

4-2022

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### Recommended Citation

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A Woman's Place is in the Church: Understanding the Perspective of Women in the Protestant  
Reformation

by

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Submitted to the LSU Roger Hadfield Ogden Honors College in partial fulfillment of  
the Upper Division Honors Program.

April, 2022

Louisiana State University

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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

# **A Woman's Place is in the Church: Understanding the Perspective of Women in the Protestant Reformation**

## **Introduction**

Modern understanding of the Protestant Reformation suffers when the female perspective is dismissed. Until recently, female perspectives about the past were ignored, hidden, or invalidated. When studying the Protestant Reformation, the writings of female reformers are overlooked just because they were not written by a man. Misogyny is not the only reason that women's opinions on the Reformation were silenced. Many male reformers of the sixteenth century rebuked women and confiscated their writings, because they viewed female commentary on the movement as improper and unnecessary. Censorship of female writing caused most letters and pamphlets written by women to fall into oblivion and be forgotten by historians. Some will try to argue that evidence of women's feelings about the Protestant Reformation does not exist. However, modern day historians have uncovered the writings of female reformers. The purpose of this paper will be to examine the role and plight of women during the Reformation, a topic that is not usually covered when studying this movement. The primary sources studied in this paper are Juan Luis Vives' book *The Education of a Christian Woman*, the letters of Katharina Schütz Zell, and the letters of Marie Dentière. Hopefully by the end of this paper it will be apparent that women were not passive bystanders but were changemakers during this religiously revolutionary time.

## *Humanism*

Humanism was the predominant intellectual movement during the time of the Protestant Reformation. All of the individuals and texts studied in this paper were influenced by Humanist ideas. Although the word appears "nowhere in the writings" of the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries, the words "humanistic studies" and "humanist" did exist and were used during this

period.<sup>1</sup> This movement sought to separate itself from “the chivalric culture of the medieval nobility and the scholastic culture of the clergy;” however, Humanists possessed “no identifiable set of philosophical doctrines,” but their ideas tended to focus on the individual.<sup>2</sup> “One implication” of humanism was that a person had the responsibility “to participate in the life of the community” such as paying required taxes or participating in a republican political system if one was present.<sup>3</sup> Reshaping education was another trademark of humanism. Humanists placed emphasis on “grammar” and “rhetoric” rather than subjects such as physics.<sup>4</sup> The goal of this new style of learning was to aid individuals in “the making of wise moral decisions” rather than identifying and understanding facts.<sup>5</sup> It was these two concepts of individual responsibility and education for the purpose of developing morality that greatly influenced Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century.

### *Christian Humanism*

The philosophical paradigm of Christian Humanism helped the magisterial reformers of the Reformation develop their beliefs about education, marriage, and in some ways the roles of women. What separates Christian humanism from regular humanism, the intellectual movement which was prevalent during the Renaissance in Europe, is its consideration of “the responsibility [of] the Christian”<sup>6</sup> in worldly matters such as government. These worldly concerns were matters

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<sup>1</sup> Nauert, Charles G. *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, pg. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, pg. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, pg. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, pg. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, pg. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Yost, J. “Changing attitudes towards married life in civic and Christian humanism.” *Occasional Papers of the American Society for Reformation Research*, vol. 1, 1977, pg. 164.

that focused on how the individual could fit into and benefit society. Such matters included, but were not limited to, education, marriage, and raising children. Education to the Christian humanist was an essential stepping-stone for salvation and spiritual growth. While reformers debated about its necessity in salvation, most agreed that education was essential for spiritual development. And, of course, like all other intellectual systems prevalent during early modern Europe, these ideas mainly concerned and tended to benefit the patriarchy.

### *Erasmus*

Humanism shaped how reformers like Erasmus and Martin Luther viewed education. Both men valued education, specifically classical education, which was based on the learning of classical Greek and Roman authors. However, the two men diverged when it came to the importance of education in regard to questions of faith and salvation. Erasmus believed “through this process of education” it was possible “to achieve universal goodness”<sup>7</sup> from humanity. What Erasmus argued is that through enough education and reasoning, an individual is bound to want to seek morality, which will in turn lead them to Christ. Contrastingly, Luther believed “anything that mere human reason could thus achieve was necessarily insufficient and at fault.”<sup>8</sup> Luther believed that salvation only came through grace, which came from God through Jesus. To Luther, the priority that Erasmus placed on education seemed to indicate that humans could potentially have a role in achieving salvation. Ultimately, Erasmus shared many of Luther’s criticisms of the Catholic Church at the time, meaning that for the most part these men held many very similar religious views. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper we will be focusing on Erasmus when

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<sup>7</sup> Caspari, Fritz. “Erasmus on the Social Functions of Christian Humanism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 8, 1947, pp. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Caspari, “Erasmus on the Social Functions of Christian Humanism,” 86.

discussing Christian humanism. Erasmus was not the only Christian humanist during this time; he had many contemporaries. Nevertheless, he serves as a useful example to study when trying to understand Christian humanism.

Erasmus, as a Christian humanist, was primarily focused on “the individual.”<sup>9</sup> He was concerned about how the individual could first achieve salvation, and then how the individual could benefit the society around him. He believed that education was of upmost importance in order to achieve either of these ideals. Erasmus believed that classical education and Christianity were “complementary”<sup>10</sup> to each other, and, though one was derived from a pagan origin, they did not contradict each other. Classical education helped teach Christians how to think critically and use their reason. From this foundation, one could then attempt to understand the things of God. He described “young boys” as “seed-beds from which will appear senators, magistrates, doctors, abbots [...]”<sup>11</sup> If Erasmus believe young boys were like seed-beds, the education was the water and fertilizer that would helped them grow.

Although Erasmus believed in the importance of “study”<sup>12</sup> for young girls, he did not believe that education served the same purpose for women as for men. Much like his contemporaries, Erasmus saw “no practical reason [...] to construct a system of education for women” when they were incapable of becoming doctors or priests like their male counterparts.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Caspari, “Erasmus on the Social Functions of Christian Humanism,” 80.

<sup>10</sup> Caspari, “Erasmus on the Social Functions of Christian Humanism,” 79.

<sup>11</sup> Sowards, J. K. “Erasmus and the Education of Women.” *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 13, 1982, pp. 87, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2540011>.

<sup>12</sup> Sowards, “Erasmus and the Education of Women,” 83.

<sup>13</sup> Sowards, “Erasmus and the Education of Women,” 87.

To Erasmus, and other Christian Humanists of the time, the importance of educating women was about equipping women to protect “the precious treasury of virginity,”<sup>14</sup> which was important for women if they wanted to marry and if they wanted to have a good reputation. Unlike his ideas about the education of males, Erasmus’ ideas about the education of women were focused on protecting a woman’s virtue. While Erasmus supported the educating of young women, he did not believe that it had any further purpose than to preserve their chastity.

