50 People Every Christian Should Know

Learning from Spiritual Giants of the Faith

Warren W. Wiersbe



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Preface

These brief biographies originally appeared as magazine articles, thirty-two of them in *Moody Monthly* magazine (1971–77) and sixteen in *The Good News Broadcaster,* published by Back to the Bible Broadcast. The *Moody Monthly* articles were compiled into *Walking with the Giants* and *Listening to the Giants*, both published by Baker; and the others into *Victorious Christians You Should Know,* co-published in 1984 by Back to the Bible and Baker. The biographies from the two *Giants* books later became *Living with the Giants*, which was published by Baker in 1993.

At the request of the publisher, I wrote the chapters on Clarence Edward Macartney and Alva Jay McClain especially for this volume.

It pleases me that there is still an interest in Christian biography. One of the goals in my writing ministry has been to encourage Christians—especially pastors—to "dig again the old wells" (see Gen. 26:18) and get acquainted with the godly leaders of the past who kept the light shining long before we were ever on the scene. I have heard from people in different parts of the world who have read these studies and been helped by them. Many of my readers have especially appreciated the bibliographical information and have searched for these forgotten books. I hope they found them!

Many Christians today are so fascinated with the latest religious fads and celebrities that they forget that all of us are "like dwarfs on

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the shoulders of giants," to quote the French philosopher Bernard of Chartres (d. c. 1130). In his essay "History," Emerson reminds us, "There is properly no history; only biography." I rejoice that in recent years, at least in the United States, there have been an increase in published biographies, both popular and academic, and I hope this continues. We must remember the warning issued by George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

The past is not an anchor to drag us back but a rudder to help guide us into the future. I have been helped greatly in my own life and ministry by reading the hundreds of biographies, autobiographies, and histories that have enabled me to write these chapters, and I trust you will benefit from reading them. When I started the *Moody Monthly* series, I was pastoring Calvary Baptist Church in Covington, Kentucky, near Cincinnati. Then we moved to Moody Church in Chicago (1971–78) and then to Back to the Bible Broadcast in Lincoln, Nebraska (1979–89).

The magazines I once wrote for are no longer being published. I'm grateful that these articles can be conserved in this volume, and I trust they will inform and inspire you.

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1

Katherine von Bora

1499–1552

November 10, 1983, marked the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther. We have heard a great deal about this courageous reformer and his ministry. But I want to focus our attention now not on Luther the preacher and leader, but on Luther the husband and father; for I want you to meet Katherine von Bora, the nun who became Martin Luther's devoted wife. He called her "Kitty, my rib," and he loved her dearly.

Katherine was born January 29, 1499, at Lippendorf, Germany, about six miles south of Leipzig. When her mother died five years later, her father put Katherine into a boarding school, and then, when she was nine, placed her in the Cistercian convent at Nimbschen in Saxony. It was not an easy place for a little girl to grow up, but at least she had protection, food, and friends. On October 8, 1515, she was "married to Christ" and officially became a nun. Little did she realize that, two years later, a daring Wittenberg professor named Martin Luther would nail his ninety-five theses to the church door and usher in a religious movement that would change her life.

As the Reformation doctrine spread across Germany, numbers of monks and nuns became believers and sought to escape from their

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convents and monasteries. Some of the nuns who sought freedom were severely punished, and some who escaped were brought back into even worse bondage. Twelve nuns at the Nimbschen convent somehow got word to Luther that they wanted to get out, and he arranged for their escape.

On Easter evening, April 5, 1523, a brave merchant and his nephew, Henry and Leonard Koppe, drove a wagonload of barrels into the convent, put each of the twelve nuns into a barrel, and drove away. When a suspicious man asked Koppe what he was carrying in the barrels, he replied, "Herring." Three of the girls were returned to their homes, but the other nine were taken to Wittenberg where husbands would be found for them. Two years later all of them had husbands—except Katherine von Bora.

Luther did his best to match her with a godly husband, but all his attempts failed. The one man she really fell in love with ran off and married another girl. Luther urged her to marry Pastor Casper Glatz, but she refused. She was living with some of the leading citizens in Wittenberg and learning how to be a lady and manage a household, so those two years of waiting were not wasted. Finally, she let it be known that if Doctor Luther were to ask her to be his wife, she would not say no.

