed and said, "Serves them right," while his sister could only shed tears.

At this point, Marguerite pulled back from Paris and resided more in her husband's kingdom of Navarre. There the spiritual writer and French Reformer writer Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples would come to live out his last days. There Marguerite entered into regular correspondence with an exiled Frenchman in Geneva, Switzerland, named John Calvin. It should be noted that throughout Marguerite's whole life, she never totally abandoned the Catholic Church. Though Protestant in faith, she still hoped the doctrines of the Reformation would re-root themselves in the Church of Rome. John Calvin was not content with people like Marguerite who didn't openly identify with Protestantism. And yet, notably, her daughter Jeanne d'Albret would openly identify with Protestantism in 1560, 11 years after Marguerite's death; Jeanne would go on to support the French Protestants called Huguenots.

Marguerite remained in her own state of exile for the rest of her days. Though deeply fond of her brother, they never saw eye-to-eye on matters of faith and therefore remained somewhat separated. Some Protestants felt she never came far enough, and yet every Catholic knew her true colors. Her longing for heaven in the midst of present sorrows were put in verse this way:

Assuage my streaming eyes, And hear my sigh. And may I have a gentle sleep, When I shall die.

From Marguerite we move on to a beloved Katie, born Katherine von Borra in 1499. Katherine was born in poverty, entering a convent at the age of 9 for survival, and taking holy orders by age 16. We know little of her time in the convent, other than it is likely she received a rudimentary education. Like other nuns, she read well enough to become aware of the writings of Martin Luther, who was writing in Wittenberg 30 miles from Katherine's convent. Soon the nuns began to write to Martin Luther about their desire to escape their monastic

vows and join the Reformation movement. Basically, they pleaded for their own abduction. Though abducting nuns was a capital offence, that didn't stop Martin Luther from enlisting a merchant to stow 12 nuns into barrels for their escape. Nine chose to stay in Wittenberg, each expressing a desire to wed a Reformed Protestant. One of the theology students at the University reported to his friends, "A wagon load of vestal virgins has just come to town, all more eager for marriage than for life. God grant them husbands lest worse befall."

Eight nuns were married off quickly, but the prickly, opinionated, and strong-willed Katie found herself in domestic service awaiting a man for 2 years. Her first betrothed snuck back home to marry a different woman. Katie would have nothing to do with Luther's second recommendation. In reply, she said, she was only interested in the key leader Amsdorf or Luther himself. Luther laughed at the idea and chortled about it with his father, but his dad pointed out that this was basically an offer of marriage and therefore Luther's last chance for a wife (and Hans Luther's last chance for grandchildren). With typical Lutheran wit, Martin went forward in marriage, in his own words, to please his father, spite the pope and the devil, and to seal his witness before martyrdom.

On June 13, 1525, the 42-year old Luther and the 26 year-old Katie were married. They would go on to have 6 children of their own and be the caretakers of hundreds of students and orphans throughout their remaining days. Luther reflected on his first year of marriage by saying, "There is a lot to get used to in the first year of marriage. One wakes up in the morning and finds a pair of pigtails on the pillow which were not there before." Some days Luther would affectionately call Katie "my rib," and then on other days the stronger "My lord." Supposedly on one occasion he changed Katie's German name just a bit to *Kette*, which means "chain."

All joking aside, Martin and Katie loved each other, and their home became a ministry outpost for all of Germany. Guests would come and go and university students would frequent their home and board at times. Luther traveled often and wrote constantly, leaving Katie to figure out how to manage and finance a home short on cash. Justin Taylor writes, "...Katie drove the wagon, took care of the field, bought cattle and put them out to pasture, brewed beer, prepared food for the graduation banquets, rented horses, sold linen, served as Martin's publishing agent, and often nursed him back to health during his frequent illnesses."

During a serious bout of illness that Luther thought might end in death, he wrote home, "My dear son and my dear Kate. I have nothing [in worldly goods] to bequest to you, but I have a rich God. Him I leave to you. He will nourish you well."