Ultimately, even the most liberal Christian Humanist who believed that both sexes should be educated had an underlying fear of the educated woman. It is in the midst of the Christian Humanist movement that our female reformers of the Reformation emerge. Even though this intellectual movement focused on education and individual responsibility, it did not give much attention to how these two values applied to women. Even though they were not given the same education as their male peers, female reformers would still develop their own complex ideas about theology.

### **Juan Luis Vives**

If an educated woman was someone to be feared in early modern Europe, but women needed to be educated in order to protect their virtue, then the question is how were women educated during this time? The answer to this question can be found in Juan Luis Vives’ work *The Education of a Christian Woman*. Vives, a “Spanish humanist,”<sup>15</sup> was a distinguished educator of his time. His contemporaries, like Erasmus and Sir Thomas More, admired the “eloquence and

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<sup>14</sup> Sowards, “Erasmus and the Education of Women,” 86.

<sup>15</sup> Vives, Juan Luis. *The Education of a Christian Woman: a sixteenth-century manual*. Edited and Translated by Charles Fantazzi, The University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. 1.

erudition” of his writing.<sup>16</sup> Cardinal Thomas Wolsey gave Vives an “appointment” to be a “lecturer” at Oxford.<sup>17</sup> “Before leaving England in 1523,” because his appointment was coming to an end, Vives wrote “two short manuals” about the education of Christian boys and girls.<sup>18</sup> Henry VIII requested that Vives write a manual “ostensibly for Princess Mary’s education but meant for a wider audience.”<sup>19</sup> So, in 1523, Vives published *The Education of a Christian Woman*. This book was “the first”<sup>20</sup> to provide its audience with a “systematic study to address explicitly and exclusively the universal education of women.”<sup>21</sup> Being commissioned by the King of England to write this book means that Vives’ manual reflects the patriarchal view of women during the sixteenth century. Groundbreaking as this manual was for the time, it did not advocate for Christian men and women to be treated equally when it came to education, spirituality, or domestic life. While Vives encouraged the education of Christian girls and women, he defined strict boundaries for the process. His justification, which he repeats throughout the book, for these parameters is that education, if not carefully regulated, can lead a woman to sin instead of virtue. Not only does *The Education of a Christian Woman* answer the question of how women should be educated, but it also describes how women ought to behave in general during the sixteenth century. Vives describes the acceptable and unacceptable behaviors of single, married, and widowed women. Despite being a pioneer for even writing about the education of women, Vives’ work is representative of the dominant patriarchal views of women before and during the Protestant

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<sup>16</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 1.



Reformation. For the purposes of this paper, he will be the primary source used to represent the patriarchal view of women during this period.

### *Vives on Unmarried Women*

The behavior of unmarried Christian women is the first and primary concern of Vives' manual. He warns parents that a young woman's mind and chastity are her two possessions that must be guarded at all cost, and that these two things are easily corruptible if they are not protected. When it comes to preserving a young lady's mind, he suggests that unmarried women avoid idleness, learn useful skills, and most importantly avoid men. To protect an unmarried woman's chastity, he advises that young ladies should never be left alone, be taught how to control their emotions, and should – once again -- also avoid men.

Vives explains that protecting an unmarried woman's mind is necessary because “a woman's thoughts are swift and generally unsettled, roving without direction, and I know not where her instability will lead her.”<sup>22</sup> Sixteenth-century men did not believe that women were able to control their thoughts or emotions. The uncontrollable nature of a woman's mind made it necessary for parents to regulate a woman's thoughts. Vives believed that if left to its own devices that the female brain would naturally lead women to sin. Because of this, Vives instructs that “women's minds must be kept under control through work or holy thoughts and conversations so that they will not lapse into shameful conduct in their idleness.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, to prevent idleness, Vives recommends teaching young women domestic skills such as “the art of cooking”<sup>24</sup> to distract their minds from

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<sup>22</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 93.

<sup>24</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 61.

any potentially evil thoughts. He goes on to advocate that unmarried women be continually engaged in prayer and meditation about scripture in order to guard against unholy thoughts. He also instructs that “any male should be excluded”<sup>25</sup> from a young woman’s upbringing. He believes that young women should not be too comfortable around men, because being comfortable around men could lead to sinful, sexual desire. Vives’ view of the female mind shows that the early modern European patriarchy mistrusted women, and held a common belief that women were more likely to have a capacity for evil than men. Biblically, this idea is derived from the legacy of Eve. This belief was highlighted by sixteenth-century practices such as preachers praying over new mothers as a reminder that Eve brought sin and the pains of childbirth into the world.<sup>26</sup> Eve caused man to sin; therefore, women were assumed to be a vessel for evil and to carry the curses of Eve

By keeping the unmarried woman’s mind preoccupied with holy thoughts and practical skills, parents hoped that these measures would protect their daughter’s chastity. A daughter’s failure was also seen as the parent’s failure. Even though what would damage a daughter’s purity were her own actions, the church would still think that the parents had failed their daughter in some way. A daughter who was judged for being unchaste would also cause for her parents to be judged as well. According to Vives “a woman’s only care is chastity,”<sup>27</sup> because it was the most important attribute of women in that society. For a woman to be unchaste meant that she allowed a man who was not her husband to see her at her most vulnerable. A man who was not her husband received something that only a married man was supposed to receive. Preserving purity meant that a woman had control over her sinful nature and truly cared about the things of God. A woman who

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<sup>25</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 55.

<sup>26</sup> Wiesner, Merry. *Reformation Christianity*. Fortress Press, 2010, pg. 143.

<sup>27</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 47.

remained chaste was assumed to be a woman who also possessed self-control and other virtuous qualities. What set chastity apart from other female virtues was that “once lost, she cannot in any way recover afterward,”<sup>28</sup> meaning that any damage done to a woman’s purity was permanent. In fact, an unmarried woman in the sixteenth century could be well-educated, gentle, kind, and polite, but if chastity was “absent, one should disregard the others,”<sup>29</sup> meaning that the only way a young woman could be considered virtuous and honorable was by being a virgin. On this one issue did a woman’s entire reputation depend. It depended on this one issue because if a woman was unchaste, then she jeopardized the reputation of not only her father but also her future husband.

One of the main reasons why Vives placed such an emphasis on chastity was because the sixteenth-century patriarchy saw chastity as a determining factor for what kind of wife a woman would be. A woman who remained chaste before marriage would be a better wife than the woman who was unchaste. Vives did not think he was oppressing young women by focusing on the importance of protecting their purity. Rather, he saw himself as trying to help better prepare women for their future of becoming wives and mothers, which was one of the only vocations allowed for women in early modern Europe. During the sixteenth century, similar to the centuries that followed it, a woman’s identity and worth were directly connected to her husband.

