

MARTIN BUCER  
 REFORMED PASTOR OF STRASBOURG

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The early German Reformer, Martin Bucer, was of great significance for the Protestant faith and church. His abilities and leadership in Protestantism were recognized by his notable contemporaries--Luther, Melanchthon, Zwingli, Bullinger, Calvin, Vermigli, and Cranmer. With all of these Bucer corresponded, fellowshipped, discussed theology, disputed, and cooperated in the gospel, as an equal, if not a superior. No theological conference in those days was complete without Bucer; and at many of them he did most of the talking, which did not always endear him to the others.

The princes of the earth paid Bucer deference. He became a chief advisor and close confidant of Philip of Hesse, the main political defender of the forces of Protestantism in those tense times. Emperor Charles V must needs invite Bucer to the conferences that sought to restore unity to the Empire, and listen to Bucer explain and defend sound Protestant doctrine. At the end of his life Bucer was invited to England with the approval of King Edward VI, who welcomed Bucer personally and who later received from the theologian the gift of one of Bucer's greatest works, *De Regno Christi (On the Kingdom of Christ)*, in which Bucer instructed the Protestant king in how to make England truly a Christian commonwealth. In her own way even Mary Tudor, the infamous "Bloody Mary," acknowledged the greatness of Bucer when, upon her accession to the throne of England, not only did she burn Lattimer, Ridley, and Cranmer alive but also Bucer who had already died. She had his body dug up from the grave, the remains chained to a post and burned.

John Calvin expressed high estimation of Bucer's gifts, acknowledging his own indebtedness to Bucer. In the "Dedication" of his *Commentary on Romans* Calvin wrote:

Finally there comes Bucer, who spoke the last word on the subject [of writing commentaries, D.J.E.] with the publication of his writings. In addition to his profound learning, abundant knowledge, keenness of intellect, wide reading, and many other varied excellences in which he is surpassed by hardly anyone at the present day, this scholar, as we know, is equalled by few and is superior to very many. It is to his especial credit that no one in our time has been more precise or diligent in interpreting Scripture than he.<sup>1</sup>

In the "Argument" of his *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* Calvin stated his dependence as a commentator on Bucer:

Bucer, a man of revered memory, and an eminent teacher of the Church of God, who above all others appears to me to have labored successfully in this field, has been especially my model.<sup>2</sup>

This is no small praise coming as it does from the prince of commentators.

Of late, accompanying a resurgence of interest in Bucer and a development of Bucer studies there is an increasing awareness of Bucer's importance for Protestantism. H. Strohle regards Bucer's commentary on Romans (1536) as "the inauguration of modern exegesis."<sup>3</sup> August Lang of Halle University asserted that Bucer is of more importance for the understanding of Reformed Protestantism than is Calvin. Along the same line, Reinhold Seeberg called Bucer the forerunner and pathfinder for Calvin.<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Pauck agrees: "The type of church which we call Calvinistic or Reformed is really a gift of Martin Butzer to the world, through the work of his strong and brilliant executive, Calvin."<sup>5</sup>

Although interest in Bucer is growing, Bucer-research is difficult at the present time. The reason is not that Bucer

wrote little. On the contrary, he wrote some one hundred fifty books, many of them large. Bucer wrote as he spoke--at great length. Even his friends complained of his verbosity. Luther (by no means always a friend) once called him a "*Klappermaul*" (chatterbox). Calvin praised Bucer for his commentaries in the "Dedication" of his own *Commentary on Romans* and went on to say, "Bucer is too verbose to be read quickly by those who have other matters to deal with. . . criticism by the secretary of Emperor Charles V: "*Windbeutel*" (windbag).

In addition to writing books Bucer carried on a voluminous correspondence, much of it with the leading political and religious lights of that day. Much of this correspondence is extant.

But until recently Bucer's work has remained buried in libraries in Germany and England, much of it in Bucer's own handwriting. Bucer's script was atrocious--the English bishop Edmund Grindal said that a conjurer was needed to decipher it.

Even now when his works are being published, little is available in English. Among the works of Bucer that are available in English we should mention the book published in 1972 by the Sutton Courtenay Press in England, *Common Places of Martin Bucer* (D.F. Wright, translator and editor), a volume of translations of strategically selected parts of several of Bucer's writings. And we must mention Wilhelm Pauck's translation of Bucer's *De Regno Christi*, Volume XIX of the Library of Christian Classics, *Melanchthon and Bucer*.<sup>6</sup>

In addition there are important biographical works on Bucer, especially Hastings Eells' *Martin Bucer*<sup>7</sup> and Constantine Hopf's *Martin Bucer and the English Reformation*.<sup>8</sup>

There is a very valuable analysis of Bucer's theology in English: W. P. Stephens' *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Martin Bucer*.<sup>9</sup>

Add to these the growing body of theses and dissertations of varying worth on specific aspects of Bucer's theology,

particularly his doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

*A Sketch of Bucer's Life and Labor*

Martin Bucer, or Butzer, as his name is also spelled, was eight years younger than Luther and eighteen years older than Calvin. He was born in 1491 and died in 1551, barely reaching the allotted three-score years. He was a German, born in the little city of Selestat in the south of Germany, and serving most of his mature life as pastor in nearby Strasbourg.

At fifteen he entered the Dominican Order, not because of any interest in holy orders but to pursue his academic studies. The Dominicans sent him to Heidelberg where in 1518 the twenty-seven year old was converted to Christ and to the Protestant Reformation through Martin Luther himself. Bucer heard Luther speak on the freedom of the will and was at once drawn to this "real, authentic theologian." The next day he met with Luther alone over supper. In a letter to Luther two years later Bucer described his meeting with the Reformer:

Smitten by great love for you as though wounded by the sharp arrows of your words, or rather the words of God the mighty, I dared to have a conference with you. . . . The result was assuredly happy. For received at dinner by you. . . I was wonderfully and bountifully refreshed, not only by the excellent delicacies at the table, but by the exquisite and sweet meat of Scripture.