Katie might have married the funniest man in Germany, but she could hold her own as well. Once while Luther was in a not-too-uncommon state of melancholy depression, he found his wife wandering the home in a funeral attire. When he asked if someone had died, she replied that since Martin was acting like God was dead, she might as well mourn with him. Maybe this incident preceded Luther penning, "a good wife is not found accidentally and without divine guidance. On the contrary, she is a gift of God."

Katie is just one of the many wives of Reformation pastors. Each of them knew their husbands' lives were in jeopardy. Every time their husbands entered public space, their lives were at risk. This caused much fear on Katie, and yet she pressed on in faith. Add to this Luther frequently risked death by physical ailment and an unwillingness to slack in his work. On a different occasion when Luther had written to Katie to prepare for his death, she responded by saying, "My dear Doctor, if it is of God's will I would rather have you with the Lord than

here. But I am not just thinking of myself and Hans. There are so many people that need you. But don't worry about us. God will take care of us."

After several years of marriage, Martin wrote of marriage with these insightful words, "The first love is drunken. When the intoxication wears off, then comes the real marriage love."

One of Luther's prized works is called "Table Talk," and it is a collection of teachings, sayings, and off-the-cuff remarks Luther made at his table with University Students and guests presents. A few more famous lines include:

"The monks are the fleas on God's Almighty's fur coat."

"The only portion of the human anatomy which the pope has had to leave uncontrolled is the hind end."

"I am the son of a peasant, and the grandson and the great-grandson [too]. My father wanted to make me into a burgo-master. He went to Mansfield and became a miner. I became a baccalaureate and a master. Then I became a monk and put off the brown beret. My father didn't like it, and then I got into the pope's hair and married an apostate nun. Who could have read that in the stars?"

Where was Katie in all this? Well, most historians agree. She was often right in the thick of these conversations. She was not some quiet, off in the corner, ignorant house-wife. She read her Bible, listened intently to all subject matter, and would have jumped in from time to time. I, for one, am certain that her influence had ripple effects for many generations of pastors, wives, and congregations. Praise God for Katie Luther.

That leaves us one final heroine of the Protestant Reformation. In this case, we'll jump across the English Channel and learn of Catherine Willoughby who would eventually become the Duchess of Suffolk. Catherine was born March 22, 1519. Her mother was María de Salinas a deeply faithful and dutiful servant of the Spanish Catherine of Aragon. To express her love and fidelity to Catherine of Aragon, she named her first daughter after this famous Catholic matriarch who refused to allow Henry VIII annul their marriage, thereby causing the English king to begin a unique English Reformation.

Catherine was a maid in waiting for the sister of Henry VIII. Though only 14 in 1531, she caught the eye of a 49-year-old Duke, the widower, Charles Willoughby. Despite the age difference, they had a happy marriage of 12 years. As Duke and Duchess of Suffolk, Charles and Catherine regularly walked among the elite of their day. Charles openly supported Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine Aragon and England's rejection of the Roman pontiff over the English Church. There were not too many people in positions of title or rank who could afford to stand opposed to Henry VIII. But there is evidence that both Charles and Catherine Willoughby were not just political Protestants, but deeply faithful and desirous of a Christ-centered English Reformation.

For instance, they invited a Scottish preacher named Alexander Seton to serve as a chaplain in Suffolk. Seton openly professed salvation by grace, not Catholic works, and thus had become a refugee from a dangerous Catholic Scotland in the early part of the 16th century.

A particularly telling example of Charles and Catherine's leanings toward Protestant theology came at a formal dinner party prior to Charles' death. The duke and duchess were having a grand party, and Charles decided to ask each lady present to request a gentlemen beside their date to escort them into the dining hall. Catherine's godfather was present, a Bishop named Stephen Gardiner who still held to the doctrines of Rome. Catherine stated for all to hear that since she could not have the man she loved most, she would accept the arm of the man she loved least. Then turning to her godfather, Bishop Gardiner, she offered her arm. Years later it would be said of the Duchess of Suffolk that she was "a lady of sharp wit, and sure hand to drive her wit home, and make it pierce where she pleases."

