

## Engage360 Episode 135 | Church History and the Voices of the Reformation

Rev. Dr. Jennifer Powell McNutt

**Angie Ward:** Hi, friends. Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. I'm your host, Angie Ward. Thanks for joining us for today's conversation. Uh, I am honored today to have as our guest, coming from Wheaton, Illinois, the Reverend Dr. Jennifer Powell McNutt. Dr. McNutt is the Franklin S. Dyrness Associate Professor in Biblical and Theological Studies at Wheaton College, a Fellow in the Royal Historical Society, and a Parish Associate at First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn, Illinois.

Dr. McNutt received her Ph.D. in History from the University of St. Andrews, an M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary, and a B.A. in Religious Studies from Westmont College, where she's originally from, in California. Dr. McNutt is going to be speaking at Denver Seminary for our Spurgeon Lecture Series, and so I have the honor of interviewing her, interviewing you, for this conversation.

So, Dr. McNutt, so glad to be able to talk with you today.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** It's so wonderful to get to meet you and to be part of this conversation. Thank you.

**Angie Ward:** Yeah, we're looking forward to having you on campus. So okay, there's a lot just in your titles that I read that we could explore [00:01:30] and different things that you're interested in. But let me ask you first, how did you become interested in history, and in Church history in particular?

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Great question. I, yeah, I think it was sort of a progressive realization of my own natural, like, inclinations towards historical thinking. It was part of taking some, you know, wonderful courses that unlocked the history of the Church, that exposed me to, you know, new parts of the story, and I think also that just integrated the history of Christianity into the history of the world.

So not seeing Church history as something separate that's, you know, going on over here, isolated in the corner, but actually something that is fully integrated into our world's history. And that really excited me. So, I think, you know, certain professors doing programs, I had the pleasure of doing a program at Oxford, as an undergraduate student, and taking Reformation for the first time with some amazing professors,

including Alistair McGrath. That was quite a privilege. And I wrote my first paper on John Calvin for him and read the institute, you know, portion of the institutes at that time. was, you know, 19 [00:03:00] years old and it was, yeah, that was really formidable. And then, when I was in Princeton Seminary, taking a class on European Christianity with Jamie Deming, who a marvelous professor. His classes were small, but we got to really engage with one another and with the material.

And he saw my potential for this work and really mentored and supported me. So, I have a lot, to say and in gratitude to him and, and so many professors along the way who guided me, I think. And I'll just say one last thing, but to me, I think the joy of history is that they're, you know, all of the resources, are relevant.

So, we can be talking about the history of the Bible, the history of Biblical languages of theology, you know, of, but also gender and politics and economics and all of those facets. So, I love the fullness of the picture.

**Angie Ward:** Yeah, that's great. And we'll pull some of those threads during the rest of our conversation, but you talked about, you know, history not being some separate thing, but what I grew up with was that. It was dry. It was dull. It was, it was something back then I, I didn't see the threads, you know, I didn't understand the connections.

Why is it so important for us to know and understand history, and Church history in particular, as Christians?

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Yeah, as Christians. It's a great question. [00:04:30] I do believe so strongly in that. And I think that, you know, that the Bible is talking about the ways, theologically, about the ways that we are interconnected with one another. That, you know, Christ is doing a new thing, bringing a family together, through confessing and believing in faith in him, by his blood, bringing a new family together, a family that is adopted, that is receiving an inheritance, and that is through him and that are brothers and sisters, you know? And so, that is so much bigger than just what the here and the now and what we see in the here and the now we, you know, we proclaim when we affirm, you know, our creeds, for example, that God created the visible and the invisible, right?

So, there are the two realms that God rules. And so, the Church is the same way, right? There's the visible and the invisible elements of the Church. And even though we can't see our connections always, we don't know those connections, we are actually connected, and this is, there's a richness that we get to inherit and receive and explore that, you know, can function in many different ways, depending upon, I think, the Lord's purposes.

So sometimes it can convict us of our sin. [00:06:00] Sometimes it can, inspire us as, you know, to be exemplary models of what it means to follow Christ. Sometimes it can be a comfort in terms of discovering that the Church has dealt with these questions before the Church has struggled with, how does it relate to politics?

How does it relate to, you know, money, right? How does it relate to sexual immorality? Questions of, of sexuality as well. And these aren't new questions, actually. And I think that that can be a comfort. It can enrich our perspective, especially that expanding our perspective, I think is so important for seeing where we actually are today as individuals, but then also as a community of faith.

So.