### *Vives on Married Women*

Vives not only gives guidance for how unmarried women should behave and be educated, but he also discusses how the married woman ought to act. During the Reformation the only two

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<sup>28</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 72.

<sup>29</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 116.

options for women were to marry or be a nun. While it was also important for the married woman to remain virtuous, her first priority differed from the first priority of the unmarried woman.

This is the meaning and lesson of matrimony: that a woman should think that her husband is everything to her and that this one name substitutes for all the other names dear to her – father, mother, brother, sisters.<sup>30</sup>

Vives makes it clear that the married woman's first priority is her husband. It is from her loyalty and obedience to him that all of her opinions and decisions will stem. To form opinions or make a decision independently of her husband would be sinful for the married Christian woman. It would besmirch the honor of her husband. Being submissive to her husband, controlling herself in public, and bearing children were all ways that a woman could fulfill the established Catholic church's view of the ideal Christian wife. Unfortunately, all three of these demands made a Christian wife's life spiritually difficult and confusing.

Ephesians 5:22-24 is one of the most compelling scriptural arguments that men such as Vives had for strictly regulating the lives of married women. This passage of scripture makes it clear that a Christian wife does have certain obligations to her husband as follows:

Wives, be submissive to your own husbands as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head and Savior of the church, which is His body. But as the church submits to Christ, so also let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 186.

<sup>31</sup> Ephesians 5:22-24 (ESV)

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Church at Ephesus, writes that in marriage a woman is expected to sacrifice certain freedoms. Even though the scripture makes it clear that the only man a woman was compelled to be submissive to was her husband, even single Christian women, as discussed in the previous section, did not enjoy complete independence during this time. By likening Christian husbands to Jesus, Paul is saying that a husband's authority can be equated to the authority of scripture and even Jesus Christ himself. Mary Wiesner's examination in her book *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* of how women were to be subject to the males in society illuminates this idea. She states that women in early modern Europe were sometimes conflicted between obeying "their fathers and husbands [...] and what they perceived as God's plan for their lives."<sup>32</sup> Just because Paul compares husbands to Christ does not mean that earthly husbands' demands reflect the commandments of Christ. At times husbands might ask of their wives, things that made them feel as if they were disobeying God.

It is from Ephesians 5:22-24 that Vives derived the authority from scripture to define a good Christian wife as one who fully and completely obeys her husband. Christian men not only used the Bible to support their cause, they also used what they considered to be reason and observations of nature. Vives believed "all laws, human, divine, and nature itself proclaim that a woman must be subject to a man and obey him"<sup>33</sup> in all circumstances. His reasoning for this belief is that "in moments of crisis, the woman is so shaken [...] she cannot use her reason or judgement," but "a man is courageous and is not shaken by fear,"<sup>34</sup> making him fit to make decisions not only in moments of crisis but at all times. Vives believes that men are emotionally superior to women

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<sup>32</sup> Wiesner, Merry E. *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 180.

<sup>33</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 193.

<sup>34</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 194.

because they are better at controlling their emotions. Since men supposedly have better control over their emotions, Vives' conclusion is that a woman's emotional control is inferior to that of a man. Similar to unmarried women, married women were perceived as mentally unfit and lacking in comparison to men. Women were believed to be controlled by their emotions, making them unfit for making independent decisions or assuming leadership roles. It was both biblical backing and perceived male emotional superiority that allowed Christian men prior to and during the Reformation to demand complete obedience from their wives.

Self-control for married Christian women meant not speaking or writing about personal opinions unless explicitly allowed by the husbands. Husbands were expected to not only be the head of the household but also the voice. Wives were expected to follow the instructions of the head of the household. Once again, this established patriarchal view is derived from the Bible. In 1 Timothy 2:11-14 the Apostle Paul writes:

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Here, Paul is writing to Timothy regarding how Christian churches should operate. The part of this passage of scripture that sticks out the most is that women should be silent when it comes to spiritual matters. Vives and his male contemporaries perpetuated this idea, believing that a woman who is able "to control the tongue" possesses "a beautiful and outstanding virtue"<sup>35</sup> that will serve her well. When Christian women married, since they were supposed to submit to their husband in

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<sup>35</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 219.

all matters, men believed that a wife's conviction was the same as her husbands. Therefore, there was no reason for a Christian woman to have to express religious convictions independently from her husband. He could and would speak for both of them.

The most complicated of all the responsibilities of married Christian women was having children. "A mother shall consider that all her treasure lies in her children,"<sup>36</sup> according to Vives. While reproduction was an important part of marriage, "during the High and late Middle Ages, clerical men who were committed both personally and institutionally to the ideal of celibacy did most of the writing that was done on the concept of marriage,"<sup>37</sup> resulting in chastity being encouraged even in marriage. To these men, "true marriage was virginal,"<sup>38</sup> making even intercourse within marriage shameful. Logically, "motherhood often troubled [Christian] women"<sup>39</sup> who wanted to serve God and obey the church but who also wanted to satisfy the demands of their marriage. While Jesus was used as one example for why celibacy should be practiced by all Christians, both men and women, the Virgin Mary was a model specific to women. Vives felt that by describing how a married woman should behave that he was preparing women to be successful at what he viewed as their most important job: to be a wife. He did not see his guidelines as restrictive but as helpful.

### *Vives on Widows*

On the subject of widows Vives dedicates only a few pages. Nevertheless, there were few things more threatening to males in early modern Europe than a woman who did not fall under the

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<sup>36</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 269.

<sup>37</sup> Yost, "Changing attitudes towards married life in civic and Christian humanism," 152.

<sup>38</sup> Yost, "Changing attitudes towards married life in civic and Christian humanism," 152.

<sup>39</sup> Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 184.

authority of a man. Unmarried young women were different from widows in that they still had a father to oversee them. Widows more than likely did not have a father to guide them, leaving them on their own. Vives states that there are two kinds of widows:

There are two types of women equally guilty, though in opposite ways, in the matter of mourning a lost husband: those who mourn too much and those who mourn too little.<sup>40</sup>

Like most other expectations placed on women during this time, there was no exact definition of how they should act but rather two extremes that should be avoided. Mourning her deceased husband too much was not proper; however, not mourning him enough was seen as vulgar and malicious. Widows should also not “make such show of [their] distress that others will see it,”<sup>41</sup> isolating the grieving widow. Similar to her married counterpart, the Christian widow was held to a standard of virtue essentially impossible to achieve.

Impractical standards, that is what the Christian woman in early modern Europe was trying to meet. She was bound between the extremities of being a virgin but also expected to bear children, of being educated but not too educated, of mourning her husband when he died but not mourning too much. While Vives saw his manual as clearly defining the behavior of Christian women at all stages of life, his analysis is actually anything but straightforward. Based on this manual, women were left to figure out where their behavior needed to fall between the extremes that Vives described.

### *The Virgin Mary*

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<sup>40</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 299.

<sup>41</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman: a sixteenth century-manual*, 303.



