

Martin Bucer (1491-1551) – Ecumenical Pioneer

Churchman 079/1 1965

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1. *Bucer Research*

MARTIN BUCER has generally been regarded as a Reformer standing midway between Wittenberg and Zürich with leanings towards the Swiss. He is largely known for his mediatorial offices at the Marburg Colloquy 1529 when he laboured to bring Luther and Zwingli to a common theology on the eucharist, but perhaps better known for his work in the English Reformation when, as Professor of Theology at Cambridge (1549-51), he advised Cranmer on the Second Prayer Book of Edward VI, the Articles of Religion, and on other theological problems arising from the Reformation. These two moments in his life are very well known and attested, in the first instance because the works of Luther and Zwingli have been collected and published, and in the second place because his dealings with England were published in 1577 as *Scripta Anglicana*. Nevertheless, it is not possible to form a proper judgment on Bucer on the basis of this evidence alone, for a great deal more has to be taken into account. He was a European figure in the centre of things at the time of the Reformation, who travelled all over Europe in conference with the Reformers, who wrote and did a very great deal in his own right, and who led the Strasbourg reformation for twenty-five years.

The generally accepted view of him as a mediatorial Reformer of Swiss learning is true as far as it goes in that it was derived from a true but fractional knowledge of Bucer's writings. His contemporary, Hubert, attempted to publish Bucer's literary work, but halted after doing a few major commentaries. When Bucer died, Strasbourg went over to Calvinism, and so Bucer was largely forgotten, or at least his theology and work were absorbed into the larger Calvinist movement. Some impetus was given on the quatercentenary of his birth (1891) which saw the appearance of a bibliography, the publication of some correspondence, and the translation of some important church documents of Strasbourg.

In spite of the insuperable difficulty of the lack of a printed, critical text, it is surprising what has appeared in the last generation, for the only scholars able to offer any judgments were the handful of men who could study at the Thomasstift in Strasbourg, and work through the manuscripts. Bucer's handwriting would deter all but the God-sent! Further, many German scholars, owing to two world wars, were physically unable to do this. Robert Stupperich, Professor of Church History at Muenster, has always shown a lively awareness of this situation and pointed it out as early as 1941, as Gustav Wolf did before him (1922). It was not until the time of the quatercentenary of Bucer's death, that notable studies began to emerge—for example, Hopf (1946), Strohl (1929), Maurer (1928), Stupperich (1951), and the American work of Eels before that (1931).

There are many problems—political and social questions, church order, Bucer's attitude to the traditionalists on the one hand and the enthusiasts on the other—that are not only difficult in themselves but cannot begin to be answered before scholars have a good edition of Bucer's works. Of Bucer's later activities, especially his labours towards church unity, several scholars have written, in particular Köhler. Köhler estimated Bucer as a mediator between Luther and Zwingli, but refused to identify him with the latter. How he was to relate Bucer to

Luther remained unfinished owing to his death, though Bizer added a chapter here and came to the conclusion that any possible rapprochement between Luther and Zwingli was wrecked by Zwinglian theology. In this connection Stupperich emphasizes the influence of Bucer's Erasmianism as important in an estimation of Bucer's relation to Luther. Yet Bucer was concerned with more than church unity. For twenty-five years he worked in Strasbourg as the chief pastor, and judging by the work of Bellardi on the Strasbourg manuscripts there is an immense amount of material to come to light on the organization of a congregation and its responsibility to society as conceived and carried through by Bucer. In this last period Pauck saw a change in Bucer's views on Kingdom and Church, and saw an inclination towards a legalist ethic.

Of special interest is Hopf's work on Bucer and his relation to the English Reformation. He shows that Bucer not only had a marked influence on the drawing up of the Book of Common Prayer but also in the whole field of contemporary theological discussion in England. His clear Reformed views on church order and organization, and the relationship of a Christian community to secular society, influenced the making of Anglicanism as well as Elizabethan poor law. Bucer strongly influenced Anglicans towards a kind of evangelical catholicism over against the incursions of Puritanism, but at the same time stiffened Anglicanism against the incursions of Romanism. Further, his devotion to the Word of God actually gave England the first printed Psalter before Coverdale's Bible.