Life changed dramatically in 1545 when Catherine became a widow. It was at this time when Catherine accepted the ministry and mentorship of possibly the most famous Protestant Reformer of England, Hugh Latimer.

Hugh Latimer was a powerful preacher and student of the Bible, eventually becoming Bishop of Worcester from 1535-1539. This did not last long because he relentlessly demanded England to leave behind all the remnants of Roman Catholic theology and practice, something King Henry VIII was reluctant to do. Latimer's relentless commitment landed him in the Tower of London in 1546 for his strong views. Providentially, this was the same year Henry VIII died and soon his Protestant-loving son, Edward VI took the throne. These were the glory days of the English Reformation. Hugh Latimer was made a court preacher. Other loyal Protestants such as Thomas Cranmer and Nicholas Ridley were made Bishops. Sadly, Edward VI died young, and a violent Catholic Restoration came to be under the reign of Queen Mary, A.K.A. Bloody Mary from 1553-1558.

In quick order, under Mary's first Parliament, the Protestant doctrines and practices of the Church of England were revoked, and Catholic doctrine, particularly related to the priests and the sacraments returned. A fierce roundup of Protestant pastors began, spear-headed by none other than Catherine's godfather Stephen Gardiner. Bishop Gardiner became Mary's henchman, given the title chancellor of the realm with jurisdiction over heresy. Latimer, Ridley, and Cranmer were all arrested and put in the Tower of London. The conditions in the Tower of London were heinous, and these men survived only by the alms, charity, and clothes sent by the Duchess of Suffolk.

The great Scottish Reformer, John Knox, scorned Gardiner with the words: "O thou beast...more cruel than any tiger, ashamed thou not, bloody beast, to betray thy native country?"

At Hugh Latimer's final trial he defended justification by faith, the rejection of the Catholic mass and other sacraments, and refused to recant. Though aged and hardly able to defend himself, he wrote much of his defense, including these lines: "Christ made one oblation and sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and that a perfect sacrifice; neither needeth there to be, nor can there be, any other propitiatory sacrifice." In due time, Latimer, Cranmer, and Ridley were all were sentenced to death. After the sentence had been pronounced, Latimer added, "I thank God most heartily that He hath prolonged my life to this end, that I may in this case glorify God by that kind of death."

Both Ridley and Latimer were burned at the stake in Oxford on October 16, 1555. As he was being tied to the stake, Ridley prayed, "Oh, heavenly Father, I give unto thee most hearty thanks that thou hast called me

to be a professor of thee, even unto death. I beseech thee, Lord God, have mercy on this realm of England, and deliver it from all her enemies."

Ridley's brother had brought some gunpowder to place around their necks so death would come more quickly. All did not go as planned, for the wood was green, and Ridley's body burned slowly. With a loud voice Ridley cried, "Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit..." So too, he was heard to repeatedly call out, "Lord have mercy upon me! I cannot burn...Let the fire come unto me, I cannot burn."

Latimer died first, but before he passed, Latimer encouraged Ridley, "Be of good comfort, Mr. Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace, in England, as I trust never shall be put out."

Not surprisingly, the influence of Hugh Latimer on Catherine was profound during the years of 1546 to 1553, before Catherine remarried and out-and-out Protestant, Richard Bertie. During the high days of Edward's Protestant Reform, Catherine concerted efforts in support are recorded this way:

She was very active in seconding the efforts of government to abolish superfluous Holy Days, to remove images and relics from the churches, to destroy shrines, to put an end to pilgrimages, to reform the clergy, to see that every church had provided, in some convenient place, a copy of the large Bible, to stir up the Bishops, Vicars, and Curates to diligence in preaching against the usurped authority of the Pope, in inculcating upon the reading of the Scriptures and especially the young, the Pater Noster [Lord's Prayer], the Articles of the Faith and the Ten Commandments in English.

