

Two Women Reformers, Argula von Grumbach and Katharina Zell

When I was a theology student in the 1980's I found myself often having to defend my right to become a minister and preach. Some other young people in Bible study groups or on retreats would throw Paul's words in First Corinthians 14:34 at me:

"Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home..."

All the more amazing, that women were speaking up, teaching and preaching 500 years ago at the beginning of the Reformation.

They recognized the power of grace and the message of liberation and equality that was being rediscovered with every fiber of their bodies and souls.

They were way ahead of their times, much too radical for most but not all of the male Reformers.

They got put in their place and their writings were not especially preserved. Their names were not included in the history books.

Letters and pamphlets written by women were not considered worth keeping.

But in the past few years many sources have been found and published. There are so many fascinating and brave women to talk about, but this morning I only barely have time to introduce two of them.

Argula von Grumbach was the first woman to write and publish treatises on behalf of the Reformation.

She was 31 years old, a Bavarian noble woman and mother of four when she published a theological treatise challenging the Theology professors of the University of Ingolstadt to dispute with her in the presence of the Lords of Bavaria in public.

It was 1523. Martin Luther had started the Reformation in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. In 1521 he had refused to take back his writings, because no one could prove to him that they weren't biblical, and had been excommunicated.

In 1522 the Lords of Bavaria issued a decree that even discussing Luther's teachings was forbidden. A young 18 year old Theology lecturer was spreading Reformation teachings, though, and was imprisoned. No one was willing to plead his case, so Argula von Grumbach stepped in.

Argula von Grumbach had received a Bible from her parents when she was 10 years old. They paid for tutors and she was well-educated. A Bible cost a fortune before the printing press came into use. It was not a translation from the original Hebrew and Greek – Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli would do that translation work later. It was a translation from the Latin, but it was a German Bible.

Argula lost both of her parents within one week to the Plague when she as a teenager. She found comfort in reading the Bible and she learned large parts of it by heart.

At the age of 23 she was wed to Friedrich von Grumbach, who worked at the court of the Duke of Bavaria as governor. She continued her reading and read all of Martin Luther's early works and they wrote theological letters back and forth.

In 1523 she fearlessly wrote the open letter, defending the young theologian, who was kept prisoner because of his teachings. It was printed for the cost of a meal.

The picture on the cover shows a woman standing alone with a Bible in her hand. She's facing the entire university faculty. One of the professors has pulled off his glove to show that he is about to engage in a duel. Books of church dogmas are lying on the ground. The arguments for and against the theses of the young theologian will have to be measured by the Bible alone, not by the man-made doctrines of the Church.

Argula von Grumbach begins by quoting Jesus in Matthew 10:32: "*Anyone* who will confess me before men, I will confess before my father." She wrote that men and women both are called to confess Jesus Christ.

She also argued: Since Jesus discussed with women, the professors should follow his example and do likewise.

She knew her Bible inside and out and could prove that God himself compares himself with a mother bear, whose cubs have been taken from her. (Hosea 13:8). She says: "I'm not jabbering women's gossip. I am proclaiming God's Word as a member of the Christian church."

In that argument we see the Protestant concept of the priesthood of all believers. All are called to spread the Gospel and to use their gifts to build up the Church. All are called to participate, to read the Bible and argue and work together to find the right interpretation.

The pamphlet was a sensation. It was reprinted 15 times. Argula von Grumbach was famous overnight.

But, although it probably encouraged a lot of women, no man took it seriously. The faculty did not respond to her letter. But her husband was fired from his job as governor because he had not kept his wife from publishing. The family was thrown into poverty. He husband remained Catholic, but never got back on his feet.

Argula von Grumbach continued to write. She wrote to the Sovereign of Bavaria, whom she had known personally since they were children: "The Bible teaches that we must obey God more than authorities." She wrote to the City Council: "If I die, a hundred women will take my place. For there are many who are even better read and smarter than I am."

The Lords did not help her. The great Reformer Luther didn't try to defend her, although he wrote privately that she was a valiant disciple of Christ. Her brother proposed to lock her away.

She criticized the childish ways of the Lords who spent more time eating, drinking, gambling and whoring than considering what God's will is. She defended her outspokenness with her baptism. In our baptism we are all called to be responsible for our own faith, not to delegate it to others.

