

**The Life and Work of Katharina von Bora**

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**HI5311 | Church History | Luther Rice College & Seminary**

**April 20, 2025**

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## **The Man and Woman Behind the Reformation**

One cannot explore the life and impact of Katharina von Bora on the Reformation without first exploring the life of Martin Luther and the Reformation. The Reformation is perhaps one of the most influential periods in the history of the church. It is certain that the Reformation period perhaps changed the Christian religion forever. While there were many reformers responsible for valuable contributions to the Reformation, one of those unforgettable reformers is that of Martin Luther. According to Edwin Booth, “the whole desire of his life focused more and more around the Bible.”<sup>1</sup> Known for his dedication and loyalty to God, Martin Luther changed the course of the history of the church through his devout study and devotion to the Word of God.

Challenging the belief system of those who claimed to be Christians and followers of Christ, Martin Luther would encounter much controversy from the Catholic church throughout the duration of his life. It should be stated that Luther was a bold, courageous and firm believer in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Refusing to back down, Luther made the truth known to all and stood readily to defend the Word of God. According to Booth, “he was no coward [and he] stood his ground.”<sup>2</sup> A man of great faith and upright character, Martin Luther was indeed the perfect portrait of how one should represent and defend the Christian faith.

While Martin Luther was well-known for who he was, his impact grew even greater when he decided to get married to Katharina von Bora. According to Buck, “Martin was not only a giant

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<sup>1</sup> Booth, Edwin Prince. Martin Luther: Heart of the Reformation. 2003. Page 53.

<sup>2</sup> Booth, Edwin Prince. Martin Luther: Heart of the Reformation. 2003. Page 153.

theologian, he was also a husband, a father and a man who dealt with everyday concerns.”<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, unforgettable in his own right, increased his influence when he joined Katharina in marriage. In fact, it would be their marriage union that would be what would help to change the Reformation period forever. Staying devoted to the Christian faith, Booth states “Luther connected his marriage, as he did everything else with the gospel.”<sup>4</sup> Due to his desire to please his father in addition to perhaps purposely angering the papacy for its chiding views on celibacy, Martin Luther gladly married Katharina. While he did want to marry Katharina, his purposes for marrying her far outweighed his personal desires. According to Booth, “he wrote to a friend that he would marry to please his father, tease the pope and spite the devil.”<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther did just what he said he would do and joined Katharina in what would be a lasting union.

### **The Woman Beside the Reformer**

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “behind every great man is a great woman.”<sup>6</sup> One can indeed find this to be true as one peruses the lives of some of the greatest men to ever live. From the Bible to the history books, some of the greatest men were accompanied by some of the greatest women who were often unheard of and unsung heroes. Katharina von Bora, also known as Katy Luther, is one of them. According to Joy Schroeder, “there has long been need of replacement for the outdated pious (and sometimes fictionalized) biographies of Katharina von Bora (1499-1552).”<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps unfortunate that when one looks for information on Katharina

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<sup>3</sup> Buck, Emily. 2020. “Katie Luther: First Lady of the Reformation. The Unconventional Life of Katharina von Bora.” *Reviews in Religion & Theology* 27 (2): 306. doi:10.1111/rirt.13821.

<sup>4</sup> Booth, Edwin Prince. *Martin Luther: Heart of the Reformation*. 2003. Page 161.

<sup>5</sup> Booth, Edwin Prince. *Martin Luther: Heart of the Reformation*. 2003. Page 161.

<sup>6</sup> Roosevelt, Eleanor. Quote.

<sup>7</sup> Schroeder, Joy A. 2005. “Katharina von Bora: A Reformation Life.” *Trinity Seminary Review* 26 (1): Page 50. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=abebe210-2ae6-38d9-adc2-3077140272b8>.

von Bora, one will find that information is far, few and in between. Fierce in her own right, there is much to be said about her though very little can be found written in history about her.

