

Martin Bucer: The Ecumenical Reformer
by Steven Wedgeworth

Martin Bucer was the pastor of the Evangelical Church in Strasbourg, Germany between the years of 1524 and 1549. During this time he did much towards the reformation of the church and the city, creating a liturgy that would later be modified and adopted by John Calvin and forming what would develop into the University of Strasbourg. Bucer was an ecumenical Reformer born between generations, after Luther and Zwingli, but before Calvin. The dates of his career, as well as his affinity towards unity, make it difficult to place Bucer within any of the ecclesiastical parties of his day. He is neither Zwinglian nor Lutheran. One is tempted to call Bucer a Calvinist, and it is true that he and Calvin shared many views, most notably perhaps their understanding of the Lord's Supper, however, given Bucer's position as elder pastor to Calvin, it would be better to follow historian David. F. Wright in saying that Calvin was a Bucerian.¹ Finishing up his career as in exile in England, Bucer was able to work alongside such influential reformers as Thomas Cranmer and Peter Martyr Vermigli. He also maintained a close friendship with the Protestant monarch Edward VI. Bucer dedicated his best known work, *De Regno Christi* (On the Reign of Christ), to Edward, in which he instructed him on how to establish an Evangelical Christian nation in England following the model of the Mosaic Law in the Old Testament. Though often forgotten in our day, no doubt due to his reluctance to create a distinct party within the Evangelical Reformation, Bucer's life and thoughts are quite valuable and instructive to our current day. He was perhaps the most catholic of the Reformers, steeping his thought in the tradition of the early church and councils, as well as retaining a central role for the sacraments even as he worked for a holy republic. In our day of reformers and visionaries, one could find no better example of a defender of both truth and unity than Martin Bucer.

Bucer was born in Seléstat, Alsace on November 11, 1491. His father was a shoemaker and his mother worked as a midwife. The family's humble earnings made it difficult to support the young Martin, and when they moved to Strasbourg ten years later, they left him with his grandfather. Bucer had a fondness for learning, but his grandfather was also unable to support him in this endeavor, and so at the age of fifteen Martin Bucer decided that in order to continue his education he would become a monk. His grandfather was unwilling to support him in this at first, since he found the "immoral and hypocritical" lives of the clergy offensive, but when Martin found a "reformed" Dominican order, he finally gave his consent.² With the added promise that as a monk he would be free from damnation, Bucer joined the monastic order.

Unfortunately Bucer was not to find satisfaction as a monk. His Latin books were taken from him, and he was forced to learn "sophistical legends" as well as the works of Thomas Aquinas, a thinker whom Bucer came to despise. For ten long years Bucer labored in Seléstat before he was finally able to transfer to Heidelberg. This change

¹ Wright, David F. "Martin Bucer 1491-1551: Ecumenical Theologian," in *Common Places of Martin Bucer* trans. and edited by D. F. Wright pg. 17

² Eels, Hastings. *Martin Bucer* pg. 2

proved monumental for Bucer, for while still living the life of a monk, here he would come under the influence of humanism. He took courses in Greek under John Brenz and came under the spell of Erasmus, learning the church fathers and the Hebrew Psalter.

In the winter of 1517 Bucer heard the news of a monk challenging the abuse of indulgences. The following spring, Martin Luther came to Heidelberg to give a defense, and Bucer was captivated. Completely struck both by Luther's ideas and persona, Bucer became a "Martinian." During this time Bucer was also ordained, and controversy was not far off. The monks at Heidelberg were no fans of Luther, and Bucer's admiration of him was ill received. As the situation intensified, Bucer was forced to choose between submission, and thus a rejection both of the humanistic learning and the Lutheran ideology, or revolt. Bucer fled the monastery.

Seeking absolution from his monastic vows, Bucer went into hiding at Speier. Through a series of convenient personal connections, Bucer received his release from monastic vows just in the nick of time. A papal legate arrived days later insisting that Bucer be examined, warning that he was "more learned and no less dangerous" than Luther³. In God's providence, however, Bucer was already a free man.