. . .<sup>10</sup>

From then on Bucer was both a Protestant and a disciple of Martin Luther.

A curious incident soon thereafter was Bucer's attempt in 1521 to dissuade Luther, at the time on the way to the Diet of Worms, from going to Worms. Bucer had been induced to undertake this task by a clever spokesman of the emperor. When Luther refused to be turned aside from his God-given calling Bucer accompanied him to Worms, so that Bucer was present at the historic Diet and witnessed Luther's good confession and stand.

In 1522 and 1523 Bucer preached the Reformation doctrines of Luther in Wissembourg, struggling against Rome to make the city Protestant. Here he developed as a preacher. Here also he was excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church both for preaching the heresies of Luther and for marrying. Bucer had married in 1522--one of the very first of the Reformers to do so. But from this city he was banished in 1523, Rome being victorious in the struggle for the soul of the city.

Thence Bucer fled to the notable city of Strasbourg, where his parents were citizens. Here he would remain for twenty-five years as the leading Protestant pastor of the city. From Strasbourg would go out Bucer's teachings, and often Bucer himself, who was constantly on the road in Germany and Switzerland. Within a year the penniless, excommunicated refugee had been installed as the first evangelical pastor in Strasbourg where Reformation teaching had just begun to be heard. By 1529 Strasbourg had become a fully Protestant city, for in that year the mass was abolished in Strasbourg. Over the years, by preaching and teaching Bucer built up a strong, exemplary, and influential evangelical, Reformed church in Strasbourg. In this work he did not labor alone. The age was an age of great men of God; and Strasbourg had more than its share of them--Capito, Hedio, and Zell were Bucer's colleagues.

During the twenty-five years that Bucer was pastor in Strasbourg, this gifted, active, diligent servant of God preached and taught the word to the flock; developed theology; established Christian schools, including a seminary; carried on vigorous controversy with Rome, Anabaptists, Lutherans, and Zwinglians; attended conferences; advised princes; labored mightily for the unity of the churches; wrote books; lodged refugees; and carried on correspondence with everyone who was someone in Europe. He also found time to be the father of a large family of thirteen children. His household was known to be an orderly, model home, although for this we will give much of the credit to Elizabeth Silbereisen (Mrs. Bucer). Like David's men, Christ's men in those days were "mighty men."

In April, 1549 there was enforced upon Bucer the notorious Interim of the Diet of Augsburg--the virtual imposition upon all Protestants of Roman Catholic worship, with a few sophs thrown in to make Romanism palatable. To his undying credit Bucer refused to submit to the Interim, although the cost was banishment. He accepted the invitation of Archbishop Cranmer to find refuge and work in England, declining a similar invitation from his close friend Calvin to come to Geneva. The last three years of his life Bucer spent in England as "Regius Professor of Divinity" at Cambridge where he received the first honorary doctorate in theology that Cambridge gave (although Bucer honored Cambridge more than Cambridge honored Bucer).

The years in England were not retirement for Bucer. Eells remarks that "Bucer was not the man to sit in quiet seclusion and croak."<sup>11</sup> Instead, Bucer significantly affected the English Reformation, as previously he had had a powerful hand in the German and Swiss Reformation. According to Hopf, "Bucer's work. . .in England formed a vital and inseparable part of the story of the English Reformation."<sup>12</sup> Bucer influenced the English Reformation and the Church of England in several ways. He contributed to the Book of Common Prayer by his criticism and suggestions concerning the First Edwardian Prayer Book. In England he wrote and gave to the Protestant king his important book *On the Kingdom of Christ*. He spoke out concerning the Vestment Controversy, a controversy about clerical garb that was a portent of fierce struggles between the Puritans and the Anglican church. Bucer engaged in theological dispute with Stephen Gardiner, Roman Catholic bishop and Lord High Chancellor of England under "Bloody Mary," over the doctrine of justification by faith. There is even some influence of Bucer on the English Bible through his commentary on the Psalms which was translated into English as early as 1530.

Bucer died on March 1, 1551 and was buried with great honors. Four years later the Roman Catholics exhumed and burned Bucer's body. In 1560, with the accession to the throne of Protestant Elizabeth, Bucer's memory was

reconsecrated at a solemn assembly; and whatever was left of his remains was buried once again.

Then Bucer suffered the fate that is far more painful to a theologian than any futile persecution of his corpse--he was forgotten.

Before going on to consider Bucer's doctrine and pastoral labor, we may briefly take note of certain significant theological and ecclesiastical turning points and periods in Bucer's life. Not only will this bring out the many-sided nature of the man and his work, but it will also give us some idea of the circumstances in which Bucer developed as a Reformed theologian.

Bucer was converted to the Reformation truths by Luther himself personally in 1518. To the end of his life Bucer, like all the Reformers, was greatly influenced by Luther. He read whatever Luther published and was loath to differ from him.

In 1524, with the publication of Erasmus' *Diatribes on Free Will*, Bucer broke with Erasmus and the humanists. Until then Bucer had cordial relationships with the humanists, for whom he had high hopes--Hutton, von Sickingen, and especially Erasmus. With all of them Bucer had personal contact. In fact, he had found refuge with von Sickingen after leaving the monastery.

But when Erasmus published his *Diatribes*, Bucer urged Luther to reply to this "pestiferous pamphlet" of that "unhappy slave of glory, who pushes forward to prefer the spirit of his own opinion to Scripture."<sup>13</sup> The controversy between Erasmus and Luther over free will opened Bucer's eyes to see several things clearly. First, the true reformation of the church was doctrinal and not merely a reformation of morals, as the humanists supposed. Second, not only was Erasmus a broken reed for those who depended upon him for the reformation of the church, but he was also an enemy of the Reformation. Third, the fundamental doctrine of the gospel that was now restored to the church and by which the thorough reformation of the church would be effected was the truth of salvation by free, sovereign grace; and integral elements of this truth were the doctrine of the spiritual

bondage of the will of the natural man and the doctrine of eternal, double predestination.