The Virgin Mary was a biblical role model who was impossible for sixteenth-century women to perfectly imitate. The study of Christian women from any point in history requires at least a brief brief of Mary. The example of the Virgin Mary “was a problematic model for normal women, who could never hope to achieve what she had,”<sup>42</sup> which was being able to give birth to a child without having sex. “[H]er singular status as both virgin and mother,”<sup>43</sup> caused married women to question to which path they were called. Either they were called to be a mother, or they were called to preserve their maidenhood, even in marriage. The problem with Mary is that she was an unattainable standard. Comparing women to Mary caused them to face a standard that they could never meet.

The Mother of God was regarded as healer of the sin of Eve and as the opposite of her misbehaving sisters from classical mythology and the Bible<sup>44</sup>

This quote is from Susan Karant-Nunn’s book *The Reformation of Feeling*, which examines the Counter-Reformation. The Counter-Reformation was essentially the Catholic Church’s response to the Protestant Reformation. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on chapter five of this book which examines the Virgin Mary. This quote by Karant-Nunn almost perfectly describes the Catholic church’s view of the Virgin Mary during, before, and after the sixteenth century. Mary the Mother of Jesus is the model of biblical womanhood for both Catholics and Protestants alike.

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<sup>42</sup> Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 184.

<sup>43</sup> Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 184.

<sup>44</sup> Karant-Nunn, Susan C. *The Reformation of Feeling*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

She is the perfect example of purity: this is the attribute that the Catholic church believed women should possess. This was characteristic by which Christian women were judged for centuries.

Of all the Christian virtues that Mary exemplifies, her most important and most weaponized virtue is purity. She was able to be the mother of the messiah without any potential of there being an earthly father. In fact, some Catholics even believe that she never lost her virginity even though she gave birth to other children. This ideal of perpetual chastity is one that would burden Christian women for centuries. On the one hand, women were expected once they married to bear children. And on the other hand, women were still expected to pursue chastity above all else, even when married, a standard not as heavily imposed on men.

The system in which sixteenth-century women lived set them up to fail. It restricted them, held them to standards they could never meet, and did not treat men and women and equally. So, how did early modern European women feel about this? Were they content because they knew no other way of life? Did all husbands act like mini-tyrants in their marriages? The simple answer is no. There were Christian women throughout this period who saw the hypocrisy in the standards to which men and women were held. There were women who understood scripture and theology just as well as their male counterparts. There were women who were wives in marriages in which their husbands did not treat them like submissive servants.

### **Women Reformers**

Katharina Schütz Zell and Marie Dentière were two female Protestant church reformers that the men who shape church history attempted to erase and silence. These two women wrote public letters about theology and their beliefs during the Protestant Reformation. Sadly, after the initial excitement of the movement subsided, these women were silenced by the Protestant

churches. Fortunately, their writings survive them. It is from the words of these two women that the Christian woman of the sixteenth century defines herself. Although these two women do not represent every single sixteenth-century woman, they both offer two perspectives regarding how a sixteenth-century Christian woman ought to behave.

### *Katharina Schütz Zell*

Katharina Schütz Zell “did not come from a family of high social rank, and she was never a member of a religious order,” making her an unlikely candidate to become a church reformer.<sup>45</sup> Born in Strasbourg around the year 1498, she lacked a wealthy family or the pedigree of being a nun.<sup>46</sup> This meant that she did not have the same social prestige that other females had during the Reformation. Nevertheless, Zell became a reformer during “the first generation of the Protestant movement”<sup>47</sup> in Europe. What Katharina Schütz Zell lacked in social status she made up for in her intellect and writings. She married former Catholic priest Matthew Zell in 1523, whom she defended publicly in one of her most well-known works. Zell’s writings reveal that she hoped to encourage reformist Christian women, to call out men she saw as corrupt, to defend clerical marriage, and to show that singleness was not holier than being married.

### *Encouraging Female Christians*

In her “Letter to the Suffering Women of the Community of Kentzingen, Who Believe in Christ, Sisters with Me in Jesus Christ,” Zell tries, as the title of this letter suggests, to edify her Christian sisters. Written in July 1524, this letter emphasizes that the women in Kentzingen must

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<sup>45</sup> Zell, Katharina Schütz. *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany*. Edited and Translated by Elsie McKee, The University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp. 1.

<sup>46</sup> McKee, *Church Mother*, 14.

<sup>47</sup> McKee, *Church Mother*, 43.

endure “insult and suffering” if they are true Christians.<sup>48</sup> Her primary audience is “housewives” who believe that they do not have the authority or ability to follow God as freely as their husbands and male counterparts.<sup>49</sup> (That hardships are the mark of sincere faith and guarantees that these women will be rewarded with Christ in heaven.) To support this claim she cites Luke 14:26:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.

She uses this scripture to support the idea that suffering is a hallmark of the Christian life. Hardship does not mean that the Lord is displeased with the women of Kentzingen. In fact, Zell argues that the opposite is true. “To suffer” for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is better than being “the wife of Holy Roman Emperor”<sup>50</sup> argues Zell, in an attempt to further emphasize her point. This was a meaningful argument by Zell, because Jesus’ suffering is often highlighted in scripture. If Jesus suffered for doing what was right, then the women in Kentzingen could expect to suffer as well. Their suffering was actually a sign that they were acting as Jesus wanted them to act. She knows that these women were facing opposition for proclaiming their faith and that men might point to their suffering as a sign of the Lord’s displeasure with them. Zell is encouraging these women to continue to do what they believe the Lord is asking of them, even if others try to discourage them.

### *Standing Up to Man*

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<sup>48</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 51.

<sup>49</sup> McKee, *Church Mother*, 43.

<sup>50</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 53.

Zell was not only bold enough to expose what she saw as incorrect theology, but she was also direct in accusing men whom she saw as liars and or false teachers. In multiple of her works she calls out men by name who she believes are teaching bad theology or spreading lies about her or husband. In her “Apologia for Master Matthew Zell, Her Husband,” she mentions two men by name: “Johannes Cochlaeus” and “Brother Conrad Treger.”<sup>51</sup> Both of these men published works in Strasbourg that rejected Protestant teachings.<sup>52</sup> She compares Johannes Cochlaeus to a “wooden spoon” who “makes a lot of noise in an empty pot,”<sup>53</sup> meaning that when he speaks he is neither speaking the truth nor saying anything important. Regarding Brother Conrad Treger she says that he is “a dog and evil worker who trample[s] God’s vineyard with his feet,”<sup>54</sup> meaning that she sees the actions and beliefs of this man as contrary to the Bible and true Christianity. In her “A Letter to the Whole Citizenship of Strousbourg,” she mentions a “preacher” by the name of “Mr. Ludwig Rabus.”<sup>55</sup> One of her objectives in this work is to show her reader the “disrespect” that this man has shown her by “publish[ing]” parts of the letters he has sent her. Zell holds nothing back when calling out these men. Her willingness to expose these individuals shows that she believed Christian women did not have to be quiet and keep their opinions to themselves, as Vives instructed. Her actions indicate that she believed a woman possessed the spiritual authority to call out sin in a man’s life. She did not believe that women should turn a blind eye to the sin of wrongdoing of men. Additionally, by publicly accusing these men of teaching what she sees as

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<sup>51</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 70.