**Angie Ward:** Yeah, that's great. Like I said, history for me was dull until recently I kind of rediscovered or discovered a love for Church history and, and like you said, I started putting pieces together and going, well, these are not uncommon. We've, we keep dealing with these things over and over. There are cycles.

There are different issues. I found when I was, I think my introduction was Church History in Plain Language by Dr. Bruce Shelley, who taught here at Denver Seminary, and I realized I had a sense of how far off the Church had gotten many times over history in the name of Jesus. When

you, as you've [00:07:30] studied history, and especially early on, what was a surprise to you as you began to delve into Church history?

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Well, I think, I'm always surprised, too. I mean, there's a tension, I think, between those two things of seeing our own story in the past and then also discovering like, oh, that was really their thing. That was really their time. They had certain blind spots or for whatever reason, their mental framework could not anticipate or imagine a different kind of dynamic at work.

And then, and then there's a change, right? There's somebody bring, you know, there's a text that is discovered, like Aristotelian philosophy, you know, comes through the Iberian Peninsula and it's translated into Latin and then it completely changes and transforms, you know, scholastic Christian theology.

And so, then there's a shift and then the community has to grapple with that shift. So, I love the moments where we realize, you know, this is really different. I don't understand what's going on here, and I don't know why this is happening. And then that's where I think history can teach us how to be empathetic, how to really listen, how to probe, how to explore and sort of go further and [00:09:00] thinking, how can I understand why this matters so much to people? I was just lecturing, for example, on Eucharistic theology and the Reformation, which is such a divisive and complex conversation. And I was, you know, these students are majoring in theology. So, we were going really deep into the specifics of the Christology that is at work in shaping these conversations.

And, you know, even though we're talking about, basically, we have Luther and Zwingli and they're, you know, Luther is really shaped by an Alexandrian school of thought. We were saying how Patristic Christology really shapes that conversation and that, you know, Zwingli is really shaped by the Antiochian School of Thought in how they understand the two natures of Christ.

So, we're getting into all the implications and the complexities of that, but at the end of the day, they're like, yeah, but, but still, why does this matter to them? Like why does this divide them so much? And I think that is, that's the challenge of doing history and the opportunity to, to try to understand people that are different from you or that don't arrive at the same conclusion.

And that's something we need in the church. You know, we need to be fostering that listening, fostering that care, and how we interact with one another. So.

**Angie Ward:** Yeah, yeah, you, used a bunch of really big Ph.D. theology history [00:10:30] words So, Zwingli and, Antiochian, you know.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Yeah.

**Angie Ward:** School of Antiochian, and Christology, all these big theological words. As an aside for our listeners, like, obviously this is after you've done decades now of study and teaching and all that.

Where does someone start? Talk to me like I'm 12.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Oh, okay. With this specific issue or something else?

**Angie Ward:** Like if I go, man, I need to, I want to learn a little bit more about history and Church history in particular.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Okay. So, I don't mean to plug my book, but

**Angie Ward:** That's allowed. That's okay.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** You know, so I have a handy book here called Know the Theologians. You know, but there are so many wonderful resources too. I think the thing about history, and about getting to know our Church family that is global and that is across time,

is that you have to, you have to choose places, you choose spots, you choose places that you begin to learn, and you build on that. So, there are many layers to these stories. I am still learning so much and anticipate learning for the rest of my life more and more of these stories and the complexities of basically how the Lord has been at work in our world, even when we haven't.

And so [00:12:00] I think, you know, starting with some survey books, like Know the Theologians or other resources as well. And to me, the key is getting to know the people. So, if you can unlock the story of a Christian leader or thinker in the past, and then go from there, it does bring history alive because, you know, they're humans, right?

They're real people. And, you know, so there's, you know, it's like getting to know people and the different sides of different people. I love the metaphor that sometimes we use in Church history, which is that, you know, we have been invited to sit at the table, Christ's table together to share this meal together.

And to talk with one another, to get to know one another. And one of the phrases that's often used is that there is a great conversation, the great conversation that has been going on about Jesus across the centuries, right? Since the Revelation of Christ. And we are invited to join into that conversation.

So, start to get to know your family don't worry if it starts off small. Maybe you just look at your tradition at first. That's good. You know, that's good. And then expand from there [00:13:30] and sort of see those interconnections.

**Angie Ward:** Yeah. That's a great metaphor. So, speaking of the people around the table and the stories of the people,

so, you have a particular interest in reformed theology, and John Calvin is one of those people that you've gotten to know at the table in this conversation of Church history.

And uh, Reformed theology or, and John Calvin in particular, there's a lot of baggage today about that in the Christian Church and evangelicals in particular. How would you sum up Reformed theology?