Hopf succeeded in high-lighting the hitherto underestimated influence of Bucer on Anglicanism and the English Reformation. He has argued convincingly that Strasbourg had an influence as marked, if not as great, as Wittenberg or Zürich. Henry VIII prevented Luther from exercising any but a secret influence. Later England disliked the Swiss theologians and those who had learned their theology there, yet listened to Bucer and heeded his views in the same way as Strasbourg, Cologne, and Hesse had heeded him.

What emerges from all this is what a few German theologians have always been saying, and this is that Bucer stands as a Reformer in his own right and should be studied as a type of Reformer as clear cut as Luther, Zwingli, or Calvin. So said Reinhold Seeberg as early as 1898. Seeberg appreciated his relatedness to Zwingli but emphasized the influence of a patristic learning as well as that of Luther on Bucer. Seeberg sensed Bucer's humanism and saw this influence his view of the Lord's Supper and showed how he later moved nearer to Luther's views on this matter. Otto Ritschl (1926), too, emphasized Bucer's spiritualist interpretation of Scripture. His teaching on justification by faith he described as forensic and not in harmony with the Reformers', though related to Melancthon's. He saw his teaching on the eucharist as Augustinian and spiritualist. Weber (1937) stressed the practical and social nature of Bucer's theology. He saw Bucer's theology as Christological and his Christology as the foundation of his teaching on justification by faith. He sensed in Bucer the transition to Protestant orthodoxy.

Bucer research teems with problems and interesting questions: his view of Scripture, his teaching on predestination, his doctrine of the Church and the Holy Spirit, his understanding of the Christian life, his ethics. All these and many others need examining and relating. Now that a beginning has been made to an edition of Bucer's Works quite certainly theologians and historians will go into all these matters afresh and come to new judgements.

2. *Bucer's Life*

A brief sketch of Bucer's career shows his involvement with the Reformation and the issues he made his own. Born in the tiny town of Schettstadt in Alsace in 1491, he entered the Dominican order at the age of fifteen in order to pursue his studies. His prior perceived the brilliance of the boy and sent him to the University of Heidelberg. At that time he was a young disciple of Erasmus (whose influence remained with Bucer all his days). He had the enormous privilege of hearing the young Luther defend his case before his fellow Augustinians at the Disputation at Heidelberg 1518. It was determinative for Bucer. He realized at once the difference between, on the one hand, Erasmus, and his ideas of reforming Christendom and, on the other, Luther, with his intense evangelical concern that Christendom should pay heed to its biblical origins and reform her theology accordingly. He wrote to his friend, Beatus Rhenanus of Basel, about the Disputation:

...I will oppose to you a certain theologian, not indeed, one of our number (Heidelberg), but one who has been heard by us in the last few days, one who has got so far away from the bonds of the sophists and the trifling of Aristotle, one who is so devoted to the Bible, and is so suspicious of antiquated theologians of our school, ... that he appears to be diametrically opposed to our teachers. Jerome, Augustine, and authors of that stamp are as familiar to him as Scotus or Tartaretus could be to us. He is Martin Luther, that abuser of indulgences, on which we have hitherto relied too much.... Although our chief men refuted him with all their might, their wiles were not able to make him move an inch from his propositions. His sweetness in answering is remarkable, his patience in listening incomparable; in his explanations you would recognize the acumen of Paul, not of Scotus; his answers, so brief, so wise, and drawn from the Holy Scriptures, easily made all his hearers his admirers. On the next day I had a familiar and friendly conference with the man alone, and a supper rich with doctrine rather than with dainties. He lucidly explained whatever I might ask. He agrees with Erasmus in all things, but with this difference in his favour, that what Erasmus only insinuates he teaches openly and freely. . . . He has brought it about that at Wittenberg the ordinary text books have all been abolished, while the Greeks and Jerome, Augustine and Paul, are publicly taught.

(May 1st 1518.)