According to Harmon in the Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia, Katharina von Bora was “born on January 29, 1499 in Lippendorf, Germany and she died December 20, 1552 in Torgau, Germany.”<sup>8</sup> Her life was filled with meaningful work as she walked beside Martin during the Reformation period.

To pay tribute to Martin Luther is to pay tribute to Katharina, the woman who stood faithfully behind him while she also stood faithfully by his side as she helped him craft the reformation of the Christian religion. According to Karin Stetina, “since Katie was not a writer, journaler or preacher, very little is known about her apart from what her husband recorded in letters and Table Talk comments.”<sup>9</sup> Though much is not known, the facts that are known are both astounding and cherished among the Reformation period. While Katharina’s religious journey began in a convent as a nun, her story ended in great resolve and defiance as she sought earnestly to depart from the Catholic faith as Angela Harmon indicates that “she no longer wished to be a Roman Catholic nun”<sup>10</sup> in the Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia.

Seemingly so, Harmon suggests that Katharina desperately wanted to escape and find a new way of life that she had been secretly reading about from “pamphlets that had been smuggled in the convent.”<sup>11</sup> Katharina was determined to start a new way of life. She desired

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<sup>8</sup> Harmon, Angela. 2023. “Katharina von Bora.” *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*, April. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=c9f088a3-cf73-3a19-9423-b26dc6d1e2f0>.

<sup>9</sup> Stetina, Karin Spiecker. 2019. “Katie Luther, First Lady of the Reformation: The Unconventional Life of Katharina von Bora.” *Evangelical Quarterly* 90 (1): 95. doi:10.1163/27725472-09001008.

<sup>10</sup> Harmon, Angela. 2023. “Katharina von Bora.” *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*, April. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=c9f088a3-cf73-3a19-9423-b26dc6d1e2f0>.

<sup>11</sup> Harmon, Angela. 2023. “Katharina von Bora.” *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*, April. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=c9f088a3-cf73-3a19-9423-b26dc6d1e2f0>.

something better, something new, something liberating. Her defiance was perhaps a holy defiance as she sought a better way of life in the Christian faith in the Reformation movement. According to Harmon, as she “learned about a new church Reform movement by a German monk named Martin Luther, she joined a group of several other nuns who were planning to escape the convent.”<sup>12</sup> Katharina’s boldness led her to an escape and perhaps right into the arms of the reformer himself, Martin Luther.

Katharina, a great woman in her own right, was a model example of a woman during her age. She was an example for all to emulate. According to Booth, “she was strong, rugged, healthy with vitality and good humor.”<sup>13</sup> Seemingly just the right fit for Luther, she had all the qualities necessary to join Luther on his life journey. She was the perfect help meet and an almost divine choice for Luther. According to Booth, “on the evening of June 13, 1525, they were married in Luther’s home by John Bugenhagen.”<sup>14</sup> Martin and Katharina’s union would eventually cause an uproar as he was a monk, and she was a nun. This went against every rule and discipline they had subjected themselves to. Their indifference to the rules caused them to be viewed through the perception of perhaps being an abomination before God. According to Booth, “Rome predicted the Antichrist would result from the union (popular tradition expected the Antichrist to be born from the marriage of a monk and a nun).”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Katharina and Martin did not allow this to deter them. Katharina’s willingness to abandon her role as a nun to

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<sup>12</sup> Harmon, Angela. 2023. “Katharina von Bora.” *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*, April. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=c9f088a3-cf73-3a19-9423-b26dc6d1e2f0>.

<sup>13</sup> Booth, Edwin Prince. *Martin Luther: Heart of the Reformation*. 2003. Page 162.

<sup>14</sup> Booth, Edwin Prince. *Martin Luther: Heart of the Reformation*. 2003. Page 162.

<sup>15</sup> Booth, Edwin Prince. *Martin Luther: Heart of the Reformation*. 2003. Page 163.

find a better way of life as a married Christian woman changes the trajectory of Christian marriage forever.