She prayed that the Good News would be preached to the poor. She confronted anonymous poets who published rhymes that made fun of her by publishing her arguments in verse form. She compared herself to Judith and Deborah in the Bible, fearless women who were called by God to lead.

But after a year and a half she published nothing more. Women and peasants were beginning to use the printing press to fight for their rights. The Lords changed the rules and didn't allow laymen and laywomen to participate publically in theological debates anymore.

She had to struggle to survive. The marriage was hard to bear. Some of the children caused her worries. She was soon widowed and impoverished. Three of her four children died before she did at the age of 48.

Today there is a statue in her honor and an endowment of the Protestant Church of Bavaria to foster equality of women and men in the Church.

Katharina Zell was born 5 years after Argula von Grumbach in Strasbourg (1497). Although Strasbourg is in France today, it was a German-speaking independent city state that was influenced as much by the Swiss Reformation as by the German Reformation. Being a city state – like Zürich – its citizens had rights and privileges. There was a city council that answered not to a Duke but directly to the Emperor.

Strasbourg lies on the Rhine River at a crossroads of trade routes between the East and West as well as the North and South. It was one of the largest and most important cities in Europe in the Middle Ages and had 20 000 inhabitants within its walls.

Katharina Schütz was the daughter of an influential joiner master. She was not nobility, but of the up and coming merchant middle-class and also well-educated. She read books at a young age and devoured Luther's writings. She felt like he had lifted her from dark and bitter Hell into the sweet Heaven of grace and forgiveness.

In 1518 the priest Matthäus Zell came to preach at the Cathedral. Soon afterwards he converted to a Lutheran understanding and was the most influential preacher in Strasbourg. Katharina was one of his many fans. In her he found a true partner, even though she was 20 years younger.

They got married in a full cathedral in 1523. He was 46, she was 26. They received Communion in both of its forms – bread and wine, which was revolutionary. For most Strasbourg citizens, seeing a priest get married was shocking. A lot of hurtful insults and gossip were hurled at the couple. Katharina Schütz Zell responded by publishing a defense of their marriage.

She wrote that they loved each other, and that they had married to further the cause of the Gospel and to build up the Church. She called the so-called celibacy of priests an hypocrisy. She knew of many priests who had gotten up to seven women pregnant at the same time.

Excursion: At that time it really was accepted that priests keep unofficial wives, as long as they paid a yearly fine to the bishop. Their wives were called priest-whores and their children were bastards without the rights of citizenship or inheritance. Zwingli wrote several letters to the Bishop of Constance, pleading with him to allow the priests to marry their

wives, but to no avail. The fines were good income. And the right of inheritance would have been a problem for the Church. Finally Zwingli married his secret wife of two years, Anna Reinhard, anyway.

Back to Katharina Zell: In her open letter of defense, she argued with the Bible against the admonition of Paul that women should keep quiet:

“Paul says: The women should be silent. I answer: “Don’t you know that Paul also says in Galatians 3: “In Christ there is neither man nor woman” and that God says in the Book of the Prophet Joel in Chapter 2: “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters will prophesy, etc. And don’t you also know that since Zacharias was dumbstruck, Elisabeth pronounced the blessing on the Virgin Mary... So, therefore... I do not desire that one listen to me as if I were Elisabeth or John the Baptist or Nathan the Prophet who confronted David with his sin... but as if I were the donkey that the false prophet Bileam heard (speak). For all that I desire is that we all are saved. To that end God bless us through Christ his beloved Son. Amen.”

Katharina Zell became one of the first minister’s wives in history. She and her husband were partners for God’s Word and for the building of community. Matthäus called her his assistant minister, which meant that she may have been in the pulpit. One could almost say that they practiced job-sharing.

She used her gifts of preaching, hospitality, service, counseling and music tirelessly to comfort, teach, help refugees, mediate in conflicts, improve the social conditions in Strasbourg and share the Gospel.