Yet another important factor in Bucer's development in the early years of his pastorate in Strasbourg was his struggle with the Anabaptists. Many of the leaders of the "radical reformation" came to Strasbourg, some to stay for a time-- Carlstadt, Hubmaier, Hans Denck, Pilgram Marbeck, Sebastian Franck, and others. Their teachings were attractive to many, insomuch that Bucer's colleague Wolfgang Capito was swept away for a time by the "heavenly prophets." Against them Bucer maintained and developed the doctrine of the covenant and infant baptism; the doctrine of divine particularism (the Anabaptists were universalists in their soteriology); the doctrine of the church, particularly the church as local institute, the importance of the means of grace, and the necessity of the eldership, with authority to exercise discipline; and the doctrine of the divine institution of the magistracy.

In part because of his close association with Zwingli in nearby Zurich, Bucer found himself after 1524 in disagreement with Luther's doctrine of a physical presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. After 1528, upon reading Luther's weightiest work on the Lord's Supper, *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, Bucer did not so much return towards Luther's doctrine as come to see more clearly that Zwingli's doctrine of the Supper as a mere memorial was unacceptable. The conflict over the Supper between Luther and Zwingli in which Bucer was deeply involved, indeed, in which he was a participant, resulted in Bucer's development of his own doctrine of the Supper.

In 1538 the young but already doctrinally developed Calvin (he had written the first edition of the *Institutes* in 1536), expelled from Geneva, found refuge with Bucer in Strasbourg, remaining there as pastor until 1541. Between Bucer and Calvin there was close contact and fellowship. An interesting, though puzzling, question is, "Who influenced whom?" There can be no doubt that Bucer influenced Calvin in many ways, so that Bucer has significantly formed the Reformed faith and church through Calvin. It is equally



certain that the relationship was reciprocal. Someone has wisely observed that the contact between these men helped both men to be more strongly what they already were; and what they were was Reformed theologians.

We should not overlook the effect upon Bucer of his life-long struggle against Rome in every facet of its teaching and practice. Already in Wissembourg in the very beginning of his ministry he contended with Rome for the reformation of the city. The conflict continued throughout his Strasbourg years. In England, too, in the last years of his life the struggle with Rome was forced upon him.

In these circumstances, formed in part by these influences but formed above all by the Scriptures, Bucer labored as the Reformed pastor at Strasbourg.

### *The Reformed Theologian*

To call him "the Reformed Pastor of Strasbourg" is not to restrict his influence--for Bucer was in fact "the Reformer of Central Europe"--but rather to indicate his main mission, the heart of all his labor and influence, and the very essence of the man and his place in the kingdom of God in history. It is something of an anachronism to call him "Reformed," for this ecclesiastical label was not used in Bucer's day to designate a particular denomination. Indeed, Bucer himself did not think in terms of a distinctive Protestant church over against the Lutheran Church that would be called the "Reformed Church." Bucer strove almost to the end of his life to unite what he saw as unnecessarily divided segments of the one evangelical, Protestant church. In fact, there lingered in his soul the notion that there yet would be but one instituted church in Europe, a church that allowed herself to be purified by the doctrines of the Reformation. For this he hoped; and for this he labored mightily. Nevertheless, it is correct and necessary to see Bucer as a Reformed pastor, theologian, and church leader.

He was ecclesiastically Reformed. He was a Protestant who was anti-Roman Catholic and anti-Anabaptist, but who was also anti-Lutheran, especially on the fundamental, divisive issue of the presence of Christ in the Supper.

Bucer's affiliation was with the Swiss Reformed and not with the German Lutherans. It is no surprise, therefore, that after Bucer's death and after the lifting of the Augsburg Interim, Strasbourg went Calvinist, or Reformed.

Bucer was theologically Reformed. We say this about him, however, as we say it of Calvin: these were the men who were developing Reformed truth and defining what Reformed has come to mean. (To say that Bucer was theologically Reformed is like saying that Augustine was theologically Augustinian.)

We note several characteristically Reformed doctrines taught by Bucer.

Bucer held the divine inspiration, sole authority, and absolute inerrancy of Scripture. With appeal especially to II Timothy 3:16, a text of central importance for Bucer, he taught that the author of Scripture is God, by inspiration of the Spirit, so that the authority of the Bible is the authority of God himself. Inspiration implies and demands inerrancy:

The Holy Spirit. . .has reserved for His own canonical writings alone this prerogative--that without any sprinkling of error or any illusion they discourse on the divine works, from which may be learnt both the power and the goodness of God. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Against the claims of Rome that the church has authority over Scripture both to validate Scripture as the Word of God and to interpret Scripture, Bucer insisted that the Bible is the sole authority in and over the church (he contended here with the notorious Albert Pighius who, in addition to assailing Calvin's doctrine of predestination, argued for an infallible pope), and that it is the Holy Spirit who enables believers to receive Scripture as God's Word and to understand Scripture. Implied is the clarity of the Bible. Bucer's Roman Catholic adversary Latomus charged that Bucer's chief error was "to maintain that all things necessary to salvation are clear in Sacred Scripture."<sup>15</sup> Some error! Against the disparagement and even the dismissal of Scripture in favor of the immediate working of the Holy Spirit (the Anabaptist Sebastian Franck, anticipating Karl Barth by four centuries,

called the Bible, as confessed by the Reformers, “a paper pope”), Bucer held the necessity and sufficiency of the written Word. Interestingly, Bucer urged the sole authority of Scripture against some slavish followers of Luther whose defense of their belief concerning the Lord’s Supper was that “Luther has spoken”:

They say, indeed, that they follow God’s Word, but if you ask how they know it to be God’s Word, if they reply truly, they say, “because he, even he has taught in this way. We know,” they say, “that he teaches nothing except the truth of the scripture. . . .” What are they doing now but making God out of a man and relying on the authority of a man in place of the testimony of the Holy Spirit in their hearts?<sup>16</sup>