It was not that Luther was against marriage, but he knew that he was a marked man and that, if he married, he would only put his wife and family into great danger. He urged others to marry, if only to spite the devil and his teaching (the policy of Rome concerning married clergy). How could a man who was declared a heretic by the pope and an outlaw by the Kaiser take a wife and establish a home?

But as the months passed, Luther weakened. He wrote to a friend, "If I can swing it, I'll take my Kate to wife ere I die, to spite the devil." Not the least of Luther's concerns were the economic factors involved in marriage. He accepted no payment or royalties for his books, his own income was unsteady and meager, and he was known for his generosity to anybody in need. If he wanted to deprive himself that was one thing, but did he have the right to force his wife to make such constant sacrifices?

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On June 13, 1525, Dr. Martin Luther and Katherine von Bora were married in a private ceremony at the Black Cloister, the "converted monastery" where Luther lived. As per the custom, two weeks later there was a public ceremony at the church. A host of friends attended, and the couple received many choice gifts. Of course, the enemy immediately circulated slanderous stories about the couple, but few people believed them. One man even said that their first child would be the Antichrist.

Luther was forty-two years old and Katherine was twenty-five. Would the marriage succeed? History records the glorious fact that the marriage not only succeeded, but set a high standard for Christian family life for centuries to come. The church historian Philip Schaff wrote:

> The domestic life of Luther has far more than a biographical interest. It is one of the factors of modern civilization. Without Luther's reformation clerical celibacy, with all its risks and evil consequences, might still be the universal law in all Western churches. There would be no married clergymen and clerical families in which the duties and virtues of conjugal, parental, and filial relations could be practiced. . . . Viewed simply as a husband-father, and as one of the founders of the clerical family, Luther deserves to be esteemed and honored as one of the greatest benefactors of mankind.

While we are at it, let's give some bouquets to Katherine too. It was not easy to convert a rundown cloister into a comfortable home. Nor was it easy to convert a hyperactive professor-preacher into a patient husband and father. She always called him Doctor Luther, but Luther had a number of pet names for his Katherine. "Kitty, my rib" is perhaps the best-known nickname, but he also called her *Selbander*, which is German for "better half." It was not unusual for him to refer to her as "my Lord Kate" or even "Doctor Katherine" (she was an excellent nurse and dispenser of herbal medicines). When he felt she was giving too many orders, he quietly called her *Kette*, the German word for "chain."

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"There is a lot to get used to in the first year of marriage," said Luther, and no husband knew this better than he. Accustomed to planning his own day, Luther had to learn that another mind and heart were now involved in his schedule. "Wives usually know the art to ensnare a man with tears and pleadings," he wrote. "They can turn and twist nicely and give the best words."

But he had nothing to fear, for nobody was a better manager of a house or a home than Katherine Luther. She transformed the old cloister into a fairly comfortable house, and, like the energetic woman of Proverbs 31, she launched into various enterprises to feed and sustain her household. She kept cows for milk and butter and for making cheese that, said her guests, was better than what they purchased at the market. She started a piggery because her husband liked pork, and this gave Luther a new name for his wife: My Lord Kate, Mistress of the Pigsty.

She turned a neglected field into a productive garden and even planted an orchard. What produce she did not use herself, she sold or bartered at the market and used the income to purchase items for the home. She even stocked a pond with fish! "Have I not at home a fair wife," Luther said proudly, "or shall I say *boss*?"

It was not long before the Black Cloister became a crowded and busy place. Catherine had not only her own children to care for—six of them—but also (at various times) her own niece and nephew, eleven of Martin's nieces and nephews, various students who boarded with them, and ever-present guests who came to confer with her famous husband. Before the Reformation, forty monks had lived in the Cloister; now, nearly as many joyful Christians lived there, learning to serve one another.

Luther wisely permitted his wife to be in charge of the management of the home. To begin with, he was far too busy to worry about such things, and, he had to admit, she did a far better job than he could do. Katherine not only cared for him and the household, but she ministered to the needs of people all over Wittenberg. She listened to their problems, gave them care and medicine in their sicknesses, counseled them in their sorrows, and advised them in their busi-

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ness affairs. The town recognized that the Luther household was an exemplary Christian home, and much of that success was due to Katherine.