In April of 1521, Bucer attended the Diet of Worms, now a full-fledged Lutheran. Throwing himself headfirst into the cause of reform, Bucer took a wife and began protesting the abuses of the Roman church in his sermons. When pressured about his teachings, Bucer asked for a public debate. Bucer volunteered to be stoned to death, following Deuteronomy's punishment of false prophets, if his doctrines could be contradicted by the Bible. Fearing his rhetorical skill and popular support, the Vicar of Speier ordered Bucer to be tried at Wissembourg where he was excommunicated.

Now a fugitive, Bucer fled to the only available shelter, his parents' home in Strasbourg. This was nothing short of providential, for Strasbourg was known for its civil liberties and moderate religious freedom. Erasmus commented that "It is the best governed city that you ever saw."⁴ Bucer was able to begin his program for ecclesiastical and civil reform here through a series of ingenious maneuvers. Still without support in the churches, Bucer decided to seek aid from the civil magistrate. He became a citizen of Strasbourg, thus coming under its legal protection. From here he began to operate as a lay preacher, rallying support for the Reformation. As controversy began to ensue, Bucer used his influence, which was substantial, to convince the city of Strasbourg to offer legal protection only to citizens. At this time, clergymen were not citizens, and so the Roman Catholic priests and monks came under considerable threat. Bucer was installed pastor in Strasbourg in February of 1524, and by March he was the head pastor of the first evangelical church in Strasbourg.

Now firmly in control, Bucer was able to implement his program for Reform. He began by instituting a new liturgy, with its most distinctive aspect being the offering of both bread and wine to the congregation during the Lord's Supper. Though his changes were

³ *ibid* pg. 9

⁴ *ibid* pg. 19

sweeping, Bucer showed a pastoral spirit in going about reform. He allowed for the continuation of pilgrimages and the honoring of the saints, so long as this was not done in superstition, but merely respect. He even waited the course of six years to remove all images from the churches. He admitted that their existence was not objectionable, but the threat of abuse was too great. Other new additions to the worship under Bucer's leadership were the introduction of congregational singing and the sermon. By 1525 a mandate was issued requiring all clergymen to become citizens in Strasbourg, and the last of the Roman clergy left. Strasbourg was an Evangelical city.

Peace could not last long in these tumultuous times, and the promise of liberty in Strasbourg attracted religious refugees of many stripes. The Anabaptists were a constant threat, and though Bucer had no patience for their separatism, he was open to some of their views concerning the church and sacraments. Under this influence, Bucer instituted the rite of confirmation, wherein children, upon reaching the age of reason, confirmed their faith, had hands laid on them by the pastor, and received their first communion. This rite, it was believed, helped to reduce hypocrisy among the membership. When Michael Keller arrived in Strasbourg, however, the situation began to worsen, and when Bucer's close friend and associate Wolfgang Capito rejected the practice of infant baptism, action became necessary. Bucer began to speak out against separatism, emphasizing the unity of the church, and the magistrates in Strasbourg began suppressing the Anabaptists. The city later would have to deal even more forcibly.

The most significant and life-consuming controversy of Bucer's career sprung up in 1524 when Andreas Carlstadt appeared in Strasbourg. Infamous for his attacks on Luther's view of the Eucharist, Carlstadt held that the only role of the Lord's Supper was that of a memorial. Upon his arrival in the city, the other Separatists rallied around Carlstadt. The threat of revolution forced the city council to ask him to leave, but during this brief time Bucer began to consider the argument and eventually adopted the view of Zwingli. This was to prove most unfortunate because Luther considered Zwingli's doctrine to be no different than Carlstadt's. Luther unleashed a series of vicious condemnations of all who held such a view, thus sparking a doctrinal controversy that would last for more than twenty years. Bucer was torn between Luther and Zwingli, for he greatly respected both, but when some of Luther's followers began calling the Strasbourg preachers heretics, Bucer felt compelled to take his stand with Zwingli. From this point until many years later Bucer would be identified with the Swiss, and thus an opponent of Luther.