Second, Bucer taught eternal, sovereign predestination, election and reprobation; and he made this doctrine central to all his theology. In his *Commentary on Romans* (1536) Bucer wrote concerning predestination:

Predestination is that act of designation on the part of God whereby in His secret counsel He designates and actually selects and separates from the rest of mankind those whom He will draw to His son. . . . This. . . is the predestination of the saints. . . . There is (also) a predestination of the wicked, for just as God forms them also out of nothing, so He forms them for a definite end. . . . The godless are the. . . tools and instruments of God, and “God has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked man for the day of evil. . . .” He gave Pharaoh up to a depraved mind and raised him up for the purpose of showing His power in punishing him; Esau too He hated before he had done any evil.<sup>17</sup>

This predestination is not conditioned by foreseen faith:

Misunderstanding of the holy Fathers has sometimes given rise to the erroneous idea that our good works are in some sense the cause of our predestination, on the grounds that God foresees that His own people will embrace the offer of His grace. . . and for this reason

predestines and predetermines them to salvation. But this is an error . . . . There can be absolutely nothing in us, therefore, which God might take into account in predetermining us to future salvation; His own good pleasure decides all that He does and gives to us.<sup>18</sup>

If Bucer shared this belief concerning predestination with all the Reformers, including Luther, Bucer is characteristically Reformed in making the doctrine central to all his theology and all his teaching. Predestination is the foundation of the church; and the church is the assembly of the elect. In his *Lectures on Ephesians* (1550,1551) Bucer disputes with Rome over "the definition of the Church and its members." Rome claims that "the church is the congregation of all baptised persons who make themselves subject to the authority and discipline of the Roman Church and its hierarchy." Not so, says Bucer; rather, "the elect of Christ are alone members of the Church, and only they who entrust themselves to Christ's discipline and word and appointed ministry, who abide in Him and live out His word . . . ." <sup>19</sup>

Predestination means for Bucer that the death of Christ was only for the elect-- "limited atonement." Therefore, as Bucer is writing on the Lord's Supper, specifically the issue forced by Luther concerning the reception of the body of Christ by the unbelieving, he can defend the position that the ungodly do not receive Christ, against the argument that Judas Iscariot partook of the Supper, by an appeal to predestination:

The belief of some that Judas partook of the bread and the cup offered by Christ is no objection at this point. Whether he partook or not, these words of Christ, (which is delivered up for you, . . . which is shed for the remission of sins, etc.) could not have applied to him and hence were not addressed to him.<sup>20</sup>

Bucer's argument is simple. Even if Judas partook of the Lord's Supper he did not receive Christ's body and blood, for Jesus himself described his body as crucified for those to whom it is given in the Supper. But Jesus' body was not crucified ("delivered up") for Judas. Bucer knows that Jesus'

body was not crucified for Judas because Judas was not one of God's elect. Predestination, therefore, is decisive for the right doctrine of the sacrament.

As it determines reception of the grace of God in the sacrament, predestination also governs the divine calling through the gospel. First, all those who are elect will be called with the effectual call that brings them to faith. In proof Bucer appeals to Acts 13:48: "As many as were ordained to eternal life believed." Second, there is a sharp distinction between the particular call that comes only to the elect and the general call that comes also to many others. Here Bucer adduces Matthew 22:14: "Many are called, but few chosen." These calls are not the same. They differ not only in the result--some believe, while others reject the gospel--but also in the purpose and power of the calling God. God's purpose with the call of the elect is their salvation and therefore he makes this call effectual by the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts to draw them to Christ. The call of the reprobate has no such purpose or power. In his important book *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Martin Bucer*, W.P. Stephens writes:

To the problem that this raises [why God should command us to call to Him those He does not wish to come] Bucer simply replies that it is for God to command and for us to obey. In any case, God wishes the reprobate to be without excuse. . . .<sup>21</sup>

Third, for Bucer predestination controls the calling in that there must be a work of the Spirit in the elect *before* they hear and believe the gospel, to enable and empower them to believe. Here Bucer appeals to the infant John leaping for joy in his mother's womb at the presence of Christ. Writes Bucer: "If the Spirit is not present, the word which is preached is never understood. . . ." <sup>22</sup> Stephens remarks that "the idea that there is some (at least preparatory) work of the Spirit, which makes the elect responsive to the gospel, is an abiding feature of Bucer's theology."<sup>23</sup> This is the high Reformed doctrine of immediate regeneration.

Those passages of Scripture that teach God's will for the salvation of "all" or of the "world" Bucer interprets in harmony with the truth of predestination. F. L. Battles has translated Bucer's exposition of the Lord's Prayer in his publication of the 1536 edition of Calvin's *Institutes*. In his commentary on the petition "Lead us not into temptation," Bucer considers those texts that are so often used to overthrow the doctrine of predestination:

Finally, these words: "I do not desire the death of the ungodly, or that one may die, but rather that he may repent and live" (Ezek. 18:23). God desires that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of truth (cf. I Tim. 1:15, and similar passages); they can by no means contend with these passages which we recall concerning hardening. Nonetheless it is an undoubted truth that God has rejected some, and hardened them and blinded them, as vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, something abundantly attested daily; therefore the fact that he says he does not will the death of an impious and dying man, but prefers that he repent and live, is to be understood concerning those whom he has chosen to the end that they repent and live, to whom the prophet chiefly spoke. "For he said to Pharaoh: I have raised you up, for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth" (Ex. 9:16; Rom. 9:17). He had hardened him just as he is wont to harden any rejected ones that they may not at all repent and live, but rather persist in their obstinacy, in their impiety, and perish, that in this he may magnify his power in the whole earth. To all he says: let it be just as if he had said, from all a few, or there is no race of men in which he does not also have his own. For frequently "all" in scripture is understood for "very many" or "anyone."<sup>24</sup>

