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Andrew Hudgins

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Women and Authority during the Protestant Reformation

Andrew Hudgins
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Abstract

This paper will examine the rhetoric and theology of four women reformers during the beginning of the Protestant Reformation to understand their conceptions of women's authority during the Reformation. These four women, Marie Dentière (1495 - 1561), Marguerite de Navarre (1492 - 1549), Katarina Schütz Zell (1497/8 - 1562), and Argula von Grumbach (1492 - 1554), wrote numerous different religious tracts to disseminate their ideas. However, they still had to overcome cultural and religious barriers that prevented them from being allowed to speak on religious matters. To circumvent religious barriers, these women relied on many common rhetorical tactics to justify their decision to speak out on spiritual affairs. They adopted and proclaimed the traditional doctrines of the Reformation such as sola scriptura and the fellowship of all believers. However, they then took these beliefs to far more inclusive ends than their male contemporaries did. They wanted to expand the authority of women by allowing them to preach and by attempting to eliminate the moral and educational barriers which would otherwise be used to deny women the ability to communicate on spiritual matters.

The Protestant Reformation began in the early sixteenth century as an attempt to reform the perceived failings of the Catholic Church. The Church had long been criticized for a variety of institutional failings and a perceived failure to accomplish its goal of ministering the care of souls. The early reformers had no intention of breaking away from the Church or forming their own religious movement, they had simply hoped to encourage the Church to enact a series of long-awaited doctrinal reforms. Unfortunately, the disagreements between the reformers and the Church were proved to be too great, and the Christian Church was split yet again, into Catholics on one hand and a variety of Protestants on the other. The inability of the Reformation to stay united with the Catholic Church speaks to the incredible theological challenges that the reformers levied at the Church. They questioned almost every aspect of Church doctrine, the existence of purgatory, the sale of indulgences, the worship of the saints, even the celibacy of priests. Of all the theological ideas which threatened the Catholic Church, the most dangerous were those which challenged the Church's divine authority on earth.

Of the many challenges the Reformation posed to the Catholic Church, none were as important as its defiance of Catholic authority. The Protestant Reformation fundamentally altered the way in which Christians in Europe conceived of the concept of theological authority. Before the Reformation, the authority to communicate with God, interpret scripture, and teach scripture was restricted to the priesthood and a few lay individuals who would be blessed by prophecy.¹ Then, the Reformation came and brought with it ideas such as sola scriptura, sola fide, and the priesthood of all believers. These ideas upended the traditional religious authorities of Western Europe. Sola scriptura meant that the only source of biblical knowledge came from the Bible, not

¹ Andrew Pettegree, *The Reformation World* (London: Routledge, 2006), 23-24.

the numerous extant writings of Church officials.² Sola fide meant that an individual could find salvation through faith alone and that the rituals of the Church had nothing to do with the fate of one's own soul.³ The priesthood of all believers meant that any true believer was capable of interpreting scripture, destroying the authority of the Church to interpret and direct Christian thought.⁴ These ideas formed the foundation of Protestant theology, and they all directly challenged the authority of the Church in its domination over Christian theology.

Reformers would use these ideas to embark on their own personal crusades against the evils that they saw in the Catholic Church and later, in their fellow reformers. These reformers, while usually following in the footsteps of others, had their own ideas about the correct practice of Christianity. Many would expand upon the ideas taught by the most popular reformers and take them in new directions. For example, while it was incredibly unlikely that Martin Luther intended women to use his ideas of sola scriptura and the priesthood of all believers to study and teach scripture, they did. Many women across Europe seized upon these basic ideas to radically expand the role that women could play in religion. The following paper will examine the theological concept of the authority of four women, Marguerite de Navarre, Argula von Grumbach, Marie Dentièrre, and Katharina Schütz Zell. Marguerite de Navarre and Marie Dentièrre followed John Calvin's ideas, while Argula von Grumbach and Schütz Zell followed Luther. They each conceived of their own ideas on Christian authority and how it should define women's role in the new church.

² David M. Whitford, ed., *T&T Clark Companion to Reformation Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 32-33.

³ Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 107-109.

⁴ Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 108-109.

Marguerite de Navarre was born on April 11th, 1492, to high French nobility.⁵ She became the Queen Consort of Navarre in 1527 through her marriage to Henry II (1503-1555). Using her position as Queen Consort, she protected many reformers from being killed during her reign and would, at times, petition for their release when they were captured beyond her realm.⁶ Marguerite de Navarre is interesting in that she was not an outspoken advocate for the Reformation. As Queen of Navarre, she maintained cordial relations with the Catholic Church throughout her life.⁷ Yet she expressed an obvious sympathy for both the reformers and the Reformation. She wrote few direct theological texts, preferring instead to use poetry to articulate her theology. These theological ideas were routinely denounced as heretical by the Catholic Church, and on more than one occasion Marguerite de Navarre found herself at risk of being charged with heresy.⁸ She primarily communicated her ideas through her poetry, making her theology difficult to parse. However, unlike the writings of the other reformers, her poems were able to be disseminated in Catholic lands openly before they were condemned.⁹ Marguerite also had extensive contact, Marie Dentière, who was far more open about her Reformation beliefs.

Argula von Grumbach was born in 1492 to a noble family in Bavaria.¹⁰ She took an interest in biblical studies from an early age, and it should not be surprising that she embraced

⁵ Gary Ferguson and Mary McKinley, *A Companion to Marguerite De Navarre* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2013), 32-33.

⁶ Patricia Francis Cholakian and Rouben Charles Cholakian and, *Marguerite De Navarre Mother of the Renaissance* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), 172.

⁷ Cholakian and Cholakian, *Mother of the Renaissance*, 22.

⁸ Cholakian and Cholakian, *Mother of the Renaissance*, 21.

⁹ Cholakian and Cholakian, *Mother of the Renaissance*, 20-21.

¹⁰ Peter Matheson, *Argula Von Grumbach: (1492-1554/7); a Woman before Her Time* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 1.

both Luther and the Reformation shortly after its inception. She closely aligned herself with Luther and the Lutherans and maintained a brisk correspondence with them soon after she took interest in the Reformation. Using her minor nobility to her advantage, she wrote many pamphlets espousing the values of the Protestant Reformation.¹¹ Her status also allowed her to attempt to defend prominent reformers when they inevitably ran into trouble with the law. She also defied the laws of Bavaria herself by encouraging towns and cities to embrace the Reformation officially. Her numerous pamphlets spread throughout Germany and earned her a reputation as a heretic and troublemaker. Eventually, she was forced to stop publishing her pamphlets and had to content herself with espousing the Reformation through her private correspondence with reformers.¹² Before she was forced to silence herself, Argula disseminated her ideas primarily through published pamphlets. These pamphlets were the result of the recent invention of the printing press.¹³ The press allowed for written works to be distributed to a far larger audience than before. Many other reformers, including Martin Luther, used pamphlets as a novel way to distribute their ideas.¹⁴

Marie Dentière, born circa 1495, was a French Calvinist reformer. Little of her early life is known except that she was born into the minor nobility and entered an Augustinian monastery. She eventually rose to the rank of abbess, a position that she would hold for only a few years before leaving the monastery at the very beginning of the Reformation in the early 1520s.¹⁵ She

¹¹ Ulrike Zitzlsperger, "Mother, Martyr and Mary Magdalene: German Female Pamphleteers and Their Self-Images," *History* 88, no. 291 (2003): 379-392, 392.