Soon after this we find him in difficulties for his evangelical theology, so much so that he was compelled to flee and seek refuge under the protection of the humanist knight Franz von Sickingen, and later to seek dispensation from his monastic vows to join the secular clergy. It was at this time that Luther was summoned to Worms, and we find Bucer in the strange plot to prevent Luther's appearance at the Diet. After the Diet, Bucer accepted appointment to a pastorate at Landstuhl from Sickingen (1522), and finally broke with Rome when he married a nun. In 1523 he accepted a call to Strasbourg where he laboured as minister for the next twenty-five years, and where in fact he founded the Reformation.

Bucer impressed his character upon the church of Strasbourg, which occupied a middle ground between Wittenberg and Zurich and was later to provide shelter to Calvin when expelled from Geneva (1538-41) as well as to the Reformed refugees from France. But Bucer was of European, not provincial stature. He attended the colloquy at Marburg (1529), wrote (with Capito) the *Confessio Tetrapolitana* for the Diet of Augsburg (1530), and with the help of Melancthon brought about an armistice between Luther and Zwingli in the Wittenberg Konkordie (1536), an armistice that regrettably did not stand the test of time. This was a bitter blow to Bucer for he believed that he had achieved his life's work in Wittenberg by finding a formula of reconciliation between Catholicism and Protestantism. Again, with Melancthon he took a leading part in the almost successful reformation of Archbishop Herrman of Cologne. Till Luther's death in 1546, his eirenic catholicity drove him in his

life's ambition to effect a reconciliation in Christendom between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals, or at least to prevent an open and irreparable breach. We shall look at this important role of Bucer as the greatest ecumenical figure in Europe in section three of this article.

Events, political and religious, proved too much for Bucer. He resisted the Interim of Charles V (1548). His days in Strasbourg were now numbered. Melancthon in Wittenberg, Myconius in Basel, Calvin in Geneva, all offered him a spiritual home and protection, but finally in 1549, when he could stay no longer, it was Cranmer's invitation to a chair in Cambridge he accepted. In England, Bucer's theology was listened to in a way that Calvinism and Lutheranism were not. He had a marked effect in modifying the 1549 Book of Common Prayer in an evangelical direction, assisted Cranmer with the Articles of Religion, and helped Cranmer generally in reforming the Church of England. Most worthy of mention is his work on the Psalter, which was not only widely read but strongly influenced the translation of the Bible. There is also his correspondence and his theological writing. Further, he had strong Lutheran ideas on the ministry to the sick and needy and his views had a marked influence on Elizabethan poor law legislation. In the vestiarian controversy he supported Cranmer against the Puritans and strongly upheld the Anglican Settlement. His controversy with Gardiner is almost exactly the same as the controversies which Cranmer conducted with the Roman Catholics. He showed on the one hand a clear but kindly criticism of Romanism, and on the other hand an awareness of the danger of Puritanism to the achievement of a reformed evangelical catholicism. His motto was *Wir sind Christglaebig, nicht Kirchglaebig*. (We believe in Christ, not the Church.)

He died in 1551 much lamented and mourned by a very wide public, a remarkable fact for a foreigner who had lived but two years in the country. In the reign of Mary his bones were exhumed and burned (1556), but in the reign of Elizabeth such remains as there were, were honourably recovered and reburied in Great St. Mary's.

3. *Bucer's Ecumenical Significance*

Bucer's full theological significance will have to wait for its proper appreciation until a full edition of his works is available and scholars have had time to reassess him and re-estimate him. Nevertheless, a highly significant concern of Bucer was shown in his unceasing efforts to effect a reconciliation between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, or at least to prevent the break up of Christendom, and on that account alone he deserves the most careful consideration within the current ecumenical movement.

After Leipzig (1519), a great body of support for Luther had gathered among the German knights, many of whom had offered Luther physical protection against any possible threat of force from Rome. Most famous of these knights was the great landowner and humanist von Sickingen. This man was approached by Glapion, the crafty father confessor of Emperor Charles V, with a view to inviting Luther, now on his way to the Diet of Worms, to stay as his guest at his castle, the Ebernburg at Oppenheim, where all possible pressure was brought to bear on Luther to dissuade him from going to Worms. Glapion's plan was to prevent Luther putting in an appearance at the Diet before the Emperor, in the hope that Luther's case would go by default and no decisions taken which Christendom might live to regret. Bucer was court chaplain at the Ebernburg under the protection of Sickingen, who had previously invited the young Bucer to a court chaplaincy when under considerable pressure from Rome

for Lutheran sympathies. Glapion conversed a whole day with Bucer who was persuaded to join the plot, and he it was who was chosen to halt Luther *en route* and acquaint him of the new plans. Bucer was staggered at the single-mindedness of Luther. It was a call of God to Luther and none could dissuade him from his purpose. With great coolness he told Bucer to tell Glapion to call on him at Worms. Bucer followed Luther to Worms.