The centrality of the doctrine of predestination in Bucer's theology has not escaped attention. Admitting that as a "son of the Wesleys" he has difficulties with Bucer's doctrine of predestination, Stephens writes that much of the power of

Bucer's theology derives from his doctrine of predestination.<sup>25</sup> Constantin Hopf asserts that Bucer's "conception of predestination was ranked next to--or above--that of Calvin."<sup>26</sup> And Francois Wendel "attributes to Bucer the doctrine of double predestination (*dans toute sa rigueur*), saying that it was common to all the reformers, but more so to Bucer who built his whole theology upon the principle of the omnipotence of God."<sup>27</sup>

Another mark of a Reformed theologian was Bucer's heavy emphasis on sanctification. Holding justification by faith alone in common with the other reformers, Bucer like Calvin stressed that justification must be accompanied by holiness of life and walk, which holiness necessarily flows out of justification. For Bucer the heart of this holiness is love. A favorite text of his was Galatians 5:6: "faith which worketh by love." His very first published work in 1523 was entitled *That none must live for himself but for others : and how a man may achieve this*, called by one scholar "one of the loveliest of all reformation tracts."<sup>28</sup> One aspect of the life of holiness emphasized by Bucer was Sabbath observance. His view was that of the Puritans and of the Westminster Confession, as well as of at least one branch of Dutch Reformed Christianity later on. In his account of his teachings at the end of his ministry in Strasbourg in 1548 Bucer wrote:

Since it has been the practice of the Churches of Christ from the times of the apostles to observe on the first day of the week, on which our dear Lord Christ rose from the dead, the general festival of the Lord which he commanded his ancient people to celebrate on the seventh day of the week, we believe and teach that we should consecrate this day to God and celebrate it with spontaneous piety and no less zeal than was demanded on the ancients in their sanctification of the sabbath. . . . The people must abstain from all temporal occupations and business which can possibly be deferred, along with their families and all who live with them; and they are to be diligent in attendance at divine assemblies, there to hear the word of God read and

preached, to join with the congregation in prayer and thanksgiving, to bring charitable gifts for the poor, and to receive the holy sacraments. . . . On this day these godly exercises should be performed and engaged in with more solemnity than at other times, and the whole day is to be spent in the pursuit of piety, as the Lord has commanded in his holy prophets. . . .<sup>29</sup>

Because of this emphasis on godly living (to Bucer, theology was not an abstract, but a practical science), he has been regarded as a father of Puritanism and Pietism. Stress on sanctification, however, is and ought to be simply an integral part of genuine Reformed Christianity.

So urgent was the desire in Bucer for godliness that when he failed to get the rule and discipline of the Strasbourg church by the eldership (which he correctly saw to be necessary for the holy life of the membership of the church), he opted for small, select "fellowships" of the sanctified within the church, the "*Gemeinschaften*" similar to the *collegia pietatis* of later Pietism. In this Bucer was impaled on the horns of his dilemma: either he must give up his view of the local church as the total membership of the city or he must sacrifice the holiness of the church.

Bucer showed himself a Reformed man also in his conception of the church. On the one hand, he viewed the catholic church as the body of Christ made up of all the elect (his Roman Catholic adversaries scoffed at Bucer's church as a spiritual church that existed nowhere). On the other hand, he taught that the true church was the local congregation, instituted in four offices and displaying the marks of the pure Word of God, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of Christian discipline. In passing, we observe the striking similarity between the thought of Bucer and Calvin. This instituted church must be self-governing.<sup>30</sup> Bucer called for a body of elders in each local church to govern the church and especially to exercise discipline. Already in 1534, when Calvin was but twenty-five and had neither written the *Institutes* nor come to Geneva, Bucer pleaded for the office of elder by writing, "We shall never come nearer to true Christian conversation without the



discipline that Christ may give us.”<sup>31</sup> Bucer’s insistence on the necessity of elders who will discipline the church grew stronger over the years. Eells writes that “the word [discipline] was constantly upon his lips until it became an obsession.”<sup>33</sup> In 1545 he “complained publicly of the lack of discipline in Strasbourg, which allowed (great sinners) to go to the Lord’s Supper, permitted others to neglect it, and countenanced other errors.”<sup>34</sup>

The stringency of the discipline that Bucer had in mind comes out in the procedure that he proposed for the restoration of an excommunicated member. Restoration would begin with a statement of penitence, “*Es ist mir leydt, ich wils nit mehr thun*” (I repent, I will not do it any more). Then would follow a public confession of sin before the congregation; a demonstration of sorrow in an elder’s meeting: “tears and cries, entreating and imploring with all sincerity”; fasting and vigils, shunning of physical delights, with generous almsgiving and proper Christian conduct; and proof of sorrow and repentance in manner of dress, eating and drinking, showing clear effort to improve his conduct. Finally, the elders would accept the excommunicant again at the Table.<sup>35</sup> To many a Reformed church today in which excommunication itself is unknown, such a discipline must seem strange if not a horror. But the reason for this view is that Reformed churches no longer share Bucer’s zeal for the holiness of God in his church, or his abhorrence of unholiness. Bucer’s concern for discipline was closely connected with his doctrine of sanctification and ultimately with his doctrine of predestination. The elect are chosen unto holiness; those members who do not repent when admonished by the elders must be excommunicated as rotten members.

Because of this conviction concerning the necessity of discipline by an eldership, Bucer fought long and hard in Strasbourg, as Calvin did in Geneva, to free the church from the rule of the magistrates, although like Calvin he held that the magistrates ought to promote the church with the sword.<sup>36</sup> Bucer found, like others before and after him, that this is difficult to accomplish. Magistrates who promote insist also on ruling.