During these safe days for Protestantism in England, Catherine also welcomed fleeing refugees from elsewhere in Europe: including French, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch and Polish Protestants. Her reputation of Christian charity and hospitality received accolades in the dedication of books by men such as William Tyndale and the Swiss Protestant Pierre Viret.

While Cranmer, Latimer, and Ridley were losing their lives, Catherine and her new husband Richard Bertie were on the run. Stephen Gardiner still had it out for his strong-willed goddaughter. It probably never sat well with him that Catherine had made it quite known that she had named her pet spaniel Gardiner, just so she could call Gardiner to heel. The couple had to flee in the cover of night with a ruse to the powers that be that they were heading into Europe to collect unpaid debts (money that those very same powers hoped to confiscate when the Berties returned to England). This was a perilous journey with a young daughter in tow and a pregnant Catherine now 36 years of age. They reached the low countries alive, took on aliases, and hid out for several months until a local bishop in sympathy with Gardiner suspected their identity. They fled again, and for two years, they lived in almost destitute conditions among sympathetic Protestants. It was *their* turn to survive in exile. Thankfully in 1557, the Polish King granted them refuge until Queen Mary died in 1558 and the tolerant Elizabeth I brought peace to England. Finally, in 1559, the Berties came back to England.

Elizabeth I was a masterful leader and religious sympathizer. Under her leadership, England adopted the 39 Articles of the Faith, a document that never sat well with Anglo-Catholics or staunch Protestants like Catherine. She even compared Elizabeth to the people of Israel in the days of Elijah who refused to decide between YHWH or Baal. Upon Elizabeth's ascension, she received a letter from Catherine that read in part: "We

generally ought to praise, thank and honour Him in you, and you in Him, with an unfeigned love and obedience all the days of our lives. It is comfort enough to all your subjects, that you do the will of Him that hath raised you up, spite of His and your enemies; but unto the heavy hearts of your persecuted subjects, these tidings distil like the sweet dew of Herman..."

In due time, Catherine would stand with the forbearers of Protestant Puritanism. Under Elizabeth I, the Act of Conformity swept across English churches requiring them to accept the middle way doctrines that sought to appease Catholic and Protestant sympathies. To her chagrin, Catherine watched as one by one the ministers in her area accept conformity. Where was the legacy of Ridley, Cranmer and Latimer with such compromise. Catherine's legacy of faithful Biblical Protestantism would reappear in the likes of John Bunyan and John Owen in the century to come. As time history would have it, Catherine Willoughby would eventually be dubbed "the high priestess of early English Puritanism."

So friends, this year we mark the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. During that glorious period, many people gave their lives to proclaim 5 glorious truths:

Sola Fide, by faith alone we are saved! *Sola Scriptura*, by Scripture alone do we know what is true Christian doctrine and practice. *Solus Christus*, through Christ alone are all the blessings of God. *Sola Gratia*, by grace alone are people made right with God. *Soli Deo Gloria*, that because everything comes by grace and faith, all this is to the glory of God alone.

Peter of Blois, a medieval theologian who died nearly three hundred years before Luther was born, expressed a sense of gratitude for the Christian writers of antiquity which should also characterize our attitude toward the reformers of the sixteenth century: "We are like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants; thanks to them, we see farther than they. Busying ourselves with the treatises written by the ancients, we take their choice thoughts, buried by age and human neglect, and we raise them, as it were, from death to renewed life." (Timothy George)

A few centuries later, Isaac Newton added: "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." Those who walked faithfully with God were finite, humans, made giants by the grace of God. They were not perfect, but they pointed to the truth of God. Let us not forget their labors...let us learn from their mistakes, but most importantly, let us pursue the same God with loyalty, love, and passion. And all God's people said...Amen.