As yet the disruptive forces within the Reformation had not yet shown themselves. Luther's challenge to Rome and its indulgence traffic had in the first instance received almost universal support, but many of his early supporters were to oppose him. First, the Schwaermer with their wild fanaticism, their radicalism, and left-wing socialism sought to divert what was a theological concern for the truth of the Gospel and the purity of the Church into a sectarian movement of questionable political and social goals. Next, Erasmus was goaded into a public attack on Luther and chose the ground of the freedom of the will and argued the Romish case of man's freedom to do good and earn merit. Luther's reply was devastating, arguing that Erasmus had never understood the Gospel at all.

Regrettable as was the break between Luther and the Radicals, painful as was the breach between Erasmus and Luther, nevertheless the plea can be submitted that neither radicalism nor humanism stand within the Gospel. The next break was more tragic, for it split the very ranks of the Reformers: it was the break between Luther and Zwingli.

It began with Karlstadt's fanciful symbolic interpretation of the Lord's supper. Luther took the firm view, based on his Chalcedonian christology and the authority of Christ's words, that the bread and wine were the body and blood of Christ: he held to a real presence but rejected the Aristotelian-based doctrine of transubstantiation. Just as Christ's mortal body was true human flesh and blood, yet divine, so the natural bread and wine were not transubstantiated, yet the body and blood. Basically, Zwingli, Ecolampadius, and Bucer had strong Erasmian leanings, and their humanism made their biblical exegesis rationalistic. Zwingli, who had begun life essentially as a humanist and classicist with strong leanings towards social reform, and who was not a trained theologian, took the view that Luther had never freed himself from the shackles of the Romanist ideas on *substantia*, and in 1525 expressed his views in a tract *On True and False Religion*. Ecolampadius supported him. Open battle raged in south-west Germany, and at the great fairs men eagerly purchased these books, as well as Luther's further answer of 1527 *That these words of Christ . . .*, a great book, though a little acrimonious. Again, Luther wrote a further and final statement *Concerning the Lords Supper*, in time for the Frankfurt fair of 1528.

It was at this moment that Bucer rose to the stature of an ecumenical figure. He saw from this last work that Luther had not been properly understood, and that when he argued for a real presence it was not an outward physical spatial presence but rather a "sacramental union". Bucer wrote to the Swiss theologians arguing that the Lutherans and the Zwinglians were not as far apart as they mutually believed themselves to be. He took on the role of peacemaker, and sought to bring unity within the Protestant ranks. Political events served the same cause. At Speier in 1529 the catholic princes succeeded in revoking the decisions of 1526. The evangelical princes felt the urgent necessity of unity both political and religious. The Wittenberg theologians produced the Schwabach Articles as a basis for theological discussion between the Lutherans and the Zwinglians—a discussion that crystallized in the Marburg Colloquy of 1529. On the Swiss side were Zwingli, Ecolampadius, Bucer, Capito, and Sturm, on the Wittenberg side, Luther, Melancthon, Myconius, Jonas, Menius, Cruciger, and Roerer, later joined by Osiander and Brenz. The two groups reached external agreement on

fourteen of the fifteen points under discussion: on the matter of the sacrament they were in two different worlds. The Lutherans refused to have communion with the Zwinglians and parted as friends but not brothers in communion. Political unity did not ensue since doctrinal unity had not been achieved.