<sup>52</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 70.

<sup>53</sup> Zell, *Church Mothe*, 70.

<sup>54</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 70.

<sup>55</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 228.

contradictions to true Christianity, she is questioning their honor. If a woman's honor was linked to her chastity, then Zell shows that a man's was linked to the truth of his words.

### *Problems with Clerical Celibacy*

In Katharina Schutz's "Apologia for Master Matthew Zell, Her Husband," she seeks "to prove that scripture teaches the rightness of clerical marriage" and "to disprove the superior holiness of celibacy."<sup>56</sup> As the wife of a former Catholic priest, Zell found that this was an extremely personal issue. If clerical marriage immoral, then Zell's marriage to her husband was invalid and shameful. Katharina Schütz Zell regarded married life as just as holy and glorifying to the Lord as a life of singleness and celibacy. Her goal in this defense of her husband is to prove that their marriage is legitimate and to dispel the notion that the clergy must be celibate in order to fulfill their duties. Zell claims that nowhere in scripture does it state that celibacy is a requirement for becoming a priest. Since she cannot find biblical backing for this practice, she seeks to expose the true motivation for the Catholic church's celibacy rule. One reason, Zell states, why the Catholic church defended the need for clerical celibacy was because clerical marriage was not financially beneficial for bishops and the pope. Zell explains that "if priests (who are supposed to be celibate) have harlots, they must have their lords' permission and fairly pay them a tax"<sup>57</sup> in order to keep said harlot. The lords that this tax was paid to were bishops, cardinals, and ultimately the Pope. Conversely, a priest did not need to pay a tax for a wife since a wife was bestowed "freely"<sup>58</sup> by God. Zell deduces in her "Apologia" that the Catholic church could profit from a

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<sup>56</sup> McKee, *Church Mother*, 57.

<sup>57</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 74.

<sup>58</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 74.

doctrine that required a celibate clergy. While this is not her only reason for why the Catholic church enforced clerical celibacy, it is a logical one.

In her “Apologia” Zell criticizes the Catholic church for trying to “protect and defend” the practice of priests having harlots which goes “against all teaching of godly scripture”<sup>59</sup> (Zell 74). To further emphasize her point, Zell shares biblical references that seem to support clerical marriage as well as marriage in general.

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable,<sup>60</sup> able to teach<sup>60</sup>

Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.<sup>61</sup>

Katharina Schütz Zell refers to this passage of scripture to legitimize her claim that clerical marriage is not heresy. In his letter to Timothy, Paul describes the requirements for elders of the Church, elder meaning any church leader such as a priest. In both of these citations, Paul mentions the elders having wives. Mentioning the responsibility that church elders have to their wives shows that members of the clergy taking wives was not sinful. Paul’s letters show that it was almost expected. Katharina Schütz Zell quotes the Apostle Paul, who was celibate, to show that the Bible does not view celibacy as superior to marriage.

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<sup>59</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 74.

<sup>60</sup> 1 Timothy 3:2 (ESV)

<sup>61</sup> 1 Timothy 3:11-12 (ESV)

Another reason why Zell believed that the Catholic church opposed clerical marriage is that it threatened the sexual life with which they had become accustomed. Being allowed to get married meant that priests would have “to choose one” woman “and give up”<sup>62</sup> their harlots. Supporting clerical marriage meant that the clergy would have “to punish adultery in the pulpit more strictly,”<sup>63</sup> something no priests wanted to do. Giving priests the option to get married would mean that they would need to follow the Apostle Paul’s advice in 1 Corinthians 7:9:

But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Priests would no longer be able to defend their sexual promiscuity with the excuse of being unable to marry, because all Christians are told in scripture to get married before giving into sexual sin. Giving up their overlooked use of prostitutes was something that Zell believed no priest wanted to do. Zell even admits that her own husband “behaved”<sup>64</sup> this way before leaving the Catholic church. The sweeping under the rug of this priestly practice shows an obvious double standard between men and women in the sixteenth century. While a woman’s reputation depended solely on being chaste, a man’s did not. Men had room to be sexually promiscuous and for this activity to not damage their public reputation. If nuns had been partaking in similar behavior, it more than likely would have been condemned. No doubt, Zell saw this same discrepancy.

“[P]riests’ friends, fathers, mothers, siblings, aunts, uncles,” and other family members opposed clerical marriage out of “fear that legitimate wives and children” would rob them of

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<sup>62</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 75.

<sup>63</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 75.

<sup>64</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 78.



“property”<sup>65</sup> and other privileges. Because others wanted to benefit from the privileges afforded to members of the clergy, family members and friends condoned clerical use of prostitutes, revealing that this was a not so secret practice. Not only did the clergy show willing ignorance to this moral issue, but members of the church did so as well. Ultimately, selfish desires from both members of the clergy and those closest to them allowed for this immorality to perpetrate itself. The overlooking of clerical use of harlots reveals that men and women were held to different standards when it came to chastity. While the early modern European patriarchy preached to women that their “only care was chastity,”<sup>66</sup> allowing priests to see prostitutes shows that men were not preached a similar message. If a man lacked chastity, as long as he possessed other virtuous traits, it could be overlooked, but if a woman lacked it she was essentially worthless. During the sixteenth century, chastity was treated almost entirely as a female virtue. No doubt, Katharina Schütz Zell witnessed this double standard firsthand and could not ignore it.

Katharina Schütz Zell was “the first woman in Strasburg who opened the way for clerical marriage”<sup>67</sup> when she married Matthew Zell. Katharina Schütz Zell was aware that she was a trailblazer for her time when it came to the question of the clergy taking wives. She hoped that she would be “encouraging and making a way for all Christians,”<sup>68</sup> by marrying her husband. Marrying a priest showed that not every teaching of the Catholic church was necessary or correct. Katharina

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<sup>65</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 76.

<sup>66</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 47.

<sup>67</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 77.

<sup>68</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 77.

Schütz Zell hope that one day priests' wives would no longer be "likened to be priests concubines"<sup>69</sup> as she and other male reformer's wives were.

