

The real challenge of herstory

By [Kendra Weddle](#)

March 25, 2014

I vividly remember my day in Wittenburg, Germany. My husband and I had taken the train from Berlin in order to see the sights connected with the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Sure, most people who travel to Wittenburg are there to learn about Martin Luther, to stand at the church door where he nailed his 95 Theses, which rather than leading to profitable theological conversation, eventually resulted in his excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church and subsequently going into hiding.

But I had made this pilgrimage to learn more about Katharina von Bora. Previously a nun, she left the convent after hearing about Luther's views on God and the church. Who was she, I wondered, as I toured Lutherhaus, the home she later ran with skilled attention and keen oversight once she and Luther married?

A statue in her honor stands outside of the family home and many exhibits throughout praise Katharina for her work: apparently she knew how to stretch a lean budget, entertain endless house guests, and raise several children, all while supporting the man we credit with changing the course of Christian history.

[Hannah Anderson recently wrote on Her.meneutics](#) that we have a lot to gain from knowing about women who have traveled this road before us. I, too, think understanding our past is invaluable. Realizing the part Katharina von Bora played in the Reformation not only humanizes Martin, who tends to be viewed as a hero who did no wrong. It also calls attention to the fact that movements for change require people working together, each doing what is necessary irrespective of social norms or theological assumptions.

Learning about women's lives is critical to providing a fuller picture of our shared history, helping us to see previous lives more accurately.

But this is just the first step in valuing the experiences of women, experiences that frequently go unnoticed. Once we bring women's lives into our assessment of our past—and, indeed, our present and future—we must confront a second necessary

shift in our thinking.

In giving attention to the stories of women, people will soon discover, as Hannah points out, the gender debates are older than we have imagined. But more to the point, women throughout the history of the church have often called into question patriarchal assumptions and theologies. Learning about women means we, too, must look squarely in the eyes of Christianity's misogyny. From Mary Magdalene to Perpetua, from the Beguines to Hildegard of Bingen, from Katharina von Bora to Sarah Grimké, women's lives require us to reconsider everything we thought we knew about our faith tradition.

If the lives of women before us are to be truly instructive we must take up the radical task that Rita Gross, a scholar of women and religion, proposes: own as our birthright the responsibility of naming reality.

Mary Daly once suggested that the Genesis narrative—when Adam named other species as well as his partner, Eve—illustrates how completely patriarchy has taken the power of identity away from women. In doing so, male experience became normative while women's experiences were discounted as inaccurate or secondary.

In response to Daly, Gross argues for the fundamental shift that must occur for religions to move beyond their patriarchal bias. Women must recover the right to bring our experiences back into focus as trustworthy and meaningful.

Can you begin to imagine how Christianity might be re-envisioned if women took this claim seriously? How would our faith be different if it had not been transferred to us in male-only experience and terminology?

Knowing herstory requires more than knowledge. It calls for a commitment to work for justice beginning with owning our power and right to name.

*Originally posted at [Ain't I a Woman?](#)*