

REMEMBERING HER

". . . what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."
Matthew 26:13



Article 28

Retrieving Women's Histories

Reformation Wives

In Reformation history many people know that Martin Luther, who had been a celibate monk, eventually married a former nun and had a lively home life. Katherine von Bora was a delightful partner and is remembered fondly by all Protestants (see RH #3). Most people, however, know very little about the spouses of other Reformers. Historians of the German Reformed Church in the United States help us to remember Anna Reinhard, wife of Ulrich or Hulrich Zwingli, and Idelette de Bures, wife of John Calvin.

Zwingli was born in 1484. After a classical education in Vienna, Berne and Basel he was ordained a priest in 1506. He made several trips to Rome and he began challenging many practices of the church. In 1519 Zwingli became the People's Priest at the Grossmünster Church in Zurich. Unfortunately, during his first year the city of Zurich was decimated by the plague and Zwingli almost died. Sobered and serious Zwingli used scriptural arguments to convince the leaders of Zurich to forbid all religious items and practices not explicitly named in the Bible. Lent was abandoned, clerical celibacy declared unbiblical, the authority of the papacy was rejected, and the mass was replaced with a simple Lord's Supper.

Anna Reinhard, "a beautiful girl of humble station," who had been widowed in 1515, became Zwingli's wife in 1524. Zwingli actually kept his relationship with Anna secret for two years, ostensibly because it was dangerous for a priest to marry. After 1524, however, she was a "model wife." According to one historian she appreciated the "grandeur of the work" and took charge of their household, saving her husband from the daily cares "which might have interfered with his literary labor."

Church officials in Rome became increasingly distressed with the Swiss "reforms." In 1531 Papal troops attacked the Protestant Swiss. Zwingli, who had joined the Swiss army as a chaplain, was killed in the battle at Cappel. It was a disaster. On that day Anna lost her husband, one of her sons, a son-in-law, a brother, and many other relatives. Her

contemporaries understood her loss and memorialized her grief in a mournful ballad known as “Frau Zwingli’s Lament.”

John Calvin first encountered Idelette de Bures when she was the wife of a good friend named John Storder in Strassbourg in 1538. Within two years, however, Storder had died from the plague. Although Calvin continued to visit Idelette in her home in the midst of her grief, he did not imagine her as his wife until some friends suggested the idea. Calvin’s enemies mocked him, saying that he only wanted “a secretary, a nurse, a cook and a manager,” but evidence shows that he “chose his wife for loftier qualities.”

Soon after they married Calvin was invited back to Geneva to help shape a new government according to the principles he had written about in his book *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Unfortunately Idelette died a few years later. Calvin’s critics called him heartless when he went on with his work. He wrote, “I do what I can, that I may not be altogether consumed with grief. I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life; she was the faithful helper of my ministry.” Many years after her death, he spoke of her with great affection.

Zwingli’s and Calvin’s wives never developed public personas like Luther’s wife “Kate,” yet Anne and Idelette provided strong quiet support. One historian noted that these women were like “ancient portraits, almost effaced by time.” We can hardly discern their features, “but enough remains to assure us of the incomparable beauty of the original.” [Joseph Henry Dubbs, *The Historic Manual of the Reformed Church in the United States* (Lancaster, PA: 1885), pp. 116-18]

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