Although challenged with opposition, their marriage union was filled with love and founded on Christian principles that would create an everlasting bond between them until they would ultimately be parted by death. Falling in alignment with God's will for the family and Martin Luther's views on the woman and wife in the home, Katharina thrived in motherhood. According to Schofield, "the first child in the Luther household was Hans, born in June 1526. Elizabeth, born in December 1527, died before she became a year old. Magdalena, born in May 1529, was a sweet-natured child who tragically fell grievously ill and died in 1542."<sup>16</sup> According to Brecht, "the other children were Martin, Paul and Margaret, born in 1531, 1533 and 1534 respectively."<sup>17</sup> Navigating the death of children would prove hard on their home as it would any home that would experience it. According to Tucker, "the Luthers faced many of the same struggles and joys common to women and men of every era."<sup>18</sup> The resilience of the Luthers would catch the eye of many as they proceeded to answer the call of God on their lives.

Katharina's accomplishments as a mother and a wife suited her well as she becomes an example for many Christian women to come after her. Ruth Tucker suggests that "by examining Katie's life as a nun, wife, mother and widow within the context of the sixteenth century Germany, Katharina von Bora broke the mold and paved the way for today's women, wife's and mothers."<sup>19</sup> Though she and Martin endured challenges with the death of their children, nothing

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<sup>16</sup> Schofield, John. 2011. *Martin Luther: A Concise History of His Life and Works*. The History Press. Page 138.

<sup>17</sup> Brecht, Martin. *Martin Brecht's Biography of Luther*. Page 203-204, 432, 439, 21, 237.

<sup>18</sup> Buck, Emily. 2020. "Katie Luther: First Lady of the Reformation. The Unconventional Life of Katharina von Bora." *Reviews in Religion & Theology* 27 (2): 307. doi:10.1111/rirt.13821.

<sup>19</sup> Stetina, Karin Spiecker. 2019. "Katie Luther, First Lady of the Reformation: The Unconventional Life of Katharina von Bora." *Evangelical Quarterly* 90 (1): 94. doi:10.1163/27725472-09001008.

seemed to fuel them more than standing beside one another. According to Ruth Tucker's contribution in the *Evangelical Quarterly* 90, "Luther fondly referred to his beloved wife Katie, a former nun who he helped leave the convent, as "my rib," "my book of Galatians," "doctress," "priestess of Wittenburg," and the boss of Zulusdorf."<sup>20</sup> Martin's deep respect, love and devotion for Katy was truly undeniable. Martin valued her and all of her contributions to his life, their marriage, his home and his ministry.

### **The Role of Katharina von Bora in the Reformation**

A woman with a quiet humility and strength, Katharina has been proven to have had such a great impact on Martin Luther, his writings and the entire Reformation period. In fact, the Reformation period should probably not be discussed without the inclusion of her accomplishments and contributions to the faith. According to Ruth Tucker in Karin Stetina's *Evangelical Quarterly* 90, "there is no doubt that Katharina von Bora was instrumental in German Reformation as she enabled her husband to write, teach, discuss and support the ideals of it."<sup>21</sup>

Out of the spotlight, Katharina supported Martin with her presence and input at home. Impactful, influential and intelligent, Katharina played an integral role in how Martin Luther helped to shape the Reformation. Perhaps, the Reformation may not have been the way it was if it wasn't for her. Unsung and perhaps forgotten, Katharina leaves a lasting heroic legacy for women, wives and mothers alike. Defying the odds and challenging ritualistic and satanic beliefs

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<sup>20</sup> Stetina, Karin Spiecker. 2019. "Katie Luther, First Lady of the Reformation: The Unconventional Life of Katharina von Bora." *Evangelical Quarterly* 90 (1): 94. doi:10.1163/27725472-09001008.