¹² Matheson, *Argula Von Grumbach*, 153-155.

¹³ Pettegree, *The Reformation World*, 110-112.

¹⁴ Pettegree, *The Reformation World*, 110-112.

¹⁵ Mary B. McKinley, "The Early Modern Teacher: Marie Dentière: An Outspoken Reformer Enters the French Literary Canon," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 37, no. 2 (January 2006): 401-412, 401.

eventually found her way to Geneva where she taught alongside John Calvin, encouraging the city to embrace the reformation along Calvinist lines. Her relationship with Calvin would turn sour due to her continued, outspoken advocacy for the expanded role of women in Christianity.¹⁶ Unlike Marguerite, Dentière wrote and spoke publicly on matters of theology, and she did not shy away from confrontation with contemporary reformers. Evidence of Dentière's bravery is the fact that one of her most important theological works was an epistle written to Marguerite of Navarre. Epistles are a special sub-category of letter which are used to espouse some grand doctrine under the guise of communicating with a single individual or group.¹⁷ They were a common way for women to write public works, as they could plausibly argue that they were simply communicating with individuals, rather than trying to espouse their view in an academic or official capacity.¹⁸

Katharina Schütz Zell was born in 1497 to an urban artisan family in the town of Strasbourg in the Holy Roman Empire.¹⁹ She would spend her whole life there, working tirelessly to promote the Reformation in her hometown. She became active in the Reformation after she heard the teachings of Martin Luther through the sermons of the new local priest Matthew Zell (1477-1548). She married Zell in 1523, and the two would work together for the remainder of his life.²⁰ Katharina Schütz Zell advanced her theological ideas through a variety of sermons, letters, and pamphlets which she published in and around Strasbourg. Although her

¹⁶ McKinley, "The Early Modern Teacher, 401.

¹⁷ Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 178-180.

¹⁸ Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 178.

¹⁹ Elsie Anne McKee, *Church Mother the Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 4-5.

²⁰ McKee, *Church Mother*, 103-105.

pamphlets did not reach as far as those of von Grumbach, who had the advantage of nobility to bolster her writings, she still managed to capture the ear of many prominent reformers across Germany.²¹ Perhaps because of her low-profile, Schütz Zell was able to avoid the violent backlash in response to the writings of both Argula von Grumbach and Dentière. She primarily disseminated her ideas through her published letters, of which she wrote many to a variety of different reformers and Protestant communities across the Holy Roman Empire.

These four reformation theologians shared several ideas in common. They all embraced the Protestant doctrines of sola scriptura and the priesthood of all believers. They all argued for an expanded role for women in the new Protestant Church. All four women were knowledgeable about scripture and the theological arguments being made by other reformers. They all also clashed with established Protestants quite frequently, often criticizing their actions as much as they criticized the acts of the Catholic Church. In this paper, I will argue that all four of these reformers argued, in their own ways, for the expansion of the authority of women in the new Protestant Church. I will also argue that they all advocated for this new position using fundamental Protestant theology to justify their authority to speak on these matters.

First, to understand how these theologians conceived of Christian authority, we must understand how they justified their own authority to speak on matters of theology. Before the Reformation, theological discourse was primarily confined to priests.²² This was the case until Martin Luther espoused the idea of the priesthood of all believers, which argued that all persons who believed in Christ had the power to act as a priest. The implications of this assertion were

²¹ Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation* (Blackwell, 2009), 235-236.

²² Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 180-182

vast. It removed the necessity of relying on a priest to intercede on one's behalf in matters of salvation. Instead, a Christian could simply appeal to God directly and in their own terms.²³ Most importantly, for our purposes, it meant that any right-minded Christian was capable of interpreting scripture. Any literate person could, theoretically, understand the words of God without the need for any interrogatory. The power to read scripture was universal and applied to everyone and was not the mark of some greater divine power. Luther held that the ability to understand scripture was not in itself a sign of divine providence.²⁴ Education and practice were also necessary, and Luther never believed that all those who could understand the Bible could do so because of some unique God given grant of genius.²⁵ Rather, the ability to understand scripture was a gift in the same abstract way that all human abilities could be attributed to God, in that God was held to be the creator of all living things.

Luther was not the only reformer to develop the idea of the the priesthood of all believers. John Calvin, the theological father of Calvinism, also wrote extensively on the concept. Calvin's view of the priesthood differed slightly from Luther's, and understanding this difference is key to understanding the differences between the reformers studied in this paper. Calvin, like Luther argued that any Christian was capable of acting as a priest, communicating with God and interpreting scripture.²⁶ Where Calvin differed was in his belief that God granted certain individuals' special gift to interpret scripture and act as priests, while others were not

²³ Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 180-182

²⁴ Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 180-182

²⁵ Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 180-182

²⁶ Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 25-27.

granted these gifts.²⁷ God, not the Catholic Church, decided who could and should preach by gifting them special skills to do so. This idea can be seen as a logical extension of Calvin's theory of double predestination, which was the idea that God had decided, from the beginning of time, who would be saved and who would be damned. Obviously, this would mean that certain people would be gifted with the gift of divine wisdom needed to interpret and understand scripture, while others would be chosen not to possess that ability. Calvin further argued that those who possess this unique ability had the task of guiding those who did not, giving them a natural position of authority.²⁸ This distinction between the nature of the ability to interpret scripture and what powers it granted someone was the core difference between Luther and Calvin on the priesthood of all believers. However, they largely agreed with one another on the broad points of the doctrine and what distinctions which exist are minor and, for our purposes, academic in nature.

The most important doctrine to the female reformers in this paper was the priesthood of all believers. Marie Dentière makes particular use of the priesthood of all believers in her epistle to Marguerite de Navarre (1539). In this epistle, she continually asserts to Marguerite that "even though we are not permitted to preach in public in congregations and churches, we are not forbidden to write and admonish one another in all charity."²⁹ In this, she uses the idea of the universal priesthood to justify her right to speak on spiritual matters. In her evocation of the idea that women have the duty to admonish one another for failing to follow the rules of Christ, she asserts authority as an interpreter of scripture while also addressing the Queen of France as an

²⁷ Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 25.

²⁸ Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 25-26.