### *A Christian Wife*

Not only did Zell challenge the Catholic church's teaching on clerical marriage, but she also challenged the status quo of how a Christian wife should behave. Wives were expected to be seen and not heard in early modern Europe, which is evident in this quote from Vives:

If you speak little in public, you are thought to be uneducated; if you speak a lot, you are light-headed; unlearnedly, you are accounted ignorant<sup>70</sup>

This quote from Vives reiterates the idea that women during the Reformation were constantly trying to achieve conflicting standards. A lack of words meant a lack of intelligence but talking too much meant you were flighty or a gossip. Since women could not win either way, Zell chose to speak. Moreover, she was not afraid to speak publicly in order to defend her husband who was criticized for taking a wife and also accused of mistreating her. In her *Apologia*, Zell addresses these rumors that Matthew Zell "has chased [her] out" of their home, "been found with the maid,"<sup>71</sup> and physically harmed her. She denies these claims by writing that her husband has never "hurt [her], great or small, with words or deeds."<sup>72</sup> Katharina Schütz Zell argues that a Christian wife did not have to keep her opinions to herself. Her relationship with her husband also revealed that husbands did not have to prevent their wives from sharing their opinions publicly. Zell believes

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<sup>69</sup> Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 190.

<sup>70</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 125.

<sup>71</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 78.

<sup>72</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 78.

that Christian wives could be outspoken and still serve their husbands well. Zell shows that there is a commandment for husbands that follows Paul's guidance that "wife submit to your husbands."

In the next line, Paul says:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it<sup>73</sup>

So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.<sup>74</sup>

The very same passage used by the sixteenth-century patriarchy to oppress women, reformist women used as proof that they were more than an object to be used only for domestic duties, sexual pleasure, and producing children. The nature of the Zell's marriage revealed in Katharina Schütz Zell's Apologia shows that her marriage reflects this second part of Ephesians chapter 5. Her husband, rather than silencing her, loved her enough to allow her to speak her mind in a time when this was not acceptable. Her publishing the "Apologia" in Matthew Zell's defense would illicit criticism from other Christians, because a man was the head of the household. He should be the one to speak publicly about family matters. The husband was his wife's proxy. There is no doubt Matthew Zell realized this but, he still let his wife speak.

One of the most difficult passages of scripture for female reformers to read was Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14. Katharina Schütz Zell addresses the apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:34 which are as follows:

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<sup>73</sup> Ephesians 5:25 (ESV)

<sup>74</sup> Ephesians 5:28. (ESV)

the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says.

She knows that this passage will be used against her to show that she should not be publicly writing in defense of her husband or publicly writing about anything religious at all. Her answer to these possible claims is that Galatians 3:28 states that “in Christ there is neither man nor woman,”<sup>75</sup> so why should she be prevented from speaking about spiritual things publicly? Zell is convicted that simply because she is a “human being”<sup>76</sup> she has the right to discuss matters of faith and even her husband’s reputation. Even “a donkey once spoke”<sup>77</sup> to reveal the things of the Lord to people who did not understand. If donkeys were allowed to speak in the Bible, Zell felt that she as a woman had even more of a right to speak publicly about the things of God.

#### *Katharina Schütz Zell as Widow*

In her *Lament and Exhortation of Katharina Zell to the People at the Grave of Master Matthew Zell*, Katharina Zell illustrates how she believed a Christian widow ought to act. She asks during her remarks at her husband’s grave that people do “not to take it wrongly” and do not become “irritated”<sup>78</sup> for her speaking publicly about her deceased husband. She knew that Christian widows were not supposed to “mourn too much;”<sup>79</sup> however, she did not let patriarchal restrictions prevent her from honoring and grieving her husband through her words. She likens

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<sup>75</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 82.

<sup>76</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 81.

<sup>77</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 81.

<sup>78</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 104.

<sup>79</sup> Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 299.

herself to “the mother of Jesus”<sup>80</sup> who publicly wept and mourned her son’s death. Zell believed that it was not wrong for her to share her despair with others. In fact, she saw herself as following a biblical example.

### *Marie Dentière*

Marie Dentière was “an early supporter of the French reform movement”<sup>81</sup> and was a friend of famous reformers such as John Calvin. She was born in 1495 into a “noble family in Tournai” and “entered an Augustinian convent”<sup>82</sup> when she was older. She “left the convent,” and married Simon Robert who was “a former priest”<sup>83</sup> in Strasbourg in 1525. In 1528, she relocated with her husband to Geneva to help to the establishment of Protestantism in that city.<sup>84</sup> Dentière, unlike Katharina Schütz Zell, had the perfect platform to be an influential reformer for her time. She came from a privileged family and had the religious training of a Catholic nun. She not only had impressive religious knowledge but also had the advantage of coming from a noble family. Both of these factors granted her influence as woman in the sixteenth century. Despite their different backgrounds, Dentière faced many of the same struggles that Katharina Schütz Zell did as a female reformer, the main struggle being to prove that she had a right to publicly discuss spiritual matters. The fact that Dentière enjoyed much more privilege and influence than Zell and still faced harsh opposition as a reformer makes Zell’s influence even more impressive. In her writings she is critical of the Catholic church’s treatment of Christian women, seeks to follow the example of

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<sup>80</sup> Zell, *Church Mother*, 104

<sup>81</sup> Dentière, Marie. *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre and Preface to a Sermon by John Calvin*. Edited and Translated by Mary B. McKinley, The University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 2.

<sup>82</sup> McKinley, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 1.

<sup>83</sup> McKinley, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 1.

<sup>84</sup> McKinley, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 5.

women in the Bible, and believes that many Catholic rituals and beliefs are unnecessary and seek to glorify man rather than God.

### *Treatment of Women in the Church*

In 1539, Marie Dentière published her “Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre.” Marguerite de Navarre was the “sister of the French King Francis I” as well as “an early supporter of the reform movement in France.”<sup>85</sup> Dentière makes her complaints regarding the Christian church’s treatment of women clear. She critiques not only the Catholic church but also Protestants. Only by being realistic about the plight of Christian women during and before the Protestant Reformation could reformers like Dentière begin to revolutionize women’s roles in the church. Dentière was not oblivious to the fact that the church silenced its female members and prevented them from participating in the church like male church members. Even though European nations such as England “prohibited women from even getting together to discuss religious matters,”<sup>86</sup> Dentière believed that women were “not forbidden to write and admonish one another.”<sup>87</sup> She tells Marguerite de Navarre that women should “not bury in the earth”<sup>88</sup> the spiritual enlightenment that they have received because it is the same enlightenment received by men. Dentière was empowered by the stories of women in the Bible who were bold in living out their convictions.

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<sup>85</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 2.

<sup>86</sup> Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 188.

<sup>87</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 53.

<sup>88</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 53.