<sup>21</sup> Stetina, Karin Spiecker. 2019. "Katie Luther, First Lady of the Reformation: The Unconventional Life of Katharina von Bora." *Evangelical Quarterly* 90 (1): 94. doi:10.1163/27725472-09001008.



about celibacy and the roles of women and marriage, Katharina breaks barriers and perhaps liberates womankind as she gives a glimpse of her independence and strength. Not lost in her identity, she reminds women of who they are and how valuable they are to their husbands and their homes.

According to Buck, it should also be known that “Katie was not a typical pastor’s wife; along with raising their four surviving children, Katie was a businesswoman and lodged students and travelers.”<sup>22</sup> Katharina’s versatility shows her resilience as a help meet to her husband as she serves her home and her community. Her ability to multi-task perhaps also created a new wave of independence among women liberating them from being tied and restricted only to the duties of the home. Katharina’s dedication and loyalty to all roles that were assigned to her as a wife, mother and woman represented something far beyond what she could imagine. Katharina was an example. She was a trailblazer. She was perhaps a heroine in her own right as she walked out her God-given assignments with grace. A blessed addition to Martin Luther, Katharina added grace and blessing to Martin’s life in the ministry as she walked faithfully beside him. Her presence was a present to Martin, the Reformation and women alike as they are forced to remember her and look back on her work and her life as a woman with nothing but awe.

### **Katharina’s Impact on Women Today**

Katharina not only had a major impact on women in her era, but also on Christian women who would come after her. Liberating the woman from the home through her example, Katharina showed that a woman can not only be a mother and a wife, but she can also be herself and be

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<sup>22</sup> Buck, Emily. 2020. “Katie Luther: First Lady of the Reformation. The Unconventional Life of Katharina von Bora.” *Reviews in Religion & Theology* 27 (2): 307. doi:10.1111/rirt.13821.

who she's called to be. An inspiration to the body of Christ and believers, Katharina reminds Christian women that the Proverbs 31 woman does it all as she takes care of her husband, her children and her business. Katharina's independence from Martin, while still yet dependent as a submissive and supportive spouse, is a reminder that women have a rightful place both inside and out of the home.

Today, some of the greatest businesses are ran by women. Some of the greatest enterprises are ran by mothers and wives. Some of the greatest men are accompanied by women who are businesswomen, mothers and wives in their own right. Katharina reminded the world that the woman's role in the home did not have to be bound to the confines of the home. Katharina reminded the world that women are powerful and that women can do just as much as men can do, if not more as they take on the tasks of childbearing and childrearing. Perhaps, Katharina's accomplishments would contribute to all the women who would come after her. A model figure of woman empowerment, Katharina impacted generations to come and changed the makeup of the home forever.

## **Conclusion**

Although little is known about Katharina, it is known that she played a pivotal role in the Reformation as it concerned women and wives. Ruth Tucker suggests a more controversial reason that Katharina is forgotten concluding that "Katharina was ignored because she did not fit the mold of a pious wife."<sup>23</sup> Remarkable in her own right, Katharina's role in the Reformation is one of honor that shall be remembered and lived on throughout the coming ages. Katharina stood

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<sup>23</sup> Wetherbee, James. 2017. "Katie Luther, First Lady of the Reformation: The Unconventional Life of Katharina von Bora." *Library Journal* 142 (13): 75. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=05e83189-0c16-3e6b-9f58-602451cbb2ae>.

for what she believed in and helped change the course of history as she accompanied Martin Luther during his studies and ministry.

If it hadn't been for Katharina, perhaps Martin Luther would not have made so great of an impact on the Reformation. Perhaps, he wouldn't have been one of the greatest Reformers of his time without her monumental impact. It is because of his wife, his faith in God and his devotion to Christ that we remember his work. Katharina's work during the Reformation is just as valuable as Martin Luther's. While she was a woman, it can be stated that she still earned her right in the history books as she trailblazed a path for women to come after her. Though she may be long forgotten amongst the history books, her contributions will live on, and she shall be remembered in the likes of every woman who embraces the role of a wife, a mother and a woman's place beside her husband in his work and her home forever.

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