²⁹ Marie Dentière, "Epistle to Marguerite De Navarre," in *Epistle to Marguerite De Navarre and, Preface to a Sermon by John Calvin*, ed. Mary B. McKinley (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 53.

equal.³⁰ In doing so, she highlights the concept that all women, regardless of nobility, were equal to one another in their potential to interpret scripture. Dentière asserts that, because she is a devout Protestant Christian, God has granted her the right to instruct others in spiritual matters. This is a direct extension of the authority that the doctrine of the universal priesthood gave to men to women. She also makes no mention of any other spiritual guide in this letter other than God and the Bible. No other reformer's words are mentioned when she condemns Marguerite de Navarre. Dentière uses the Bible alone in her rebuke, in what is both a display of sola scriptura and an assertion of her own authority to understand God's word. Her refusal to reference other reformers is an indication of her belief in her own abilities of interpretation. At the same time, her constant reference to the Bible is a clear use of the concept of sola scriptura in justifying her views.

Furthermore, the epistle to Marguerite de Navarre is itself an assertion of Dentière's own spiritual authority and ability. The epistle was written to Marguerite after she had requested Dentière's opinion on the decision of the Calvinists in Geneva to oust Calvin from his position in the city.³¹ Dentière seized upon the opportunity and instead wrote back an epic response decrying the men in Geneva for their treatment of Calvin and urging Marguerite to take further actions in on behalf of the Protestant Reformation. This letter, like all epistles, was intended to be published and was written to a larger audience than just the two women. Dentière freely switches between addressing the larger audience and the Queen herself. Dentière directly states that she is writing for "the poor little women wanting to know and understand the truth, who do

³⁰ McKinley, "The Early Modern Teacher," 403.

³¹ McKinley, "The Early Modern Teacher," 403.

not know what path, what way to take.”³² This tactic proves that Dentière’s response is then a direct attempt to engage the larger Reformation community in a debate over the role that women should play in the Reformation itself.

It is highly likely that Marguerite de Navarre was receptive to these words, as she had already demonstrated similar views in her own writing. Marguerite de Navarre directly elaborates on the universal priesthood in her poem *Mirror of a Sinful Soul*. While reminiscing about her spiritual growth, Marguerite de Navarre states that grace “by its bright light illuminates my darkness, and by its great goodness looks upon my flaws. Lifting the veil of ignorance, it gives me the clear and proper vision.”³³ Here, she embraces the idea that God grants wisdom to individual followers to remove ignorance and to live according to God’s wishes. She asserts her own authority to understand Christianity, arguing that God provides the wisdom she needs directly, without going through a priest or other intercessor. Notice that Marguerite de Navarre does not assert the right to admonish others. She instead asserts only the authority to interpret scripture personally, without extending such authority into the public domain. This emphasis on a personal interpretation of scripture is an interesting interpretation of Calvinist doctrine, and it is interesting to find it in the poetry of a French queen. Calvinists usually emphasized the public exercise of spiritual authority, best demonstrated in their attempt to create public councils with the power to regulate morality and religious doctrine in a city.³⁴ Marguerite instead interoperates

³² Dentière, “Epistle to Marguerite De Navarre,” 53.

³³ Marguerite de Navarre, “The Mirror of the Sinful Soul,” in *Selected Writings: A Bilingual Edition*. eds. Rouben Charles Cholakian and Mary Skemp (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 79.

³⁴ Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 191-192.

the Calvinist doctrine to encourage a private relationship with God which does not incorporate any public authorities.

Marguerite's view also stands in contrast to Marie Dentière's, who was more than willing to use the authority God gave her to condemn the acts of others when she saw fit. It is possible that she was still unsure as to the full extent of how far she should extend the authority of women in the Protestant Reformation, given the heightened scrutiny her arguments would have received given her political position. However, it is also possible that Marguerite de Navarre felt quite limited in her ability to publicly criticize the Catholic Church considering her role as a French Queen.³⁵ Her poetry in which she discusses these theological views was published and was widely read throughout Europe. Even a private appeal that a protestant should find their own interpersonal connection to God is not truly a private statement. Furthermore, her views here do not reject the broader Calvinist doctrine which states that strict public discipline is necessary to maintain a righteous community. The Catholic Church certainly found these ideas unorthodox enough to threaten her with charges of heresy over the publication of these poems.³⁶

Schütz Zell's view of the universal priesthood was as expansive as it was a departure from past Christian thought. In her first published letter, a letter of encouragement to the persecuted women of Kentzingen, she writes that they must "not let the invincible word of God go out of your heart, but always meditate on that word that you have had with you for so long and heard with all earnestness and faithfulness."³⁷ Schütz Zell's first letter is interesting for a

³⁵ Cholakian and Cholakian, *Mother of the Renaissance*, 174-176.

³⁶ Cholakian and Cholakian, *Mother of the Renaissance*, 243-244.

³⁷ Katharina Schultz Zell, "Letter to the Suffering Women of the Community of Kentzingen, who Believe in Christ, Sisters with me in Christ Jesus," in *Church Mother the Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 50.

variety of reasons. It was written to the women of the Protestant town of Kentzingen during the Catholic occupation of the town. The men of the town had elected to flee in order to avoid prosecution while the women stayed behind to defend their property.³⁸ Many of the women felt \them. Already, in her first published work, Schütz Zell is asserting that the women of Kentzingen are bound to the larger Protestant community in their opposition to the Church.

Schütz Zell argues that the most important thing that these women can do to keep their faith in a trying time is read and understand the word of God. Schütz Zell also engages in robust biblical interpretation in this letter, boldly showing her knowledge in her use of scripture and scriptural interpretation to offer comfort. Of note is the fact that she changes the words of one Bible verse that she cites, adding “husbands” to the verse “So also to you, believing women beloved by God, Christ says, “Whoever does not want to leave father and mother, wife, husband, and child, and all that he has, for my sake and the Gospel’s, that one is not worthy of me [Mt 10:37, 19:29; Lk 14:26].”³⁹ The broader implications of this change will be considered later. For now, it is enough to note that Schütz Zell is willing to apply her own interpretation of scripture in order to make her theological argument.

Schütz Zell also did not limit her universal scriptural authority only to providing comfort to women, remarking in a later apologia that she has the right to defend her husband from “great lies”.⁴⁰ In debunking these lies, she employs her right as a Christian who is “bound to defend his neighbor as his fellow member of the body in Christ,” to attack the clergy attacking her husband

³⁸ McKee, *Church Mother*, 47.

³⁹ Zell, “Letter to the Suffering Women,” 51-52.

⁴⁰ Katharina Schultz Zell, “Katharina Schutz’s Apologia for Master Matthew Zell, her Husband,” in *Church Mother the Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 63.

on a broad array of theological issues.⁴¹ Furthermore, she makes no reference to any other instructor except for scripture in her letter, underscoring her own authority to understand biblical texts. Shultz Zell is also quite comfortable in using her newfound authority to interpret and explain scripture to the women of Kentzingen. However, she always addresses them as equals, referring to them as sisters rather than students. In doing so, she embraces the idea that all are equal in their ability to understand scripture.