At the same time that Bucer was seeking the rule of the church by elders he was also doing justice to the office of believer. Bucer required congregational participation in the election of ministers and in the exercise of discipline. This arose as far as Bucer was concerned from the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of believers, a principle that Bucer took with utmost seriousness. The Roman Catholic scholar William Barron has written:

. . . while this doctrine [of the priesthood of all believers, D.J.E.] was enunciated by Luther in 1520, only Bucer and the Swiss took it seriously in the sense of attempting to implement it in practice.<sup>37</sup>

Although he was an outstanding theologian, Bucer was fundamentally a pastor, a Reformed pastor: he devoted his theology as well as his gifts and labor to the people of God, especially the flock at Strasbourg, by teaching and ruling the congregation. For twenty-five years Bucer served as pastor in Strasbourg, preaching, teaching, and taking heed to the flock. Much of the work that gained wider renown for Bucer and that was helpful to the church in other places was simply an outgrowth of his care of the Strasbourg church, e.g., his refutation of Rome and of Anabaptism; his teaching on church government and discipline; his liturgy; and even his doctrine concerning the sacrament of the Supper.

Whatever counsel he gave others concerning the reform of the church--and he gave much to many!--was first of all put into practice in Strasbourg.

This labor was a labor of love--Bucer loved the Strasbourg flock as the chosen and redeemed of the Lord. It is touching to read of the sorrow of Bucer in England, now old, sick, and exiled, because of the lack of care for him by the people of Strasbourg, insomuch that no one even wrote him. Still, he cared for the Strasbourg congregation and exerted himself to help her from afar. Like Paul, although the more he loved the church, the less he was loved, he loved the church all the same.

The pastoral heartbeat of Bucer is heard in several aspects of his labor. It is heard in his emphasis on preaching.

Preaching is necessary; preaching is the primary need of the church. The reason according to Bucer is that "it is impossible to come to faith and eternal life unless you hear the gospel and that administered by a man."<sup>38</sup> For this Bucer appealed to Romans 10:14: ". . .how shall they hear without a preacher?" He had little use, therefore, for radical actions of reform--destroying icons, discarding clerical vestments, and the like. All of this is useless unless good preachers have *preached* the truth into men's hearts. Writing Calvin from Cambridge, Bucer observed:

. . .you may find parishes in which there has not been a sermon for some years. . .and you are well aware how little can be effected for the restoration of the kingdom of Christ by mere ordinances, and the removal of instruments of superstition.<sup>39</sup>

Bucer's attitude came out in his involvement in the Vestment Controversy in England. Although he personally favored discarding the clerical vestments created by Rome, and although shortly before his banishment from Strasbourg he refused to wear the white surplice because this was required as a sign of his submission to the Interim of the Diet of Augsburg, nevertheless he would not condemn the wearing of the vestments because, he said, the important thing is that the preachers preach the truth. What they wear while doing it is of no fundamental importance.

One who takes preaching seriously--with the seriousness of Romans 10:14--must be concerned about the training of preachers. Bucer was. Very early in the Strasbourg years he and his colleagues began a seminary in the city. Much later, in 1549, Bucer drew up a document for the examination and ordination of candidates for the ministry. It required and outlined a careful, thorough examination of every candidate. A major part of the examination consisted of asking the candidate "what he has been taught and believes on the fundamental principles of our religion, especially those that have been made the subject of controversy." The extensive doctrinal examination begins by asking the candidate concerning his beliefs regarding the inspired Scripture and his subscription to the creeds.<sup>40</sup> No unqualified, unsound preacher

may be let loose upon the flock of God.

Bucer's efforts on behalf of the government of the church by elders and on behalf of good discipline were motivated by pastoral concerns. The book in which Bucer called for such government and discipline was significantly titled, *Von der Waren Seelsorge und dem rechten Hirtendienst (Concerning the True Care of Souls and the Proper Role of the Pastor; 1538)*. This book is generally regarded as one of the finest pastoral treatises to come out of the Reformation. Discipline saves the sinner by bringing him to repentance when all else fails; and discipline saves the congregation from the leaven of sin. In his *Lectures on Ephesians (1550,1551)*, Bucer wrote:

So too has discipline been commanded by Christ, and its collapse has dire consequences. The corruption of discipline ruins the entire ministry of teaching and sacraments, and the devil fills their place with fearful superstition. Where discipline is dormant, men are asleep and the devil sows tares.<sup>41</sup>

As a true pastor of Christ's church Bucer was concerned to feed Christ's lambs. He called for the catechizing of the children of the church:

. . .that they diligently make the Church's catechism known to them when they are old enough to understand it. For unless the foundation of the church is firmly laid in early childhood through the catechism of Christ, its upbuilding will proceed very poorly from then on. . . .<sup>42</sup>

Bucer is the father of the practice of confirmation and thus of the Reformed practice of "public confession of faith" prior to covenant children's celebration of the Lord's Supper. His concern for the rearing of the children of the church manifested itself also in his efforts with the famed educator Johannes Sturm, "the greatest of the great school rectors of the sixteenth century," to establish in Strasbourg a system of education that was characterized both by solid learning in the various branches of knowledge of the day and by instruction in the principles of Reformed

## Christianity.

Bucer gave a great deal of attention in his teaching and writing to marriage. One fourth or more of *De Regno Christi* is devoted to marriage. He was convinced of the dignity of marriage:

. . .let us notice here also the commendation of the wonderful dignity of marriage: God is its author, and he it is who united those who come together in marriage. What way of life, what regimen of the holiest of monks and nuns enjoys such an encomium?<sup>43</sup>

He knew the importance of marriage for the State and Church as well:

How important it is for the decency and well-being of the commonwealth that matrimony be contracted and revered according to the will of Christ and not dissolved without a just cause! Who would not understand this? For unless that first and most sacred union of man and woman is established in a holy way, so that household discipline flourishes among the spouses according to God's precept, how can we expect a race of good men?<sup>44</sup>

Bucer was a strong advocate of the marriage of the clergy, an issue of great importance at that time both for the conflict with Rome and for the practical welfare of the church and her ministers. Practising what he preached, Bucer was one of the first reformers to marry. It was he who urged John Calvin to marry and who picked Idelette de Bure for the hesitant Calvin. In his controversial writing against the Roman Catholic Bartholomew Latomus, Bucer destroyed the Roman law on the celibacy of the clergy, basing his argument on I Corinthians 7, Rome's favorite passage in support of that law:

1. Most men are made to serve God in matrimony and very few in celibacy.
2. For all those called to matrimony, the choice of a celibate life is a snare; for them fornication is inevitable despite prayer.