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Okay. Yeah. So, I'm definitely looking at Reformed theology as it's emerging in the 16th century especially. And then I do have a book on the legacy of Reformed Theology in the 18th century, which is its own time and own context. But I would say, yeah,

Reformed theology is, you know, emerging in conversation with the, the writings and the thought of Martin Luther, is certainly shaped by Luther initially, with recognition, especially from John Calvin.

Calvin's Institutes is shaped, initially, the first edition, by Martin Luther's Small Catechism. So, there's a lot of points of connection and continuity, but as it is when, you know, theology develops [00:15:00] in different contexts, there are other questions or other points of emphasis that can emerge.

And we can really see that with Reformed theology and looking at John Calvin, who was just a child when Luther's 95 Theses were written and distributed. So, he's really a second-generation thinker and theologian. and one thing that I really appreciate about his theology and his story, and I'm writing a book about this actually on Calvin.

**Angie Ward:** What are you not writing a book about?

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** I my know. question. Yeah, sorry.

**Angie Ward:** That's, no, great.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Some of these projects take many years.

**Angie Ward:** Oh yeah.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** So it is that, you know, this theology written in displacement, right? Theology written in exile. Sometimes when we talk about the Reformation, we think about the Reformation, we don't realize that there is this refugee crisis that is going on, that their people are displaced from their homes and their locations.

And there's this, you know, maybe a million people being displaced from their homes, and this actually started before the Reformation, but it really picks up steam in the 16th century as a result of the Reformation. And Calvin is one of those examples, right? One of those individuals that we especially know who has been, you know, displaced from [00:16:30] his home in France and is writing in exile, writing, you know, as a refugee in certain regards. There's a complexity to that term too. And so, I think what is very striking about that is what are the emphases that come out if you were writing theology from that perspective? And one of the most important things for Reformed theology is the freedom of God.

And so, this sounds kind of funny to say, but you know, there was a sense from the late medieval Church that the way that theology and the practices of the Church were constraining God's freedom and God's will. And the Reformed tradition, I think it's so, it's so interesting to see then how, at a time where they are like, experiencing the loss of freedom, that they would really find comfort and assurance in, you know, emphasizing God's freedom and God's will and God's ability to save you no matter your circumstances, no matter your challenges, no matter the struggles you face.

God can save you. And that is such a good, that is such a good message. Of course, it's a biblical message and so it's, you know, I've been doing a lot on the French Bible and how the French Bible is shaped for those Christians to read Scripture through that lens. And there is this idea of,

you know, God [00:18:00] is the God of the Exodus who is, you know, who's going to protect his people through, you know, bringing his people to the Promised Land, despite a, you know, an angry and persecuting ruler, right?

So, there are some of those dynamics, I think that are so helpful. And then, I would say the emphasis on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, which we don't always.

**Angie Ward:** No, I wouldn't affiliate that with. Yeah.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Yeah. Calvin, even in the history of theology, has been described as a doctor of the Holy Spirit. So that's where the freedom of God is also seen, in the Holy Spirit

at work and illuminating our understanding and helping us to see who we are in relation to God. And I think a lot really culminates for Calvin in discovering that God is, God seeks to show his benevolence towards us, his goodness, and his kindness towards us. But that's a side of Calvin that you will not often hear. You know, usually he's described as, you know, cold and hard and, but this is the man who loved the Psalms and saw the Psalms as the expression of the anatomy of the soul. And you know, is, there's, I think other dimensions to him that we often miss in our world today.

**Angie Ward:** Yeah, I'm [00:19:30] just continuing to reflect on that image of a big table with John Calvin being one of the people there and the different people there. It just brings, the people, I think, bring the history off the page because when I read about it, I don't think about John Calvin being displaced and, you know, a Frenchman then in, you know, in Geneva?

Right? I don't think about that. He was just a kid when Luther was first, you know, posting his 95 Theses. I just thought, you know, in my simple understanding, the way I feel like it was taught to me, or at least what I caught of what was taught, was that Calvin, Luther, Zwingli, these other Reformers, they were all the same age, they all got together in a room, they all said, "Let's do this Reformation Ready? One, two, three, break." You know, and so having the nuance of that is just really enlightening. So.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** The story, you story, the humanity of it not to say, and certainly Calvin was not perfect. And there were lots of things that, you know, we would disagree with or whatever. So, it's, I'm not trying to over, or to dehumanize him in the other way, you know, so there, but to allow there to be the complexity of the people of the past in the same way that we would recognize in the people today.

So.

**Angie Ward:** Well, so tell me about, you have, I mean, several main themes. You've got Reform [00:21:00] theology, you've got history, but also women and women in history and women in Reformation history. So, as we're picturing this table of the Reformation, who would be one prominent woman at that table?