Argula von Grumbach also maintained an expansive view of the priesthood of all believers, as evidenced in her writing to the faculty of the university of Ingolstadt. In condemning their decision to expel a Lutheran student, Argula von Grumbach stated that “in the German writings of Luther and Melanchthon I have found nothing heretical.”⁴² Here, she is directly asserting her ability to read and interpret theological tracts. Interestingly, she makes direct reference to the writings of Luther in her defense of the accused. Certainly, it may just be because one of the accused’s crimes was that he had been reading Luther. However, it may also indicate a greater desire to justify her authority to speak on theological matters by indicating her knowledge of other Reformation writers. This tactic was used by many reformers, both men and women, to bolster their arguments by using the arguments of their peers.⁴³ Furthermore, she asserts that even if “Luther were to revoke his views, which would not worry me. I do not build on his, mine, or any person's understanding, but on the true rock, Christ himself.”⁴⁴ It is difficult

⁴¹ Zell, “Katharina Schutz's Apologia for Master Matthew Zell,” 63.

⁴² Argula von Grumbach” Letter to the university of Ingolstadt,” in *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions*, ed. Denis Janz (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2008), 148.

⁴³ G. Sujin Pak, “Three Early Female Protestant Reformers' Appropriation of Prophecy as Interpretation of Scripture,” *Church History* 84, no. 1 (2015): 90-123, 95-97.

⁴⁴ V on Grumbach” Letter to Ingolstadt,” 148.

to assume anything else from the use of Luther, other than that she is willing to place herself alongside the infamous reformer.

Argula also demonstrated in this pamphlet a direct assertion of her ability to interpret scripture and understand theology. As part of her conclusion, she directly challenged the theologians of the university to debate her in person, publicly, in the German vernacular, an unprecedented request for a woman to make at the time.⁴⁵ The broader implications of this demand will be discussed later. Yet already it should be obvious that this is a bold assertion of sola scriptura and the priesthood of all believers. Argula von Grumbach places herself on the same level as the educated intellectuals of the university. She refers to herself, as not engaging in “woman’s chit-chat,” but as a member of the broader community of Christ.⁴⁶ Argula asserts that she has the authority to rebuke any member of the Christian church who strays from the divine will of God, just like a priest of the Catholic Church. Argula’s view of the priesthood of all believers that grants her the ability to rebuke others is like that of Marie Dentière, as both women believed that the universal priesthood enabled them to critique the spiritual views of others.

Equally important is the fact that she calls on them to debate not canon law, but scripture. She challenges them to defend their actions in the context of scripture alone, rather than relying on Catholic laws and writings. The fact that the priests refused to debate a laywoman does not diminish the obvious use of sola scriptura in her request for a debate.⁴⁷ This appeal to pure scripture can be seen in the writings of all the reformers as well. Marie Dentière refers to the

⁴⁵ Peter Matheson, “Breaking the Silence: Women, Censorship, and the Reformation,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27, no. 1 (1996): 97-109, 100.

⁴⁶ Von Grumbach, “Letter to Ingolstadt,” 148-149.

⁴⁷ Matheson, “Breaking the Silence,” 55.

Catholic priests in France as “usurping” the divine power of scripture.⁴⁸ The claim that Catholic critics of the Reformation were basing their objections on sources other than the Bible allowed reformers such as Dentière to reflect Catholic injunctions against them while also opening the door for anyone else to read and interpret scripture. If the Church lacked the authority to comment on theology, then anyone and everyone would have the authority to urgently fill the void left behind. Into this void, Dentière reasoned, could step the Protestant men and women who would advance their new theology without having to contend with the domination of the old Church.

None of the above theological arguments, however, would have ultimately granted these female reformers the right to speak their thoughts in public. Despite all the deviations from Catholic canon undertaken by the male reformers of the Reformation, they still held fast to the so called “Pauline Injunction.” This injunction, which was based on the words of Paul in Timothy was the prohibition against women’s ability to speak in public or during Church. This injunction unfortunately derived from scripture, and so it was still cited by many protestant reformers.⁴⁹ Indeed, by the end of the century, male reformers were almost united in their opinion that the injunction still stood and that women should not be allowed to speak in Church or on spiritual matters at all.⁵⁰

However, the early Reformation offered these four women a unique time to present their theological arguments as the opinion of the Protestant community was still not set against them. The early Reformation was also a time of great strife, where many Protestants lived under the

⁴⁸ Dentière, “Epistle to Marguerite,” 59.

⁴⁹ Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 42-43.

⁵⁰ Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 130-132.

threat of death. This created an incredible pressure on the Reformation, which allowed the women to use Luther's doctrine of "extraordinary circumstances," which argued that a women could speak out in public if the circumstances were dire enough.⁵¹ The early Reformation was a time of great political and social strife. Wars were fought frequently between the papacy and the reformers, with countless towns and villages caught in the center.⁵² It would have been madness to insist in this climate that women were never allowed to speak on theological matters, as the new religion was just struggling to get off the ground.

Of note is the fact that the first writings of two of the reformers, Schütz Zell and Argula von Grumbach, were both written in response to an ongoing crisis. Schütz Zell's letter was written to provide spiritual advice and guidance to the women of a town under siege by the forces of the Empire. The women of Kentzingen were faced with both a crisis of the faith as well as an actual, physical threat to their safety and security. One of her other letters speaking out was in defense of her husband, in which she directly references the fact that "every Christian is bound to defend his neighbor as his fellow member of the body in Christ and to stand by him when he suffers unjustly, as each would also want done for himself."⁵³ It was an actual threat to the integrity of her husband that she claimed moved her to write her public rebuttal. That the topic of this rebuttal extends far beyond merely defending her husband's actions into a broad defense of their collective theology indicates that the unique circumstances which forced her to speak did not limit her to only speaking on the topic at hand.

⁵¹ Whitford, *T&T Clark*, 185-186.

⁵² Pettegree, *The Reformation World*, 89-90.

⁵³ Zell, "Apologia for Master Matthew Zell," 63.

Another interesting about this letter is that Schütz Zell claims that she was “forced” to speak out in the defense of her husband, not that she wanted to speak out.⁵⁴ She frames it in religious terms, that she had no choice but to defend his honor against the men who would accuse him of wrongdoing. In doing so, she attributes her agency to God, asking “How can I not do for my neighbor, Matthew Zell, what I would want my neighbor to do for me?”⁵⁵ In this she uses an old Catholic trick that Catholic women had employed for decades before the Reformation. Often times Catholic women would use the rhetoric of being “forced” to speak by God to justify themselves deliberately breaking the social and religious prohibitions against women speaking out publicly.⁵⁶ A key difference between Shultz Zell and these past writers is that the Catholic women of the past would usually attribute their words directly to God.⁵⁷ Their message came not from them, but from God, and so they still had divine authority despite coming from a woman. Schütz Zell, however, does not attribute her words directly to God. Instead, she claims that she herself is “in turn correct the error and lies that my neighbor believes?” based on her own understanding of scripture.⁵⁸ Not only does this difference attest to the Protestant doctrine of sola scriptura, it also allowed Shultz Zell to assert her own authority as a woman to interpret scripture. The act of interpretation went from a single instance of divine inspiration to a continually process using her God-given gifts over the course of her life.

⁵⁴ Zell, “Apologia for Master Matthew Zell,” 63.