Always the ecumenist, Bucer attempted to continue supporting Luther in all areas except his understanding of the Lord's Supper. In 1524, Bucer published a Latin translation of Luther's commentaries on Peter and Jude, and these proved so popular that Bucer set out the project of translating Luther's sermons on the Gospels and Pauline Epistles. In an effort to honor Luther, yet still put some distance between what he believed his theological errors to be, Bucer included a preface and editorial notes stating the "true doctrine" of the Lord's Supper. What was an attempt at concord proved to be disaster when Luther saw the newly released book. Of Bucer's work, Luther said "he could not restrain himself from boasting and propagating his own interpretation, and an incredible madness of a covetous spirit- first in a virulent and sacrilegious preface, then in noxious

notes he has crucified my work.⁵” Luther would also add that Bucer was “a servant of the devil, if not the devil himself.⁶” These were difficult times. Bucer was stamped a Zwinglian, and he even went so far as to state along with Zwingli and Oecolampadius that “the [doctrine that] the body and blood of Christ are actually and bodily received in the bread of the Eucharist may not be proved from Scripture.⁷”

Amazingly, Bucer had a shift back towards Lutheran thought in 1528 when he read Luther’s *Von abendmal Christi*. Seeing that Luther used the phrase “sacramental union” to describe the relationship between the bread and Christ’s body, Bucer was convinced that he had heretofore misunderstood Luther’s position, confusing it with that of the papists. Bucer now claimed that Luther and Zwingli were in fundamental agreement, and the dispute was merely over words. Proving this would be the challenge, and perhaps the bane, of Bucer’s career.

Convincing Luther that he was again an ally was no easy task. In September of 1529, Bucer attended the Marburg Colloquy in hopes of creating a union between Luther and Zwingli, but when he attempted to defend Zwingli’s doctrine, Bucer fell under the condemnation of Luther yet again. “You are a rogue.” Luther said. “You are of the devil, and if you had a correct belief and the Scriptures, you would not have betrayed me to Satan when I opposed your opinion.⁸” Disappointed, but not defeated, Bucer continued his peace-making efforts and finally returned to good graces in the eyes of Luther when he was willing to admit that “the true body of Christ and the true blood are truly present in the Supper.” Bucer emphasized terms like “substantially,” even allowing for it to be said that Christ was taken through the mouth and received by the unworthy, but to their damnation. This would prove too much for Zwingli to sign now, and peace could not be found. In frustration, Bucer offered up a plea for Biblicism, “If permanent unity in the true faith in Christ was to be accomplished... it would be advisable wherever possible to clothe the articles in biblical words and to set them forth in the clearest and most concise manner.⁹” In more efforts towards union between the Swiss and the Lutherans, however, Bucer would depart from this simple approach and invoke such convoluted phrasing as “the body and blood of Christ are truly, that is, essentially and substantially, but not qualitatively or quantitatively or locally, present and given in the Supper.¹⁰” However well intentioned this quest for unity might have been, it would ultimately satisfy neither Luther nor Zwingli, both suspecting Bucer of seeking unity at the expense of the truth. Zwingli would call Bucer a fox, and Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli’s immediate successor, stated that Bucer was a scorpion, always ready to sting.

Seemingly undaunted by such hurtful criticisms, Bucer labored on for unity, and it ought to be noted that he truly did believe that Zwingli and Luther were in agreement on the fact that Jesus Christ was presented to the believer in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

⁵ *ibid* pg. 81

⁶ *ibid* pg. 83

⁷ *ibid* pg. 86

⁸ *ibid* pg. 93

⁹ Wright pg. 34

¹⁰ *ibid* pg. 51

Bucer felt that the other disagreements should be regarded as secondary for the sake of the church, and thus any inconsistency in his wording of the doctrine must be understood in the context of this colossal struggle.