## *Biblical Role Models*

Dentière emphasized the need for scriptural support for theological beliefs, showing that she was a believer in Martin Luther's idea of *sola scriptura*. All of her views regarding theology, such as not believing in the real presence in the Eucharist, have a biblical origin that she cites in her writings. One reason why the use of scripture to support her beliefs was so important is because she saw a lack of biblical backing for teachings of the Catholic church. In her Epistle, she interrogates the Catholic church, asking "If you have scripture on your side, blind and leaders of the blind, why do you not show it?"<sup>89</sup> She demanded that the Catholic church "prove what they say"<sup>90</sup> through the use of scripture. Because of the value she placed on scripture, one of her most important arguments regarding more equal treatment of women in the church was the study of women mentioned in the Bible. In order to better comprehend Dentière's understanding of the behavior of a Christian woman, it is necessary to briefly examine some of the women that she references in her Epistle. These women are Sarah, Rebecca, Jochebed, the Samaritan woman, and Mary Magdalene.

Dentière rejected the patriarchal notion that it was "too bold for women to write to one another about matters of scripture,"<sup>91</sup> or to discuss spiritual things publicly. She believed "that all those women who have written and have been named in holy scripture should not be considered too bold,"<sup>92</sup> because their acts and words were recorded in scripture to not only set an example for women but for all Christians. "Sarah and Rebecca, for example, [were] first among all others in

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<sup>89</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 61.

<sup>90</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 61.

<sup>91</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 54.

<sup>92</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 54.

the Old Testament;”<sup>93</sup> Dentièrè explains in her Epistle that Sarah and Rebecca are mentioned in the Bible along with their husbands Abraham and Isaac. The names of these women could have easily not been listed and their stories never told, but scripture devotes verses to discussing the lives of these two women. Neither of these two women were perfect. Sarah, for one, showed a blatant lack of trust in God’s promise that she would have a son, but God still allowed her to give birth to Isaac. Both of these women are bold in their actions, and sometimes that boldness should be celebrated. In Rebecca’s story she helps her younger son receive her husband Isaac’s blessing and inheritance. This was not the normal way families worked during biblical times. Rebecca did this, because God foretold that her older son would serve her younger one. Even if meant breaking societal norms, Rebecca was faithful to God’s commands. A third bold Old Testament woman that Dentièrè mentions is “the mother of Moses” who was also courageous in her actions. “In spite of the King’s edict, [she] dared to keep her son from death,”<sup>94</sup> showing her willingness to both trust the Lord and to do what she saw as right in the face of great adversity. Her final Old Testament model for a Christian woman’s behavior is Deborah “who judged the people of Israel in the time of the Judges,”<sup>95</sup> having as much authority over men and she did women. Dentièrè asserts that Deborah “is not to be scorned,”<sup>96</sup> because she had dominion over men. She is instead to be praised. She should serve as an example of a strong female leader.

The next group of female biblical role models that Dentièrè examines are found in the New Testament. Dentièrè muses about who “was a greater preacher than the Samaritan woman who

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<sup>93</sup> Dentièrè, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 54.

<sup>94</sup> Dentièrè, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 54.

<sup>95</sup> Dentièrè, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 54.

<sup>96</sup> Dentièrè, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 54.



was not ashamed to preach Jesus and his word,”<sup>97</sup> to a community of people who were hostile to both. Also, while not explicitly stated by Dentière, the story of the Samaritan woman shows that unchaste women could be redeemed. Women who were no longer sexually pure could pursue spiritual and godly things. The Samaritan woman (also known as the woman at the well), was caught in adultery when she met Jesus, but still he chose to give her salvation and to use her to spread his Gospel. Another example, Mary Magdalene, not only followed and learned from Jesus, but she also was “the first” to witness the “manifestation of the great mystery of the resurrection of Jesus.”<sup>98</sup> Dentière emphasizes the point that women were the first to learn about the resurrection, not the male disciples. Women learning of the resurrection before men showed that the Bible viewed women to be just as spiritually capable as men. If God did not view women as spiritually equal, then he would not have entrusted them with sharing the news of Jesus’ resurrection. Regarding the virgin Mary, Dentière states that no “greater grace has come to any creature on earth than to the virgin Mary” who was given the privilege “to have carried God’s son.”<sup>99</sup> Dentière provides a female’s view of the virgin Mary. Here, is a woman who sees the virgin birth as a miracle and a blessing, not as a standard for women to be held. Dentière views Mary’s status as the mother of Jesus as acknowledgement from God of the importance of women. Jesus did not see women as inferior to men, because he humbled himself to be born of a woman, to be nursed by a woman, and to be completely dependent upon a woman just like a normal child. To Dentière, Mary’s virginity is not what should be admired the most. Rather, it is Mary’s willingness to be an obedient servant to God that should be admired and imitated by Christian women. Dentière further

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<sup>97</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 55.

<sup>98</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 55.

<sup>99</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 55.

supports her emphasis on studying biblical women by stating that “no woman ever sold or betrayed Jesus, but a man named Judas did.”<sup>100</sup> Dentièrè acknowledges that “even though in all women there has been imperfection, men have not been exempt from it”<sup>101</sup> either; therefore, women should not be more harshly judged when they do sin.

Studying the lives of women mentioned in scripture defined what it meant to be a Christian woman for Marie Dentièrè. From their example she finds the authority to refute patriarchal church views of women such as not being allowed to talk publicly about scripture and faith. To those who would say that women do not have a right to talk about the things of God she would say “those women who have written and have been named in holy scripture should not be considered too bold.”<sup>102</sup> Dentièrè believed that scripture gave women spiritual authority not only over themselves but also the spiritual authority to help others grow in their faith. Dentièrè believed women were just as equipped as men to be evangelists and theologians.

### *Problems with the Catholic Church*

Marie Dentièrè not only earns the title of church reformer because of her displeasure towards the treatment of women by the Christian church, but she also earns the title because of her critiques of Catholic theology. In her “Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre,” Dentièrè criticizes the Catholic church’s lack of scriptural support for its doctrines as well as not encouraging the lay Christian to understand scripture for themselves. She does not believe in the Eucharist or the need for sacraments other than baptism and communion. Furthermore, she rejects the notion that the

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<sup>100</sup> Dentièrè, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 56.

<sup>101</sup> Dentièrè, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 55.

<sup>102</sup> Dentièrè, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 54.

clergy should be celibate and be required to live a life that is different from the lives of his fellow Christians.

Much like all male Protestant reformers, Marie Dentièrre believed in the paramount authority of scripture. She makes it clear to Marguerite de Navarre that church practices and doctrines must have scriptural support. The Catholic church expected lay Christians to “just believe simply without questioning anything”<sup>103</sup> that the church taught them. Refusing to translate the Bible from Latin into common languages showed that the Catholic church did not want its parishioners to read the Bible on their own. Fear that churchgoers would develop doctrine contrary to the clergy fueled this restriction. Additionally, Dentièrre suggests that the Catholic church did not have biblical support for some of its practices such as indulgences and the Eucharist. She calls out the church by asking “if you have scripture on your side [...] why do you not show it?”<sup>104</sup> This questioning implies that the Catholic church did not have any scripture to support the practices that Marie Dentièrre questioned. On the basis of *sola scriptura* did Dentièrre judge the Catholic church, and in her opinion they failed.