⁵⁵ Zell, “Apologia for Master Matthew Zell,” 64.

⁵⁶ Pak, “Three Early Reformers’,” 91-93.

⁵⁷ Ronald K. Rittgers and Vincent Evener, *Protestants and Mysticism in Reformation Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 166-167.

⁵⁸ Zell, “Apologia for Master Matthew Zell,” 66.

Argula von Grumbach's first letter was written to defend a student who was publicly humiliated and forced to recant his beliefs. She explicitly mentions the idea that it was the "foolish violence" inflicted "against the word of God" which moved her to speak.⁵⁹ His suffering is her suffering, and as a good Christian woman the Lord had forced her to comment on the matter. Of further note is the fact that she refers to the fact that she was "compelled" to speak.⁶⁰ This rhetorical flourish underscores the severity of the young man's situation while also allowing her to portray her decision as one motivated by empathy rather than motivated by a desire to engage in theological debate.⁶¹ The use of empathy itself is yet another trope which women used as a way to justify their decision to speak on a subject.⁶² She further uses this crisis to justify her invitation to debate the theologians publicly. This seeming contradiction is resolved by viewing her initial excuse of empathy as just that, an excuse. The body of the text clearly indicates that she desired to engage in Reformation debates for its own sake. So, while her rhetoric would seem to limit her authority only to matters requiring feminine sympathy, her clear intention with this letter is to expand her authority to allow her to comment on spiritual matter writ large. Furthermore, she claims that "where the word of God is concerned, neither Pope, Emperor, nor princes – as Acts 4 and 5 make so clear – have any jurisdiction. For my part, I have to confess, in the name of God and by my soul's salvation, that if I were to deny Luther and Melancthon's writing, I would be denying God and his word."⁶³ The implications of this claim are clear. So long as the Catholic Church is resisting the Protestant reformation, Argula and other women will

⁵⁹ Matheson, *Argula Von Grumbach*, 46-47.

⁶⁰ Von Grumbach" Letter to Ingolstadt,"147.

⁶¹ Matheson, *Argula Von Grumbach*,46-47.

⁶² Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 126-127.

⁶³ Matheson, *Argula Von Grumbach*, 50-51.

have ample justification to speak out against the Church and to speak out in favor of Protestantism.

Even Dentière's epistle to Marguerite de Navarre was written in response to the expulsion of Calvin from Geneva, which could be construed to be a crisis by those supportive of Calvin and his aims. Dentière also speaks in her epistle of a continuous, ongoing crisis that is besieging Christianity. She describes the continuing attempt of the Papacy as a crisis which will not abate until they "for the honor of God, kings, princes, and lords, to whom God has given the sword to punish the wicked and protect the good, allow the truth to be preached in your lands."⁶⁴ She also notes to Marguerite de Navarre that many Protestant reformers are afraid to "leave our houses and our towns to do our work or collect our goods, because some people are persecuted and put in prison, while others are burned, tyrannized, and put to death."⁶⁵ Her invocation of an actual physical threat that is threatening the Reformation would have allowed her to comment on current religious affairs without incurring the ire of her male Reforming counterparts. The use of crises of the faith to justify women speaking about Christianity was not unique to the women of the Protestant reformation. It was, in fact an old Catholic tactic that was used by Catholic women for years before the Reformation.⁶⁶ Marguerite's poetry represents an alternative approach to bypassing the injunction. While there was a stigma against women speaking out on matters of faith, there was no such injunction against women writing poetry or songs. Furthermore, as the queen of France, it was expected that Marguerite be educated in the ways of prose and poetry.

⁶⁴ Dentière, "Epistle to Marguerite," 61.

⁶⁵ Dentière, "Epistle to Marguerite," 80.

⁶⁶ Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 214-216.

Her writings could be published and distributed without the stigma that was attached to the writings of Schütz Zell and von Grumbach.

Having established the methods by which these women granted themselves authority, it is time to analyze their ideas of the authority of women should be in the new Protestant religion. Historically, Christianity had been a male-dominated religion. What role women could play was usually limited to the private space of nunneries rather than out in the open teaching and instructing the masses of Europe. As hinted above, Schütz Zell's view on the authority of women in the new Church was far greater than the authority which women currently held in the Church. She believed that women had the obligation to correct and instruct men when they went astray in their faith, as seen when she tells the women of Kentzingen to "speak comfortingly to your husbands and also to yourselves the words that Christ Himself has said."⁶⁷ She grants to women everywhere the authority to correct their husbands, thereby implicitly granting them equal authoritative status to men in their ability to interpret scripture. In doing so, she implicitly articulates a vision of Protestant Christianity in which women can serve the same function as men in spiritual guidance, even if they are not ordained as ministers. Schütz Zell also emphasizes the importance of community of women believers, as indicated by her letter to the women of Kentzingen. In that letter, Schütz Zell refers to the women as her "dear Christian sisters."⁶⁸ She clearly believed that women had a special obligation to keep and maintain the faith together and that the spiritual plight of one woman should be seen as the spiritual plight of all women.

⁶⁷ Zell, "Letter to the Suffering Women," 83.

⁶⁸ Zell, "Letter to the Suffering Women," 86.

Schütz Zell envisions a world in which women may be allowed to break free of the authority of their husbands in order to follow the authority of God. As mentioned above, she wrote to the women of Kentzingen assuring them that they were right to stay in the village while their husbands left as that was what God had called them to do. In order to demonstrate her point, she deliberately changed scripture, adding in “husband” to the verse, “Whoever does not want to leave father and mother, wife, husband, and child, and all that he has, for my sake and the Gospel’s, that one is not worthy of me.”⁶⁹ Clearly, she believes that her power to interpret scripture goes beyond mere textual analysis and also includes interpretations of context and meaning. Schütz Zell inserts “husband” to assure the women of Kensington that it is acceptable for them to abandon their husbands if it is necessary to maintain their spiritual consciousness, a power that they were not considered to have under Catholicism. This bold expansion of married women’s authority places them directly under God rather than under their husbands, and the implications of the assertion could allow a woman married to a Catholic to instead worship in the Protestant way if she felt called to.

Schütz Zell also wanted women to possess the tools needed to exercise their authority. She believed that it was necessary for women to be given access to scripture in order to be able to study and understand it.⁷⁰ Clearly, Schütz Zell believed that women must be given the tools they needed to properly exercise their spiritual and moral authority. That would mean that women must be taught to read the Bible, and read it fluently, an idea not out of line with the ideas of Luther.⁷¹ It is worth noting, however, that women’s literacy rates in Germany during the

⁶⁹ Zell, “Letter to the Suffering Women,” 83.

⁷⁰ McKee, *Church Mother*, 255.

⁷¹ Alberto Melloni and Anne Eusterschulte, *Martin Luther: A Christian between Reforms and Modernity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 1163-1164.