Bucer finally achieved a measure of success when in 1533 he drew up a document known as the *Bericht*. The key doctrinal statement read:

We believe and confess that the Lord gives us his true body and his true blood, not as food for the stomach and therefore in a fleshly manner like other bodily foods, but in such a divine way that the Lord truly lives in us and we in him and are truly partakers of his body and his members, and so of his kind and nature.¹¹

This statement most pleased Luther, and though Zwingli had died on the battlefield two years earlier, Bucer was able to receive guarded approval, perhaps better understood as toleration, from Zwingli's successor Heinrich Bullinger. Finally a practical ceasefire was implemented.

Zwingli's death had served to cause a hardening among his disciples, no doubt an attempt to further champion his name, and Bucer did feel that many were now departing from the true doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Exhausted and frustrated by years of controversy, Bucer's most telling expression can perhaps be found in a letter to Italy in which he writes "Flee formulas; bear with the weak. While all faith is placed in Christ the thing is safe. It is not given for all to see the same thing at the same time."¹²

During the course of these controversies and colloquies, known as "the supper strife," Bucer was still busy working at the Church at Strasbourg, and this would perhaps lead to one of his greatest legacies. A young John Calvin, exiled from Geneva, arrived in Strasbourg in the fall of 1538. He was first given temporary lodging by Capito, but then later by Bucer himself. Calvin was very much impressed by Bucer's liturgy and took a modified form of it back to Geneva. This is significant because nearly all of Calvin's students also took this liturgy to their respective countries. Bucer biographer Hastings Eells sums up Calvin's view of the pastoral side of Bucer in saying, "Before coming to Strasbourg Calvin had criticized severely Bucer's methods in trying to establish concord, but after he came into personal contact with the peacemaker, and realized that he had to deal with a situation and not a theory, his attitude changed."¹³ This is no doubt what Bucer felt throughout all of the controversies: while everyone around him was at war over theory, his goal was to save a church. Another aspect of Bucer's influence over Calvin can be seen in certain key terms in Calvin's Eucharistic theology. Among those reminiscent of Bucer are the "mystical union" and the concept that the sacraments "exhibit" (*exhibitio*) Christ.

Bucer's peacemaking attempts were not yet done, and in 1541 he attended the Diet of Regensburg along with Philip Melancthon and Roman Catholic theologian John Eck.

¹¹ Eells pg. 161

¹² *ibid* pg. 340

¹³ *ibid* pg. 237

The goal was to achieve agreement between Protestants and Roman Catholics, and though the Diet was ultimately a failure, rejected both by Luther and the Pope, Bucer was able to draw up, amazingly, a statement on justification by faith that was accepted by all parties. In achieving this harmony between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, on the article by which the Church stands or falls no less, Bucer implemented the concept of “living faith.” He defined this faith as:

The movement wrought by the Holy Spirit whereby, truly repenting of their old life, men are turned to God and truly apprehend his mercy promised in Christ, so that now they truly believe that they have received forgiveness of sins and reconciliation through the merit of Christ by the free gift of God’s goodness, and they cry out to God, ‘Abba, Father’: but this happens to no one unless there is also at the same time infused into him that love which heals the will... Therefore living faith is that which apprehends God’s mercy in Christ and believes that the righteousness of Christ is freely imputed to oneself, and at the same time receives the promise of the Holy Spirit and also love... But it remains true that we are justified, that is, accepted and reconciled to God by this faith in so far as it apprehends God’s mercy and the righteousness which is imputed to us on account of Christ and his merit, not on account of the worth or perfection of the righteousness which is imparted to us in Christ.¹⁴

Commenting on this definition, John Calvin writes, “You will be astonished, I am sure, that our opponents have yielded so much, when you read the extracted copy, as is stood when the last correction was made upon it, which you will find enclosed in the letter. Our friends have thus retained also the substance of the true doctrine, so that nothing can be comprehended within it which is not to be found in our writings.¹⁵”

Though little remembered in our day, Regensburg represents a spirit of unity which Bucer embodied all of his life. Whether it was rejected by both Rome and Wittenberg for political reasons or whether the two sides had simply hardened in their positions, we cannot be sure, but the fact that men like Bucer, Melancthon, and Calvin supported the statement (alongside Eck!) is quite significant. Unfortunately, and ironically, justification was the only article on which the two sides could reach agreement at Regensburg.