3. Authorities have no right to keep those called to matrimony in celibacy, but should encourage them to serve the Lord in matrimony.
4. Among those called to marriage many are worthy of the priesthood and the ministry. A law which keeps fit men away from the priesthood is repugnant to the Word of God. This law drives men away from the priesthood and imposes celibacy upon the unfit. Therefore this law is openly repugnant to the Word of God.<sup>45</sup>

Strangely, Bucer took a very lax stand regarding divorce and remarriage: he permitted divorce for many reasons and the remarriage of guilty and innocent parties alike.

Wherefore, anyone who lacks the gift to live chastely outside marriage must be able to embrace marriage, regardless of whose fault it was, his own or another's, that his previous marriage collapsed.<sup>46</sup>

He expended a great deal of energy in the effort to make Christ and the apostles support this stand.<sup>47</sup> His contemporaries were struck unfavorably by Bucer's laxity of teaching concerning divorce. In a letter to Bullinger in 1550, John Burcher wrote:

. . .Bucer is more than licentious on the subject of marriage. I heard him once disputing at table upon this question, when he asserted that a divorce should be allowed for any reason, however trifling. . . .<sup>48</sup>

At the root of Bucer's permissiveness concerning the remarriage of divorced persons was his erroneous explanation of Genesis 2:18, "It is not good that the man should be alone," to mean that whenever a man or woman finds himself or herself alone, regardless of any and all circumstances, God approves, if he does not will, his or her remarrying. He certainly would have justified his stand as the expression of a pastor's love towards those who find themselves in the distressing circumstances of loneliness.

As a pastor Bucer developed a distinctive Reformed liturgy, or the Biblical worship of the saints (borrowed by

Calvin); he urged the care of the poor, suggesting measures to reduce begging and to provide for the truly needy; and he was one of the few Reformers to call for foreign missions.

Not the least of his pastoral concerns was the peace of his own congregation. Bucer kept his church from the divisions threatened by the Anabaptists and was very careful not to introduce the Supper-strife into the congregation.

### *The Significance of Bucer*

Martin Bucer was a powerful, influential instrument of God for bringing about the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century through his preaching; by his writings, especially his commentaries (which were also his dogmatics), and his controversial writings; and by his participation in the conferences of his day, many of which he sponsored.

Although there never resulted a "Bucer Church," his influence was wide and deep. He had widespread influence in his own day throughout Germany, Switzerland and England. Through the years he has significantly influenced Lutheranism, Anglicanism, Puritanism and Pietism, as well as the Reformed church.

Especially we Reformed are Bucer's debtors. The channel of his influence was Calvin and Calvin's work in Geneva. There can be no doubt that Calvin drew from and depended upon Bucer in many important areas. Even before Calvin found refuge in Strasbourg in 1538, Bucer and Calvin corresponded. Calvin then spent three years in Strasbourg, where he could see firsthand what Bucer had been teaching and doing in the church since 1524. It is only natural that Calvin, eighteen years younger than Bucer, would look to the older, more experienced Bucer for guidance, something Calvin himself acknowledged.

Without detracting in the least from Calvin's own contribution in each of these areas, it may safely be asserted that the Reformed church is the beneficiary of Martin Bucer in terms of doctrine (e.g., predestination and sanctification), church government (e.g., the autonomy of the local church, the eldership, and discipline), and liturgy; for commentaries

on Scripture; and, most emphatically, for the unique Reformed doctrine of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.<sup>49</sup>

As Bucer's works become available Reformed theologians will learn much from the Strasbourg Reformer concerning the Reformed faith and the life of the church that holds this faith.

We ought to learn too from the indefatigable angel of Strasbourg how important and powerful is a diligent, faithful, Reformed pastorate. Ours is a time when Reformed pastors are needed more than ever and esteemed less than ever before. Many hanker for non-pastoral "ministries." These free-lancers in their "ministries" are the new monks let loose on Christendom; and like their predecessors they are a plague. Few who do enter a pastorate engage in the Reformed fundamentals: preaching, catechizing, administering the sacraments, disciplining, and bringing the Word from house to house.

Bucer, like Calvin, can be an example that men called to the ministry keep before them, and that their professors hold before them.

And even though the hour is late, who is to say that God will not bless such diligent pastorates with the fruit of a powerful testimony to the Reformed faith that goes out into all the world?

#### NOTES

1. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, Ross Mackenzie, tr., David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, editors (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 2.
2. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Vol. 1, William Pringle, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) xl.
3. Quoted in *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, D. F. Wright, tr. and ed. (Appleford, Abingdon, Berkshire, England: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1972) 13. Hereafter: Wright, *Martin Bucer*.



4. Cf. Reinhold Seeberg, *Textbook of the History of Doctrine*, Charles E. Hay, tr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 390-393.
5. Wilhelm Pauck, *The Heritage of the Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1968) 91.
6. *Melanchthon and Bucer*, Wilhelm Pauck, ed., The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XIX (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1969).
7. Hastings Eells, *Martin Bucer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931).
8. Constantin Hopf, *Martin Bucer and the English Reformation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946).
9. W. P. Stephens, *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Martin Bucer* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1970).
10. Quoted by Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 20.
11. Eells, *Martin Bucer*, 41.
12. Hopf, *Martin Bucer*, ix.
13. Quoted by Eells, *Martin Bucer*, 41.
14. Stephens, *Theology of Martin Bucer*, 130-131.
15. Quoted by William S. Barron, Jr., *The Controversy between Martin Bucer and Bartholomew Latomus (1543-1546)* (unpublished thesis, Washington: Catholic University of America, 1966) 210.
16. Stephens, *Theology of Martin Bucer*, 136.
17. Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 96-97.
18. Martin Bucer, *Commentary on Romans*, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 102.
19. Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 212.
20. Martin Bucer, *The Eucharist: The 1526 Apology*, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 331.
21. Stephens, *Theology of Martin Bucer*, 43.

