

CONCERNING THE TRUE CARE OF SOULS

Martin Bucer (trans. Peter Beale)

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The world is indebted to Peter Beale for ending a wait of nearly five centuries for an English translation of Martin Bucer's classic, *Von der warum seelsorge*.

Published in Strasbourg in 1538, this short treatise has long been recognised as the foremost Reformation work on Christian ministry. This handsome hardback edition now puts us in closer touch with the pastoral warmth, simplicity and thoroughness of one of the most sympathetic of the reformers.

A short yet comprehensive introduction by the late Professor David Wright sets *Concerning the True Care of Souls* in the historical context of Bucer's life (1491–1549)—which ended with a short but influential spell in England, as Regius Professor in Cambridge and theological consultant to Thomas Cranmer. *De facto* leader of the reform movement in Strasbourg for twenty-five years, Bucer's ministry was marked by an enthusiastic programme of biblical preaching and training, and by an acute awareness of the tension between Strasbourg's official adoption of reformation and its aversion to ministerial freedom. Bucer's determination to address this issue accounts for a striking stress on the exercise of discipline.

Bucer's reputation for being long-winded—Luther called him 'that chatterbox'—is belied by the TCS. The work is eminently succinct and pungently readable. Most chapters are short, and commence with series of short biblical texts to which close reference is subsequently made.

The opening chapters address the nature of the church, and pastoral ministry as the means by which Christ governs the church by his word. The abuse of authority by the late medieval church and the rejection of authority by the reformation radicals are both repudiated as unbiblical. The mutual ministry of all Christians is affirmed, and diaconal ministry receives due attention (in both Strasbourg and Cambridge Bucer was noted for his insistence on the church's responsibility to meet social need). But the dominant focus is on the 'ministry of teaching and spiritual discipline'. This is how the elect are brought into the church, and then kept, fed and encouraged in godliness. Recognising that many gifts are required, Bucer argues for a plural eldership—and that the office of elder and bishop is 'one office and one order' (p. 36).

Two-thirds of TCS describes the five tasks of pastoral ministry. Though Bucer justifies this division from a reading of Ezekiel 34:16 which is not supported by more recent translations, this by no means undermines his argument. Strikingly, he begins with the pastor's responsibility to seek out the lost sheep.

Apparently, among the baptised citizenry of a confessional city-state like Strasbourg, evangelistic work was a priority. Secular rulers should insist on doctrinal conformity, and church attendance, but Bucer is clear: no one enters the full communion of the church without hearing the ‘word of salvation’.

The second task of ministry is diligently seeking out stray sheep. This is briefly treated, in five pages. By contrast, the next sixty-five deal with the issue of discipline. Bucer was the first reformer clearly to insist upon discipline as one of the constitutive marks of the church, alongside word and sacrament. The length of its treatment in TCS is related to the struggle he faced in Strasbourg in securing freedom for her ministers to exercise an authentic Christian discipline. Bucer sees discipline as medicinal and curative in its practice; love and gentleness are vital to its effective use. Carefully distinguishing his prescription from both the secular punishment of crime and the medieval church’s penitential regime, he supports his argument both from Scripture—notably Matthew 18 and the Corinthian correspondence—and from the practice of the early church. It is striking to read such trenchant commending of public penance, especially from the pen of one of the best-loved pastors of his era. His concern for the purity of the church has a challenging contemporary resonance.

The fourth and fifth tasks of pastoral ministry are described as strengthening the weak and guarding and feeding the strong. Bucer identifies sound teaching as the remedy for weakness in confessing or following Christ, since ‘anything which is missing or aberrant in genuine Christian living always comes from the fact that the faith of such Christians is foolish or deficient’ (p. 166). Similarly, for growth and stability, ‘faith and a living knowledge of Christ’ is indispensable. The responsibility of the pastoral office is therefore the proclamation of the doctrine of Christ ‘not only in the public gatherings of the church, but also in the home and to each one individually’ (pp. 179, 181).

As an example of reformed theology in the service of gospel ministry, Bucer is hard to beat. Contemporary pastors—and their congregations—will gain useful perspective on modern pastoral preoccupations, as well as encouragement and stimulation for their ministry practice, from sitting at his feet.

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