When it became clear that harmony would not be achieved between the papal party and the evangelicals, Bucer shifted his energies towards fully supporting and promoting the Reformation. This latter part of his career helped him to regain the support of some more extreme reformers who had all but written Bucer off due to his ecumenical spirit. Political winds had begun to change as well, and in 1549 Bucer was exiled from his home in Strasbourg.

Now more popular than ever, Bucer received numerous calls. Calvin asked him to grant his services to Geneva, another call was issued from Basel, and even from Poland, but the

¹⁴ Wright pg. 43

¹⁵ Henry Beveridge. *Selected Works of John Calvin: Vol I - Letters Part I 1528-1545*, p. 260.

most appealing was from England. Bucer had retained warm relations with Thomas Cranmer as well as King Edward VI, and the promise of working in protestant England excited Bucer. Bucer began teaching at Cambridge in 1549, a school which would become known as a bastion for Reformed thought, producing such notables as William Perkins and William Ames. At this same time, Peter Martyr Vermigli was lecturing at Oxford, and England seemed poised to become the first full-fledged Reformed nation.

Unfortunately, Bucer was unable to adjust to England's inclement weather and cooking, and in 1549 he took ill. He died a few years later in 1551, and it was not long before England's religious climate would change as well. When Queen Mary came to power, she ordered that Bucer's body be exhumed and burned as a heretic. It was not until 1560, under Elizabeth, that he was restored honors.

Bucer was important as a Reformer because he represents a middle position between Luther and Zwingli. His sacramental thought was clearly "Bucerian," and it is only due to the Calvinian adoption and modification of this thought that we do not speak more of a Bucerianism today. Of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Bucer believed that a sacramental union, a bond made by the Holy Spirit, brought the real body and blood of Christ together with the bread and wine, both received through the ritual of eating and drinking in faith. Though always objectively present, Christ could only be received by faith. As the bread and wine are taken by the mouth, Christ is taken by faith. Whereas Luther believed that Christ was present in the bread and received by all through the mouth, and Zwingli believed that Christ was only made present by the faith of the recipient, and thus was not present for unbelievers, Bucer held together the thought that Christ was objectively present, based wholly on his promise, and that he must be received by faith.

Other aspects of Bucer's sacramental thought are striking. Of baptism Bucer wrote:

We confess and teach that holy baptism, when given and received according to the Lord's command, is in the case of adults and of young children truly a baptism of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, whereby those who are baptised have all their sins washed away, are buried into the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, are incorporated into him and put on him for the death of their sins, for a new and godly life and the blessed resurrection, and through him become children and heirs of God (Tit. 3.5; Acts 22.16; Eph. 5.26; Rom. 6.4; 1 Cor. 12.13; Gal. 3.27). It is certain that this inheritance is also received and enjoyed in its entirety by all who do not themselves subsequently, by their own wanton sins, cast away this grace which is communicated to them in baptism. For in holy baptism all sins are remitted and forgiven them, and on account of this grace, anything of original sin remaining in them is not imputed to them for condemnation, provided that they do not give way to the wicked desires of this evil passion. Moreover, the power of this passion in them is weakened by the Spirit of Christ, and they are strengthened to fight boldly against it, daily mortifying it more and more, and likewise to obtain by prayer the forgiveness of all their actual sins.