Reformation remained rather low, as the loss of convents destroyed one of women primary ways of achieving literacy.⁷² Schütz Zell's call should then be seen as a functional departure from the status quo, even if her call was theoretically supported by other Protestant thinkers. She expands this view even further with her extraordinary claim that she and other women should "seek to hear others and to be exhorted as far as they speak the truth! But where that is not so, then I would tell you and not keep silent, but speak, point out, and answer your wrong preaching and insulting words about the innocent."⁷³ While she does not call for them to be officially ordained, she does argue that the gifts of God are not limited by sex and that any woman blessed with scriptural understanding by God would have an obligation to go out and teach the word. Her definition of a good teacher is one who is humble, attentive, dutiful, and observant.⁷⁴ It is perhaps not a coincidence that all of these characteristics could also be applied to herself.

The letter to Schwenckfeld is itself interesting as it represents Shultz Zell publicly defending herself from accusations of heresy foisted upon her by the preachers of Strasbourg following the teachings of Rabus.⁷⁵ Rabus was another Lutheran reformer who had begun to expand and, in Schütz Zell's view, distort, the theological teachings of her husband.⁷⁶ Facing an increasing amount of pressure from other reformers fighting over the doctrine of her dead husband, Schütz Zell wrote this letter to Schwenckfeld explaining her position and defending

⁷² Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 57.

⁷³ Katharina Schultz Zell, "To Sir Caspar Schwenckfeld, my gracious dear Sir and old friend: to his own hands," in *Church Mother the Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 196-197.

⁷⁴ Zell, "To Sir Caspar Schwenckfeld," 196-197.

⁷⁵ McKee, *Church Mother*, 177.

⁷⁶ McKee, *Church Mother*, 176-177.

her interpretation of her husband's legacy.⁷⁷ It is against this context that Shultz Zell proclaims that university education was completely unnecessary in order to understand the Bible. She writes that "if a person is a disciple of a teacher or writer and should be called by his name if he reads his books— then all of you [Rabus and friends] must be called by the names of Aristotle, Virgil, Plato, Cicero, and many such heathens, also papist and all heathen poets and hypocrites."⁷⁸ Interestingly, Shultz Zell does not call for women to be educated in the universities but instead insists that universities play no role in an individual's authority in interpreting scripture. In doing so, she circumvents one of the criticisms about herself and her teaching, which is that she does not possess the education required to properly inform the masses. By changing what grants one the ability to interpret scripture, Shultz Zell can deftly increase the authority of women vis-à-vis men while appealing to fundamental Protestant doctrines such as sola scriptura. The letter also serves as a reminder that, despite the immense potential of the early Reformation for the advancement of the role of women in the church, by the mid-century the ossification of doctrine was already conspiring to exclude women from religious conversations.

It must be noted that, while Schütz Zell's view of women's authority in matters of faith was quite expansive, she was not interested in upending the entire social order of gender relations. In her defense of her husband Matthew's behavior, she states that she has "gladly served many with counsel and deed, according to my ability, as I was also obligated before God

⁷⁷ McKee, *Church Mother*, 177-178.

⁷⁸ Zell, "To Sir Caspar Schwenckfeld," 194.

to do, and as my husband commended to me at the end.”⁷⁹ In doing so, she stresses the importance of her husband and her loyalty to him in her theological arguments. Her argument here may be purely rhetorical, as her relationship with her husband was always one of equals, albeit equals with different roles in the community.⁸⁰ It is possible that, taken in conjunction with her statements about the duty of women to correct the misguided morals of their husbands, she meant to imply that she had found no fault in his statements which she needed to correct. Her letter to the women of Kentzingen was also written to, well, women, while her defense of her husband was written to men, which almost assuredly would have caused her to change the rhetoric that she used. Nevertheless, it is clear from her writings that, while her view for the role of women in the Protestant religion was expansive, she did not wish to fundamentally upend gender relations or gendered authority broadly.

Von Grumbach’s concept of authority did not differ much from Schütz Zell’s. I have already established that von Grumbach believed that women were capable of publicly teaching matters of scripture in her letter to the University of Ingolstadt’s theologians. Von Grumbach plainly and boldly asserts that she has the capacity to read and understand both the Bible and the theology of Martin Luther, writing that she “too, can ask questions, hear answers, and read in German.”⁸¹ In doing so, she directly asserts that her knowledge is equal to that of Luther and the men of Ingolstadt. That is significant as both the men of Ingolstadt and Luther had university educations, while Grumbach did not. Indeed, she admonishes the men of Ingolstadt for their

⁷⁹ Katharina Schultz Zell, “A letter to whole citizenship of the city of Strasbourg from Katharina Zell, widow of the (now blessed) Matthew Zell,” in *Church Mother the Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 225.

⁸⁰ McKee, *Church Mother*, 17-18.

⁸¹ Von Grumbach, “Letter to Ingolstadt,” 148.

inability to “show me where this is written!”, referring to their condemnation of Luther, in the Bible.⁸² This appeal to sola scriptura is not just an appeal to fundamental Protestant beliefs, it is also an assertion of the authority of women to interpret scripture in the new Protestant order. Many male reformers had begun to use the lack of education amongst women as a weapon to delegitimize their theological ideas. Zell says as much in her letter to Schwenckfeld, noting that “they regard me instead as a presumptuous spirit and (as some mockingly say) “doctor Kathrina.”⁸³ By attacking the heads of a university and granting herself identical authority to them because she could read and write as well, von Grumbach advocated for a broad expansion of women’s role in the Reformation.

Dentière argued for a dramatic enhancement in the authority of Protestant women in the new Church. She asserted that it was the moral and religious duty of all Christian men and women to use whatever God given power and authority they possessed to advance the call work of God. She writes “What do you fear from the cardinals and bishops who are in your courts? If God is on your side, who will be against you? Why don’t you make them support their case publicly, before everybody?”⁸⁴ Remember that, in the context of the Epistle, Dentière is speaking to Marguerite. As noted above, Dentière believed that both men and women had a prominent role to play in expanding the kingdom of God on earth. She directly states to Marguerite “For I will preach, I will indoctrinate, I will give good examples, I will make something good from it, rescuing the poor persecuted brethren.”⁸⁵ She also implies that women were able to criticize the

⁸² Von Grumbach, “Letter to Ingolstadt,” 147.

⁸³Zell, “To Sir Caspar Schwenckfeld,” 191.

⁸⁴ Dentière, “Epistle to Marguerite,” 96.

⁸⁵ Dentière, “Epistle to Marguerite,” 109.

religious decisions of men, indicated by her hatred of the decision of Geneva to expel Calvin. Dentièrre does not defer to the men's decision. Rather, she criticizes the "wise men of the people" for expelling Calvin, which she equates to rejecting "Jesus Christ the Just."⁸⁶ It is worth noting the Dentièrre and her husband were with Calvin when he was cast out from Geneva, and that she had held an active role in the Reformation in the city during their time there.⁸⁷ Dentièrre also calls for a public confession of the Protestant faith, saying that "what God has given you and revealed to us women, no more than men should we bury it in the earth."⁸⁸ This desire is not merely rhetorical, as it represents her respect for the power and position of Marguerite de Navarre and her awareness of the role that she could play in the Protestant cause if she proclaimed the Protestant faith.