It was not easy being married to Martin Luther. He would let his food get cold while he debated theology with his guests or answered the questions of students. "Doctor," said Katherine one day as the dinner grew cold, "why don't you stop talking and eat?" Luther knew she was right, but he still snapped back, "I wish that women would repeat the Lord's Prayer before opening their mouths!" One day he said, "All my life is patience! I have to have patience with the pope, the heretics, my family, and Kate."

But out of those mealtime conversations came one of Luther's finest books, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*. Baker Books has reprinted the edition edited by Thomas S. Kepler, and I recommend it to you. As you read it, keep in mind that it was Katherine Luther who really made the book possible. It was at her table that these sparkling conversations were recorded—while the food grew cold.

Luther called marriage "a school for character," and he was right. He realized that his own life was enriched because of the love of his wife and family. When I was teaching the history of preaching to seminary students, I reviewed Luther's philosophy of ministry and read many of his sermons, and I was impressed with the many allusions and illustrations drawn from the home. I was also impressed with Luther's Christmas sermons, and I wonder if they would have been as effective had he remained an unmarried man.

As in every home, there were times of trial and sorrow. The Luthers had six children: Hans (b. 1526), Elizabeth (b. 1527, d. 1528), Magdalene (b. 1529, d. 1542), Martin (b. 1531), Paul (b. 1533), and Margaret (b. 1534). Luther would arise at six each morning and pray with the children, and they would recite the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, and then sing a psalm (Luther himself was an excellent musician). He would then hurry off to preach or to lecture and would be busy the entire day.

But Luther was not a robust man, and he had many ailments that often struck him without warning. On several occasions, Katherine

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prepared to become a widow, but the Lord graciously healed her husband and restored him to her. In 1540, it was Katherine who was despaired of, her condition considered hopeless. Day and night her husband was at her side, praying for God's mercy on her and the children, and the Lord graciously answered. Six years later, it was Martin who was being nursed by Katherine, but his recovery was not to be, and on February 18, 1546, he entered into glory. I am sure that one of his first acts of worship in heaven was to thank God for Katherine.

Let me share two of my favorite stories about Katherine Luther.

At family devotions one morning, Luther read Genesis 22 and talked about Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. "I do not believe it!" said Katherine. "God would not have treated his son like that!"

"But, Katie," Luther quietly replied, "He did!"

During one very difficult period, Luther was carrying many burdens and fighting many battles. Usually jolly and smiling, he was instead depressed and worried. Katherine endured this for days. One day, she met him at the door wearing a black mourning dress.

"Who died?" the professor asked.

"God," said Katherine.

"You foolish thing!" said Luther. "Why this foolishness!"

"It is true," she persisted. "God must have died, or Doctor Luther would not be so sorrowful."

Her therapy worked, and Luther snapped out of his depression.

It is interesting to read Luther's letters to his wife and note the various ways he addressed her: "To the deeply learned Mrs. Katherine Luther, my gracious housewife in Wittenberg"; "To my dear housewife, Katherine Luther, Doctress, self-martyr at Wittenberg"; "To the holy, worrisome Lady, Katherine Luther, Doctor, at Wittenberg, my gracious, dear housewife"; "Housewife Katherine Luther, Doctress, and whatever else she may be"!

After Luther's death, the situation in Germany became critical and war broke out. Katherine had to flee Wittenberg, and when she returned, she found her house and gardens ruined and all her cattle gone. Then the plague returned, and Katherine and the children

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again had to flee. During that trip, she was thrown out of a wagon into the icy waters of a ditch, and that was the beginning of the end for her. Her daughter Margaret nursed her mother tenderly, even as her mother had nursed others, but there was no recovery. Katherine died on December 20, 1552, at Torgau, where she is buried in St. Mary's Church.

On her monument, you will read: "There fell asleep in God here at Torgau the late blessed Dr. Martin Luther's widow Katherine von Bora."

They could have added: "Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all" (Prov. 31:29).

I suggest that we make either January 29 or June 13 "Pastors' Wives' Day," not only in honor of Katherine von Bora, but in honor of all pastors' wives everywhere—that great host of sacrificing women of God who make it possible for their husbands to minister. I salute these women who must often turn houses into homes, who carry the burdens of their people as well as their own, who do without that others may have, who cheerfully bear criticism, and who do it all to the glory of God.

By the way, what have *you* done lately to encourage *your* pastor's wife?

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