Bucer had failed, as he was to fail again. Unfortunately, Luther had grown suspicious of Bucer not only for his theological views but because of reprehensible misrepresentations. Bucer had played the role of translator of many of the works of the Wittenberg theologians. He had had the audacity in translating to modify Bugenhagen's views on the Lord's supper. Bugenhagen was enraged and promptly republished another edition expressing his own original views. When Bucer actually did the same thing again by writing a preface to Luther's Postills to correct his theology of the sacrament, Luther launched a scathing attack on Bucer's audacity. When they met at Marburg, the anger had died down, but Luther laughingly pointed a finger at him and said, "You old rogue!" It had been Bucer's consuming passion for unity that had persuaded him to do what was academically indefensible. His motive had been pure and Luther gave him that credit.

Bucer was not faint-hearted. When the Evangelicals and Roman Catholics met at Augsburg 1530 and failed to reconcile their differences, in spite of the immense concession the gentle Melancthon was making to regain unity, Bucer opened up further overtures. He attempted to lay another confession on the table, the Tetrapolitana, representing the views of Strasbourg as well as the three cities of Konstanz, Memmingen, and Lindau, places that occupied a position midway between Luther and Zwingli. The Emperor disregarded him; Melancthon mistrusted him; Luther left his letter unanswered; yet he determinedly presented himself at the gate of the Coburg as "the prophet of concord". Luther nevertheless received Bucer with kindness as well as frankness, and Bucer left the Coburg determined to bring unity to divided Christendom, or at least to reconcile the parties somehow.

Luther consented to Bucer visiting the Swiss theologians in an attempt to produce some formula of concord. Ill-luck dogged Bucer. Zwingli was killed on the field of Cappel in 1531, and the eirenic Ecolampadius died a month later. When in 1533 he learned that the Emperor had persuaded the Pope to call a general council, Bucer submitted a discussion with a view to bringing Protestants and Roman Catholics together. The document pleased the Wittenberg theologians. He followed it up with another which showed opposition to the Anabaptists but a desire to unify the Lutherans and Zwinglians. A meeting followed in Cassel 1534, and yet another in Wittenberg 1535. Luther was impressed by Bucer's activity and his documents that he brought with him. He invited Bucer to meet him at Eisenach 1536 in company with other Reformed theologians. Grave illness prevented Luther's appearance, so the delegates considerably moved on to Wittenberg. Melancthon and Luther showed some reserve, but as the days went on the delegates persuaded the Wittenbergers of their theological soundness and their moral earnestness. Great and deep unity was experienced, and a simple holy communion celebrated. The outcome of this was the Wittenberg Concord 1536, a unity which drew south-west Germany nearer to Luther but estranged the really right-wing Zwinglians.

A few days after this achievement of unity the Pope announced the calling of a council at Mantua in the following year, the purpose of which was to extirpate the Lutheran heresy. Luther wanted to attend, and to this end the Wittenberg theologians wrote the Schmalkald Articles, a strong evangelical statement from Luther's hand (February 1537). Luther desired reconciliation and doctrinal unity, but always felt it would never come as long as Rome remained unreformed. He insisted on justification by faith alone and attacked both the mass

and the papacy. He said that the evangelicals were not attending the council to lick the feet of the enemy who were seeking to destroy them: they would have to stand up against the papacy and fight for sound doctrine. At this time Bucer was active and was the direct means of taking to Luther the friendliest messages from the Swiss congregations, and from him in turn, most kind and hopeful communications. The Wittenberg Concord in which Melanchthon and Bucer had been active was approved at Schmalkald. More letters followed from Luther to Bullinger (Zwingli's successor at Zurich) and to the Swiss clearly showing, if not doctrinal unity, then a desire for peace and friendship. Luther was now bent on mutual forgiveness and begged the Swiss "not to disturb the birds at roost". Clearly Bucer's views were having effect. Unfortunately Luther fell dangerously ill and had to be taken home from Schmalkald. We have a revealing picture of Bucer following Luther when he heard that he had recovered slightly, to discuss the problem of unity with Luther even on a sick bed. At Schmalkald the evangelicals declined to take part in the promised council on the grounds that it was not free and that it was to be held in Italy. Owing to political pressures the Emperor was compelled to yield.