Soon after her marriage, 150 persecuted Christians arrived in Strasbourg. She took 80 of them into her own home and provided meals for 60 more. The men had accompanied their minister to protect him when he was forced to flee from the town of Kenzington. When they got back the city gates were closed and Austrian soldiers were guarding the city. One was seized and killed. The others fled to Strasbourg. Katharina Zell wrote an open letter of comfort to their wives who were held captive in the city. She reminded them that God is like a mother who could never abandon or forget the child she nurses. (Isaiah 49:15).

She herself needed comfort as well. She lost both of her children while they were still babies.

When the Peasants War broke out in 1524 she went with her husband and another Reformer, Wolfgang Capito, to the camp of the rebels to convince them not to fight. But to no avail. They were slaughtered by the Duke’s soldiers, unfortunately Luther legitimated the violence against the Peasant uprisings. 3000 survivors of the massacre arrived in Strasbourg, many women and children. Katharina Zell organized their accommodation in an empty cloister and in private homes. She led the crisis relief for half a year.

In 1529 she was hostess to Ulrich Zwingli and Johannes Oekolompad when they were on their way to Marburg to debate with Luther. The unity of Protestantism was at stake. In the end, when they couldn’t agree on whether Christ is materially in the bread of Communion as Luther said, or if the bread stands for Christ and his presence is spiritual, as Zwingli said, Katharina Zell wrote a letter to Luther, scolding him for being stubborn and letting dogmas stand in the way of Christian love and unity.

Katharina Zell was an avid letter-writer and received letters from Reformers like Blarer, Bucer, Zwingli, Bullinger and Schwenkfeld, besides Luther. These were theologians who in some cases started calling each other heretics. But she remained friends with all of them and pleaded for more tolerance.

She also published a book of Christian songs and prayers to help Christians to keep in touch with God while going about their daily lives. That was new thing about the Reformed faith. You didn't just practice it on Sunday by going to mass, you practiced it all week long by trying to live by God's grace and forgiveness and helping the needy to the glory of God. Instead of listening to the monks sing in Latin, everyone was to sing spiritual songs in German. A prayer sung touched the heart more. Everyone was responsible for his own personal relationship with God. You couldn't delegate that to a priest.

When her husband died in 1548 she preached at his funeral. Many found that inappropriate, so she wrote a public defense of her sermon. She said that she didn't claim for herself the office of preacher or apostle, but that it had been with her as with Mary Magdalena who spontaneously became an apostle when she was sent by the Lord himself to the disciples to tell them that Christ had risen.

She wrote that her husband had been the most tolerant among the Reformers. He had preached that whoever confessed Christ to be God's true son and Savior of all should be allowed a place in the fellowship and at the Lord's Table.

It was probably Katharina's own generous heart and mind that led Matthäus to be so tolerant. She visited the Anabaptists who were imprisoned in Strasbourg because of their faith. She wrote that it was not right to persecute them. So many had "confessed Christ unto poverty, prison, fire and water", meaning that they had been burned at the stake or drowned in the river.

After her husband's death a new generation of Lutheran hardline preachers came to Strasbourg. They taught that Zwingli and Bullinger were heretics. When Katharina protested in a written letter that they were tearing the Body of Christ apart instead of building it up in love, the letter was returned unopened. Katharina Zell was against forcing parents to baptize their children as infants. She said it should be a free decision. She was able to find her own position theologically and never followed anyone's teachings blindly. For her the main thing was Christ. Everything else was a matter of conscience.

She preached at the funerals of two women. The second had followed the teachings of an Anabaptist preacher and so no minister was willing to bury her without proclaiming that she had fallen away from the true church. So the family asked Katharina Zell to conduct the funeral.

She was so sick herself that she had to have herself brought to the cemetery in a wagon. She preached. The City Council wanted to try her for breaking the law, but she died before that could happen. She was 60 years old. The people turned out at her funeral in throngs.

With her words and actions she showed that God's love and grace make men and women equal and that Christians who disagree on doctrinal issues are nonetheless brothers and sisters in Christ.

Catherine McMillan, 14.04.18 in Dübendorf

For "Body&Soul" Spiritual Brunch @EMK Affoltern

Sources:

Sonja Domröse, "Frauen der Reformationszeit", Vandenhoeck–Ruprecht, 2014

<http://frauen-und-reformation.de/>