The people are to be instructed and reminded, in a clear and earnest way from the word of God, of these great and unutterable graces and gifts of God which he bestows on his own in holy baptism, above all at times of administration of holy baptism, but at all times and especially when they are afflicted with particular temptations and distresses.¹⁶

Just as with the Eucharist, Bucer retained his understanding of dynamic receptionism, that the reality must be received by faith, in baptism. Rather than using this to take away from the efficacy of baptism, however, Bucer explained that the visible sign out to teach us to believe in the invisible reality. He again writes:

However, to prevent scruples arising out of what we have said or have yet to say on baptism, it is advisable to add this, that we are speaking of baptism (as Scripture does) in terms of its divine institution and correct observance, not of its perversion and misuse at the hands of the ungodly. Without any qualifications Paul can call baptism 'the washing of regeneration', and describe all who have been baptised as buried with Christ and clothed with Christ. For baptism was instituted to present this regeneration and this communion in Christ, and no one who receives baptism will in fact lack them unless he refuses to accept them because of his own unbelief. Accordingly, our description and assessment of baptism must be determined by what God has assigned it to effect, even if it is not received by all who are baptised. A minister seeks in his ministry to fulfil the Lord's will as he understands it from the word of the Lord. Hence as far as he is concerned, in baptising he is always washing away sin and imparting new birth, even though by their own fault some persist in their sins and the old life of the flesh. Yet as soon as they begin to trust in the graciousness of God and in Christ's redemption which are both presented by baptism, they receive the fruit of baptism. It is improper for the baptism which the Church presented in good faith to be repeated, even though the unbelieving did not receive it in good faith. Instead let those who practise deceit abandon their deceit, and let the Church's administration of baptism in reliance on God's word remain valid.¹⁷

We have already noted Bucer's understanding of justification. Always driven by the Augustinian notion of faith working through love, Bucer held that the faith that justifies is a living and obedient faith. This did not threaten the doctrine of *sola fide* for Bucer because his notion of union with Christ taught that imputation and *impartation* occurred simultaneously.¹⁸

Another interesting aspect of Bucer's thought was his view of the Mosaic Law. He often invoked Deuteronomy's capital punishment for false prophets in public debate, offering himself to be stoned if it could be shown that he contradicted the bible. He also sought to create full-fledged Christian republics based on the teachings of the Old Testament, most clearly seen in his socio-political tract *De Regno Christi*. It was his hope that this could

¹⁶ *A Brief Summary of Christian Doctrine* number 16

¹⁷ *An Explanation of the Mystery of Baptism in Common Places* pg. 297, 298

¹⁸ Wright pg. 43

be achieved in England under Edward VI. The example of a Christian society in Strasbourg served as an inspiration, no doubt, to John Calvin's work in Geneva.

But of course, the strongest distinctive of Bucer's career must be identified with his indefatigable ecumenical spirit. Losing the respect of friends and nearly their protection and support as well, Bucer was relentless in the pursuit of peace. The result of this is doubtless the main reason why we no longer remember him. Bucer was not interested in creating a sect, certainly not a Bucerian church, and thus he was willing to sacrifice at nearly every juncture. Sometimes he truly believed that opponents were not opposed at all, merely disagreeing over words, but even when Bucer felt that there was genuine disagreement, he always held to the fact that the Church was larger and more important than any particular understanding or articulating of it. As long as the faithful were not oppressed, Bucer was willing to work towards concord.

Bucer's legacy ought to serve as a model for us all. In a post-Christian America, indeed even in a post-evangelical and post-Reformed subculture of America, Bucer gives us an invaluable example. His sacramental piety and irenic demeanor ought to instruct us as we attempt to navigate between the Luthers and the Zwinglis of our day. Though bold servants of God, it seemed that neither of these men could fully submit himself to the other, and thus both attenuated the progress and solidarity of the Reformation. Both hampered that cause which he felt so strongly about through unwavering temperament and biting rhetoric. Bucer was able to see what these great men could not, that in addition to the sacrifice of wealth and livelihood, the cause of Christ and his church also demanded a sacrifice of pride. Let us honor his memory and follow his teaching in submitting our own pride this day. While not relinquishing on the truth, let us represent a peace-seeking church, humbling ourselves to the words of Scripture and the love of the brethren.

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