On his return to Germany in January 1541, the Emperor thought something might be gained if moderate Catholics and moderate evangelicals conferred. There was an abortive conference at Hagenau (June-July 1540) at which Eck, Faber, and Cochlaeus debated with Osiander, Brenz, Capito, Cruciger, Myconius, and Bucer. The debate was adjourned to Worms (November 1540) where the argument was carried on by one speaker from either side, Melanchthon and Eck, and where the only agreed ground was found to be on original sin. Still we find Bucer active in the cause of unity. The Emperor called in Cardinal Contarini who guided his own side and the high water mark of ecumenical discussion was reached in the Colloquy of Ratisbon 1541, which was a continuation of Worms 1540.

When the Emperor launched the Diet he declared that it had two purposes: first, to establish religious unity, second to resist the Turk. To achieve the first he appointed Eck, Pflug, and Gropper as Roman Catholic representatives and Melanchthon, Pistorius, and Bucer as Protestant representatives. John Calvin was there at Melanchthon's request, though not as the Emperor's delegate (he was also present at Hagenau and Worms, being now in close touch with Bucer, exiled as he was from Geneva).

Neither Luther absent nor Calvin present had any hopes of success, though Bucer still hoped to fulfil his life's end and bring some kind of unity to disrupted Christendom. The conference touched on original sin and bondage of the will, when the Augustinianism of the Reformers served to protect them. Surprisingly enough an accord was reached on the doctrine of justification, when the Roman Catholics assented to justification by faith but not by faith *alone*. Nevertheless it was not the evangelical doctrine: it allowed justification by faith *propter Christum* as well as *propter virtutes donatas*. The statement was attained only after tremendous effort, but it proved acceptable to neither party in the end.

There was division on the question of the power of the Church, deadlock on the eucharist. Calvin expressed himself very strongly on the latter, rejecting transubstantiation as a scholastic fiction and describing adoration of the host as idolatry. Fortunately, for the peace of the conference, the argumentative Eck was indisposed and took little part in the conference, and consequently the debate was conducted by both sides in a conciliatory and understanding manner. Impatiently, the Emperor pressed for decisions. The Roman Catholic delegates demurred that they had no authority to make decisions but were obliged to report back to Rome. Melanchthon worked heroically with the scholarly Pflug. Never was there

more hope of unity between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism than at Regensburg in 1541, never have the two sides been nearer, never better represented. The failure of the colloquy to reach agreement was a shattering disappointment to Bucer. He knew the chance could hardly recur. He must have realized that Luther and Calvin were right in believing that the religious split in Christendom was not going to be healed by a theological formula.

Stimulated by Ratisbon, Hermann von Wied, Elector Archbishop of Cologne, sought to reform his own diocese. He had already improved its moral tone considerably, and now turned to Melanchthon and Bucer for theological help. Bucer drew up a scheme for liturgical reform, Melanchthon one for doctrinal reform. These were published in 1544, but the documents are better known to Englishmen as the *Consultatio* of 1547-48, a document which had some influence on Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer. Hermann had considerable lay support, but his chapter was solidly against him, and the intervention of the Emperor resulted in Hermann's removal from office and excommunication. He died a Lutheran.

When the Interim of 1548 made it no longer possible for Bucer to play his part in Europe, it was to the religious hospitality of England he turned where he again played the distinguished role of mediator and conciliator. As indicated earlier he had a marked effect on the English Reformation. Canterbury was never at ease with Wittenberg, Zürich, or Geneva: she found in Strasbourg what she never saw in others. She found a theology firm against Rome yet kindly firm; a theology firm against Puritanism and Radicalism, but equally kind; a theology that breathed in the pure Gospel, unadulterated, unpolluted. It was a scholarly, reasonable, reformed, evangelical catholicism.

Bucer was at home in Wittenberg, Zürich, Geneva, and knew intimately and personally the lives and works and thinking of the great Reformers. He was not only a conciliator between the Lutherans and the Swiss but a reconciler of all those of south-west Germany who were neither Lutheran nor Swiss. He almost reconciled Roman Catholic Cologne with Protestantism. He was a theological bridge between the ferment of the Continent and the insularity of England. Stupperich's insistence (though he is not alone in this) that Bucer stands in his own right as a Reformer, may well prove to be justified when the world has the texts of Bucer's works.

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