Dentièrre is bold in her rejection of the Catholic belief that the bread and the wine used in the Eucharist become the literal body and blood of Jesus. She claims that believing “the bread is changed or transformed [...] is a crazy illusion”<sup>105</sup> that has no biblical backing. This practice was

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<sup>103</sup> Dentièrre, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 78.

<sup>104</sup> Dentièrre, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 61.

<sup>105</sup> Dentièrre, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 63.

a distraction from and rejection of the “death and passion of Jesus”<sup>106</sup> in the eyes of Dentière. The Eucharist is one of many manmade practices with which Marie Dentière disagreed.

As the wife of a former Catholic priest, Dentière, like Katharina Schütz Zell, did not believe that it was necessary for the clergy to be celibate. This belief was supported by some of her male counterparts such as Erasmus who was “in favor of clerical marriage.”<sup>107</sup> In fact, “Erasmus consider[ed] marriage the norm and celibacy a special privilege,”<sup>108</sup> rather than a requirement for being a priest. Dentière, like Katharina Schütz Zell, could not ignore the hypocrisy of members of the clergy “having concubines” while they also preached that for a priest “to have a legitimate wife” was “heresy.”<sup>109</sup> Both Dentière and Zell saw the moral inconsistency in the Catholic church’s banning of clerical marriage but allowing for the use of prostitutes to continue. On many parts of this issue do Zell and Dentière agree; however, the two reformers slightly differ in their reasonings for why this hypocrisy is allowed. Zell believed that forbidding clerical marriage financially benefited the Catholic church and that Priests did not want to give up their sexual freedom and promiscuity. Dentière, on the other hand, believed that there was a deeper reason for this practice. Dentière states that “the pope” was against clerical marriage for the “sole purpose of drawing us away from God”<sup>110</sup> (Dentière pg. 70). She views this rule as the pope’s attempt to purposely teach people incorrect doctrine and to interfere with their faith. She believes that this practice is rooted and originates from sinful intent and desire. Dentière does not discuss the issue

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<sup>106</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 77.

<sup>107</sup> Yost, “Changing attitudes towards married life in civic and Christian humanism,” 158.

<sup>108</sup> Yost, “Changing attitudes towards married life in civic and Christian humanism,” 158.

<sup>109</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 70.

<sup>110</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 70.

of clerical marriage as much as Zell, but nevertheless she has an obviously negative view of the practice. Denitère viewed the Catholic church as not only preaching incorrect theology but as also having malicious intentions.

*Do We Have Two Gospels?*

Did not Jesus die as much for the poor ignorant people and the idiots as for my dear sirs the saved [...] Do we have two gospels, one for men and another for women?<sup>111</sup>

The theme of all Marie Dentière's problems with the Catholic church are summarized by this quote from her Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre. The groups of people for which Dentière advocated were the uneducated, the poor, and women. She focused on these groups because they were completely dependent on the church for spiritual growth and guidance. None of the members of these three groups were allowed or able to read and interpret scripture on their own. They were all expected to receive and accept the doctrine they were taught by the Catholic church. To support her claim that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was created for all people, Dentière cites Galatians 3.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.<sup>112</sup>

This passage in Galatians shows that the Bible itself states that its message is for all people. Zell also uses this scripture in support of more equal spiritual treatment of women in the church. The phrase that most likely stood out the most to Dentière is "nor is there male and female,"

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<sup>111</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 78.

<sup>112</sup> Galatians 3:26-29 (ESV)

meaning that men and women are equals because they receive the same salvation through Jesus Christ. A man's salvation is not more important than a woman's salvation. The heaven that men will experience will be the same one experienced by women. Why, then, if the Bible states men and women are equal did the Catholic church treat the two sexes differently? Dentière believed the Pope did this an attempt at "drawing us away from God"<sup>113</sup> (Dentière pg. 70) and giving himself more power. Using the church to oppress women made men feel superior. It allowed them to create their own doctrine that benefited men to the detriment of the way women were treated.

## **Conclusion**

Katharina Schütz Zell and Marie Dentière agreed on many theological issues, but it is important to note ways in which they differ. Most notably, Zell and Dentière represent two different kinds of sixteenth-century Christian women. Zell reflects the opinions of women who had a basic education and could be seen as the equivalent to modern day housewives. Contrastingly, Dentière reflects the attitudes and opinions of wealthier and well-educated women. Hailing from different socioeconomic backgrounds causes Zell to have a more straightforward and simple way of writing while Dentière's writing tends to be slightly more complex and nuanced. Moreover, Katharina Schütz Zell dealt more with the practical side of Christianity, while Marie Dentière focused on the spiritual. Zell wrote about what Christian women (and even Christian men) should and should not do, and Dentière wrote about the theological importance and implications of such practices. While these two women differ, their lives prove that women were not complacent bystanders during the Protestant Reformation.

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<sup>113</sup> Dentière, Marie, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre*, 70.

The core beliefs that Marie Dentièrè and Katharina Schütz Zell shared were the rightness of clerical marriage and the spiritual equality of men and women in the eyes of God. Dentièrè and Zell were both wives of former priests, meaning that the validity of their marriages depended on clerical marriage being morally acceptable. Not only were they women married to priests, but they were outspoken women who were married to priests. The lives of these two women contradicted the advice of Vives. Instead of being quiet and allowing their husbands to speak for them, they spoke for themselves. Unlike Vives, they did not see women as emotionally unstable or inferior to men. They both believed that God gave all women the same spiritual capabilities as men. The lives of Dentièrè and Zell prove that sixteenth-century women did not believe their spiritual life was completely dependent upon their husbands or fathers. Not all sixteenth-century women were ignorantly submissive. They were intelligent and capable and took ownership of their faith.

Some of the criticisms that Katharina Schütz Zell and Marie Dentièrè had against the Catholic church are still being argued and discussed today. Clerical celibacy is still a doctrine that is enforced by the modern Catholic church. Questions regarding whether or not women should be allowed to speak about spiritual things in church are still being asked today. By no means can Dentièrè and Zell be compared to modern day feminists; however, these two women were revolutionary for their time. Their thoughts regarding the status of women in the church and society were representative of other women in early modern Europe. It is women like them who shape history and it is important that they are remembered. Women were present at every major historical event, movement, and revolution. Lacking female accounts of history is not due to their absence but it due to their lack of representation in the retelling of history. In order to properly understand

the past, it is necessary to “integrate gender as a category of analysis”<sup>114</sup> in order to fully appreciate history. When women are written out of history more than just another perspective is lost. Fifty percent of the world’s perspective is lost.

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<sup>114</sup> Wiesner, Merry E. “Beyond Women and the Family: Towards a Gender Analysis of the Reformation.” *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 18, 1987, pp. 311–21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2540718>, pp. 311.



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