Tell me about who that would be and why they were at the table and what their contribution was.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Yeah. Oh, well, thank you. That's a great question. I love it. So, there are several, gosh, there's so many. I guess I can only choose one. I just plug a book. This is by Kirsi Stjerna, *Women Reformers of Early Modern Europe*. So that would be, I think, a really helpful book to get some of those snapshots of those women.

Probably because of my interest in Reformed theology, there's two women in particular that I would love to talk about to sit next to at that table. One is a woman by the name of Marie Dentière. And she was actually in Geneva before Calvin, and she is considered, you know, a Reformer's wife, but also a Reformer in her own right.

She was an Abbess, a leader in the monastic, the medieval monastic Church before she discovered Protestant thought and embraced that, [00:22:30] she was actually a defender of Calvin. Calvin didn't always appreciate her defenses, but so I don't know if they would be sitting next to each other, but nonetheless.

**Angie Ward:** She'd be at the table.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** She would be at the table, and she is the only woman named on the Reformation Wall in the city of Geneva.

Her name was put on there by the first female moderator of the Company of Pastors in Geneva that I got to meet, it is connected to the Reformation Museum there, but so Marie writes though a really important open letter to Marguerite of Navarre, who was the sister of King Francis I of France.

And she writes a letter to Marguerite, who has been a patron of what we, the word that they used at the time was evangelicalism. I know we think about it in a modern way, but that's, they were thinking about, we're Gospel people. So evangelical versus papists, Pope people. So, anyway, and so she was sort of protecting the leaders in France that were seeking Reform within the country.

And then a lot of those leaders, you know, ended up in Geneva or in other parts of the Swiss Confederation in that time. And so, Marie also is going to move to Geneva and she's going to be part of that. And she writes to Marguerite, and it is intended to be a, you know, [00:24:00] encouragement of women to really, you know, dig into Scripture and to not be afraid to talk about their faith, to share their faith with one another, and to even proclaim. She talks about women as, you know, preaching and the importance of that, and even, you know, the Mary Magdalene served as an example of and so they find a lot of the women of the Reformation are looking to the women of the Bible because of elevating the authority of the Bible as the first and final authority, then the women of the Bible become really important for the women of the Reformation, and to see what are the precedents that are, have been set here, what is allowed, what is permitted, and so some of the women of the Reformation are pushing those boundaries, some of them are pushing, you know, receiving encouragement from the male Reformers in certain ways.

It kind of depends on the generations and the way that that develops and shifts. But Marie is one of those who is advocating for women to preach, you know, a lot of, for these women, not just Marie, but also, Argula von Grumbach, who was in Germany, the first Protestant female theologian, bestselling writer who rivals Luther initially in her writings, and she, she also,

they're looking to things like the Parable of the Talents and saying that, you know, Christ has said [00:25:30] that we have these talents and we shouldn't bury them.

We shouldn't hide them because at the end of the day, when we stand before the Lord, we have to give an account for how we use them. It's the talents that we have received, and we need to be faithful in that. So, both. So, it's interesting to see that parable actually has a huge impact on the women in the Reformation.

And there are many others. Can I give you one more example?

**Angie Ward:** Uh.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Is there time?

**Angie Ward:** if it's a, well, it's a quick one, but yeah, I want to transition to your spot at the table and your role, just your experience as a woman in following in those footsteps. So go ahead. What's your, what's your third?

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** I don't know. You can cut it out if you want.

**Angie Ward:** Okay.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** I am also writing a book on Mary Magdalene. So, in the history of the reading of Mary Magdalene, but, you know, we think about the women of Luke 8 and how they, you know, you know, use their connections and their finances, you know, to, to really support and guide the ministry of Christ.

I think Jeanne d'Albret, who is the Queen, who becomes the Queen of Navarre in France, is another great example, because she is, you know, introducing Reform in her kingdom. She is funding the translation of the Bible into the common language of her kingdom. She is using her political standing and [00:27:00] position to make a place for the Church a Reformed church in her community.

So that's another one that I'd love to meet and that I think aligns well with some of the women we see in the Bible as well.

**Angie Ward:** Yeah, that's gonna be a long line of people to talk to when we get to Heaven, right? And see all people around the table. Let's transition, let's take it personally because you and I are way down 500 years plus post-Reformation, but in Church history in over 2000 years. And we have seats at the table in Christian ministry, in the academy, in some part thanks to the work of those women. Mm. And so I'm interested in what has been your experience as a woman in the academy and in theology, as a discipline in particular, and even studying Reformation and Calvinistic

theology, which in modern times, there's a lot, you know, certain streams of that would interpret that as very complementarian and not really a role for women as leaders. So just share a little bit about your own experience on that journey.