Authority is a prevalent theme throughout the Epistle. Dentièrre's central attack on the Catholic Church is its usurpation of Christ's authority by teaching false doctrine, such as forbidding the priests to marry and transubstantiation.⁸⁹ In her view, the very existence of the Church was an abomination to Christians everywhere and thus, the Church should wield no authority over the lives Christians anywhere. Dentièrre was equally critical of those individuals who attempted to remain within the Church to reform it, castigating Marguerite for allowing the clerics in her court to "dominate you? We say the opposite of what they say, let them prove what they say."⁹⁰ Dentièrre was not unique in her uncompromising view on the authority of the

⁸⁶ Dentièrre, "Epistle to Marguerite," 52.

⁸⁷ McKinley, "The Early Modern Teacher," 404-405.

⁸⁸ Dentièrre, "Epistle to Marguerite," 53.

⁸⁹ McKinley, "The Early Modern Teacher," 408-409.

⁹⁰ Dentièrre, "Epistle to Marguerite," 53.

Church. Indeed, she shared it with a majority of Swiss Calvinists who took a hard line on the existence of the Church and its moral authority.⁹¹ What is interesting is her belief that women generally have a prominent role to play in opposing the un-just, un-Christian institution that was the Church. She believed that the moral fiber of women was equal to that of men.

Dentière's boldest assertion of the authority of women in the new Church is her affirmative defense of women's right to preach and teach in church. Unlike Shultz Zell, Dentière sees no reason to concede the Pauline injunction and instead asserts that women have as great a role to play in advancing the faith on earth as men do. This was not only a direct violation of the Pauline injunction, but it also went against what the majority of Protestant men believed was the role of women in the new Church as well. Dentière was well aware of this fact, asking "Who are they, I pray you, who have invented and contrived so many ceremonies, heresies, and false doctrines on earth if not men?"⁹² However, the disdain of others did not dissuade her from asserting that women had as much right to preach as men did. She attempted to put this into practice throughout her life. One of her first public acts as a reformer was to attempt to persuade other nuns to abandon the convent and marry priests.⁹³ Clearly, this represents a bold and novel assertion of women's spiritual authority and their ability to lead the new Protestant faith. She bases her call on the principle that God has granted the gospel to all people, asking whether "we have two Gospels, one for men and another for women? One for the wise and another for the fools? Are we not one in our Lord? In whose name are we baptized?"⁹⁴ However, she does not

⁹¹McKinley, *Epistle to Marguerite De Navarre and, Preface to a Sermon by John Calvin*, 32-33.

⁹²Dentière, "Epistle to Marguerite," 56.

⁹³ Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 36-38.

⁹⁴ Dentière, *Epistle to Marguerite*, 79.

assert that all individuals are capable of the ministry, noting that God has only reviled scripture to “some good women, revealing to them by his holy scriptures something holy and good.”⁹⁵ As a Calvinist, she does believe that God has selected a few precious individuals who have the responsibility to guide and minister to the rest of the community. Her Calvinist belief in double predestination may have also played a role in her views on the origins of divine authority. The doctrine of double predestination asserted that some individuals were destined for heaven while others were destined for hell.⁹⁶ Her belief that God predetermined who was saved and who was damned also implied that some people were chosen to receive divine knowledge, and some were not. Since it would be inconceivable that no women were saved, it must be that some women have the authority to interpret scripture as they were selected by God.

The outlier among these women was Marguerite, as her position was less publicly focused than that of the other three reformers. This is no doubt that her incredibly sensitive political position restricted her ability to share her views publicly. However, this does not mean that her vision for women’s authority in Christianity was any more limited than that of her peers. Rather, it means that she emphasized the interpersonal connection to God over the public exercise of authority. As demonstrated in her poem *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul* (1531), where she writes that “the unique font of heavenly riches, may I believe, dare I say that it comes from you? Am I able to write it?”⁹⁷ She is openly arguing that she possesses the authority to communicate with the divine without the need for a religious instructor. The fact that she is a woman does not prevent her from understanding the word of God, and so she can determine

⁹⁵ Dentière, *Epistle to Marguerite*, 56.

⁹⁶ Whitford, *Tett Clark Companion to Reformation Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 22.

⁹⁷ Marguerite de Navarre, “The Mirror of the Sinful Soul,” 143.

proper Christian doctrine on her own. Clearly, she believed that women had as much authority to comment on spiritual matters as men did. Marguerite de Navarre also struck back against another common argument that was made against the authority of women; that they were morally inferior to men and therefore underserving of the role of teacher or moral guardian. She writes that she is “guilty of all the wrongdoings one can commit,” but God has “assured me of my salvation.”⁹⁸ In doing so, she compares the alleged moral failings of women to the moral failings of all humanity and attempts to remove the distinction between the moralities of men and women. This would, no doubt, open the way for women to act as the moral guides of men just as Schütz Zell had suggested in her letter to the women of Kentzingen.

Now that the beliefs of the four reformers have been established, it is time to analyze their theologies in relation to each other. These four women had far more in common in their conception of authority than they differed. They used the same techniques to justify their participation in the Reformation. For example, Dentière, Schütz Zell, and Von Grumbach all used the rhetoric of crisis to justify their decisions to speak out publicly. They made use of fundamental Protestant concepts, such as sola scriptura and the priesthood of all believers, to provide the necessary authority they needed to comment on religious matters. They expand the priesthood of all believers to include women and argued that they had the authority to comment and instruct in religious matters. They also went beyond the standard definition of sola scriptura, that the Bible was the only source of theological knowledge, to argue that knowledge of the Bible was the only type of knowledge required to interpret scripture. Both Schütz Zell and Von Grumbach saw the need to argue against the necessity of university education as a prerequisite to

⁹⁸ Marguerite de Navarre, “The Mirror of the Sinful Soul,” 97-99.

interpreting scripture. The fact that all four women denied the necessity of traditional teachers and educators indicates that they were all aware of the threat that they faced from educated men using their educations to crowd them out of the theological conversation. That the Queen of France felt the need to write a verse in which she reflects on that fact shows that this was a universal barrier which would have prevented them writing on religious matters and undermined their theological authority as well.

These women also used references to crises throughout their works to justify their decisions to speak out on religious matters. Here, the exception is Marguerite, who communicated her theological ideas through poetry rather than through prose. However, even in her poems, she refers to crises of faith and belief, which forced her to speak out in the name of God. This rhetorical similarity indicates how useful the practice of asserting crises really was, as it allowed women to speak on matters which they usually would not be able to. Another rhetorical trick that they used was to refer to being “forced” to speak out on an issue due to the suffering of an individual involved. This tactic has a long history, as women for years had used such emotional appeals to justify their decisions to write on matters of faith. However, the way these reformers employ it is different than the women of the past. For one, they argued that it was an injustice to the faith, rather than an injustice done to a particular individual, which moved them to speak. They also referred to their own abilities to determine when an injustice to the faith had been done, such as forcing an individual to recant a belief that they held to be correct. By arguing that the circumstance had “forced” them to speak, they were also able to highlight the existence of the requisite extraordinary circumstances which required them to speak out.