22. Stephens, *Theology of Martin Bucer*, 203.
23. Stephens, *Theology of Martin Bucer*, 205
24. John Calvin, *Institution of the Christian Religion*. . . , 1536 edition, Ford Lewis Battles, tr., "Appendix II: Bucer on the Lord's Prayer" (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975) 457.
25. Stephens, *Theology of Martin Bucer*, 260.
26. Hopf, *Martin Bucer*, 260.
27. Quoted by W. J. Nottingham, *The Social Ethics of Martin Bucer* (unpublished thesis, New York: Columbia University, 1962) 141.
28. The German title is *Das ym selbs niemant, sonder anderen leben soll, und wie der mensch da hyn kummen mog*. ET by Paul Traugott Fuhrmann, *Instruction in Christian Love, by Martin Bucer, the Reformer* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1951).
29. Martin Bucer, *A Brief Summary of the Christian Doctrine and Religion Taught at Strasbourg for the Past Twenty-eight Years*. . . , in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 90. Cf. also Bucer's distinction between a temporary, ceremonial aspect and a lasting, spiritual aspect of the fourth commandment in his *Lectures on Ephesians*: "On the one hand, the. . .outward observance of a fixed day, by means of cessation from work. . .has been abolished. On the other hand, there is the inward and spiritual purpose of the commandment itself, for the preservation and renewal of worship. . .since this aim is highly expedient and eternally valid so long as the Church continues on earth, the Church has therefore never changed the commandment itself, nor will it ever change it" (Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 217). Bucer's examination of candidates for the ministry questioned the candidate closely "whether he believes that we incur God's stern displeasure when we fail to devote the Lord's Day. . .to godly exercises. . ." (Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 264-265).

30. Concerning Bucer's view of church government, cf. W. Van't Spijker, *Goddelijk recht en kerkelijke orde bij Martin Bucer* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1972). For Bucer's doctrine of the offices in the church, cf. W. Van't Spijker, *De Ambten bij Martin Bucer* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1970).
31. Quoted by G. J. Van de Poll, *Martin Bucer's Liturgical Ideas: The Strasbourg Reformer and His Connection with the Liturgies of the Sixteenth Century* (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum's Theologische Bibliotheek, XXVII, 1954) 63.
32. Quoted by Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 31.
33. Eells, *Martin Bucer*, 386.
34. Eells, *Martin Bucer*, 508.
35. Nottingham, *The Social Ethics of Martin Bucer*, 135-136, from Bucer's *Von der Wahren Seelsorge*.
36. ". . .because pious princes must plant and propagate the Kingdom of Christ also by the power of the sword, as by all the powers which they have received from the Lord, it is also their duty not to tolerate anyone who openly opposes and undermines the sound doctrine of the gospel. . .those who refuse to be taught the things that are of Christ's Kingdom should not be tolerated in a Christian commonwealth, much less those who dare to rebel against and vitiate these things" (Martin Bucer, *De Regno Christi*, in: *Melanchthon and Bucer*, W. Pauck, ed., 272).
37. Barron, *Controversy*, 263.
38. Stephens, *Theology of Martin Bucer*, 181.
39. Hopf, *Martin Bucer*, 85.
40. Martin Bucer, *The Restoration of Lawful Ordination for Ministers of the Church*, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 253-278.

41. Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 205.
42. Martin Bucer, *De Regno Christi*, in: *Melanchthon and Bucer*, W. Pauck, ed., 280.
43. Martin Bucer, *Commentary on the Four Holy Gospels* (1527,1530), in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 419-420.
44. Martin Bucer, *De Regno Christi*, in: *Melanchthon and Bucer*, W. Pauck, ed., 316.
45. Barron, *Controversy*, 120-121, from Bucer's *Responsio altera et solida M. Bucerii*.
46. Martin Bucer, *Commentary on the Four Holy Gospels*, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 418. Bucer is commenting here on Matthew 19:3-12.
47. Wilhelm Pauck omits twenty-five chapters of Bucer's defense of divorce and remarriage in his translation of *De Regno Christi* in *Melanchthon and Bucer*. Pauck notes that John Milton translated this section into English in his *Judgment of Martin Bucer concerning Divorce*, and that this work is readily available in editions of Milton's works. Pauck summarizes Bucer's labored and lengthy attempt to defend his lax stand on divorce and remarriage as follows:

"Bucer's verbose and repetitious defense of divorce and the right of remarriage is noteworthy for the following reasons: 1) He insists that the control of marriage is properly the function of the political power and not of the church; 2) he argues that there are many reasons besides adultery why divorce should be granted to married persons, e.g., incurable disease (leprosy) or impotence, etc.; 3) he defends the right of legitimately divorced persons to remarry; 4) he employs very strained reasoning in order to demonstrate that in all these opinions he has the support not only of Scripture but also of many of the fathers of the church. In particular, he tries to show that the sayings of Jesus as recorded in Matt. 5:31-32 and 19:3-11 must not be understood as forbidding divorce, except in the case of adultery" (*Melanchthon and Bucer*, 328).

48. Hopf, *Martin Bucer*, 115.
49. Bucer's influence on Calvin was far more extensive and pervasive than the areas listed here. Ford Lewis Battles mentions, e.g., that the chapter on prayer in Calvin's *Institutes* "owes a great deal to Martin Bucer's *Commentary on the Gospels* (1530)" (cf. Battles' "Introduction" to his translation of the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, p. xlv).