**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Yes. Thank you. My journey began with my parents' stories. So, my parents met at Fuller Seminary. I would like to say the first time I went to seminary was in the womb, for the seminary. [00:28:30] So I had a different kind of model, one that I obviously was very comfortable with new, you know, didn't know anything different, but my parents were, ministered together as co-pastors in our denomination in the Presbyterian Church.

And so, my mom was really a pioneer in the Seventies that, you know, you know, going to seminary, and ordination and those kinds of things. So, I've always had, so I've had that model and I know that that's very different for a lot of listeners probably, to have that model. I appreciate that.

The uniqueness or the rarity of that. So that's been a big part of my journey. I think the academic side, adding the academic side to the mix is different, you know, pursuing a Ph.D. at the same time as I was pursuing ordination, I, you know, in terms of my own personal story, I had an experience as a child at age 10, where I experienced the Lord's Calling on my life.

And I knew then, I knew I was going to go to seminary. I knew that I was going to pursue this, and I didn't know exactly where it would lead me, but I knew that I was being called to be equipped to serve the Lord and that I wanted to do that to the best of my abilities that I wanted to receive.

I wanted to pursue excellence in that. So, excellence in education, excellence [00:30:00] in, you know, meeting the standards that are required in those places and then being open to where the Lord would call me and how the Lord would use me. And I think, you know, had a model of how in certain seasons you might be called to do this or in certain seasons you might be called to do this in part because that's what happened to my mom.

But as it turns out, my journey has been very, has been a lot simpler, actually, insofar as, you know, I finished my dissertation, I got the job at Wheaton College, I've been here for 16 years teaching full time, and, you know, so it's been a little bit more stable than I think what, you know, what I observed with my family. And my primary calling is in the classroom, as it turns out, and, you know, serving and mentoring students, you know, guiding them, equipping them, launching them to do the work that God's called them to do.

And I love that. You know, there's so much joy in that work. There's so much joy in bringing in discovery of, you know, of the history of the Church, it's the theological story, etc. And then bringing that into the life of the Church through ministry. My husband and I started a ministry called Make Nutshell Ministries that we're doing together, and Know the Theologians comes out of that, that book is really for the Church.

It's for [00:31:30] classrooms as well. And it's, you know, intended to bring some of the stories that people might not have heard or not, might not know to their understanding and to shape their faith in their lives. So, we'll see what happens with that, but we're very thankful. Yeah, so that's part of the story, I think, for me, has been just the complexity of doing the two things.

So not just the professor-academic route, but also the ordination church leadership route and trying to understand how do these, how do I manage my time? How do I direct my time faithfully? My energy, where is the Lord calling me in this season or not? Sometimes I'm in contexts where it's a problem for me to be an ordained woman.

And sometimes I'm in a context where that is celebrated. And so being able to navigate that, as a person, I think as a person of goodwill, as a person who seeks connection with brothers and sisters in Christ across denominations and across traditions, that's really where my heart is. And so, trying to be sensitive to that and also to be who I am and have been called to be.

**Angie Ward:** Yeah, thank you. Yeah, what a wide-ranging [00:33:00] conversation, and I just thank you for being here and treating our listeners to a lot of church historians and people that I haven't heard of and are intrigued to learn about. I know you have two books. You've talked about a number of them you've written or have it coming out. Your next one is Know the Theologians, we've talked about that. That's from Zondervan in April. And The Mary We Forgot; I'm assuming that's Mary Magdalene?

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Yes, is.

**Angie Ward:** That's with Brazos Press in October. And again, we'll look forward to having you here for the Spurgeon Lecture Series at Denver Seminary. And yeah, thank you for your work as a woman in the intersection of women and theology and Reformation and history, and for being here today.

**Jennifer Powell McNutt:** Thank you. It's been a wonderful conversation. I appreciate you having me and I'm looking forward to being there soon.

**Angie Ward:** Sounds good. Friends, we're grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us. If you get the chance, leave us a rating or review wherever you listen to podcasts, and please send any questions or comments to us at [podcast@denverseminary.edu](mailto:podcast@denverseminary.edu). You can also visit [denverseminary.edu](http://denverseminary.edu) for more information and resources about Denver Seminary, such as events, degree programs, and other episodes of Engage360, this podcast, including full transcripts if you'd rather read them. We're grateful for your interest, support, and prayers. Until next time, may the Lord bless you. [00:34:30]