Theologically speaking, all four women believed that women had both the right and the obligation to participate in the Reformation directly. All four emphasized the need for women to

embrace their authority as teachers and use scripture to instruct men and women about the proper practice of religion. It is interesting that all four women make reference to women acting as teachers or the necessity of women teachers throughout their writings. As mentioned above, women were prohibited from “preaching” due to the Pauline Injunction, so to bypass this, all four women justified their work by referring to it as “teaching” rather than “preaching.” This subtle distinction allowed them to write and work publicly under the guise that their actions technically did not qualify as ordained preaching. Women had been teachers in Europe before the Reformation, so it was perfectly acceptable for these women to refer to themselves as teachers and fit into this social role.⁹⁹

By constantly downplaying the importance of university education and emphasizing the importance of God given gifts and their natural talent as teachers, they were able to argue that women were as capable of receiving the gifts of God’s wisdom as men. This practice is similar to the Catholic practice of women referring to their written works as “divine revelations,” however it has a few key differences. For one, they did not assert that God gave them the words to say directly. Rather, they believed that God gave them the necessary wisdom to interpret scripture writ large. There was no one of spark of brilliance, which could be marked with a festival day and cleanly incorporated into wider theological canon. Instead, they were gifted the wisdom and authority to interpret and understand scripture on a continual basis as well as men were. There were differences on this front, however. Dentièrre asserted that this knowledge was a direct divine revelation, while Shultz Zell and von Grumbach believed that they were part revelation and part

⁹⁹ Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 24, 53-54.

wisdom. However, despite these differences, they all asserted that women could and did receive these gifts as freely as men.

Despite imposing the limit of “teaching” on themselves, all four women attempted to engage in preaching through their writings. Schütz Zell, von Grumbach, and Dentièrre did so directly by directly attempting to influence Catholics into adopting the Protestant creed. For example, in her epistle to Marguerite de Navarre, Dentièrre referred to the need for Marguerite to “take pains with the King, your brother, to obviate all these divisions which reign in the places and among the people over whom God commissioned him to rule and govern.”¹⁰⁰ The French Reformation started after the German, and faced stiffer resistance in the kingdom of France than it faced in the kingdoms of Germany.¹⁰¹ That Dentièrre calls for public support from another woman to help win converts to the cause clearly shows how she believed that women could play an active role in preaching. Here, as well, there were some differences. Dentièrre argued that women should be allowed to preach outright, whereas von Grumbach and Shultz Zell never went that far. However, despite these differences, all four asserted the fundamental belief that they were capable of leading and directing spiritual affairs as well as men.

All four also asserted the moral authority of women. None of them accepted the doctrine that women were morally inferior to men. They continually used the rhetoric of the Reformation, such as the ability for anyone to interpret scripture without needing a priest, to reject the hierarchical perceptions of male and female morality. In doing so, they took such doctrines far beyond what other male reformers were arguing at the time. Clearly one of the presiding interests of all four women was their desire to expand the role that they would be allowed to possess in

¹⁰⁰ Dentièrre, *Epistle to Marguerite*, 53.

¹⁰¹ Pettegree, *The Reformation World*, 211.

the new church. Despite other differences in their theologies, all four women believed that women had the means and the call to aid the Reformation in an active and public capacity. They sought to reduce pre-existing barriers to public discourse by employing the new language of the Reformation in combination with old rhetorical tricks to justify and explain their decisions to speak out on spiritual matters.

So far, this paper has primarily discussed the similarities of these four women's theologies. However, Schultz Zell and von Grumbach were Lutherans, while Marguerite and Dentière were Calvinists. Lutherans and Calvinists disagreed on a wide variety of theological points, so this similarity may initially seem bizarre. However, this similarity is simply the logical result of the way the women in this paper used concepts of authority in their theology. As established above, there was little substantive difference between Luther and Calvin on the issue of the priesthood of all believers. The difference that did exist, the extent to which the ability to understand scripture was special divine revelation, was relatively minor. All four women derived the majority of their arguments as to why they should be allowed to exercise authority in the new church from the idea of the priesthood of all believers. Therefore, it should not be surprising find broad agreement on the particular theological question of feminine authority. All four women also faced the same questions as to their ability and authority to speak on theological matters at all. That four different women used similar arguments to overcome shared challenges using common Protestant doctrines is unsurprising and shows how widespread the challenges that they faced in speaking were.

What disagreement we do see between these women can largely be attributed to the subtle differences in their conceptions of the priesthood of all believers. This difference can best be demonstrated by comparing the theologies of Dentière and Zell. As discussed above, Dentière

held that God gifted to certain individuals the unique ability to interpret scripture. Zell's beliefs differed only slightly, holding that the ability to interpret scripture was not a special divine blessing and that "God did not use some special revelation with you anymore than with me."¹⁰² This subtle difference can explain why Dentière could advocate for women to preach while Zell and von Grumbach would only advocate for them to teach. Dentière could argue that women obviously possessed the skills necessary to understand scripture. She stated that the ability to understand scripture came from "Jesus Christ, the just, without whom we cannot have true and perfect understanding of his Scriptures. That knowledge is revealed little by little to his followers."¹⁰³ Her use of the term "revealed" is telling, as it shows her belief that God alone grants understanding of scripture on a special basis. As mentioned above, Zell could not agree with this theory, as Luther's theory of the priesthood of all believers did not impose the idea that everyone who could understand the Bible possessed some greater authority from God. This difference meant that she could not endorse the statement that women should preach, as their ability to understand scripture was not a sign of special divine providence.

The Protestant Reformation was a transformational time in sixteenth century Europe. It enabled individuals of numerous diverse backgrounds to challenge the traditional authority of the Catholic Church and argue for what they believed was the true expression of Christianity. Women, as well as men, entered into this discourse and attempted to chart their own way through the Reformation. Despite coming from radically different backgrounds and belonging to different sects of the Reformation, all four women had similar views on what their authority should be in the new reformed Christianity. In order to spread their ideas, they relied on the use of the

¹⁰² Zell, "To Sir Caspar Schwenckfeld," 210.

¹⁰³ Dentière, "Epistle to Marguerite," 64.

common theology of the Reformation, such as the priesthood of all believers and sola scriptura, to justify their own abilities and authority on spiritual matters. When these appeals proved insufficient, they used a variety of common rhetorical techniques in order to justify and explain their messages. That the men of the Reformation would eventually unite against them and remand women to the same corner of religion that they had held before the Reformation does not detract from the importance of their arguments. Ultimately, the theologies of authority articulated by Marie Dentière, Argula von Grumbach, Katharina Schütz Zell, and Marguerite de Navarre indicated a common interest in expanding the authority of women in Christianity and a willingness to use a variety of methods to communicate and defend their visions.

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I pledge on my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help with this work. – Andrew Hudgins.